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Online Publication Date: 01 December 2008

To cite this Article Warntjen, Andreas, Hix, Simon and Crombez, Christophe(2008)'The party political make-up of EU legislative bodies',Journal of European Public Policy,15:8,1243 — 1253
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13501760802407813
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501760802407813

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The party political make-up of EU legislative bodies

Andreas Warntjen, Simon Hix and Christophe Crombez

ABSTRACT This research note provides an overview of the party political make-up of EU legislative bodies for the period 1979–2004 (Commission: 1979–2007) in terms of the left–right and pro-/anti-Europe dimensions. The various methods of measuring political positions are discussed and compared. Measures for the left–right dimension based on party manifestos and expert surveys are relatively strongly correlated for the time period. This is not the case for the pro-/anti-Europe dimension. The dataset is available via the homepage of the European Legislative Politics Research Group (www.elprg.eu).

KEY WORDS Dataset; EU; left–right; measurement of political positions; political parties; pro-/anti-Europe.

1. INTRODUCTION

Political parties have become a focus of research on the European Union (EU) (cf. Hix 2008; Lindberg et al. 2008; Manow, et al. 2008). Even scholars who are not studying parties per se use data on their policy positions as a proxy for the goals of European political actors. The most widely used policy positions of parties are on the left–right and pro-/anti-Europe dimensions (Hix and Lord 1997). However, so far, cumulative research in this area is impaired by a lack of shared datasets (Gabel et al. 2002). We compiled a dataset on the party political composition and positions on the left–right and pro-/anti-Europe dimension of all legislative bodies in the EU between 1979 and 2004: in other words, starting with the first year in which the European Parliament was elected directly and ending with eastern enlargement. The dataset will be publicly available to facilitate further research and to ensure direct comparability of results. This research note briefly discusses the issues involved in the measurement of party political positions, introduces the dataset, and provides a quick overview of party political movements in the EU institutions.

2. THE MEASUREMENT OF POLICY POSITIONS

Several measurement techniques have been employed to estimate the position of political actors. We can distinguish between four principal sources of data. The first of these sources are statements of political actors. Party manifestos, for
example, have been studied to infer the political positions of parties on a number of issues. More recently, computer-aided coding has been used to study a wider range of texts (party manifestos, speeches, etc.). A second method is to ask ‘experts’ (usually political scientists) to estimate the location of political parties in a variety of policy dimensions. A third method is to use opinion poll data. Here, survey respondents were either asked to place parties directly on a given issue continuum (e.g. the ubiquitous left–right dimension) or their self-placement was combined with a question on their partisan affiliation. A fourth method is to study the behaviour of actors (e.g. voting behaviour in the legislature) to infer their political position.

However, none of these methods measures the positions of political actors directly. Political statements do not necessarily present the true positions of political actors as they are also affected by strategic calculations. Expert surveys and public opinion polls both measure the perception of the position of political parties. And political behaviour reflects the preferences of actors and also the institutional setting. Nonetheless, these techniques often (but not always) provide reasonably close approximations of where political actors are located, and are used in a wide range of studies.

The most comprehensive dataset on the political positions of actors is provided by document analysis, namely the Comparative Manifesto project (CMP) (Budge et al. 1987, 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006). The CMP has manually coded the party platforms of all parties standing for elections in Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries after the Second World War and for the former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe after 1990. Party positions on 56 issues in the fields of external relations, freedom and democracy, political system, economy, welfare and quality of life, and social groups were coded. To provide an overview of the positions and priorities of parties, the coders assigned each quasi-sentence in a party manifesto to one of the categories. Each (grammatical) sentence can consist of several arguments; a quasi-sentence is an expression of just one argument. This way of dividing up the text ensures that the measurement is not influenced by style (e.g. one party using longer sentences than the others). The final score is derived by calculating the percentage of quasi-sentences devoted to a particular issue with the overall number of quasi-sentences (i.e. the length of the text) as the base (for coding instructions, see Budge et al. 2001: appendix II). To locate parties in terms of a general left–right dimension, the scores for policies typically associated with left-wing ideology (e.g. regulation of capitalism, expansion of social services) are subtracted from the scores of typical right-wing policies (e.g. free enterprise, law and order). Thus, a negative score on the left–right scale denotes leftist policy stances, whereas positive scores denote right-wing positions (for details, see Budge and Klingemann 2001: 22).

