

**Searching for the Positions of Political Actors:
A Review of Approaches and
an Evaluation of Expert Surveys in Particular**

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This paper is designed to offer a rough overview of the goals and approaches that have characterised the various attempts to locate the positions of political actors in policy and/or ideological spaces over the past twenty-five years or so. In so doing, I pay particular attention to the emergence of "expert" surveys as a tool in defining these policy/ideological spaces, and a large part of the paper is devoted to offering various arguments as to why we should be wary of relying too heavily on this strategy. In offering this overview of goals and approaches, I do not claim to have a command of all of the relevant literature; nor do I claim to have a full understanding of the different methodologies involved. What I have tried to do, however, is to point to the main strands involved in the different strategies, and I have also tried to develop some thoughts on their different limits and possibilities. The principal assumption which underlies this paper is that the various attempts to define some abstract policy and/or ideological space, as well as the various attempts to locate political actors in that space, are driven by the need to generalize; that is, they are driven by the imperatives of *comparative* research. Defining abstract policy spaces makes sense only if these are intended to facilitate comparative research, whether across nations or across time. In the main, and in and of themselves, these approaches offer little to those scholars who are interested only in the understanding of a single case within its own terms. Following Sartori's (1970) usage, the attempt to define a policy and/or ideological space involves moving up the ladder of abstraction, and this makes sense only if the goal is to establish concepts and measures that can travel.

The first section of this paper offers a cursory overview of the context within which these various searches for party positions have developed, and presents a quick run-through of the purposes for which these strategies have been devised. Section II of the paper is devoted to a brief and sometimes critical summary of the six major approaches which have tended to dominate the literature to date, ranging from the use of *a priori* judgements to the use of expert surveys (see also Laver and Schofield, 1998: Appendix B). In so far as it proved possible, I have tried to discuss these approaches in the chronological order in which they came to be widely employed. Finally, section III of the paper is devoted to six propositions, each of which is intended to emphasise the need to be wary when dealing with expert surveys in particular.¹ These propositions should not be read as a series of hypotheses or even quasi-hypotheses; they are in fact an English version of the Dutch term *stelling*, a way of organizing debate that constitutes as central a component in Dutch academic discourse as does the *pannenkoek* in Dutch "cuisine". These are propositions for discussion and argument, and I would be just as happy should they all be shot down. That said, they do seem particularly appropriate in the context of a workshop - and hence working - paper.

I. THE CONTEXT: What can be learned by locating parties in a common space, be this uni-dimensional or multi-dimensional?

First and most obviously, the capacity to locate political parties within a common space allows us to compare parties and party systems both cross-nationally and over time. Indeed, given the genetic variety

¹ Since I was involved in designing one of the first of these studies (Castles and Mair, 1984), and since I have probably benefitted from its frequent subsequent citation, I feel few compunctions in now urging caution (see also Mair and Castles, 1997;

that we find across party systems, locating the parties within a common space clearly affords a variety of useful insights. To begin with, it allows us to identify "functionally" equivalent parties, and to compare them according to a variety of different characteristics - electoral performance, governmental role, stability, organizational structure, etc. Unless we can compare like with like, these sorts of exercises become impossible (Mair and Mudde, 1998). Moreover, and in practice, there are few if any comprehensive alternative criteria to those of policy and/or ideology, which is what we aim at in spatial models. Family and/or genetic identity, transnational links, and so on, though important, are often difficult to establish in a comprehensive fashion, and any emphasis on the origins of parties may also have become increasingly irrelevant with the passage of time as well as with the increased fragmentation and destructuring of party systems (although this latter may also even undermine efforts to locate parties in a given dimensional space - see below). In addition, it helps us to compare party systems in terms of such important indicators as the degree of polarization, the direction of competition, and so on. It also allows us to compare party systems in terms of relative ideological biases, and to measure the degree of convergence or divergence both across different party systems and across time within individual party systems. Indeed, the ability to locate parties in some form of common space, usually in left-right terms, has been a central element in some of the classic and still highly influential typologies of party systems (e.g. Dahl, 1966; Blondel, 1968; and especially Sartori, 1976).

Second, the capacity to locate political parties within a common space helps us to understand the dynamics, structure and consequences of party competition in a more specific sense. On the one hand, it allows us to assess why certain coalitions of parties are more likely to form rather than others, and to test for the extent to which policy or ideological affinity across parties is a factor in explaining coalition formation. In addition, this approach also allows us to compare party systems cross-nationally and over time with respect to the role played by policy or ideology in promoting alliances between different parties, as well as in promoting or restraining the fractionalisation of party systems. The volume of literature in this field is clearly enormous, and in most cases the more sophisticated models that have been developed rely explicitly on some measure or other of policy distance (for the earliest studies see Taylor and Herman, 1971; de Swaan, 1973; Taylor and Laver, 1973; Dodd, 1976; for a more recent overview of the field, see Laver and Schofield, 1998).

On the other hand, it also allows us to assess the extent to which partisan politics makes a difference - that is, the old question of whether politics matters. Locating parties within a common space permits us to assess the extent to which the differences between them have any relevance to the policy outputs of the governments to which they belong. In other words, it allows us to compare parties as inputs, and then to measure these against a variety of outputs, often with the intention of identifying the independent role of political/partisan factors (see, for example, Castles, 1982; Keman, 1988; Schmidt, 1996).

Pedersen, 1997).

