Parties in Democracy, Democracy in Parties:
Lessons from Ian Budge and the CMP Data

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The Manifesto Research Group and its offspring, the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP), have produced important benefits. Its benefits are too many to enumerate, but its importance is easy to appreciate by considering the role of party position taking in democratic theory and practice. An essential promise of democracy for polities operating on the scale of a nation-state is to translate multifaceted popular preferences into a meaningful electoral statement that, in turn, has foreseeable policy consequences. Political parties first organize the packages of policies on offer to electors and later have the responsibility of seeing to it that they translate into policy. Each party does this by stating publicly what, in its view, are the desirable policy emphases, and in exchange for a promise to make good on the emphases it asks citizens for vote support.

Knowing whether, how, and how well this promise of democracy is fulfilled depends fundamentally on knowing what policies parties have emphasized. This is what the CMP tells us. It has created and released a record of party policy emphasis over the post-War period for 25 nations (Budge et al. 2001). And, at the time of this writing, it is preparing to release records of party policy position emphasis in Central and Eastern Europe (Budge et al. forthcoming)

My purpose here is not to celebrate the CMP as such. That has been done by the Comparative Politics Section of the American Political Science Association when, in 2003, it recognized the outstanding contribution to scholarship made by the project. Instead, I intend to consider the implications of a feature of the CMP that some scholars and commentators, myself included at one time, find disorienting. The feature is the positional volatility that the CMP data tell us is a prominent feature of every party’s policy position taking. Most other measurements of party policy positions—e.g., expert surveys—leave the impression that parties by and large take fixed positions, say, along the left-right dimension (McDonald and Mendes 2001). Many analyses, too, those that use party dummy variables to estimate whether different parties advocate and pursue different policies, implicitly assume parties stand in more or less fixed policy positions (e.g., Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995). The CMP data tell us these stability findings and assumptions are unfounded. Party positions are volatile. One wonders, therefore, is the volatility fact or artifact; is it real or measurement error?
The short version of my answer can be stated in two conclusions and one hypothesis. **Conclusion #1**: The volatility of party position taking revealed by the CMP data should not be taken as nuisance measurement error to be identified and smoothed over so as to reveal the true essence of each party’s policy position. **Conclusion #2**: Positional volatility may be the spice of life in party democracy that animates party competition so as to produce accurate representation in the long run. **Hypothesis**: Parties do not ‘develop’ positions as a strategic means to their office-seeking ends nor do they ‘have’ policy positions formed from their principled policy desires; rather, parties take positions reflective of the faction that has gained temporary control within the party.

The long version of my answer takes the remainder of this chapter. It starts in the middle, with a re-report of just how accurate the representation in party democracies is. One plausible reaction to the accuracy finding is disbelief, thinking it must be nothing more than a consequence of merging errors in the measurement of party positions into derivative measurements of median voter and government positions. In section three, I recount where my own skepticism took my thoughts and how, in the end, I came to see that the volatility of party positions could just as well be attributable to truly erratic party behavior as to faults in the measuring instrument. Section four asks, as Ian Budge several times has asked me, what if we ignore the so-called measurement error. I show theoretically that one should expect positionally volatile parties to carry a democratic political system a long way toward producing accurate representation. This ‘long way’ is further than parties in fixed positions can carry accurate representation and, in absolute terms, is very close to what empirical analysis of accurate representation looks like using the CMP data. Finally, because all that I will have said begs the question of why parties would be positionally volatile in the first place, section five circles back and develops a hypothesis to suggest that we should stop theorizing about parties as either strategic or principled actors, seeking office or policy, and, instead, look them as organizational conveniences of ambitious politicians.

What are the lessons to be learned? The CMP data tell us party positions need to be characterized in terms of their two prominent features: (1) they are distinctly different, seldom leapfrogging one another, and (2) they are volatile. Try as one might to look through the volatility and find the essence of party position taking in distinct party differences, it turns out that an important contribution of parties in democracy could come from their positional volatility. And, try as one might to find party strategy in the
volatility and to find party principles in the essential differences, it turns out that an important contribution of within-party democratic leadership selection may be to sustain the essential differences and, through time, supply the volatility. The consequences, if all this is so, are democratic parties wandering hither and yon around their ideologically home neighborhood with boundaries set by their ideologically distinct memberships, thereby creating enough distinctiveness and volatility in their policy positions to produce accurate representation of median voters for a nation at large, in the long run.

