

## **Political Parties and Comparative Policy Agendas: an ESF Workshop on Political Parties and their Positions, and Policy Agendas**

**University of Manchester, 20-21 May 2010**

The workshop is part of the collaboration funded by the ESF – a EUROCORES ECRP 2007 project - *The Politics of Attention: West European politics in times of change*, led by Stefaan Walgrave, Department of Political Science, University of Antwerp.

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### **Background**

There is a substantial and important literature on the different issue profiles, agendas, and strengths of political parties in campaigns (Petrocik 1996), manifestos (e.g. Budge & Hofferbert 1990; Klingemann et al. 1994; Budge et al. 2001; MacDonald & Budge 2005; Grossback et al. 2006) and party positions (Adams 2001; Adams et al. 2005; Green 2007). Such studies find that parties tend to mark out distinct issue agendas for political competition. This has consequences both for electoral outcomes and for the governing mandates of election winners. The interplay of party and issue competition is central to understanding modern politics.

In contrast, the literature on policy agendas (e.g. [www.comparativeagendas.org](http://www.comparativeagendas.org)), which form the basis of the ESF project *The Politics of Attention: Western European Politics in Times of Change*, considers how patterns of issue attention are affected by institutions, issue definitions, and selective attention (e.g. Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Theories of punctuated equilibrium argue that the combination of “friction” in institutions with a dominant issue definition induces extended periods of policy incrementalism interspersed with sudden and dramatic policy shifts as pressure exceeds the threshold required for change. Most studies of policy agendas tend to focus on governing institutions, leaving party politics to one side or adding political parties as an exogenous influence on the agenda rather than as an integral part of policy dynamics. It is therefore arguable that the theoretical and empirical treatment of political parties could be better developed in analysis of the content and dynamics of policy agendas. For example, this might offer possible explanations of how and why the policy agenda reacts to public opinion and how policy-makers seek to shape political attention. The proposed workshop therefore aims to enrich the study of policy agendas and party positions by engagement of these two literatures, drawing upon theoretical synergies and reflecting upon the growing number of datasets available to scholars for research.

The analysis of party agendas using data from the Comparative Manifestos Project is a long-running research programme originating from the seminal work of Ian Budge, Michael McDonald and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (Klingemann et al. 1994), which culminated in a large scale longitudinal comparative analysis of policy preferences of political parties in the post-war era (Budge et al. 2001). Existing work on parties and policy agendas suggests that party positions have become increasingly complex over time (Green-Pedersen 2007) and exhibit punctuated dynamics of attention (Walgrave and Nuytemans 2009). The decline of cleavage-based politics (e.g. Franklin et al. 1992) presents an opportune time to bring together researchers specialising in political parties – and the analysis of party positions – and researchers working on policy agendas – of governments, opposition parties and other political institutions ([www.comparativeagendas.org](http://www.comparativeagendas.org)).

This workshop will provide an opportunity for researchers to present recent work and exchange ideas on theory, measurement and analysis of political parties and policy agendas. It will compare and contrast the theoretical approaches of agenda-based and spatial models of politics, and associated questions of measurement, data collection, and analysis. That is, what synergies might be found in considering the issue-based and left-right dimensions? What sort of overlap is there between particular issues and left-right positions.

The programme will attempt to advance understanding of questions such as:

- What theoretical differences are there between the study of political parties and policy agendas? What possible synergies are there between these approaches?
- What difficulties do researchers encounter in measurement of policy topics and left-right positions?
- Do parties matter in the composition of policy agendas?
- Is it possible to analyse agendas data with a spatial model so that parties choose both a space on the left right scale and an item on the policy agenda?
- Does the policy agendas approach offer new data or measures (e.g. agenda diversity) that might be used in the study of political parties?
- Is there future scope for a research agenda of comparative work on political parties and policy agendas?

### **Provisional programme/agenda of the activity**

#### *Day 1*

##### Session 1: 2-5pm

##### The State of the Art in Research on Party Positions and Policy Agendas

Introductions & Welcome to Manchester

-The Comparative Agendas Project: An Introduction

-Political Parties and Party Positions:

-Comparative Manifestos Project

- Measuring and Analysing Party Positions

Reception sponsored by the Democracy, Elections and Parties Network and Politics: 6-7pm

Dinner in Manchester City Centre 7.30pm

#### *Day 2*

## Session 2:

### Research on Agendas and Party Positions 9-10.45am

- Series of 4-6 papers with empirical research on policy agendas and party positions
- Abstracts to be submitted by February 2010.
- 10 minute presentations, 30 minutes for Q&A session

## Session 3: 11-1pm

### Methodological Approaches to Analysis of Parties and Policy Agendas

- Series of 4 papers with methodological/measurement orientation
  - Policy & Issue Coding: quasi-sentences, single/double coding and all that
  - Spatial models
  - Comparative Design & Analysis
  - Statistical Methods (e.g. leptokurtosis)
- Automated Coding
  - Text Tools
  - Word Scores

## Session 4 – Future Synergies of the Party Position and Policy Agendas Approaches?

Brief one-hour open session on future directions of research on party positions and policy agendas.

- The Comparative Agendas Project and Comparative Manifestos Project: possible data combinations?
- Comparative Design & Analysis

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