

1/29/2010

Workshop Title: Why and How of Party Manifestos in New and in Established Democracies

Subject Area: Political Parties

Workshop Abstract:

Political party manifestos/platforms have long been treated as important primary documents within the literature on political parties in established democracies. In cross-national research involving established western democracies, manifestos are most often treated as though such documents have the same meaning and weight across the studied cases. However, it is risky to simply assume that all parties design manifestos for the same purpose, adopt them by the same process, or employ them with the same seriousness or vigor. And if there is important variance among parties of established western democracies on the “hows and whys” of party platforms, it is likely that the variance assumes a greater order of magnitude when parties of lesser developed or younger democracies are included in the mix. It is therefore important not to ignore the variance on the purpose and method of party manifestos, each of which is worthy of theoretically-driven, empirical study in its own right. While there has been considerable study involving the issue positions taken by parties in their manifestos, as well as the relative amounts of attention devoted to various issues, there has been very little serious, systematic, empirical scholarship on the purpose of manifestos and how they are developed. It is the purpose of this workshop to begin to fill that void, with discussion of both theoretical and empirical papers covering a range of settings and with discussion leading ultimately to development of a new data base on how party manifestos are developed, adopted, and disseminated, and for what purpose(s).

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HARMEL BIO STATEMENT

Robert Harmel is professor of political science and Director of the China Archive, Survey, and Education Program at Texas A&M University. His primary research is political parties in

western democracies, with side interests in political attitudes and behavior in China. Most of his recent work on parties has focused on change in parties of established western democracies. He has published on political parties in books, edited volumes, and journals including *Party Politics*, *Journal of Theoretical Politics* and *Journal of Politics*.

## SVASAND BIO STATEMENT

Lars Svasand is professor of comparative politics at the University of Bergen, Norway. His primary research interest is the study of organizational development of political parties, in established as well as in newer democracies. Most of his recent works have been on party developments in Malawi and Uganda. His articles have appeared in journals like *Party Politics*, *International Political Science Review*, and *Democratization*.

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## FULL PROPOSAL:

Political party manifestos/platforms have long been treated as important primary documents within the literature on political parties in established democracies, especially as meaningful sources of information regarding a party's stances on various issues of presumed importance to the electorate. Indeed, manifestos are not only claimed to be official statements of what individual parties stand for, but also to have significant impact on how the parties perform policy-wise, and to meaningfully differentiate among the stances of the multiple parties in a given system. Most generally, Craig Allen Smith and Kathy B. Smith (2000: 458, citing Birch 1980) state that manifestos may "be viewed as the texts through which parties characterize themselves and their differences with their rivals." And according to Laver and Hunt (1992: 31), "since parties can at least in theory be held accountable for their published policy statements, these documents do provide some reasonably firm ground on which to base a description of official party policy."

In cross-national research involving established western democracies, manifestos are most often treated as though such documents have the same meaning and weight across the studied cases. However, it is risky to simply assume that all parties -- even when limited to those of just established western democracies -- design manifestos for the same purpose, adopt them by the same process, or employ them with the same seriousness or vigor. To do so is to ignore important variance on the purpose and method of party manifestos. Not only do these dimensions have importance for how manifesto content should be appropriately interpreted, but each is worthy of theoretically-driven, empirical study in its own right.

Leonard Ray (2007: 16-17), after noting that it is "reasonable to ask what manifestos tell us about political parties," correctly asserts that "it would seem that the purpose of the manifesto and the identity of the authors may vary from one political organization or context to another. It is possible to conceive of a manifesto as a contract, an advertisement, or a statement of principle."

If the manifesto is seen as a contract, policy differences across parties should be minimized by the constraints of real world policymaking... If manifestos serve as

advertisements, they may be prone to exaggeration of policy differences, and a proliferation of vague or unrealistic promises... [If the manifesto serves] as a statement of the party's identity and philosophy, ... it can be the subject of intense battles within the party, disputes with little direct connection to the upcoming election." (2007: 17)

Linking the manifesto's "purpose" to how it is produced and by whom, Ray then argues that "the purpose of a manifesto may vary according to its authors." Indeed, who produces the document and how it becomes "official" are additional, important variables for thorough study of manifestos. With specific reference to ecology parties, Ray himself (citing Kitschelt 1989) notes that "the manifesto drafting process [in such parties is thought to be] participatory democracy in action." Keefe (1994: 119-120) describes the process in the major American parties in much less lofty and more pragmatic terms, noting that the drafting of the platform is one means by which a party might try to "[heal] party rifts and [forge] a cohesive party."

