

# Analyzing party competition through the comparative manifesto data: some theoretical and methodological considerations

Mattia Zulianello

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**Abstract** This paper deals with some of the theoretical and methodological concerns arising from an in-depth analysis of one of the most successful research groups in comparative politics: the Comparative Manifesto Project. The first part of the paper discusses its theoretical background: the dimensionality of the political space, the operationalisation of the saliency theory and whether through election manifestos it is possible to determine the actual party positions. The second part attempts to contribute to the methodological debate by focusing on generally neglected weaknesses of the CMP's method with regard to both the classification scheme and the coding procedure. In particular, it shows that it is probably impossible to correct the major problems here identified without destroying their comparability across time and space, since they are so deeply rooted in the CMP's approach.

**Keywords** Election manifestos · Party competition · Content-analysis · Left-right · Polarization

## 1 Introduction

Since 1979 the Manifesto Research Group (MRG), now the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), has been collecting and coding election programmes with the aim of determining the policy preferences of political parties (Volkens 2002). Election programmes are taken as indicators of the parties' policy preferences, and they are examined through quantitative content analysis. The first version of the classification scheme was developed by David Robertson (1976), who tried to analyse the dynamics of party competition in Great Britain. Since then the MRG–CMP method has been increasingly utilised to discover the preferences of relevant parties of more than fifty countries and its extensive dataset covers all free democratic elections since 1945 (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; Volkens et al. 2012).

The dataset produced by the MRG–CMP has served as the basis of hundreds of studies and received the APSA award for the best dataset in comparative politics in 2003. Despite

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M. Zulianello (✉)  
Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane, Florence, Italy  
e-mail: matt.zulianello@gmail.com

its overwhelming success, however, one suspects that the increasing tendency to use the CMP's dataset is dictated more by the convenience of bypassing the work-intensive phase of data-gathering than by a conviction of the essential worth of such a method. In this paper we argue that there are two broad sets of criticisms that can be addressed to the CMP: the first concerns the theoretical choices behind it, and the second deals with some weak points of the coding procedure and their consequences for the determination of party preferences.

## 2 Theoretical problems

### 2.1 The one-dimensionality of the political conflict

Peter Mair points out why it is worth locating political actors in a common space: (1) it allows us to compare parties and party systems both cross-nationally and over time; (2) it helps to explain the dynamics, structure and consequences of party competition; and (3) it sheds light on the workings and effectiveness of representative government (Mair 2001: 10–12). A general problem that confronts any analyst has to do with determining the number and identity of the policy dimensions needed to generate valid representations of political life (Benoit and Laver 2006: 49).

It is obvious that the reconstruction of one or more spaces of competition is far beyond the capabilities of any of the most frequently used techniques in the literature, such as mass surveys (Sani and Sartori 1978), content analysis (Budge et al. 2001) or expert judgments (Castels and Mair 1984; Huber and Inglehart 1995; Benoit and Laver 2006), regardless of their level of sophistication. At the same time, it is equally clear that they can only provide the operative tools for locating parties in a space previously identified and selected a priori by the researcher. Indeed, despite the great methodological differences between mass surveys, expert judgments and content analysis we can see how these lead in most cases to the same result, that is, the construction of a one-dimensional political space. This output derives from the theoretical orientation of the researcher, and such a political space is considered capable of gathering a great amount of information about the dynamics of party competition. Though we do not consider labels such as right and left as meaningless in terms of understanding political behavior, it is more appropriate to introduce the concept of political space to discuss if it is (still) possible to analyse the dynamics of party competition through the adoption of a one-dimensional perspective. Roberto D'Alimonte defines political space as:

The area of political conflict that underlies the relationship between voters and parties in a given political system in a given historical moment. Every political system is characterized by a number of conflicts [...] [and] the extent in which they are factors of mobilization of the electorate, they will influence the behavior of political parties and the strategies of the parties and, therefore, the trend of the electoral competition. (2004: 919)

In the literature there is a broad consensus that in many contemporary democracies the basis of the relationship between voters and parties is still perceived primarily in terms of left and right, but answering the question of political space by means of a priori identification of such labels is certainly simplistic and allows for a degree of arbitrariness in the analysis that is arguably “scientific”. In particular, the main danger is losing the link with empirical reality, the analytical core of our discipline.