Third, the capacity to locate political parties within a common space helps us to understand the working and effectiveness of representative government. For example, by locating parties in this way, and by comparing their positions to the preferences expressed by voters, we can gain a real and measurable sense of the extent to which these two core components of representative government are mutually congruent. This again is an old question, but by locating parties in a common space we not only can hope to measure the real degree of congruity or incongruity, but we can also compare party systems, and political systems more generally, in terms of their capacity to match electoral preferences and party policies (see, for example, Klingemann, 1995; Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999). In addition, and in a variation of the "does politics matter?" theme that was noted above, this approach may also be used to compare the positions which parties and governments advocate with the policies which they produce, thus revealing the extent to which the democratic mandate in general proves meaningful. In other words, by comparing what parties stand for, both in terms of policy and ideology, on the one hand, and what government actually produces, on the other, we can gain a better sense of the extent to which representative government is responsive to the demands and preferences of a party-mediated citizenry (see, for example, Klingemann et al). Finally, the location of both parties and voters within a common policy space is also beginning to prove essential to those studies which seek to test different voting models, as, for example, in the recent discussions of the competing proximity and directional models (e.g., Rabinowitz and Macdonald, 1989; Krämer and Rattinger, 1997).

II. THE APPROACHES: How have party positions tended to be estimated?

Via a priori judgements.

This is one of the oldest and most tried and tested approaches to locating parties in a given policy space, and simply involves the ordinal ranking of parties according to their core identity and/or genetic origin. These types of studies have tended to be restricted to the analysis of parties from the principal transnational party families - communists, social democrats, liberals, christian democrats, conservatives, and so on - and they have also tended to locate the parties only in left-right terms. One of the first and most influential attempts to relate coalition outcomes to policy proximity, that of Taylor and Herman (1971), appears to have adopted this approach, and with some success. This was also the approach adopted by Sigelman and Yough (1978) in one of the first systematic attempts to explore variance in the ideological polarization of party systems. In this latter case, estimates of party left-right rankings was also controlled by reference to a seemingly similar and intriguing estimation system produced by the U.S. State Department, which, since 1961, had produced regular reports coding parties as either communist, non-communist leftist, centrist or conservative (Sigelman and Yough, 1978: 366-7). Although intuitively appealing, and although clearly very easy and straightforward, this approach has since been regarded as having a very limited application. In the first place, it is more or less applicable only to a very general left-

right dimension. Second, as an ordinal ranking, it cannot take account of varying intra-party distances. Third, and most crucially, it is limited by the necessary assumption that all parties of a given party family are ideologically undifferentiated, while parties outside the major families are essentially uncodable. On the other hand, if one is content to consider only the left-right dimension, and if ordinal rankings are sufficient, then one is likely to find that the location of parties as determined on such *a priori* grounds is unlikely to differ significantly from that derived by other approaches (note, for example, the sheer stability and predicability of the major parties' ordinal rankings as recorded by the three expert surveys summarised in Table 1).

Via secondary reading

The principal alternative to *a priori* judgements which was explored in the early stages of comparative research in this area was that of secondary reading. In other words, scholars simply immersed themselves in as much of the available literature as possible regarding a given party system, and deduced from that literature study a sense of relative party positions, as well as changes in those positions over time. This was the approach adopted by Thomas (1975; see also Thomas 1980), for example, in a then influential study of ideological trends in western party systems. It was also the approach adopted by de Swaan, who based his assessments on "the judgment of parliamentary historians" (1973: 136) and Dodd, who sought to identify salient cleavage dimensions by means of "an extensive study of the literature" (1976: 97) in their formative analyses of ideology and coalition formation. Ken Janda's International Comparative Political Parties Project followed a similar strategy, devoting a considerable effort to code the positions of up to 158 parties in 53 countries along 13 issue dimensions, each based on an 11-point scale (Janda, 1980: 53-77). It is also worth emphasising that the issue dimensions then selected by Janda bear a strong resemblance to those later incorporated in the manifesto research group as well as to those in Laver and Hunt's (1992) more recent expert surveys (see below), and they include such themes as Government Ownership of the Means of Production, Government Role in Economic Planning, Redistribution of Wealth, Social Welfare, Secularization, Support of the Military, East/West Alignment, Supranational Integration, and Civil Liberties. Indeed, given the effort and care with which Janda constructed his policy codes, and given that their application was to the period 1950 to 1962, which is otherwise marked by a major dearth of such comparable data, it is perhaps surprising that these data have not been more widely used by later scholars. In addition, and as with Sigelman and Yough (1978), Janda sought to control his core left-right findings by reference to the State Department codes, as well as by reference to an equally intriguing sounding set of comparable estimates produced by experts in the USSR.² Finally, a literature study was also conducted by Taylor and Laver (1973) in their now classic early analysis of the role of ideological profiles in determining coalition formation. Indeed, two observations by Taylor and Laver merit particular attention here. In the first place, they describe their use of this secondary reading as relying on "the judgments of experts" (p. 216), an interesting use of the term which quite predates the shift towards

² The US source is cited as a then annual report of *World Strength of Communist Party Organizations*. The Soviet source is cited as *Politicheskie partii zarubezhnykh stran (Political Parties of Foreign Countries, 1967)*. See Janda (1980: 73-5).

the more formalized expert polls in the late 1970s and 1980s (see below). Second, they offered a rather ironic hostage to fortune in dismissing out of hand the possibility of using manifesto analysis to locate party positions. This was partly, they suggested, for what were then practical reasons. But it was also partly on methodological grounds: "it is far from certain that the ideological differences between parties which are important in the process of coalition formation are all to be found in manifestos (which are addressed to the electorate rather than to other parties)" (Taylor and Laver, 1973: 215-6).

