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Party Manifestos

Pola Lehmann (WZB Berlin Social Science Center)

Abstract: Party manifestos are one of the most consistent and comprehensive sources to study parties' policy preferences. Written before an election in an oftentimes democratic process within the party they present the parties' self-ascribed and unified policy positions. They normally cover a broad range of policy topics, while especially emphasizing those issues most salient to the party. Manifestos have four main functions: Parties use them to communicate their policy preferences to prospective voters and competing parties; they serve as guidelines for parliamentarians; and they contribute to the party's unity and self-reflection. While some critics emphasize that manifestos only have a small readership, research has shown that the media does a good job in communicating manifesto content. Even more importantly voters should care what is written in manifestos, as the policy preferences and pledges made in manifestos have a huge impact during coalition building and on the policy output of government parties.

Keywords: party manifestos, political parties, elections, policy preferences, issue salience, pledges

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Defining Manifestos

Election manifestos, as they are called in the UK, or party platforms, as they are referred to in the US, are documents in which political parties, electoral coalitions or presidential candidates describe their policy preferences and record policy plans they promise to support once elected.¹ They are one of the most authoritative and comprehensive sources to study parties' policy preferences (Klingemann et al., 2006, p. xvi). Written before an election by the party itself they present the party's self-ascribed and unified policy positions and normally cover a very broad range of policy topics, while especially emphasizing those issues most salient to the party. Given this profile manifestos hold information about which issues are most salient to a political party, which positions it takes on certain issues, where to position it on overarching policy dimensions, and which concrete election pledges the party makes to its voters.

As a unique programme type they should be distinguished from general programmes, on the one side, and from election leaflets or short programmes, on the other side. In comparison to general programmes they are often much more specific. While general programmes outline a party's ideology and depict its policy preferences on a more general level, manifestos often describe very concrete plans with regard to certain policies the party wants to pursue if elected. Having such a broad outlook general programmes are often effective for many years or even centuries and the decision to write a new general programme often marks a decisive turning point in the party's history at which it adjusts its ideological stances. Election manifestos, in contrast, are written at a very specific point in time, they present the party's plan for the next legislature and thus inform the party's positions for the cause of the next electoral term. On the other side of the spectrum manifestos can be contrasted to election leaflets or short programmes, while these are – just as manifestos – written for an election, they are much shorter and not equally comprehensive, as they often only address certain policy areas and target specific voter groups (Merz & Regel, 2013, pp. 215–216).

Drafting and Adopting Manifestos: Manifestos and their Authors

Comparative research on how manifestos are written and adopted is unfortunately still rare, but there are a few country case studies that provide some insights into this process (e.g. Däubler, 2012; Dolezal et al., 2012; España-Nájera, 2018; Kavanagh, 1981; Merz & Regel, 2013). While these case studies attest an inclusion of different party groupings in the drafting process and also quite often an involvement of the party congress in the adoption, they also find notable variance. For example, there seems to be some evidence that left-wing parties tend to be more open towards including larger groups of party members in the manifesto production process than right-wing parties. The time used for drafting manifestos also varies and begins up to a year before the election (for Austrian parties see for example Dolezal et al., 2012, p. 874).

Length and Style of Manifestos: Changes over Time and Differences between Countries and Parties

Even though all manifestos share the unifying element of being written before an election and stating policy preferences, they do not all look the same. In fact, there is great variance in manifestos' length and style, which can partly be traced back to systematic differences between countries, party types or

¹ It should be noted that not all manifestos are literally called manifesto (or whatever the respective translation). Other frequent titles are, for example, government programme (to amplify the aspiration to govern), working programme or - in Australia - leader speech (dating back to the Australian tradition of party leaders giving an account of the party's programme before an election) (for the latter see Klingemann et al., 1994, p. 22). Finally manifesto titles are often quoting the party's election slogan.

over time developments. Such systematic differences are, for example, that new and smaller parties publish on average shorter manifestos than established parties, because the former often have fewer resources to write them and often also start with a smaller more specific issue set. Other differences are rooted in country specific traditions; e.g. the reason for the shortest manifestos on average being written in Latvia, lies in the fact that the Central Electoral Committee in Latvia obliges parties to submit an electoral programme no longer than 4000 characters (Balcere, 2014, pp. 481–482).

Significant changes can also be seen over time: manifestos become longer and more colourful and picture heavy. Changes which likely follow from the fact that manifestos used to be distributed as printed copies or as part of a party's newspaper and are nowadays mostly shared online. Another outcome from this development is that some parties do not publish a single manifesto anymore; but instead publish a small catalogue of issue-specific documents on a dedicated subpage of their website, allowing the parties to directly target specific voter groups.

The Four Functions of Manifestos

Manifestos serve four main functions: They communicate a party's policy preferences to prospective voters; they inform competing parties including potential coalition partners about the party's policy stances; they serve as guidelines for parliamentarians and party members in government; and they contribute to the party's unity and self-reflection. They are thus addressing very different audiences, from voters, over party members, to competing parties and have an outward as well as an inward looking aspect to them.

The first two functions are outward looking functions and the first one is maybe the most obvious one: manifestos are directed at voters. Many of these documents directly address the voters in the preamble. They are supposed to inform voters about the party's policy programme for the next legislative term and tell them what kind of policies they will get if they cast their ballot for the respective party. But voters are not the only external audience. In fact, parties also use their manifestos to communicate their positions to competing parties. This position signalling is important for position differentiation during election campaigns and for coalition negotiations after an election. From manifestos of competitors parties can take important cues with regard to who might be a suitable coalition partner because of positional overlaps, which issues might challenge a possible coalition formation, and where there is room to negotiate.