Indeed, we believe that the old-fashioned distinction between left and right is unable to take into account news occurring in the meta-political reality, forces analysis to focus on

**Table 1** The components of the CMP RILE scale

Left categories	Right categories
Anti-imperialism	Military: positive
Military: negative	Freedom and human rights
Peace	Constitutionalism: positive
Internationalism: positive	Political authority
Democracy	Free enterprise
Market regulation	Incentives
Economic planning	Protectionism: negative
Protectionism: positive	Economic orthodoxy
Controlled economy	Welfare state limitation
Nationalisation	National way of life: positive
Welfare state expansion	Traditional morality: positive
Education expansion	Law and order
Labour groups: positive	Social harmony

Source Budge et al. (2001)

stereotypes and condemns analysis as intrinsically static (Tarchi 1994). The developments in Western party systems, with the gradual disappearance of the class vote and traditional loyalties (Dalton 2002; Mair 2002), the weakening of ideological appeal and the emergence and consolidation of political forces that challenge the classical dichotomy (for example, new centrist populist parties), lead us to doubt the necessity and the desirability of adopting such labels to analyse the ongoing dynamics of party competition. Some scholars argue, however, that party competition is still structured by only one dominant left-right dimension which has absorbed core sociocultural issues such as immigration (Van der Brug and Van Spanje 2009). Here, however, we agree with scholars who argue that left and right are ‘open and empty containers’ (Sartori 1982: 256), whose contents are influenced by both temporal and contextual dimensions that render comparative research between different countries on the basis of this single dimension unreliable (Ieraci 2006, 2008). As Jahn underlines, the left-right dimension is time- and country-specific, different statements have different meanings on a left-right scale and the importance of dimension itself varies across time and across countries (2010: 760).

To underline the inadequacy of the left and right categories as developed by the CMP we need to take a look at how the division of categories is determined in order to produce the RILE-score (Table 1).

The Right-Left Scale was constructed by the CMP by qualifying statements as ‘Right’ or ‘Left’ by merit of their factor loadings, and the RILE index is calculated by summing up the relative frequencies of thirteen ‘Right’ statements and subtracting the relative frequencies of thirteen ‘Left’ statements from a total of 56 statements (Jahn 2010: 747). The theoretical range of this scale is thus –100 to 100, although in practice nearly all RILE scores span the scale’s middle range of –50 to 50 (Mikhaylov et al. 2012: 80). As we shall see, the right and the left identified by the CMP are essentially stereotyped and, moreover, they arguably correspond to the empirical reality.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There have been several attempts to fix the manifesto scheme: Gabel and Huber (2000), for example, suggest simply extracting the first principal component from the 56 issues, developing an approach named the ‘vanilla method’, whereas others have retained the seven main categories in the original dataset and then extracted principal components from each category (Klingemann 1995).

In particular, we can see that the CMP scales have too much economic and too little social content (McDonald and Mendes 2001: 101–103). Keman argues that the inclusion of very different aspects in a left-right scale is not only confusing but also wrong and that ‘reducing these complex differences into one dimension or using simple dichotomies is bad for comparability and conceptual clarity’ (2007: 4). Although Budge and Laver (2006: 58) point out that the scale epistemology of the CMP is a posteriori, we can easily see that the method is based on a priori identification of what is left and right, since ‘it assumes in advance that we know the number and substantive meanings of key policy dimensions’ for the construction of the RILE score. Then, we can say that originally the CMP was a posteriori, but after the creation of the right-left scale it became a priori and essentially static. Even if we do not take into account the fact that many of the components used in Table 1 can be found in the rhetoric of both the right and the left (e.g. democracy, peace, freedom and human rights, free enterprise and so on), we should bear in mind that such a perspective on the study of party competition allows us to understand very little about the political reality.

What we are trying to suggest here is that even if the RILE scale was developed after a factor analysis based on 30-year-old data, such a scale should be open to change or adapt to the changing conditions of the objects of study. Benoit et al. argue that ‘the centrist bias in the CMP’s scales stems from the CMP’s “saliency” approach, which counts all uncoded text units in the denominator’ (2012: 2). However, the real problem is the summation of very different issues, with very different meanings and direction, to a level that raises doubt about the adequacy of a left-right dimension built in a similar way to that of the CMP. The inadequacy of a linear perspective is even more evident if we attempt to analyse the party competition in Eastern Europe, since as Bustikova and Kitschelt (2009) rightly point out the programmatic overlap between left and radical right parties is not limited to economic policy preferences as in the Western Europe (and to some aspects of foreign policies) but encompasses economic distribution as well as sociocultural issues.