Via mass surveys

The use of mass surveys to locate the positions of parties, particularly in left-right terms, has such a long and voluminous history that it is both impossible and pointless to attempt a proper overview here. Ever since the seminal study by Inglehart and Klingemann (1976) in particular, and ranging through the very valuable contribution by Sani and Sartori (1976), this has in fact proved one of the principal and most robust means of charting party and/or voter positions (for a valuable long-term overview of the data on self-placement, see Knutsen, 1998a). At the same time, the application of this approach is also somewhat skewed, seeming to be particularly appropriate in the analysis of levels of voter-party congruence and that of party system dynamics, while appearing to have been of surprisingly little value in the work on coalition theories or in that of the "politics matters" school. This particular contrast in application may itself be indicative of a sense that voter positions are taken to mean something different to party positions, at least insofar as the latter are defined in policy terms. In this sense, the contrast may also be indicative of the potentially inverse relationship between ideological polarisation (associated with electoral alignments), on the one hand, and policy competition (associated with party programmes), on the other hand (see Proposition Four below).

When employing mass surveys to identify party positions, two related approaches tend to have been adopted. In one version, respondents are asked to locate the parties in left-right terms, and their judgements are then taken as presenting an accurate picture of voter perceptions of where the parties stand at that point in time. In another version, respondents are asked to locate themselves in left-right terms, and these individual responses are then aggregated by individual party preference to give a composite picture of the party in question. In this latter case, it is the constituency of the party that is being located rather than the party itself. Each approach is obviously valuable and worthwhile, but each also involves a quite distinct set of assumptions. In the one case, the position of the party is seen to derive from the party itself, albeit with data that are filtered through individual voter perceptions. In the other case, the position of the party is seen to derive from that of its own voters. It is currently unclear to me how - if at all - these differences might work through in practice, or whether they might reveal different images of the space in which parties compete. Despite these different assumptions, however, both versions of the mass survey approach are believed to come closer to tapping into the core ideological

identity of the parties - and the electorates - involved. It is perhaps for this reason that these sorts of data have tended to be favoured by analysts of party systems and those concerned with levels of systemic polarisation (e.g., Sani and Sartori, 1983).

Via elite studies

Elite studies in this field take a variety of forms, although usually they tend to be restricted to single-country analyses, and have rarely proved sufficiently robust or comparable for wide-ranging comparative analyses. One approach here is to gauge the proximity of parties and to deduce something about the dimensions along which they are aligned by means of roll-call analysis, and by looking at voting behaviour in the parliamentary arena itself (e.g., Pedersen et al, 1971; for an application to the party groups in the European Parliament, see Attiná, 1990). The problem here, however, as Taylor and Laver (1973: 215) point out, is that the parties in parliament are not sufficiently independent of one another to allow an "objective" judgment of their positions. In other words, party voting in parliament will already be constrained by whether the party in question is part of the government, and hence this cannot then be used as an independent predictor of future coalition behaviour. A more objective picture can perhaps be derived from interviews with parliamentary elites, and this approach has already been used quite successfully in the Dutch case in particular (see Daalder and van de Geer, 1977, for an early application, and Hillebrand and Meulman, 1992, for a more recent application; for applications in other countries, see Budge et al, 1976). The problem with this approach, however, is that of cross-national comparability - not to mention the costs in terms of both money and time. A third approach that can be cited here remains at an elite level, but this time comes down from parliament to base the analysis of party positions on the attitudes of the so-called "middle-level elites" or party activists. Indeed, as early as 1973, de Swaan suggested that this could be the most accurate way of assessing a party's stance: "[T]he best overall indicator of a party's policy position in the long run would be the attitudes of its activists...[I]n theory, some statistical aggregate of the policy preference of the party's activists might be taken as an indicator of its rank on the policy scale" (de Swaan, 1973: 136). To date, however, work in this field has remained quite sparse - indeed, apart from a valuable paper by van Schuur (1989), who used middle-level elite responses to locate parties on a left-right scale in ten west European countries, and the possibilities that are now inherent in an ongoing cross-national research project on party memberships (led by Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley), it seems that virtually nothing is available. On the other hand, and despite de Swaan's assertions, doubts can be expressed about whether this layer of the party organization is truly representative of the party as a whole, and particularly about whether its views offer a valid insight into the party's externally-directed competitive position (May, 1973; Kitschelt, 1989; Norris, 1995).

Via the analysis of party programmes and manifestos

Much as in the case of the mass survey approach, the manifesto approach has now such a voluminous and well-documented history that it seems hardly necessary to pay it particular attention here. Despite

some earlier single-country applications (e.g., Borg, 1966; Robertson, 1976), this approach effectively enjoyed its lift off in the early 1980s, when the ECPR cross-national manifesto group was launched under the direction of Ian Budge and David Robertson. The project has continued more or less actively since that time, albeit in a now much expanded and relatively routinized form. Indeed, in terms of longevity and consistency, this remains one of the great success stories of international political science cooperation. It has also spawned numerous publications, both comparative and national, and in the form of both lengthy collaborative volumes and one-off articles (for an overview and analysis of the principal findings, see Budge et al, 1987; Laver and Budge, 1992; Klingemann et al, 1994). The data employed in this approach have also been applied to an inevitably wide range of analyses, including, in one way or another, most of the separate themes identified in Section I above. The core problem which confronts this approach, however, over and above the question of whether it is tapping into ideology or policy (see below), is the extent to which the solutions which it seeks are genuinely comparable across nations. This is not a new problem, of course, and it has been addressed and tackled in a variety of ways in most of the literature which builds on these data. But given that the major benefit of each of the approaches reviewed in this paper is assumed to be that of comparability across nations and through time, this problem is necessarily acute. In some ways, the difficulty involved here is akin to that involved in comparing party systems by reference to the genetic identity of the parties they include. Whether we are dealing with the famous 54 categories in the case of the manifestos, or just the five or six relevant actors in the case of party systems, we still end up by confronting differential quantities, combinations and nuances, all of which must be standardised in some common set of measures.

