Measuring party positions and issue salience from media coverage: Discussing and cross-validating new indicators

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have started to use media data to measure party positions and issue salience. The aim of this article is to compare and cross-validate this alternative approach with the more commonly used party manifestos, expert judgments and mass surveys. To this purpose, we present two methods to generate indicators of party positions and issue salience from media coverage: the core sentence approach and political claims analysis. Our cross-validation shows that with regard to party positions, indicators derived from the media converge with traditionally used measurements from party manifestos, mass surveys and expert judgments, but that salience indicators measure different underlying constructs. We conclude with a discussion of specific research questions for which media data offer potential advantages over more established methods.

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1. Introduction

Over the past twenty-five years, methodological research on the measurement of political parties' policy positions has been continually growing. This scholarly interest in developing new methodologies to locate political parties in policy and/or ideological spaces is motivated by the need to operationalize a range of new and fairly sophisticated theoretical models of political competition (Laver, 2001: 6). Some of these models are also concerned with issue salience, that is the relative importance of particular issues to some parties. The underlying idea is that party competition is not mainly a direct confrontation of opposing positions on the same issues, but that parties compete by emphasizing those issues on which they hold comparative advantages (e.g., Budge and Farlie, 1983).

There is a wide variety of methods to generate data on party positions and issue salience, but one can draw a basic distinction between survey data and document-driven data (Keman, 2007: 77). Among the former, expert judgments are the typical example, among the latter, human coding of party manifestos is the dominant approach. Both have become standard techniques to estimate party positions and issue salience.

Despite the well-accepted conception in the literature that the mass media constitute the most important arena for public debates on politically relevant issues in present-day Western democracies (e.g., Bennett et al., 2004; Ferree et al., 2002), the media are still an underused data source in the study field of party politics. While media data have long been a primary data source in various other research areas over the past two decades (e.g., Earl et al., 2004; Ferree et al., 2002; Koopmans et al., 2005; Koopmans, 2007; Kriesi et al., 1995; Trenz, 2005; De Vreese, 2003), they have only recently been used to measure party positions and/or issue salience (Kriesi, 2007; Kriesi et al., 2008, 2010; Statham et al., 2010).

With regard to the literature on European integration, Mair (2006: 162) has lately compellingly argued that instead of 'crude but easily accessible data' provided by expert

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judgments and party manifestos, there is need for 'a much more systematic, inductive, and largely bottom-up comparison of political discussions at the national level […]'. It seems that data derived from media coverage are particularly well suited to do exactly this. In addition, they respond to a concern raised by Netjes and Binnema (2007: 42, 48) who ask for the cross-validation of traditional salience measures based on expert surveys and party manifestos with 'a 'harder' measurement of salience, utilizing content analysis of national and EP election campaigns in the printed media'.

Against this background, and following the lead of various scholars who have already cross-validated traditional approaches that measure party positions and issue salience from party manifestos, expert and mass surveys (e.g., Benoit and Laver, 2006, 2007; Marks et al., 2007; Netjes and Binnema, 2007; Ray, 2007), the aim of this article is to determine whether content coding of media coverage might be a valid alternative for the estimation of party positions and issue salience. Our aim is not to promote a new approach, but to discuss its key characteristics in comparison with manifesto and expert data and to investigate whether or not they measure the same underlying constructs. This is also of interest regarding the sometimes-evoked bias of media data and the question to what extent information that is reported in the media is distorted by journalists.

To this purpose, we concentrate on the issue of European integration for two reasons. The first more practical reason is that previous studies have focused on European integration (Marks et al., 2007; Netjes and Binnema, 2007; Ray, 2007), and this gives us the opportunity to put our empirical findings into perspective. The second more theoretical reason is that a growing literature is concerned with how national parties adapt to European integration (e.g., Marks and Steenbergen, 2004), and it is therefore important to think about the characteristics and comparative advantages of different indicators measuring party positions and issue salience in this particular policy field.

We proceed as follows. We start with a comparison of the main characteristics of data derived from media coverage, party manifestos and expert surveys. Next, we present two different approaches to the coding of media coverage, the core sentence approach and political claims analysis, and explain how they allow us to create indicators for party positions and issue salience. Then, we cross-validate these new indicators with more traditional ones to see whether or not they measure the same underlying constructs. In the concluding section, we offer a more analytical perspective and discuss possible research questions for which media data may provide advantages over the traditionally used expert judgments and party manifestos.

Before we start, we need to make clear what we *do not* address in this paper. We are mainly interested in the characteristics of the data sources themselves, not in the way data were collected or coded. For example, a source of contestation is that the coding of party manifestos relies on a priori fixed, thematic categories, which might become inappropriate over time. Yet, this is a problem related to a coding decision, but does not concern party manifestos as a data source. In fact, party manifestos could be recoded with a different coding scheme and recent advances towards computer-assisted coding prove that this and other problems can be alleviated (e.g., Laver et al., 2003; Pennings and Keman, 2002).

Likewise, we ignore specific reliability problems because they are also more directly linked to the way the data are collected. Recent advances in computational content analysis have provided new ways for estimating party positions; most prominent are computer programs and scaling algorithms such as Wordscore (Laver et al., 2003) or Wordfish (Slapin and Proksch, 2008). In this respect, an important question is to what extent automatic-coding is superior to hand-coding in terms of efficiency but inferior in terms of validity, as humans probably better understand media messages. All these aspects are crucial and need to be addressed (and important work has already been done on these topics). For lack of space we however limit ourselves to the comparison of data sources. This is an important first step, as media data have so far never been systematically compared with other data sources that are used to measure policy positions and issue salience.

2. Media data in comparison

In this section, we highlight the key characteristics of media data in comparison to party manifestos and expert surveys (see also Benoit and Laver, 2006: ch.3, Marks et al., 2007: 26–7).[2] As shown by Table 1, while all three data sources share some characteristics, each has its specificities. Most basically, the three sources produce different *types of data*. In contrast to expert judgments, data from media coverage and party manifestos can be considered 'objective' in the sense that they are based on written, publicly available documents and therefore allow for competing and replicable measurement. Yet, whereas manifestos mirror self-declared positions and issue emphases, defined by political parties themselves, media data provide information on party positions and issue salience in public debates, as transmitted by the media. In contrast to manifestos, political parties cannot fully control the content of mass-mediated public debates. On the one hand, the media intervene in the selection of political information and shape the public perception of party positions and issue salience. On the other hand, the salience of issues in the media is also determined by the agenda-setting strategies of other political actors and by exogenous events such as economic crises or natural catastrophes.

Second, regarding the *time scale*, it is possible to establish long time series with party manifestos and media coverage because both are document-based and can be analyzed retrospectively. For experts, in contrast, it is difficult to assess party positions and issue salience in the past, but some expert surveys have been replicated and provide estimates for subsequent years (e.g., Ray, 1999; Marks et al., 2007). As a consequence, all three data sources offer the possibility to track changes over time. Given that party manifestos are published at the beginning of an election campaign, they can

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[2] We do not discuss mass surveys in detail here, as they are of clearly minor importance in the literature and share almost all of the characteristics of expert surveys.