## 2.2 Are election manifestos reliable indicators of parties’ policy positions?

Having outlined our scepticism about the suitability of left-right categories to analyze the contemporary dynamics of party competition, we must discuss two broad theoretical problems related to the CMP’s method, that is, the adoption of the Robertsonian saliency theory and the assumption that through election manifestos we are able to determine parties’ policy positions. David Robertson (1976) postulates a limited ability of the political parties to move along the left-right continuum and that they compete by emphasising and de-emphasising some issues and not others. This view is very promising, since it goes beyond Anthony Downs’s classical proximity theory (1957) because parties would not compete by taking different positions on the same set of issues but would prefer to focus on some very specific issues on which they perceive themselves as ‘strong’. According to Robertson, in short, positions do not matter as such and competitive differences are to be found in the importance that each party attaches to the different issues during an election campaign. We certainly agree with Budge and Farlie (1983) that parties will place certain issues more prominently than others on their policy agendas as well as with the assumption that parties will emphasise issues they ‘own’ (Bélanger and Meguid 2008; Green and Hobolt 2008; Petrocik 1996). A first step in dealing with this problem is to understand how these changes can be ordered in a theoretical framework more adequate to describe the contemporary political reality.

Christoffer Green-Pedersen rightly points out that the literature ‘pays little attention to how the changes in society affect the way in which parties compete for electoral support’ and that ‘the party competition in Western Europe has increasingly focused on an issue competition’

(2007: 607). Green-Pedersen's perspective is very similar to that of Robertson (1976) since its main argument is that parties will emphasise issues which they would like to see dominate electoral competition, although one cannot expect parties to focus solely on the issues they prefer, since they are at the same time forced to pay attention to issues that other parties have emphasised in their political agendas (Green-Pedersen 2007: 609–611). The main argument developed, however, is that the increased importance of issue competition, defined as the competition for the content of political agenda, implies the reduced dominance but not the disappearance of positional competition (Green-Pedersen 2007: 608).

Pedersen's analysis is convincing when he underlines that the relative dominance of positional competition on mainly economic left-right issues is decreasing, but the way in which he demonstrates this assumption is not. Green-Pedersen considers economic and distributional issues as 'definitely left-right issues', and the growing importance of issue competition is thus determined through the percentage of quasi-sentences referring to other issues than the former. As discussed in the previous paragraph, however, even economic issues cannot be considered unequivocally as rightist or leftist and, in particular, Green-Pedersen does not provide any tool for reconnecting the positional element of competition with that of salience. Indeed, even if we agree that issue and positional competition, despite their possible connections, should not be conflated (Green-Pedersen 2007: 610), we think that in order to disentangle the complex relationship between the two types it is necessary to abandon a linear perspective since even salience cannot be completely distinguished by the positional element.

Indeed, as some scholars have pointed out, positions and salience are two distinct components of a policy (Laver 2001: 66), political positions have both salience and direction (Kleinnijenhuis and Pennings 2001: 180) and should be evaluated independently (Pappi and Shikano 2004: 76). As Laver (2001: 73) argues, the saliency theory 'assumes a strong relationship between party position on, and party emphasis of, an issue' although there is 'a complex analytical relationship' between position and salience, as in some cases 'issue emphasis provides no systematic information about policy position'. One solution may be to determine which areas of competition a party decides to emphasise and, therefore, on what basis it chooses to organise and develop its political platform. Not all saliences are the same, since parties may emphasise the same policy area while expressing very different and even polarised political preferences. Volkens underlines that the saliency approach is often misunderstood because it 'is not non-positional but for the most part one-positional' (2007: 117), and Alonso and Claro da Fonseca point out that the CMP dataset, despite its emphasis on salience 'allow(s) for a positional interpretation (all except economic goals) [...] because many categories are split into a positive and a negative formulation' (2009: 8).