Three distinct solutions appear to have characterised the manner in which this problem of comparability has been handled in the manifesto approach. The first, which is hardly a solution at all, simply involved standardising the methods of data analysis, which, even together with the common coding scheme, resulted in a range of more or less different and unique national solutions. In other words, from the starting point of a common coding frame, and by means of a common statistical technique, the national solutions were allowed to vary as the particular national analyst saw fit. Thus spaces proved uni-dimensional and multi-dimensional, and the parameters of these spaces proved more or less specific to each country (see the country applications in Budge et al, 1987). The results were often valuable and insightful, but they obviously fell substantially short of the degree of comparability to which many of the competing approaches to locating parties aspire. The second solution was therefore to standardise the space as well as simply the codes and techniques, a strategy that involved a quite complex staged procedure by which national patterns were slowly abstracted and filtered in order to produce a common left-right dimension. The individual national parties' relationships to this dimension, as well as the relationship between their alignment on this dimension and various standardised measures of policy performance, were then subject to analysis (see Laver and Budge, 1992; Klingemann et al, 1994).³ A third

³ For a more recent and quite interesting application of this later technique see Kim and Fording (1998), who weigh these comparable party positions by levels of electoral support and then use the resultant figures to estimate the left-right positioning

solution, which does not seem to have enjoyed so much favour, is to use the common data set as if the various parties were all competing in the same system. In other words, rather than working up from the country analyses to produce a single dimension which could then be applied to each national system (in EU parlance, a sort of inter-governmental strategy), a pooled analysis is conducted across all parties and all elections, regardless of location or period (a sort of supranational solution). This was the approach adopted by Bartolini and Mair (1990), for example, who derived a single left-right economic policy dimension against which all parties across Europe could be arrayed, as well as by Çarkoglu (1995), who derived a single left-right dimension based on the data covering both economic and social policy. This last solution seems to me the closest equivalent to the cross-national application of a common left-right dimension in both mass and expert surveys. That is, and in common with these mass and expert surveys, a single dimension is established *a priori* and then party positions and/or voter preferences are squeezed onto it - regardless of national peculiarities.

Via expert surveys

Although the use of literature studies has been sometimes defined as availing of "expert judgments" (e.g., Taylor and Laver, 1973: 216), the first formal expert study was that conducted by a young American scholar, Michael-John Morgan. To the best of my knowledge, no report of this survey or its results has ever been published, but details of the methodology are reported at length in Appendix B of Morgan's PhD thesis (Morgan, 1976: 417-500). In brief, and in a strategy more or less (unknowingly) replicated in later expert surveys, Morgan sought to establish interval level measures of party distances along a number of ideological dimensions by polling some 160 "knowledgeable experts" (p. 436) and asking them to assign a score (on a scale of 0 to 100) on the dimensions to as many of the relevant parties as possible. The arguments advanced by Morgan to justify this innovative strategy, as well as those which have been subsequently cited in defence of later expert surveys, are effectively the same as those summarised below under Proposition Five. Given the subsequent development in the structure of expert surveys, however, a number of features which are distinct to Morgan's approach are worth recalling. In the first place, the experts polled were not assigned to particular countries; rather, each was invited to locate parties in as many countries as he or she felt capable of doing. Second, the dimensions on which the parties were to be located were not specified in advance; rather, each expert was invited to use up to three dimensions, to be defined by the respondent him/herself, and to indicate which if any was primary, and which was "auxiliary". Third, the periods in which the parties were to be located was carefully specified, and even included separate polls for the interwar years. In all, Morgan received some 100 replies, which allowed him to locate parties in 12 countries (and 19 different time periods) along up to six principal dimensions. In all countries and periods, the left-right dimension was seen as relevant.

The second principal expert survey was that carried out by Frank Castles and myself, the results of which were later published in the *EJPR* (Castles and Mair, 1984). This was a much simpler exercise than that of Morgan, in that it aimed only at the then contemporary location of parties, and concerned itself only with a (naively designed) 11-point left-right scale. In this case, experts from 17 countries were asked to locate parties only in their "own" country, with the overall number of responses exceeding 100. No effort was made to poll these experts on the salience of this left-right dimension, and nor were the experts asked to provide an indication of how they had interpreted left and right. Reflecting our then quite casual approach, the number of countries for which judgements were solicited was also quite limited. Little more than a decade later, this expert survey was followed by a significantly more systematic and precise poll by Huber and Inglehart, the results of which were published in *Party Politics* (Huber and Inglehart, 1995). This survey also sought to locate parties on a (proper 10-point) left-right scale, albeit this time with the much more ambitious purview of 42 societies. In all, some 800 experts were polled, each being asked about his or her "own" country, and some 340 responses were received. The meaning of left and right in the different countries was also probed, as was the extent to which other dimensions of conflict existed, thus enabling Huber and Inglehart to analyze both the content and relative salience of left-right competition. In brief, this latest expert poll on left and right has also proved the most informative and comprehensive to date, and offers a model for future replications in this field.⁴

Parallel to this latest development have come the much more nuanced and variegated expert polls which were initiated by Laver and Hunt (1992), and which have since been replicated by Laver and various colleagues on a sporadic country by country basis - usually being conducted in the wake of a national election. This strand of expert studies probes party positions on a variety of different policy dimensions, and also asks respondents to indicate the relative salience of each dimension for each of the actors involved. Comparability is assured through the prior specification of some key dimensions in all countries and over time, while respondents are also invited to identify additional dimensions which they regard as important, and which therefore allows for specific national variations. Finally, Laver and his colleagues also ask their experts to rank cabinet portfolios in order of importance, a potentially crucial dimension in explaining subsequent inter-party bargaining and coalition formation. Perhaps surprisingly, information about the locations of actors along the basic (non-specified) left-right dimension has usually not been requested, although this question has been included in Laver's most recent expert survey for the Netherlands. Three elements therefore mark this particular initiative out in terms of the general expert survey approach. First, it involves a multi-dimensional space, thus allowing for a much more nuanced and sophisticated picture to develop. Second, it remains an ongoing and persistently comparable project, which will eventually facilitate a clearer understanding of party movements through time. Third, it operates on a much larger scale, in that responses are usually sought from upwards of 40 respondents per