The third and fourth function are directed towards the party itself and address its members of parliament (MPs) and its party members. For MPs manifestos are an important guideline for their actions in parliament. They oftentimes contain very concrete plans for parliamentary behaviour and governmental decisions and MPs are well advised to act in accordance with them if they do not want to be accused of breaking their pledges (see below). Finally, by addressing party members manifestos contribute to the party's unity. They give members reassurance about the party's policy preferences and – if they are written and adopted in a more or less democratic way – they give party members a say in the position formation process – legitimizing the parties' policy stances (Merz & Regel, 2013, pp. 212–214; see also Harmel, 2018, pp. 229–233). But how relevant are these manifesto functions for the actual policy process?

Communicating Party Positions: Manifestos and the Media

This first function described above, might also be the most contested one, as opponents argue that voters do not read manifestos. But even though this is true in most cases, parties can still deliver their

message to voters and successfully do so through the media. Research comparing manifesto content with how parties are portrayed in the media finds a high correlation between the two: Policy issues especially salient to certain parties are associated with them in news articles and parties' left-right positions are reflected in these articles (Merz, 2017). Even though this general effect is slightly moderated by aspects like party size, which impacts in which situations parties can best get their policy preferences across (Schwarzbözl et al., 2020), it can be concluded that journalists are doing a good job in communicating the parties' manifesto positions to voters. In fact, manifestos are regularly mentioned in media articles before an election.

Competitors: Party Competition and Coalition Negotiations

The most frequent use of manifestos appears in party competition literature. Based on policy preferences extracted from manifestos this research strand has extensively studied how parties react to each others' positions both on overarching dimensions like left-right (for an overview see Adams, 2012), as well as on specific issues, like immigration policies (e.g. Dancygier & Margalit, 2019). Manifestos are thus sending important signals to competitors before an election. After an election they become relevant for coalition negotiations with these competitors. Manifestos are relevant for determining who are likely coalition partners, what policies the coalition agreement will incorporate, and portfolio allocation (e.g. Bäck et al., 2011; Laver & Budge, 1992).

Predicting Behaviour: Manifestos and Policy Output

Another manifesto function that is often contested is its relevance for post-election behaviour. It is a well nourished prejudice that parties do not care about their election promises once the election is over. Research has shown otherwise: the policy preferences and policy pledges made in manifestos have a huge impact on the policy output of government parties. There are primarily two research strands that have looked into the connection of manifesto content and government output. The first analyses in this regard were carried out by the Manifesto Research Group (today Manifesto Project), who compared issue saliency in manifestos with government spending in ten democracies. With the exception of two highly proportional systems with multiple party coalitions, the Netherlands and Belgium, they find a rather good congruence (Klingemann et al., 1994). The second strand is the research carried out by the members of the Comparative Party Pledges Project (CPPP)², who examine the fulfilment of manifesto pledges. Their results clearly underline the relevance of manifestos for government policies: They find that government parties fulfil on average around 60% of their pledges, though with some clear differences depending on the electoral system – similar to the results above (Thomson et al., 2017). Whereas in majoritarian systems the winning party faces fewer obstacles for implementing its manifesto, in proportional systems the necessity to form coalitions often demands compromises.

Manifesto Usage in Research

Because manifestos are one of the most authoritative sources for party preferences and are being published by many parties worldwide, they are a useful source for comparative research. Consequently, they have been the basis for many studies in past decades.

² <https://comparativepledges.net/>

Manifestos: A source for parties' policy preferences

The most frequent usage of manifestos in research is their application for estimating parties' policy preferences. The methods used to extract policy preferences from manifestos range from qualitative and quantitative content analysis, to automated classification methods.

The usage of manifestos to study parties' policy preferences has not been uncontested though. Alternative sources being suggested in this context are expert studies, voter surveys, surveys of parliamentarians, or media studies. All of these are important sources for parties' policy positions, the interesting question though is not, how well they are correlated, but why they differ, as they measure substantially different things: From the position the party wants to communicate (manifestos) and intra party variance (parliamentarians), to the position the media reports (media), and the position that is being perceived by voters (voters) and experts (experts).

Manifesto Research beyond Party Positions

While estimating party positions is clearly the most frequent use case of manifestos in research, it is not the only one. First, manifestos contain a lot of content beyond policy preferences that is subject to research (e.g. their readability, their prospective or retrospective outlook, attacks on the opponents), second the genesis of manifestos is an interesting research question in itself (see above).

Manifesto Data

As manifesto research has played such an important role in political science and political communication research for so long, there is a great pool of data researchers interested in manifestos can draw on. The main source is the data provided by the Manifesto Project. This is a large long-standing project, which uses manual coding to analyse national manifestos in over 60 countries dating back to 1945. The content analytical data as well as the original manifesto texts can be accessed through the Manifesto Project Dataset and the Manifesto Corpus³. Another source for manually coded manifestos is the Comparative Agendas Project, which analyses many different text types of the political process, among them manifestos⁴. Researchers interested in other state levels can also consult the Euromanifesto Project⁵, the Regional Manifesto Project,⁶ or the Local Manifesto Project⁷. The former two using adapted versions of the Manifesto Project's coding scheme, the latter one employing automated classification for text analysis. Finally, original manifestos can also be found on the website of the Polidoc⁸ project and through many national archives.

³ <https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/>

⁴ <https://www.comparativeagendas.net/>

⁵ <https://www.uni-saarland.de/lehrstuhl/braun/standard-titel/euromanifesto.html>

⁶ <http://www.regionalmanifestosproject.com/>

⁷ <http://www.localpartymanifestos.de/>

⁸ <http://polidoc.net/>

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