CMP Coding

The origin of the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) can be precisely dated with the launching in 1979 of the ECPR cross-national Manifesto Research Group (MRG) under the leadership of Ian Budge and David Robertson. The project, which is still ongoing after almost thirty years in a much expanded form, has produced a huge amount of data, and numerous publications in the form of edited volumes (Budge, Robertson and Hearl 1987; Laver and Budge 1992; Klingemann, Budge and Hofferbert 1994; Laver 2001), a special edition of *Electoral Studies* (Spring 2007), and countless refereed articles, and chapters in edited volumes. The Comparative Manifesto Project now involves 52 countries. The project received the 2003 data set award from the American Political Science Association in recognition of its unique contribution to the field.

The initial objective of the CMP project was (and still is) to record and analyze the contents of the election platforms in democratic countries since World War 2. These data are then used to position the parties in their respective national political space and track their evolution from one election to another. The election platforms are coded into a pre-established set of 54 policy categories (see Volkens 2002). The coding unit is the paragraph, which means that each and every paragraph in a text is coded in one and only one category.

The CMP method postulates that political parties during election compete with one another by selectively emphasizing (priming) policy issues that are important to their constituencies, while trying to ignore issues that are not (Budge and Farlie 1983). Unlike Downs'(1957) model of party competition, which assumes that political parties directly confront each other on every issue, the selective emphasis model assumes that parties talk past each other focusing only on issues that are favourable to them while ignoring issues that could be electoral liabilities. The CMP method measures the location of political parties in a multi-issue space by computing the relative salience of issues in their election platforms. A strongly positive correlation between two parties indicates that they are close to one another on the multi-issue space. At the opposite, the strong negative correlation between two parties means that they are far apart from one another on the multi-issue space.

Each text is coded separately by two research assistants who, at the end, compare their respective coding and try to reach agreement when they disagree. When agreement cannot be reached, the assistants ask a referee to settle the issue. Successive waves of coding and arbitration are undertaken until perfect agreement is reached. The inter-coder agreement, the percentage of agreement between the coders when they first compare their results, is a measure of uniformity of comprehension and the only measure of uncertainty available. Disagreement can have many causes: cognitive differences between coders, ambiguity in the meaning of the manifesto or the categories, and random errors of coding. A low level of agreement threatens the validity of the coding process.

The strengths and weaknesses of the CMP method have been widely discussed. Here is a short list of some strengths and weaknesses based on Laver and Garry (2000), Benoit and Laver (2007), and Marks et al. (2007).

Strengths:
1. Relies on objective data;
2. Cumulative research over time;
3. Separation of preferences and behaviour;
4. Party manifestos provide direct evidence of declared salience.

Weaknesses:
1. Limited policy coverage and silent issues;
2. Issues that arise during the campaign are not covered;
3. No information about intra-party dissent on issues;
4. Ambiguity in the interpretation of manifesto and coding categories;
5. A posteriori interpretation: no objective standards for deciding whether a particular spatial interpretation is more correct than another.

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