⁴ A detailed comparison of the results of the Castles-Mair and Huber-Inglehart data is reported by Knutsen (1998b). See also Mair and Castles (1997: 154-6). A more general comparison of various different left-right scales is summarised in Laver and Schofield (1998: Appendix B, Figures B1-18).

country, with the response rate itself usually coming well into double figures. This is substantially in excess of the response rate per country achieved by either Castles-Mair or Huber-Inglehart.

In addition to these broadly-based expert surveys, other more ad hoc polls have also been carried out of specific themes. Ray, for example, recently polled almost 300 experts in 18 countries, and received some 135 responses, probing the position of political parties on the issue of European integration (Ray, forthcoming). What is particularly striking in this case is that the experts were also asked to track movements in party positions by locating them at four different points of time between 1984 and 1996.

III: AN EVALUATION: Why we should be more wary than we are about expert judgements, and even about indicators of party positions more generally: six propositions.

"All right," said Deep Thought. "The Answer to the Great Question..."

"Yes...!"

"Of Life, the Universe and Everything..." said Deep Thought.

"Yes...!"

"Is..." said Deep Thought, and paused.

"Yes...!"

"Is..."

"Yes...!"

"Forty-two," said Deep Thought, with infinite majesty and calm.

[From Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979)].

P-1: Any indicator is better than none.

Although this first proposition is self-evidently true, it is worth recalling if only to underline how scholars may sometimes prove quite uncritical in their use of the available indicators. This is also a general problem, of course, and is not simply confined to the use of indicators of party positions.⁵ That said, it is also certainly true for the use of indicators on the left-right positioning of parties. Thus, for example, one can point to the long shelf-life which has come to be associated with the Castles-Mair (1984) data, which have been used not only to locate party positions into the 1990s, but which have also been sometimes extended backwards to the 1960s, or have been taken to apply to the postwar period as a whole. In fact, these data are but a snapshot from the early 1980s, and they clearly should not be given the degree of weight or infallibility which the sometimes pavlovian seizure of indicators has subsequently implied (see Mair and Castles, 1997). Indeed, at one stage this stretching of the temporal validity of what is essentially a very limited indicator was taken so far that one particular scholar chose to include in his later use of the index a number of new, post-1983 parties, together with his own reading of what their Castles-Mair left-right score was likely to be (Hazan, 1995: 442-3). Finally, there may also be problems involved in what is perhaps the uncritical application of one and the same indicator - in this case, left-right positioning - for a

⁵ See, for example, the debate on the extent of the relationship between the strength of the left, on the one hand, and economic growth, on the other, which waged in the pages of the *Journal of Politics* in the late 1980s - noted in Mair (1996: 325-6).

variety of different purposes, such as predicting coalitions, defining the profiles of governments, measuring patterns of competition, and so on. As is suggested below, the ideology of parties is itself a multi-faceted phenomenon, and there is also sufficient reason to be wary of conflating policy positions, on the one hand, with ideological identity, on the other.

This is not intended to be an argument against the use of these or other indicators as such. It is indeed a truism that any indicator is better than none, and we have no choice but to make use of the limited measures that are available. Rather, the proposition is advanced simply with a view to urging greater care and caution in the application of such indicators. In the end, these are only indicators. In this sense we should also be conscious of the increasing tendency in our discipline for debates regarding the supposed truth or falsity of relationships between variables to revolve increasingly around the methods used to measure these relationships, rather than around the sometimes questionable validity of the variables - or the indicators - themselves.⁶

P-2: The accuracy - and consistency - with which a party can be located on a given policy dimension is a function of the salience of that policy dimension for the party in question. Hence determining the location of parties on a given policy scale is more meaningful in the case of some parties than in others.

This second proposition reflects the sense that evidence of fluctuations over time in expertly-derived party positions stems at least in part from the observers' uncertainty about where that party stands. Note here the summary data in Table 1, for example, which reports the ordinal ranking of those parties in those party systems that were included in each of the three expert surveys to date (Morgan, Castles and Mair, Huber and Inglehart). Seven countries were included in all three surveys, and the data from all three taken together reflect party positions across an 18-year period - indeed, across a period of substantial political change, running from the high-point of the domesticization of cold-war politics (in the mid-1970s) to the triumph of liberal democracy (in the mid-1990s). But what is remarkable here is how the relative positions of so many of the parties appear to have remained unchanged, and particularly so those parties for whom left-right competition may be assumed to have been most salient. Thus, for example, we see the PS and the Liberals remaining "stable" in Belgium, and a reshuffling among the PSC, the FDF and Volksunie. In Denmark, all of the parties prove relatively stable, with the exception of the Liberal-Conservative reshuffle between 1982 and 1993. In Finland, the SKDL, SD and Conservatives prove stable, while the remaining parties reshuffle. In Italy, only the PRI and PSDI reshuffle, as do only the SGP and GPV in the Netherlands in the late 1970s. In Norway, the left Socialists, Labour and Conservatives prove stable, while the Christian, Centre and Liberal parties reshuffle. In Sweden, all parties prove stable, except for the Liberal and Centre parties in the late 1970s.

