

# 110. Party manifestos and political representation

DANIELA BRAUN AND GIUSEPPE CARTENY

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary democracies, the link between voters and political parties represents a crucial cog in the machinery of political representation. It represents the first link in the chain of delegation of liberal-democratic systems which threads itself from citizens to governments (Müller, 2000). The empirical analysis of this connection allows one to gauge whether or not political parties *substantively* represent voters' needs and demands (Pitkin, 1967). While this can be achieved using different research epistemologies, methodologies or methods, contemporary political science usually adheres to a post-positivist perspective, generally employing quantitative methods to gauge the *congruence* between voters and their party preferences (Louwerse and Andeweg, 2020), and the *responsiveness* of parties to citizens' needs and behaviour (Russo, 2020). These analyses are usually developed by jointly investigating micro-data concerning citizens' preferences and behaviour – e.g., survey data – and related party characteristics.

Amongst the possible alternatives for analysing party features (for an overview, see Bakker and Hobolt, 2013), *party manifestos* represent a crucial data source. Manifestos – political parties' electoral programmes – consist of official documents that summarise parties' positions and priorities before an election. They allow an estimation of these positions and priorities, which in turn allows researchers to assess parties' substantive representation of voters' demands.

The following two sections of this chapter aim to describe the role that party manifestos play in political representation and address the following questions: first, what is a party manifesto and what role does it play for political representation? Second, how do political scientists use party manifestos in their research to map political representation? The final section deals with the theoretical assumptions on which the analysis of party substantive representation is based and the limitations of this research effort.

## 2. Parties, voters, and representation: the role of electoral manifestos for political representation

In the chain of delegation that runs from voters to legislatures, governments and policy outputs, parties play a number of important roles (Müller, 2000). They reduce complexity and difficulties in the electoral process, provide guidance and constraints to representatives in legislative bodies, enhance citizens' ability to observe and evaluate representatives' behaviour and affect cabinet formation. Whatever the perspective used, and despite some normative disagreements about their role, representative liberal democracy would be simply inconceivable and infeasible without political parties.

One of the most crucial functions of parties is to connect citizens with each link in the delegation chain. Relying on the framework provided by Pitkin in her magisterial work on political representation (1967), one might argue that parties connect citizens with the political system by acting as agents of both *descriptive* and *substantive* representation. Parties select, propose and support candidates, potentially allowing people to vote for other individuals who might be part of the same or similar social group according to certain – e.g., socio-demographic – characteristics. By doing so, they foster the composition of public institutions (like legislatures) that should resemble, more or less accurately, that of the whole nation (Pitkin, 1967: 60).

Nevertheless, parties usually provide consistent world views and policy platforms to both voters and candidates, thus enhancing the possibility for a *substantive* representation of voters' needs and demands in policymaking. Although the toolbox that parties can use for reaching such a form of representation has varied instruments and involves a range of behaviours at different stages of delegation (Müller, 2000), a fundamental tool for achieving this representation is the electoral programme issued by parties before election campaigns – the party manifesto. In these documents, political parties describe and explain their policy priorities for the period following the election. They can therefore be considered crucial for informing and constraining both voters and representatives, hence fostering a substantive link between voters' preferences, representatives' behaviour and policy outputs.

To be more specific, in line with manifesto research, we assume that issues emphasised by political parties in their manifestos are to a large extent consistent with the policies they advocate in parliaments and governments (Budge et al., 2001). Accordingly, party manifestos represent the collective expression of the policy preferences of a party and reflect the official positions of parties towards political issues that they have deemed relevant in an election. Of course, one has to take into account that these official documents are campaign instruments and are thus written with an eye to strategic considerations: in the elaboration of their manifestos, political parties for example consider the stances of their supporters and potential voters on political issues. While manifestos tend to be drafted by a rather small group of specialists within a party, they are regularly discussed and agreed upon by a party congress that is representative of party members and activists. We can therefore assume that the content of election manifestos reflects the official position a party takes on specific issues ahead of an election and is widely used by party elites and activists during the election campaign. Consequently, even if only a very few people actually read these manifestos, citizens are encouraged to pay attention to the elite communication concerning them and the media coverage of them.