The coding scheme was influenced by valence theory (Budge and Bara 2001: 6–7). According to valence theory (Stokes 1966; Robertson 1976), political parties do not compete directly on issues with one group advocating an issue and the other arguing against it. Instead, political parties put different emphases
on different issues. For example, a social democratic party would not argue against tax cuts but for an expansion of the welfare state. Despite this theoretical background of some of the members of the CMP group, their coding scheme can be used to generate positional data (Benoit and Laver 2006: 65–6). First, 24 of the categories are explicitly positional (cf. Budge 2001a: 82–4; Budge 2001b: 55–9). There is, for example, one category for welfare state expansion and one for welfare state limitation. Second, nearly all the remaining indicators describe a particular view vis-à-vis a policy debate (e.g. favourable views towards farmers) rather than an issue (e.g. any reference to farmers). These indicators reflect a position on a given topic (McDonald and Mendes 2001b: 91–2). Third, categories describing (ideologically) mutually exclusive goals can be combined to generate a position on the overarching question. This forms the basis of the left–right indicator, which combines scores for ideal-typical left-wing and right-wing goals to determine the position of a party on the left–right dimension. In recent years, computer-aided analysis of documents has emerged as an alternative to manual coding. This technique is based on dictionaries which assign words to policy positions (Laver and Garry 2000; Ray 2001).

A second document analysis approach to estimate political positions is based on a comparison of the frequency of words in different texts (Kleinnijenhuis and Pennings 2001: 164–6; Laver et al. 2003). This technique builds on the idea that words have a different probability of appearing in a text based on the content of that text. The positions expressed in a set of comparable texts (e.g. party manifestos or speeches in parliament) can be inferred from a comparison of word frequencies if the position of a reference text is known (Laver et al. 2003). To avoid differences in word frequency owing to the context of a text, only texts of the same type (e.g. party manifestos or speeches) should be compared. The word frequency approach also allows the calculation of the uncertainty (confidence interval) around the estimated (mean) position of an actor (Laver et al. 2003; Benoit and Laver 2006: 66–7).

Instead of relying on documents, both public opinion and expert surveys have been used to estimate the policy positions of political actors. Some public opinion surveys include a question on the political position of parties. Alternatively, a self-placement on a policy dimension by a respondent can be combined with a statement on his or her partisan affiliation to create an estimate of the position of the party (Mair 2001: 14–15). Expert surveys ask country experts to provide the location of political parties on a given policy dimension (e.g. Castles and Mair 1984; Laver and Hunt 1992; Benoit and Laver 2006). Another source of information is the political behaviour of actors, most prominently their voting behaviour (Poole 2005; Hix et al. 2007). However, this is often limited because of data availability (e.g. there are no public voting records for the European Commission). Hence, we will not pursue this further.

None of the available techniques are direct and unbiased measures of political positions: surveys reflect the perception of political parties, texts
such as party manifestos and speeches are influenced by strategic calculations. Consequently, all methods of estimating political positions have their relative advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage of expert surveys is that they represent the cumulative knowledge of experts in the field. Both expert and public opinion polls can also be tailored to specific research needs. A researcher can, for example, choose which and how many policy dimensions to include (Benoit and Laver 2006: 73–7). The main advantage of expert surveys may also be their main disadvantage in so far as they only offer a ‘crude synthesis’ of other data sources: ‘experts 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’ (Mair 2001: 25). Thus, it is not necessarily clear to which incarnation of a party (i.e. the party in the electorate, the legislature or in government) and to which time period the responses apply (Budge 1999: 107–8). In contrast, the authorship, status and time of the writing of a document can be clearly established. Another disadvantage of both public opinion and expert surveys is their availability. ‘[E]ven avid devotees of survey techniques cannot rewind history to conduct new surveys in the past’ (Laver et al. 2003: 311). Thus, if a survey did not include a placement of political parties on a given dimension, this information is simply not available for this point in time. In contrast, documents can be analysed at any time with regard to any research question.