The second theoretical problem of the CMP has to do with the theoretical meaning that we should give to the data produced through content analysis of election manifestos. Invariably, the CMP's scholars argue that manifestos allow for measurement of party policy positions (Volkens 2001, 2002; Werner et al. 2011). It is arguable, however, that through such documents we can estimate 'real' policy positions. As some authors point out, for example, the CMP gives implausible placements of Italian parties (de Vries et al. 2001: 201–202; Pelizzo 2003, 2010) and tends to locate extreme (left) parties closer to the centre than do other approaches (Gabel and Huber 2000: 94). Indeed, we find Pelizzo's argument convincing:

[...] The scores generated [with the method of the CMP] indicate party *movements* rather than party *positions*. The scores show how the parties move to adapt to changing political conditions. In other words, they indicate how (and how much) parties modify their ideological outlook to remain electorally competitive (Italics in the original). Pelizzo 2003: 83]

Through a reanalysis of party manifesto data Pelizzo correctly underlines how the left-right scores of many Italian parties do not look very plausible, since the DC occupied the centre only in 1987 and, for example, the PCI became in 1953 the second most extreme right party after the PLI and the MSI occupied the right-most position only twice (1963 and 1987) (Pelizzo 2003). In brief, the Italian party system resembled the polarised pluralist party system described by Sartori (1976) only in 1987, and in the other elections, albeit it was a polarised pluralist one, it was so for different reasons from those suggested by Sartori himself (Pelizzo 2003: 71). Similar considerations can be formulated also for the Belgian, the Danish, the Dutch, the German (Pelizzo 2003: 81) and the Greek party systems (Dinas and Gemenis 2010) and the CMP's data provide misleading information about the locations of several extreme right parties as well as many Dutch parties (Pelizzo 2003: 78). For these reasons we agree with Pelizzo that the CMP's scores indicate party movements and not party positions. The rationale behind the former is that a party would attempt to shift the voters' perception of its location on the political spectrum and, consequently, election manifestos can be used as sources of information about the direction of competition (Pelizzo 2003: 83–86).

### 3 Methodological problems

#### 3.1 Non discriminating categories and arguable dichotomisations

The coding unit identified by the CMP is the so-called 'quasi-sentence', defined as 'the verbal expression of one political idea or issue' (Volkens 2001: 34). A numerical label is assigned to each quasi-sentence identified in the document, so that one of the fifty-six categories of the CMP's codebook corresponds to each code.<sup>2</sup> This coding procedure does not validate the equation 'sentence=quasi-sentence', as in a sentence one can find (and it happens very often) more than one politically relevant piece of information. The CMP classification scheme is constituted by fifty-six categories, which fall into seven major policy domains (external relations; freedom and democracy; political system; economy; welfare and quality of life; fabric of society; social groups).

Although the CMP's codebook appears to be very extensive and well-constructed, we can identify two major shortcomings: some issues do not find an adequate location in the classification scheme whereas others are dichotomised very harshly. The first problem is well-exemplified by the absence of a category that can collect negative references to immigration and by the information gathered by category 305, 'political authority'. One could say that at the time at which the codebook was created immigration was not relevant as it is today. It is true. Yet if on the one hand we can understand the reason why such categories are not present in the codebook, on the other we might ask how the increasing number of quasi-sentences relating to this topic in many election manifestos is handled by the CMP procedure. It is worth noting that there are two dichotomous categories concerning multiculturalism (607 and 608), and looking at their definitions we can appreciate that the concept of is not be confused with "immigration". However, this distinction allows to gather only "positive mentions of immigrants" (705), while leaving to one only possible destination for issues relating to negative references to immigration: category 000, that is, uncodable quasi-sentences. Then, the next logical step is to believe that the CMP's data present an increasing use of category

<sup>2</sup> If policies at the European level are discussed with respect to their impact at the national or regional level the appropriate code (108 or 110) has to be coded as well as the specific national position (Volkens 2002: 13).

**Table 2** Examples of negative references to immigration in three election manifestos with no quasi-sentence classified as ‘000, uncodable’

Conservative Party, 2005	UKIP, 2001	FPÖ, 2006
Our out-of-control immigration system encourages people trafficking and penalises genuine refugees	The experiences of Canada and Australia have shown the benefits of admitting immigrants on the basis of skill and experience, not national or ethnic origin	Stopping immigration
That is why a Conservative government will bring immigration back under control	The UKIP insists that the processing of asylum applications must be speeded up	The fact that Austria is not an immigration country has to be laid down in the Federal Constitution
We will set an overall annual limit on the numbers coming to Britain, including a fixed quota for the number of asylum seekers we accept	Asylum applicants must, however, be closely monitored during the application process	A Secretariat of State that would deal with the repatriation of foreigners has to be established
Refusing to set a limit on new migrants is irresponsible politics	The current system, which affords the opportunity to ‘disappear’ makes a mockery of the law and helps to make Britain a popular destination	A visa requirement for non-EU foreigners has to be introduced
This government has lost effective control of our borders	Britons of all origins favour a firm but fair asylum policy	