So, party manifestos are a crucial piece in the representation puzzle. And analysing them, in conjunction with the analysis of voters' preferences, provides crucial information concerning the representation of these preferences in the political system.

### 3. Manifestos as data: how political scientists use party manifestos in their research on political representation

Manifestos can be used to gauge party *positions* on different topics – e.g., complex overarching ideological dimensions, such as the left–right one, or specific issues like taxes, immigration, foreign policy and so on. Issue analysis is generally used to investigate the positioning of political parties along with policy and ideological dimensions. Moreover, party manifestos allow one to estimate the *salience* parties attach to different issues and topics. It implies that the decisions about which topics to talk about and which ones are

perhaps best ignored is highly relevant from the perspective of political parties (see in particular Petrocik, 1996). Both positions and salience can be assessed qualitatively from a limited number of manifestos or quantitatively from a larger set of documents. In this chapter we focus on the latter approach.

To estimate party positions and salience, manifestos are usually manipulated by changing their structure while keeping their content intact – for instance, by breaking down a document into sentences. These new units of measurement are coded and then aggregated to produce estimates of the quantities of interest (for a systematic review, see Braun, 2023). Indeed, the analysis of party manifestos has a long history, mostly driven by the Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR) project (Lehmann et al., 2024), providing manifesto data on the national level, while several projects have also been developed for capturing party policy preferences for different electoral levels: the Euromanifestos (EM) project (Carteny et al., 2023) for the EU level of governance and the sub-national manifesto projects at the regional (Alonso et al., 2013) and local (Gross and Jankowski, 2020) levels.

When manifesto data are used in conjunction with systematic evidence concerning voters' preferences – e.g., survey data – they allow researchers to estimate voter-party *congruence* and *responsiveness*, in both a static (Louwse and Andeweg, 2020) and dynamic (Russo, 2020) fashion. There are many ways to conceptualise and operationalise voter and party positions, priorities and their interrelationships. All these steps are informed by normative and empirical considerations, which in turn relate to the questions a researcher is addressing. However, a few approaches tend to dominate the literature on voter-party congruence and responsiveness.

The most common approach consists in aggregating voter and party preferences on a single dimension or issue, in a given context, at a specific point in time. For this, party positions are relevant – and party positions, such as their positioning on the left–right dimension, can be primarily extracted from manifestos. Although a number of scholars have raised doubts about the validity and reliability of the estimates commonly used to measure the left–right positioning of political parties, this strand of literature has for a long time shaped a vibrant debate over the most

appropriate method for investigating party positions. Once extracted from party manifestos, these preferences are usually aggregated at the national level around election times, with the dimension of interest being the overarching left–right continuum. By doing so, one can then estimate the proximity or distance between voters and parties on a given issue, thus investigating the so-called mean or median voter representation model. Yet, one might also evaluate the congruence between the positions of voters of a specific party and the positions of the latter, the so-called mean *party supporter* representation.

A less explored perspective relies on salience theory regarding party competition, which looks at how much emphasis political parties place on particular political issues. For representation, this approach focuses on how voters' and parties' *priorities* align. These studies usually assume that substantive representation should not be simply related to the positions that voters and parties have on a given issue, but rather whether said issue is *relevant* for both of them. In other words, rather than positional congruence or responsiveness, these studies investigate *salience congruence* between voter and parties. As this kind of congruence allows us to build a more nuanced picture of the priority attached to issues on which voters and parties disagree, it represents the best option for investigating party-voter congruence on *valence* issues, namely policies, goals or issues that almost everyone approves or disapproves of – such as economic growth and public security, or corruption and terrorism.

### 3. Conclusions

In this chapter we tried to offer a broad view of the role of party manifestos in fostering and analysing political representation, in particular its substantive aspect. However, the research endeavours presented in this chapter all rely on the same set of assumptions and face similar limitations.