A problem common to all methods of estimating political positions is the potential of words and arguments to change their meaning and relevance over time (cf. Budge 1999: 107–8; Benoit and Laver 2006: 68–9). The coding scheme of the Party Manifesto Group, for example, includes a category on anti-imperialism. Anti-imperialism and the language associated with this idea refer to different political positions in the decades after the Second World War. Another example is the issue of environmental protection which is now much more prominent than it used to be. Hence, the frequency of words might differ across texts not because they differ in terms of content but because the meaning and connotation of the word itself have shifted over time. Similarly, different expert judgements on the positions of the same party over time might not reflect changes of positions but rather changes of circumstances. Given these relative advantages and disadvantages, not least in terms of availability, several studies have compared the results produced by different methods. The focus of these studies has been on a comparison of party manifesto data to expert judgements owing to the availability and prominence of these data sources. Comparisons of left–right scales derived from party manifesto data to expert judgements show that they produce similar results overall (McDonald and Mendes 2001a; Benoit and Laver 2006: 95–101; Klingemann et al. 2006: ch. 4; but see Keman 2007: 82). However, the match is not perfect. Some parties are placed differently by experts and party manifesto estimates generally show more volatility.
3. TRENDS IN THE PARTY POLITICAL MAKE-UP OF EU LEGISLATIVE BODIES

To describe the party political make-up of EU legislative bodies in a systematic fashion we compiled data on the party political composition and the positions of political parties from several existing sources (Woldendorp et al. 2000; Keesing’s Worldwide (2000); Budge et al. 2001; Hooghe et al. 2002; Hix et al. 2006; Klingemann et al. 2006; Wonka 2007; 2008; EJPR Political Data Year Book, various years).

Several steps have to be taken to derive political positions for EU legislative bodies. First, political positions cannot be represented in their complexity for a large number of issues. In so far as EU law involves regulation and redistribution, the left–right dimension familiar from national politics offers a useful shorthand to describe general trends. Second, it is not possible to generate unique data for each individual actor (i.e. Member of the European Parliament, minister, commissioner) within the legislative bodies. However, the assumption can be made that the actors in the EU institutions have broadly similar policy preferences to the political party to which they belong. In some instances, members of the Commission and ministers in the Council do not have a partisan affiliation. In this case, they were not included in the calculations. Third, EU legislative bodies are not governed by one individual political party. Instead, the political positions of several parties have to be aggregated.

We use a mean of party positions (weighted by the distribution of seats in the case of the European Parliament) to give a general impression of the development of the political positions in the three EU legislative bodies. While more theoretically sophisticated measures are available (e.g. median voter, pivot), the mean has the advantage of being a straightforward descriptive measure which is directly comparable across institutions. Incidentally, mean-based measures fare relatively well in terms of predictive power in a comparison of several decision-making models (Thomson et al. 2006).

The longest time series of policy positions is currently provided by the party manifesto group data. In the following, we discuss the trends in the mean positions of the actors in the EU institutions on a summary left–right dimension and a pro-/anti-Europe scale using the party manifesto dataset. There are some missing values, in particular for some French and Italian coalition governments and some of the smaller parties in the European Parliament. Both indicators of the general policy stances are composite scales. In the case of the left–right scale this is derived from the relative frequency of a number of topics that are a priori associated with a left or right position. A positive score indicates a position to the right of the political centre. For the pro-/anti-Europe scale this is based on the scores of two items: positive and negative mention of the European Community/EU. A positive score indicates that positive statements outweighed negative ones.

Figure 1 gives the party political make-up of the Commission for the period 1977–2007 (i.e. including the current Barroso Commission). Solid lines
indicate movement on the left–right dimension, the broken line tracks the pro-/anti-Europe stance of the mean value of the Commissioners’ national parties, based on their party manifestos. There is not much variation on the pro-/anti-Europe dimension. All values are positive and there is a peak in the third Delors Commission, in 1993/94. This lack of variation is probably due to the fact that issues of European integration are hardly contested by mainstream political parties and subsequently play only a small role in their election programmes. There is a more notable movement on the left–right dimension. Overall, the data show a rightward shift in the make-up of the Commission and a moderation of policy stances. While the Jenkins and Thorn Commissions in the 1970s and early 1980s were relatively left-wing, subsequent Commissions starting with Delors I have been more moderate. The first Delors Commission, the Santer and the Prodi Commissions lean towards the left, while the second Delors and the Barroso Commissions are more to the right.