Sources Conservative Party ‘*Are you thinking what we’re thinking? It’s time for action*’, 2005 General Election Manifesto; UKIP, ‘*2001 General Election Manifesto*’; FPÖ, ‘*Wahlprogram der Freiheitlichen Partei Österreichs Nationalratswahl*’ 2006

000, since immigration is becoming a highly debated issue in the election campaigns of advanced democracies. Indeed, the converse is the case.

To explore this controversial point, wish to analyse three election manifestos for which the CMP’s dataset does not identify any uncodable quasi-sentences: the British Conservative Party (2005), the UKIP (2001) and the Austrian FPÖ (2006). Since the number of uncodables is, according to the CMP, zero, we should expect no negative references to immigration in these parties’ manifestos. As shown in Table 2, however, there are several quasi-sentences which clearly concern immigration, and we must underline that we have reported here only a few examples although the three parties dedicate at least one section of their manifestos to the topics of immigration and/or asylum.

The next step is to ask how such references are coded by the CMP, since there are no adequate categories able to gather negative attitudes towards immigration. A good example of how the classification scheme performs very badly can be taken by the Conservative Party’s election for the 2005 election (Great Britain). In such document, there is even a paragraph titled ‘Secure Borders and Controlled Immigration’ and the references to immigration are several, and some of them are reported in Table 3.

The implications of how the quasi-sentences reported in Table 3 are coded are evident. In such examples the quasi-sentences concern immigration, and a classification scheme grounded on the ‘saliency theory’ and unable to discriminate such policy preferences is clearly destined to underperform. In particular, we should be aware of the implications of such codes for the construction of the RILE scale. The quasi-sentences coded 305, ‘political



**Table 3** Examples of classification of references to immigration according to the CMP's classification scheme

	Quasi-sentence	Code
The original documents with handwritten codings can be downloaded from the Manifesto Project Database <a href="https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/">https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/</a> Source Conservative Party, 'Are you thinking what we're thinking? It's time for action', 2005 General Election Manifesto, p. 19	This government has lost effective control of our borders. More than 150,000 people (net) come to Britain every year, a population the size of Peterborough. Labour see 'no obvious upper limit to legal immigration'	305×3
	That is why a Conservative government will bring immigration back under control	305
	Our objective is a system where we take a fixed number of refugees from the UNHCR rather than simply accepting those who are smuggled to our shores	705
	We will set an overall annual limit on the numbers coming to Britain, including a fixed quota for the number of asylum seekers we accept	705
	Refusing to set a limit on new migrants is irresponsible politics	305

authority', go to the 'right', whereas those coded as 705, 'underprivileged minority groups', are not used to produce the RILE score. Also, some quasi-sentences of the *same* topic but following *different* directions are not taken into account for the determination of party salience. Moreover, the quasi-sentences coded as 705 in Table 3 are given a 'positive' orientation toward immigration whereas a reading of the entire paragraph shows clearly that the references to both immigrants and refugees have a clear direction towards the reduction of their numbers.<sup>3</sup>

There is another category of the classification scheme that is even more ambiguous than the previous ones: category 305. Such a category is labelled 'political authority', and stands for 'favorable mentions of strong government, including government stability; manifesto party's competence to govern and/or other party's lack of such competence'. As we can see, there are three very different elements in this category, which are unlikely to be considered as indicators of 'political authority'. In particular, category 305 is even used to construct the RILE score, and this increases scepticism about the scientific meaning of such a scale. To make this point clear, let us examine some examples of category 305 as coded by the CMP, in particular by taking into account that such a category is considered to be one of the 'right' (Table 4).

