



Assessing the validity of the Manifesto Common Space Scores



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ABSTRACT

RILE estimates based on party manifesto data suggest that political parties leapfrog on the left-right scale over time. This implausible finding has raised questions about the efficacy not only of RILE for estimating left-right positions but of coded party manifestos for political science research in general. The recently developed Manifesto Common Space Scores (MCSS), which reduce leapfrogging by accounting for the election-specific character of party manifestos, provide alternative estimates for parties left/right-positions, but little is known about their validity. This study shows that MCSS estimates exhibit greater convergent validity relative to RILE estimates when compared to other measures of parties left/right-positions. It also finds that MCSS has greater construct validity relative to RILE estimates in two prominent cases (Greece and Italy). Overall, the findings underscore the election-specific character of party manifestos and demonstrate that MCSS is a useful alternative measure of parties' left-right positions.

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1. Introduction

The Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) provides political scientists with a dataset of more than 3000 party manifestos, which are coded into a scheme of 56 categories that reflect broad policy issues (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006). Based on this dataset, the CMP's Right-Left (RILE) score – which persuades by computational simplicity¹ – has become the most frequently used estimator for measuring the ideological left-right positions of political parties in the field of comparative politics (e.g., Martin and Vanberg, 2005; Tavits and Letki, 2009; Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009).

While frequently used, a closer inspection of the RILE estimates reveals a puzzling ideological volatility (leapfrogging) of political parties over time in many party systems. A typical example is the zigzag movement of parties in Sweden, which is conventionally considered to have a frozen party system due to voters' strong partisan alignment (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Foldal, 1989; Vedung, 1988; Sundberg, 1999). Fig. 1 (upper panel) illustrates the volatility

of the RILE estimates for the most important Swedish parties, which stands in sharp contrast to the system's observed stability and moderate gradual change of parties' positions over time (Hanley, 1999; Mair, 1999; Hug, 2001; Golder, 2003). Even if one expects some change in the Swedish party system with the emergence of the Democrats in 2010 (Pierre, 2015), the sudden collapse of all Swedish parties into a similar ideological left-right position, as indicated by the RILE estimates, is peculiar.

According to Adams (2001) voter bias provides an incentive for political parties to avoid leapfrogging, which has raised questions about the plausibility of the temporal patterns of party positioning and has called left-right estimates based on the CMP into question (Benoit and Laver, 2006, 2007). More specifically, König et al. (2013) (henceforth KMO) question whether counts of left-right categories from the CMP data, and hence the resulting RILE estimates, are comparable over time. According to KMO, the price for the appealing computational simplicity of RILE is to ignore that party manifestos are election-specific statements written for party competition at one particular point in time. Hence, scholars using RILE estimates follow the assumption that parties position themselves, irrespective of their competitors on the left-right scale, when they draft and adopt their party manifestos. Under such a myopic-positioning assumption, leapfrogging (as exemplified in the case of Sweden above) are plausible patterns. However, if one instead believes that parties position themselves relative to their competitors, then neither the left-right category counts nor the

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¹ The RILE score is computed by subtracting the total counts of 13 predefined left categories from the total counts of 13 right categories and dividing by the sum of these categories.