[Table 1 about here]

⁶ In Klingemann et al (1994), for example, the key concern appears to be with the way in which relationship between the common left-right dimension and various policy outputs can be modelled, while at the same time the integrity and validity of the

In fact, these patterns suggest two conclusions. First, the remarkable and perhaps predictable stability of the main left-right actors suggests that maybe we could do just as well by making our own judgements - these are more or less self-evident placings. In this sense, these data offer some support for the simple *a priori* approach which was discussed above. Second, the parties which do reshuffle are perhaps those about whose location the observer is likely to be uncertain. In other words, it's not necessarily that the party itself moves, it's just that we have never been sure where it really fits.

It is this latter conclusion which suggests that accuracy or consistency may well be a function of salience. For example - and with the caveat that this has not been subjected to proper cross-national statistical analysis - we can see in the most recent expert survey on Irish politics (Laver, 1998) that the parties for whom an issue dimension is most salient are also those that tend to take up the most extreme positions on these dimensions. This also makes intuitive sense: if a party takes a particularly strong stand on an issue, as does (in the Irish case) Sinn Féin on Northern Ireland, for example, or the Greens on the Environment, or the Democratic Left (left) or the Progressive Democrats (right) on the economy, then we are also likely to judge these parties to be located on one or other extreme of the dimension in question. If the issue is not particularly salient, on the other hand, then we're likely to witness fluctuation around the middle or more neutral point - and again, not necessarily because the party itself is shifting ground in any objective sense; it's just that we cannot pretend to any real accuracy in determining its location.

Hence in these surveys we may find parties changing their positions for any of three reasons, only the first two of which are meaningful: either (a) because of convergence or divergence in the party system itself, including those changes provoked by the emergence of new parties; or (b) because the party simply changes its views, and moves from holding one position to another; or (c) because of observer uncertainty and, as it were, sampling error.

P-3: Given the increased fragmentation of party systems, and given the increased care and accuracy with which the studies are conducted, expert surveys are likely to indicate increased levels of polarisation over time.

This third proposition derives from a very simple assumption: the more parties an expert has to locate along a given dimension, the more likely it is that he or she will occupy a wider range of the space in determining those locations. In other words, and obviously with other things being equal, we'll tend to reflect a broader spread of positions in more fragmented systems. Hence more fragmentation will lead to greater perceived levels of polarisation. The evidence from the Castles-Mair and Huber-Ingelhart expert surveys offers some support for this tendency, since in both surveys, increased fragmentation was associated with a greater range in values (see Table 2).

dimension itself (the indicator of party positions) is taken more or less for granted.

Table 2: Number of Parties and Polarisation as Evidenced by Expert Surveys
(Castles-Mair data recalculated to 10-point scale)

N Parties	Mean Polarisation (range):	
	Castles-Mair	Huber-Inglehart
2-4	3.8 (2.0-6.3)	4.2 (2.7-6.5)
5-8	5.9 (5.4-8.2)	6.1 (4.3-7.8)
9 or more	7.8 (7.9-9.3)	7.1 (3.9-9.0)

What is also necessary to underline is that an important *time* dimension is involved here. This is the case since (a) party systems have tended to become more fragmented over the years, which necessarily obliges us to try to locate more parties; and (b) the expert surveys themselves have become more precise with time, in that they now normally specify that all parties - and a list is usually included - be located. For both these reasons - there fact that there are more parties and the fact that we as experts are asked to locate more parties - our results are therefore likely to indicate a greater degree of polarisation (or to underestimate the degree of depolarisation). The problem here is that this may at least in part be simply an artefact of the approach.

As we know from Sartori (1976; see also Sani and Sartori, 1983), party system fragmentation can derive from two quite separate factors. On the one hand, systems can prove fragmented, and even increasingly fragmented, because of the multiplicity of "domains of identification". There are multiple identities within the electorate, and there are therefore multiple parties. This is most obviously seen in the Belgian and Swiss cases, but it can also be usefully generalised to any plural society. On the other hand, systems can also prove fragmented, and also even increasingly fragmented, because of a stretching of the ideological distance. In other words, more extreme parties emerge, or parties are pushed to more extreme positions because of new challenges. In the one case, fragmentation is associated with segmentation; in the other, it is associated with ideological competition. It also follows that it is really only in the second type of case that we as experts should find ourselves linking increased fragmentation to increased polarisation. My worry is that this is not the case, however, and that we fail to make this distinction. In other words, my worry is that through expert surveys we may risk linking (increased) fragmentation simply to polarisation - regardless of its source.

P-4: Policy space may not be the same as the ideological space

Proposition Four follows immediately from the discussion above, and also suggests that we should perhaps exercise more care in extrapolating from party positions as derived from expert judgements. The electoral and ideological appeal of any given party is clearly multi-faceted. Indeed, across a literature

stretching from Converse's (1964) early work on belief systems through to and beyond Strom's (1990) more recent work on the theory competitive political parties, we have come to learn that party support - and party strategy - is constituted by a multiplicity of different elements. Given this, and given the overriding distinction between what a party stands for and how it competes, or, to follow Sani and Sartori's (1983) usage, the distinction between the domains of party identification and the dimensions of party competition, how then should we understand party locations within a policy space? Are these the positions that parties adopt in order to compete? Or do they reflect the character of their domains of identification?

In all likelihood, of course, the correct answer is probably some combination of the two. But what is potentially most problematic here is that the nature of this combination will vary from party to party, and from space to space. Thus the position of a religious party along in a space defined by alternatives in social policy may well have more to do with how that party is identified than with how it chooses to compete. Conversely, when that same party is located in terms of economic policy, the judgement is likely to owe more to its competitive stance than to its core identity. In the one case the position of the party may be associated with what that party *is*; in the other case, it may be associated with what that party *says*. In terms of party competition, and most especially in terms of the comparison of party system dynamics, such different nuances may prove very important. When we both read and conduct expert surveys, on the other hand, the distinction may be blurred.