Table 4 shows how party declarations about competitors' under-performance are assigned to a category which is unable to determine the party emphasis even if the content of the quasi-sentences is quite clear (early release of criminals, international relations and welfare), and this results in loss of information and unacceptable determination of a party's emphasis. Moreover, we believe it is simply unacceptable to assign such a category to the polarity of the 'right', as this passage of the British Liberal Democrats' manifesto clearly shows:

Conservative and Labour governments have changed Britain into one of the most unequal societies in the developed world, where ordinary people struggle to make ends meet while the richest benefit from tax breaks.<sup>4</sup>

Without the references to the Conservative and Labour governments this quasi-sentence would, however, be coded as a 'leftist' quasi-sentence. According to the CMP's RILE scale,

<sup>3</sup> An attempt to determine party positions on immigration from the CMP's dataset is made by [Alonso and da Fonseca \(2009\)](#).

<sup>4</sup> Liberal Democrats 2010 Election Manifesto, p.13.



**Table 4** Examples of the inadequacy of category 305 to determine ‘selective emphasis’

Party	Code: 305, ‘political authority’	Political problem
Conservative Party, 2010,	In the last 3 years, 80,000 criminals have been released early from prison because the Government failed to build enough places	Early release of the criminals
Labour Party, 2010, 70	The poverty of the Tory vision is summed up by their false choice between an alliance with the United States and one with Europe	Relations with the EU and the United States of America
Liberal Democrats, 2010, 17	Pensions and savings have been undermined	Reform of the system of benefits

Source Conservative Party: ‘*Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*’, General Election Manifesto 2010; Labour Party: ‘*A Future Fair for All*’, General Election Manifesto 2010; Liberal Democrats: ‘*Change That Works for You. Building a Fairer Britain*’, General Election Manifesto 2010

**Table 5** Examples of hazardous dichotomisations from the British parties’ manifestos

Party manifesto	Quasi-sentence	Code assigned
Conservative Party, 2005, p. 8	A conservative government will put the right values at the heart of our education system	506, Education expansion (Left)
Labour Party, 2010, p. 21	In an insecure world, people need first-class healthcare they can rely on	504, Welfare state expansion (Left)
Liberaldemocrats, 2010, p. 50	Every child deserves a happy life free from poverty and free from fear	603, Traditional morality: positive (Right)

Source Conservative Party, ‘*Are you thinking what we’re thinking? It’s time for action*’, 2005 General Election Manifesto; Labour Party: ‘*A Future Fair for All*’, General Election Manifesto 2010; Liberal Democrats: ‘*Change That Works for You. Building a Fairer Britain*’, General Election Manifesto 2010

any reference to category 305 serves to increase the percentage of the ‘right’ of the party’s manifesto, and this gives us an idea of both the inadequacy of the classification scheme and the sensitivity of the coding procedure to the style of document (see next paragraph).

Indeed, it is true that ‘a basic check of validity of a classification scheme is the proportion of texts units left as uncodable [...] a classification scheme is not or no longer valid if this proportion is high or if it increases considerably over time’ (Volkens 2007: 117) but it is unlikely that the decrease of the percentage of category 000, ‘uncodable’, implies its greater ‘validity’. On the contrary, it should invite us to check the dataset and the original manifestos and make some critical comparisons, as per our examples in Tables 3, 4 and 5. At this point, it is clear that the classification scheme presents several categories with very low discriminating power, and the consequences of this can be very significant for any study using the CMP’s dataset.

The second major problem of the CMP’s classification scheme has to do with the way in which some categories are dichotomised. Let us consider the possible statements in two policy domains, education and welfare. In such cases, the party preferences are likely to be more ‘general’ than ‘directional’, since expressing positions explicitly against both may be a competitive hazard. Instead, it is very likely that a party, even if it actually prefers a reduction in the range of welfare or education services, does not express clearly such direction.

Although it may seem trivial, a harsh dichotomisation of the quasi-sentences relating to welfare and education includes in the category ‘positive’ very general references such as ‘Party x is outraged by the phenomenon of medical malpractice’ and ‘Party y strives to improve the quality of education’. In sum, the risk is attributing a polarity to quasi-sentences even if they do not have any ‘directional’ meaning at all.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, it is appropriate to recall the warning of Giovanni Sartori:

The lower the discriminating power of a conceptual container, the more the facts are misgathered, i.e., the greater the misinformation. Conversely, the higher the discriminating power of a category, the better the information (1970, 1039)