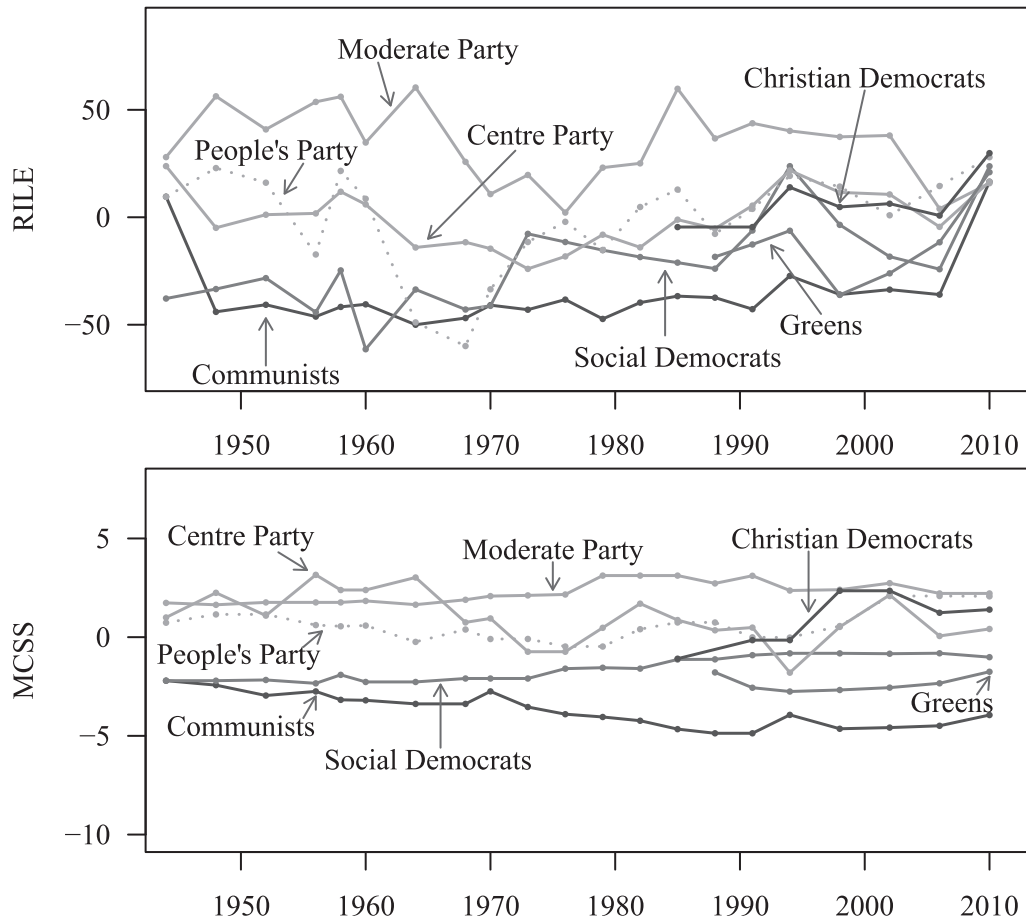


Fig. 1. Party positions for Sweden: The upper panel shows the RILE estimates and the lower panel shows the MCSS estimates.

resulting RILE estimates are directly comparable over time, and the observed leapfrogging suggests that RILE estimates are contaminated by measurement error. This is worrisome given that measurement error biases coefficient estimates in regression models towards zero which means that comparativists will too often conclude that variables constructed with RILE estimates have no effect.

To construct plausible temporal patterns of party positioning from party manifestos that take into account the relative positioning of parties and consequently are more comparable over time, KMO propose to employ bridge observations in a version of a factor analytical model that integrates each election-specific left-right scale into a common policy space. Using this model and transformed manifesto data, KMO estimate their Manifesto Common Space Scores (MCSS) for parties in 25 European Union (EU) member countries in the period 1945–2010. Their findings show that parties are ideologically much less volatile than suggested by RILE, and that there are significant election-specific changes to the entire left-right scales that distort the comparability of party position estimates if not taken into account.

The lower panel in Fig. 1 shows their estimated MCSS for Sweden. Consistent with conventional wisdom, the MCSS estimates indicate that the left-right positions of Swedish parties are quite stable over time and do not collapse to a single point in the recent election. Over time, some trends are visible, but there is no leapfrogging from one election to the other, nor does the overall stability of the Swedish party system change (König et al., 2013, 486). These findings, for Sweden, support KMO's approach, but the

question is whether MCSS estimates are generally more valid relative to RILE and less prone to measurement error. Compared to the many insights on RILE's convergent validity,² little is known about MCSS and whether the estimates are more valid relative to the prominent RILE estimates.³

In this study, we fill this gap by evaluating the relative performance of RILE and MCSS estimates focusing on the convergent and construct validity. We begin by conducting a country-by-country analysis to examine the convergent validity of MCSS and RILE estimates relative to left-right estimates from other, independent data sources. For this purpose, we compiled a large dataset of validation measures estimated from text data, as well as mass- and expert-survey data. Since the usage of RILE is typically justified by the provision of a long time-series of party positions, we focus on the country-by-country longitudinal performance of MCSS vis-à-vis RILE and leave the cross-sectional performance to future research. To evaluate the construct validity, we further re-analyze two critical cases: The Greek and Italian party systems. In both cases, scholars have raised serious concerns about the construct validity of RILE (Pelizzo, 2003; Dinas and Gemenis, 2010), so MCSS

² Recent instances include, for example, Dalton and McAllister (2015) and Bakker et al. (2015) who, inter alia, point out that RILE correlates only weakly with expert- and mass-survey data (relative to the correlation between expert- and mass-survey data).

³ We focus on RILE because alternative estimators, including the Logit scores (Lowe et al., 2011), the Vanilla scores (Gabel and Huber, 2000), and the Franzmann-Kaiser scores (Franzmann and Kaiser, 2006), have not been applied as often as RILE.

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