First, representation as congruence or responsiveness is a model which hardly exhausts the complexities of substantive representation and its possible realisations. Substantive representation is a phenomenon that involves a long list of normative assumptions. Some of these refer to the interests that should be represented – e.g., the nation as a whole, or individual constituencies. Other

assumptions concern whether substantive representation should be achieved at one link in the chain of delegation – party or representatives' positions and priorities – or another one, like a policy outcome (Pitkin, 1967: 209–240). In this regard, voter-party congruence or responsiveness sharply reduces the complexity of the phenomenon in its normative and empirical dimensions.

Second, reliability and validity when it comes to voter-party congruence rely on assumptions concerning both voters and parties. Congruence and responsiveness become relevant only if we assume that voters make up their minds and choose at the ballot box by comparing their own positions and priorities with those of the political parties participating in elections. While these assumptions are supported by empirical evidence, individual voting behaviour is informed by several other factors that do not follow this model.

Third, manifesto data itself also has limitations concerning validity and reliability. While the objectivity of manifesto data outweighs other data sources, this is less true for the reliability of the data, as one weakness of manifesto data relates to the manual coding procedure which is certainly prone to errors (for more detail, see Braun 2023). However, some of these reliability issues could be overcome in future by applying AI to quantitatively analyse manifesto data (using, e.g., large language models).

From a more general viewpoint, we can conclude that the general debates surrounding the strengths and weaknesses of coding manifesto data have endured throughout the long history of manifesto coding. However, the strengths of this data source far outweigh its weaknesses, since the data enable us to study the preferences of political parties over a long period and across many countries. One additional advantage is that manifesto data can be linked to other data sources, such as individual-level, demographic information. And this is one of the major advantages of manifesto data as a rich source for studying political representation.

### References

- Alonso, S., Gómez, B., & Cabeza, L. (2013). 'Measuring centre–periphery preferences: The Regional Manifestos Project'. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 23(2), 189–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2012.754351>.

- Bakker, R., & Hobolt, S. (2013). 'Measuring party positions'. In: G. Evans & N. D. De Graaf (Eds.), *Political Choice Matters* (pp. 27–45). Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199663996.003.0002>.
- Braun, D. (2023). 'Text analysis of party manifestos'. In: N. Carter, D. Keith, G. M. Sindre, & S. Vasilopoulou (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Parties* (First Edition) (pp. 439–449). London: Routledge.
- Budge, I., Klingemann, H.-D., Volkens, A., Bara, J., & Tanenbaum, E. (2001). *Mapping Policy Preferences: Estimates for Parties, Electors, and Governments, 1945–1998*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carteny, G., Reinl, A.-K., Braun, D., Popa, S. A., & Schmitt, H. (2023). *European Parliament Election Study 1979–2019*. Euromanifesto Study (ZA5102). <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14120>.
- Gross, M., & Jankowski, M. (2020). 'Dimensions of political conflict and party positions in multi-level democracies: Evidence from the Local Manifesto Project'. *West European Politics*, 43(1), 74–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1602816>.
- Lehmann, P., Franzmann, S., Al-Gaddooa, D., Burst, T., Ivanusch, C., Regel, S., Riethmüller, F., Volkens, A., Weßels, B., & Zehnter, L. (2024). *The Manifesto Data Collection*. Manifesto Project (MRG/CMP/MARPOR). Version 2024a [dataset]. Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB)/Göttinger Institut für Demokratieforschung (IfDem). <https://doi.org/10.25522/manifesto.mpps.2024a>.
- Louwerse, T., & Andeweg, R. B. (2020). 'Measuring representation: Policy congruence'. In: M. Cotta & F. Russo (Eds.), *Research Handbook on Political Representation* (pp. 276–288). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788977098.00031>.
- Müller, W. C. (2000). 'Political parties in parliamentary democracies: Making delegation and accountability work'. *European Journal of Political Research*, 37(3), 309–333. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.00515>.
- Petrocik, J. R. (1996). 'Issue ownership in presidential elections, with a 1980 case study'. *American Journal of Political Science*, 40(3), 825. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111797>.
- Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Russo, F. (2020). 'Responsiveness, the dynamic aspect of representation'. In: M. Cotta & F. Russo (Eds.), *Research Handbook on Political Representation* (pp. 314–325). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788977098.00034>.