In addition, a quasi-sentence referring to education can be legitimately included in the CMP’s classification scheme if it stands for the ‘need to expand and/or improve educational provisions at all levels’. The codebook is not so clear regarding the dichotomisation of the welfare state, but we should expect that in category 504, ‘welfare state expansion’, we can include references about improving the system, as is also possible for category 506, ‘education expansion’. The pitfall is obvious: it should be clear that many ‘improvement’ statements do not express a clear ‘direction’ at all (Table 5). As a leading CMP scholar admits ‘few parties will for example propose limiting education: thus references to education are almost all for expansion’ (Budge 2001: 59). Let us consider, for instance, these possible quasi-sentences ‘Party j considers education essential for the development of the country’ and ‘Party z will fight to improve the quality of the welfare system’: can they be considered in themselves expressions of a direction toward an ‘expansion’ in the education and welfare system? Obviously not. Instead, it is possible that the importance given to ‘quality’ by Party j (and the same is true for the example relating to welfare) could well lead to a party’s preference for a minimal state intervention in such a policy area.

### 3.2 Codes are heavily influenced by the style of writing

The second broad set of methodological criticisms that we can make of the CMP has to do with the choice, in the coding procedure, between the so-called ‘policy goals’ and ‘policy means’. We do not consider completely acceptable the consideration that ‘all party programmes endorse the same position, with only minor exceptions’ (Budge et al. 2001: 82). Despite the great growth in automated methods, the most common means of analysing political documents remains manual content analysis (Krippendorff 2004; Neuendorf 2002) and the MRG–CMP is one of them. In particular, here we focus on an important feature of the CMP’s procedure, that is, the assignment of only one code to each quasi-sentence, with the exception of references to the European Union. To clarify this point, we provide an example taken from the electoral programme of Chunta Aragonesista for the elections to the Cortes de Aragón in 2007:

In order to improve the accessibility of the health system and the quality of life in the rural areas of Aragón, we will realize the necessary investments in health centers and local surgeries, we will increase the number of paediatricians, and we will extend the number of basic medical specialties, the high resolution surgeries, and the ambulatory surgery to as many rural districts as possible. (Volkens et al. 2010)

This long period is coded by the CMP as a single argument and to it is assigned a single code, but this seems an oversimplification. It is true that, as anticipated, in accordance with the

<sup>5</sup> Protsyk and Garaz (2011) establish a ‘neutral’ category for multiculturalism to cover the same concerns we point to here.

**Table 6** The distinction between policy ‘goals’ and policy ‘means’

Party	Quasi-sentence	Code	Policy goal	Policy mean
Conservative Party	We will achieve this through: a freeze on major new Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) spending; immediate negotiations to achieve cost reductions from major suppliers; tighter control of public sector recruitment; reductions in discretionary spending, including travel, expenses, advertising, consultancy and office supplies; and, reductions in public sector property costs	305; 411; 414; 303; 303; 303	Deficit reduction	Cut ICT spending; Cost reduction Recruitment controls Reduction discretionary spending Reductions property costs
Labour Party	We will [reduce the deficit] through a combination of: fair tax increases; a firm grip on public spending including cuts in lower-priority areas; and strategies for growth that increase tax revenues and reduce spending on benefits	414 and 402	Deficit reduction	Fair taxes increases Grip on public spending Cuts lower priority areas Strategies for growth
Liberaldemocrats	Overhaul Westminster completely: fair votes, an elected House of Lords, all politicians to pay full British taxes	304	Political corruption	Electoral reform Elected House of Lords Taxation of MPs

Source Conservative Party: ‘*Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*’, General Election Manifesto 2010; Labour Party: ‘*A Future Fair for All*’, General Election Manifesto 2010; Liberal Democrats: ‘*Change That Works for You. Building a Fairer Britain*’, General Election Manifesto 2010

CMP coding the breakdown of the sentences into quasi-sentences is required only in cases where there are more political arguments, but that carries a very real danger of losing a great deal of politically relevant information. Indeed, although there is just one main argument (health policy) five “concrete” measures are proposed by Chunta Aragonesista.<sup>6</sup> The point is particularly relevant if we consider that CMP scholars underline that a key advantage of their method is its independence from the writing style. Yet it is evident that a slightly different writing style would have produced very different results, since the presence of a full stop implies the presence of (at least) one quasi-sentence.

In Table 6 we compare the codes assigned to some quasi-sentences by the CMP with the political arguments that can be identified in each passage taken from an election manifesto.