More generally, this raises the broader question of whether the space in question is defined by policy differences or ideological differences. In fact, the distinction is often fudged in the literature on party distances, with policy sometimes being used interchangeably with ideology, or, as is sometimes the case in this present paper, with the space in question being defined as one of policy "and/or" ideology. The contrast can prove quite acute, however. In one earlier study, for example, Bartolini and Mair (1990) noted quite a marked *inverse* relationship between left-right economic policy distance as measured by the analysis of manifestos, on the one hand, and left-right ideological polarisation as measured at the mass electoral level, on the other hand. Nor was this seen as simply an artefact of the different methods employed in these cases. Indeed, as was then suggested, it may well be even systemic in nature, in that it is perhaps "only in those situations in which an ideological consensus prevails ...that policy competition can afford to be more adversarial. Conversely, systems in which ideological opposition is intense...may prove relatively uncompetitive in terms of policies - not least as a result of elite perceptions of the potential risks of such competition. In effect, therefore, [we] suggest that it is precisely in those countries which are characterised by an absence of ideological polarisation at mass electoral level that policy competition *per se* will play a major role in determining differences between parties" (Bartolini and Mair, 1990: 7).

P-5: *Expert surveys should always be treated as "expert" surveys.*

As noted above, expert surveys are seen to have three crucial advantages over alternative approaches to estimating party positions. First, precisely because they reflect the judgements of experts, who are presumably intelligent, well-read, and well-informed, they acquire a certain weight and legitimacy. In particular, they are likely to approximate much more closely to the "real" position, since they avoid the danger of popular misconceptions, which is a problem with mass surveys, and that of bias, which is a problem with surveys of political elites. Second, they have the advantage of being "objective", that is, they allow for a judgement of party position based on what the party is currently doing or saying, rather than being based on assumptions derived from past party behaviour. For example, and as I recall it, one of the criticisms levelled against the way in which de Swaan (1973) determined the ideological proximity of different parties was that he had allegedly placed too much weight on the evidence of how these parties had interacted in the past. If one is testing the extent to which ideological proximity determines coalition formation, then clearly it is necessary to find a measure of such proximity that is independent of past coalition behaviour. Otherwise one would be left with a largely tautological model, in that past coalition behaviour would be taken as a indicator of ideological proximity and this, in turn would be taken as a predictor of current coalition behaviour (this point is also discussed in Morgan, 1976: 430-435). Expert judgements were believed to avoid this circularity, and this was one of the major points in their favour. Third, expert judgements are quick and easy, and reasonably comprehensive. For example, they avoid the need to pore over party programmes and the need to subject these to various data reduction techniques. Moreover, the analysis of a party programme and the translation of its contents into a specific party location within a given policy space clearly risks much more slippage and uncertainty than simply taking a policy dimension and asking a well-read jury to locate a party along it. In this sense, expert judgements permit the collection of highly *comparable* and *standardized* data across a very wide variety of party systems, and certainly a much wider variety than could be afforded by evidence drawn from idiosyncratic mass surveys or the analysis of multi-tongued party programmes. Indeed, given the widespread internationalisation of political science networks, it is now simply much more feasible to consider mounting an expert survey - as evidenced in particular by the major achievement of Huber and Inglehart (1995) in gathering comparable data across as many as 42 democracies. There is also a fourth advantage to the expert survey, of course: as with Deep Thought, the computer to end all computers in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, you get a precise numerical answer to your query.

But this also begs the question: how do the experts themselves derive their judgements? On what basis do they determine the location of parties? The answer, of course, is through some or other combination of these other three approaches. In other words, being well-read, being well-informed, and being mainly intelligent and experienced observers, experts will base their judgements on a combination of often unconsciously imbibed sources such as past coalition behaviour, party programmes and ideology, and both mass and elite perceptions. Expert judgements are therefore not really an alternative to these other

approaches; instead, they reflect a crude synthesis of these other approaches as filtered through the perceptions of a well-read and intelligent observer. They are less an alternative than a short-cut. It is in this sense that they remain "expert" judgements.⁷

P-6: *Although surveys of expert judgements have become more professional and precise over time, wider political changes suggest that their results have become less meaningful.*

This sixth and final proposition derives from three separate sub-propositions which I will run through one by one.

First: *in electoral terms, we are witnessing a significant decline in what might be termed the "vote of belonging".*⁸ Although scholars vary in their interpretations of the level and extent of the changes involved here, and although there exists an inevitable and substantial cross-national variation, most of the literature is at least agreed that there has been some distancing of parties from society, and that mass attachment has been subject to more or less substantial erosion. The level, and certainly the strength of affective loyalties to parties has clearly declined across most national systems, as has the level and degree of involvement of party membership. With this change has also passed the old notion of the mass party, and, more generally, the notion that a group of political leaders could emerge out of a strong socio-political organizational network, and then compete for office with the intention of translating the interests of their predefined constituency into public policy. In social linkage terms, parties are now much more autonomous than before, and significantly less tied down by given constituencies. This change was already associated *in nuce* with the emergence of the early catch-all parties, and has since gathered pace. Parties no longer belong to a given set of voters, nor do voters belong to a given party. Both sets of actors now range more freely, and hence the notion of *bottom-up* representation has become less meaningful to representative government more generally (see Andeweg, 1998).