While there has been considerable study involving the issue positions taken by parties in their manifestos, as well as the relative amounts of attention devoted to various issues, and to changes in positions and salience over time, there has been very little serious, systematic, empirical scholarship on the purpose, method, and impact of manifestos.

And if there is important variance among parties of established western democracies on the "hows and whys" of party platforms, it is likely that the variance assumes a greater order of magnitude when parties of lesser developed or younger democracies are included in the mix (Klingemann et al 2006). Where parties are based more on charisma and patronage than on societal cleavages and ideology, it might be expected that the nature and purpose of party manifestos would be quite different from those in established western party systems. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some non-western, democratic or semi-democratic countries, party manifestos do exist, but their existence is far from publicized. Indeed, in some cases, the existence of the platforms is known only to party functionaries, and sometimes only to small subsets of those. Rather than "running on" party manifestos, it is not clear whether parties' candidates even know of their existence, much less their contents. In these situations, what purpose is served by development of the party platform, and by what process is it developed and adopted? Again, anecdotal evidence suggests that in some such settings, representatives of the party in parliament may be made aware of the party's manifesto, but perhaps only after being elected.

Because this is a relatively new area for serious, systematic, empirical study, the directors anticipate and encourage papers of multiple types. Some papers may be directed at the empirical question of whether/to-what-extent parties in one or more non-western, lesser-experienced democracies produce manifestos with a purpose and by a process similar to what a "western model." Some may compare the "how and/or why" of party manifestos across political systems, e.g. highly developed vs. lesser-developed democracies. Some may be primarily or completely theoretical, with an eye toward developing rich empirical theory linking variance in the how's and why's of party manifestos to such "independent variables" as regime type, length of experience with democratic institutions, breadth of voting franchise, centrality of political parties within the political system, and importance of "ideology/issue profile" to party identity. Other papers may provide empirical tests of such theoretical propositions, either with in-depth case

studies or cross-national comparisons.

While wanting and expecting to include several papers on parties based in “western” settings, the directors especially encourage proposals involving parties of lesser-developed democracies, whether in Asia, Africa, Latin America, or the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe.

Beyond discussion of papers and consideration of a joint publication, it is anticipated that the workshop will also result in development of a new, cross-national data base on how party manifestos are developed, adopted, and disseminated, and for what purpose(s). While the workshop discussion will determine the ultimate content of the data base, it is likely to include for each country and its parties answers to such questions as (1) who writes/adopts the manifestos, (2) how readily accessible are the manifestos to voters, to the parties’ MP’s, to researchers, (3) how often/regularly are manifestos adopted/changed, (4) how regularly are manifestos references by local media, by the parties’ candidates, by the parties’ MP’s, (5) are the manifestos available on the internet, (6) are local branches formally or informally required to follow the national manifestos, and (7) are MP’s formally or informally required to adhere to the national manifesto?

Ultimately, that data base – along with the theoretical and empirical papers presented at the workshop – should serve to stimulate and support development of a substantial body of systematic, theoretically-driven, empirical research on the “why’s” and “how’s” of party manifestos, covering parties of multiple geographical regions and regime forms.

Participants in the workshop are likely to include scholars on political parties of established western as well as less-established non-western democracies. While the workshop topic will be particularly appealing to those whose past research interests have included party manifestos, we also anticipate substantial interest from students of parties more generally, and especially from students of parties in lesser-developed democracies. Though the directors are completely open with regard to specific participants, they would not be surprised to receive proposals from such scholars as Gero Erdmann (Berlin), Ingrid van Beizen (Leiden), David I. Steinberg (Georgetown), Shin Myung, Scott Mainwaring (Notre Dame), Vicky Randall (Essex), Michael Laver (NYU), Peter Mair (EUI), or Kris Deschouwer (Brussels).

We expect that the cost of participation by the two directors will be covered by their respective home institutions. We are happy to report that the proposal has the endorsement of the ECPR’s Standing Group on Political Parties.

REFERENCES: Craig Allen Smith and Kathy B. Smith, “A Rhetorical Perspective on the 1997 British Party Manifestos,” *Political Communication*, 17 (2000) 457-473; Michael Laver and W. Ben Hunt, *Policy and Party Competition*, Routledge, New York, 1992; Leonard Ray, “Validity of Measured Party Positions on European Integration,” *Electoral Studies* 26 (2007) 11-12 ; William Keefe, *Parties, Politics, and Public Policy in America*, Washington DC, CQ Press, 1994; Hans-Dieter Klingemann et al, *Mapping Policy Preferences II*, Oxford University Press, 2006.