Figure 2 provides the same overview of the European Parliament from the first directly elected Parliament in 1979 to the fifth Parliament, whose term ended in 2004. Again, there is little variation on the pro-/anti-Europe dimension of the mean Member of the European Parliament. On the left–right dimension, the first and the fourth Parliaments were clearly to the left of centre whereas the second and the third Parliaments display more moderate values, and the fifth Parliament represented a notable shift to the right.

Finally, Figure 3 gives the mean policy stances for the Council, based on the party manifestos of the parties in government in the EU member states. To derive a value for a coalition government, the values of the parties in the government were weighted by the number of cabinet seats that each party held. Just as with the supranational bodies, the values in the graph represent
Unlike the previous graphs the values are shown here for half-years because of the six-monthly Council Presidency. If there was a government change, the values for the government which was in office for the longest time during that six-month interval have been used. As can be expected, the values are more volatile as an election in any of the member states will affect the partisan position of the Council as a whole. Again, the values on the pro-/anti-Europe dimension are positive and relatively stable. In contrast, there is much variation on the left–right dimension. The early 1980s saw a relatively leftist Council which was

Figure 2 Party political preferences of the European Parliament (mean values), 1979–2004

Figure 3 Party political preferences in the Council (mean values), 1979–2003
followed by a decade of a more centrist or right-leaning one. After a short return of a leftist Council in the mid-1990s there was an alternation of moderately right-of-centre and then moderately left-of-centre Councils.

The party political trends just discussed are based on party manifesto scores. Would expert judgements paint a different picture (cf. Döring and Tiemann 2007)? To answer this question we calculated two measures of association (Pearson’s r, Spearman’s rho) between these two estimates of party positions (see Table 1). In the case of the Commission, these are the party manifesto and expert judgement scores for the political parties of all Commissioners for which both values are available. For the other legislative bodies, these refer to the parties represented via the member state governments in the Council and the European Parliament. The measures of association were calculated separately for each policy dimension and the three legislative bodies. The measures based on party manifestos and expert judgements on the left–right dimension are relatively highly correlated. Scatter plots of these values (not reported) show a linear relationship. These results suggest cautious optimism when it comes to the comparability of studies using different indicators for the left–right dimension. This is not the case for the pro-/anti-Europe dimension, where the indicators are only weakly correlated. This is because of the fact that many party manifestos did not cover European integration at all. Hence, there is no variation on this dimension as measured by party manifestos for some parties whereas expert judgements do show different assessments of parties’ positions on Europe.

### Table 1 Correlation between expert judgement and party manifesto data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Pearson’s r coefficient</th>
<th>p-value (two-tailed)</th>
<th>Spearman’s rho coefficient</th>
<th>p-value (two-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td><strong>Left–Right</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>0.58</td>
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<td>0.664</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council</td>
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<td>0.57</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
<td>0.589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pro-/anti Europe</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commission</td>
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<td>0.151</td>
<td>0.18</td>
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<tr>
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<td>&lt;0.01</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

4. **CONCLUSION**

A crucial variable in many studies of EU politics is the position of its legislative bodies. The role of political parties has become a focus of research on the EU as it is studied increasingly as a political system broadly comparable to the ones existing in its member states or in other parts of the world. Using several existing sources, we compiled a dataset on the party political make-up of EU legislative
bodies for the period 1979–2004. By combining this information with data on party political positions we can track the development of the positions of EU legislative bodies over time. The dataset contains both information based on party manifestos and expert judgements. We discussed the party movements as estimated by party manifestos. Both indicators are relatively highly correlated for the left–right dimension but only weakly correlated for the pro-/anti-Europe dimension.

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**NOTES**

1 We are grateful to Arndt Wonka for providing us with his dataset on the party political affiliation of Commissioners and to Martijn Vlaskamp for valuable research assistance. The Department of Government, London School of Economics and Political Science, and the Department of Political Science and Research Methods, University of Twente, have provided logistical support.

2 Via the data section of the European Legislative Politics Research Group’s website (www.elprg.eu).

3 The Italian government in 1995 (Dini) consisted entirely of independents and was excluded from the calculations.

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