Second: *in electoral terms, we are also witnessing a significant decline in the capacity to mobilize the "vote of exchange".* This is especially the case when this vote is expressed through collective interests. In other words, parties are now limited in their capacity to make and redeem policy promises. This does not mean that parties are less inclined to make promises to the voter, of course; indeed, the evidence suggests that pledges are now much more readily offered than before (e.g., Thomson, 1999). What it does imply, however, is that the scope of these promises has become more limited, and that the room for manoeuvre within which these promises can take effect has become more constrained. Again, there is already an enormous literature dealing with this question, and there is a fairly closely fought debate about the real extent to which the policies of parties in government are now genuinely circumscribed. But given that so

⁷ See Castles and Mair (1984); it is only in subsequent studies that these quote marks have been dropped - see Pedersen (1997: 149).

⁸ The term comes from Parisi and Pasquino (1979: 14-18), who develop a valuable typology of party-voter linkages, and who distinguish between three types of party voter linkage: "the vote of opinion", which is based on the voter's pragmatic evaluation of the competing party appeals; the "vote of *appartenza* [belonging]", which reflects the voter's long-standing affective loyalty to the party concerned; and the "vote of exchange", which is given by the voter in return for the satisfaction of a need or in return for the meeting of a particular interest.

much of government activity is necessarily devoted to simply the maintenance of existing and inherited programmes (Rose, 1990); given that long-term costs of internationalisation and globalisation effectively curtail the full exercise of certain policy instruments at the national level; and, within the European Union area, given that the demands of harmonisation and convergence effectively rule out certain policy options, it is then almost impossible to assert with any degree of conviction that governments remain free to make the promises of their choosing. Too many options are simply ruled out from the beginning. In Parisi and Pasquino's terms, this also implies an erosion of meaning in even the "vote of opinion."

Third: *in terms of competition, parties are now much more free in their choice of partners and allies.* In other words, government options - the options available to parties in seeking to build alliances for government - have grown with time. There are many different elements that can be cited to account for this increasing promiscuity in processes of government formation, including the two factors cited immediately above. Whatever the explanation, however, the trend is empirically undeniable. In Italy, for example, the first Olive Tree coalition was effectively a coalition between the former Communist Party and senior figures from the former Christian Democrats, two parties whose mutual rivalry had served to define the parameters of the Italian party system from 1948 through to the early 1990s. In Ireland, we have recently witnessed the first ever coalition between Fianna Fáil and Labour, as well as the first-ever coalition joining Fine Gael and the Democratic Left. In the Netherlands in 1994 we saw the first ever government to be formed that excluded the religious mainstream - the first ever secular government in modern Dutch political history. In Spain, we have seen the Catalan coalition shifting its support from the Socialist Party to the Popular Party. In Germany, the Greens have now emerged as an alternative junior partner for the Social Democrats, opening up processes of government formation in that country for the first time in thirty years. And so on. In other words, governing formulae have begun to prove more innovative and hence more unpredictable. More options are open, and the question of who gets into government becomes much more a matter of short-term bargaining and contingent choice. Much as has been emphasised in the more recent literature on democratic transitions (e.g., Kitschelt, 1995), we therefore see also in this field the need for much greater emphasis on the role of agency, and much less on that of structure.

If we put each of these three elements together, then the conclusion almost speaks for itself. Party interactions in general, and processes of coalition formation in particular, seem now much less *determined* than before - much less structured, as it were. Party behaviour is no longer easily explained in terms of its sociology - there are few given constituencies any more, and the notion of bottom-up representation has slowly withered away. Nor is it easily explained in terms of programmatic emphases - the capacity for top-down representation has also perhaps been limited, and the increasing effect of external constraints is to force the adoption of a more or less common or even consensual approach across the mainstream of any given party system. Nor, finally, is party behaviour so easily explained in terms of traditions and/or

genetic identities - parties are now much more open to forming new sorts of alliances, and have become much more promiscuous in terms of their choice of governing partners. Politics in this sense has become increasingly autonomous, with short-term leadership considerations, the sheer force of circumstance, and what Converse (1964) once referred to in another context as "the nature of the times", now emerging to play a far greater role.

It is for this reason that knowing where parties are located in left-right terms, or, indeed, in terms of almost any policy and/or ideological space, may seem less meaningful than before. In other words, although the expert surveys in particular have become more professional and more precise with time, what they tell us about party systems may have become less important. Given the relevance of short-term contingent choice, and given what we know of leadership ambition and strategy, then knowledge of the location of parties may not end up telling us very much about the processes of coalition formation. Given changes in the character and demands of representation, such knowledge may not even tell us very much about how well government functions, nor about its legitimacy. And given that party systems appear increasingly *destructured* in terms of ideology and support, it may not offer any substantial insight into the functioning of these party systems themselves. It is perhaps ironic that at a time when we are finally in a position to properly institutionalise a network of expert surveys, we must now also begin to question their utility.

Table 1: Ordinal Ranking of parties (from Left to Right) in three expert surveys

Country	Morgan (1976)	Castles-Mair (1984)	Huber-Inglehart (1995)
Belgium	PS PSC FDF VU LIB	PS FDF PSC VU LIB	PS PSC VU FDF LIB
Denmark	SPP SD RAD LIB CON	SPP SD RAD LIB CON	SPP SD RAD CON LIB
Finland	SKDL SD KESK FRP LIB SPP CON	SKDL SD KESK LIB FRP SPP CON	SKDL/VAS SD LIB SPP FRP = KESK = CON
Italy	PCI PSI PSDI PRI DC PLI MSI	PCI PSI PRI PSDI = DC = PLI MSI	PDS/RC PSI PSDI PRI DC PLI MSI
Netherlands	PVDA D66 "CDA" VVD SGP GPV	PVDA D66 CDA VVD GPV SGP	PVDA D66 CDA VVD GPV SGP
Norway	SOC LAB LIB KF CENT CON	SOC LAB LIB CENT KF CON	SOC LAB CENT LIB KF CON
Sweden	CP SD CENT LIB CON	CP/L SD LIB CENT CON	CP/L SD LIB = CENT = CON

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