As we can see, in each example the quasi-sentences identified by the CMP follow the ‘policy goal’ declared by the party, but this is exactly the reason why the results are heavily influenced by the writing style. This is particularly evident in the passage taken from the Liberal Democrats’ election manifesto. Indeed, although only one quasi-sentence is identified by the CMP, and it is classified as 304, ‘political corruption’, there are three political arguments:

<sup>6</sup> As Protsyk, a CMP’s scholar argues, the quasi-sentences which imply specific actions the party aims at undertaking, are to distinguished (2010: 4–5).

electoral reform; the transformation of the House of Lords into an elective assembly; and the reform of taxation for MPs. Who can argue that these topics are just policy means and not policy goals in themselves? Here we have a clear examples of how the choice between the ‘goal’ and the ‘means’ causes the CMP to be heavily influenced by the style and not independent as their scholar argues.

There are at least two reasons why we should question the adoption of a harsh distinction between them. First, a policy mean *always* implies a precise action by the party, which can in itself be a goal and, as such, it could have been written as a sentence on its own because it has a specific meaning. Second, and most importantly, we should not forget that in many cases the objectives of the parties are identical but the means through which they achieve a particular ‘goal’ may differ significantly. Let us take a very relevant and contemporary topic, the reduction of public debt. As we know, the ongoing economic crisis has revived the economy as a crucial topic in political debates throughout advanced democracies. Although it is very hard to find a party which denies the importance of reducing the burden of debt, there is no consensus on what measures should be adopted to achieve such a goal. For example, in the 2010 British election all parties expressed the importance of reducing public debt, but the means differed significantly. For example, parties agreed, *inter alia*, to ‘cut government contribution to Child Trust Funds [...]’ (Conservative Party, p. 8), ‘reduce the public sector to the size it was in 1997’ (UKIP, p. 4), ‘raise taxation from its very low level of only 36 % of GDP’ (Green Party, p. 9) and ‘cancel Eurofighter Tranch 3b’ (Liberal Democrats, p. 16). In short, it is easy to understand that polarisation is far from limited to the policy goals, and indeed is more likely to concern the ‘means’. Unlike the mainstream literature we argue that issues and *not* policies are the main sources of political conflict in contemporary party politics.

For example, within higher education policy, issues could be the introduction of tuition fees, the implementation of the Bologna Process, or the amount of public subsidy to be allocated to private universities. Some of these issues can also have effects on policy areas different from that of higher education. For example, an issue relating to apprenticeships has a clear impact on employment policy, perhaps raising new issues, such as reimbursement of expenses incurred by trainees, which has an effect on state budget and so on. It is hard to find a party taking a stance against the enhancement of the quality of education, but it is this policy goal that generates a number of potentially infinite controversial issues that feed political competition. Thus, we argue that parties most frequently compete by taking positions around topics defined as micro- or meso-level, rather than more general and meta-political ones, and this should invite us to reflect about the appropriateness of distinguishing between “policy goals” and “policy means”.

## 4 Conclusions

In this paper we tried to focus on some specific pitfalls of the CMP’s theory and method, some of which are generally neglected even by the literature that criticises it.

The real problem in dealing with the CMP is that is not possible to improve the quality of its data significantly without destroying its comparability, since more than 3,000 manifestos have been coded over the last forty years. We focused, however, on two broad sets of criticisms: theoretical and methodological. Although it is commonly accepted that the adoption of one theory instead of another should not be criticised, here we have underlined some critical links between the Robertsonian saliency theory and its concrete methodological expression.

Theoretically, although the reconstruction of a plurality of space of competition is always possible, the results would be rather unsatisfactory, since the many problems concerning the CMP are found in the coding procedure and classification scheme. It appears that a solution to the shortcomings identified in this study, in particular those relating to the coding procedure and the classification scheme, is not possible without destroying the cross-time and cross-space comparability of the results. Albeit we recognise that no method can be suit everyone, this study tried to underline some previously neglected problems related to the CMP's datasets, an endeavour which is, nevertheless, the best available for scholars of party competition.

What now? We believe that future work on party competition developed from the content analysis of election manifestos will face a dilemma: should they continue to adopt the CMP's datasets despite being aware of their limitations, adopt minor revisions which, however, cannot solve most of the problems we have underlined in this paper, or begin the construction of an alternative approach? The last solution, however, would not lead, at least in the short term, to the creation of a dataset able to match the size and importance of the results produced by one of the most successful research groups in the history of comparative politics.

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