Accurate Representation: How Can It Be?

Ian Budge, Silvia Mendes, and I have reported that governments of Western parliamentary democracies provide accurate representation of the median voters in their respective countries, when considered over the long run (McDonald, Mendes, and Budge 2004). This is an amazing revelation, perhaps so amazing as not to be believed. For one thing, it appears to conflict with the theoretical proposition that democratically decided outcomes can end up anywhere in a policy space (McKelvey 1976; Schofield 1978). It also appears to be at odds with the empirical findings that representational distortions exist in all Western democracies and, relatively speaking, exist to an especially large extent in nations that elect their parliaments through single-member districts (Huber and Powell 1994; Powell 2000; Powell and Vanberg 2000).

One feature of the analysis does much to resolve the seeming conflicts. The CMP data permit a long-run view. Seen from that perspective it is possible to understand that no one electoral outcome is easily predicted, just as theory tells us to expect and just as one-off empirical analysis shows us is true. Moreover, even if one were to aggregate the congruence/incongruence over a few elections in order to record average distortion, the average represents a mean level of absolute values over a series of one-off distortions. Since each single election produces distortion, the average absolute value itself has to record distortion. But, as we see immediately below, despite these short-run shortcomings, the mis-predictions and distortions balance out in the long run.

Table 1 reports the average distortion between median voters and governments, by nation and electoral system type, for twenty parliamentary democracies. Distortion is the absolute difference between the left-right position of the median voter and the left-right position of governments (Powell 2000), as measured using the CMP data (see McDonald, Mendes, and Budge 2004). Every nation shows sizable distortion, and the
average distortion is about twice as large under SMD systems compared to PR systems. Fortunately, with a long enough sweep of time the analysis of representation can go two steps further. First, it can reveal whether the one-off distortions compensate one another by canceling a leftward distortion at one time with a rightward distortion at a later time, or vice versa. Second, it can reveal whether the positions of governments tend to respond to the positions of median voters so as to produce a one-to-one correspondence.

[Table 1 about here]

Consideration of compensatory distortions shows that representation is far less biased than the distortions alone might be taken to imply—compare the magnitude of numbers under “distortion” to those under “long-term bias.” As for responsiveness, the analysis shows that in 18 of 20 countries government positions systematically respond to median voter positions. Moreover, there is no nation for which one can reject the hypothesis that the responsiveness is one-to-one.

Arguably, such accurate representation may be too good to be true, even in the long run and maybe most especially because it can only be seen in the long run. The measurements of median voter positions are created using Kim and Fording’s (1997) idea of overlaying the voter distribution party percentages on the party positions as measured by the CMP. Similarly, government positions are measured by averaging the CMP party positions of parties in government, weighted by each government party’s number of seats in parliament. Imagine a situation in which the voter distribution remains exactly the same between two elections and the same parties entered government with the same number of seats. Under that set of facts, so far as one could tell, nothing changed. However, if party positions as measured by the CMP change, the recorded positions of median voters and governments would move in tandem as a mere reflection of the measured party positions. In that sense, the measurement of party positions might be the source of the long-run correspondence between voters and governments. Worse, if much of the party position movements reflects nothing more than noise in the CMP measurements, it could be mis-measurement that produces the correspondence.

Looking for the Essence and Thinking about the Noise

That the CMP data are available for Western-democratic party systems over more than a fifty-year period makes them the one and only currently available data source for analyzing party dynamics. But the claim that the CMP data are all that we have cannot
justify an argumentum ad ignorantiam that since we cannot tell whether they are bad measurements they must be good.

Figure 1 provides an overview of party positions as scored, on average, by the CMP. Each party is located according to its mean position on the CMP left-right score calculated over all elections of the post-war period. This is a way of using the CMP data that assumes party left-right positions are static. The figure also provides a perspective on the distinctiveness of party positions within each party system. Shaded and boxed parties have positions that, while numerically distinguishable in their mean values, are not reliably distinguishable given their over-time variation. As a summary statement of distinctiveness within national party systems, the $R^2$ values in the right-most column indicate how much of a party system’s total left-right variation is between-party as opposed to within-party variation across-time. From top to bottom, the nations are ordered according to the number of distinct party clusters (Denmark has 5, Sweden and Norway 4, … Italy 2) and secondarily by their $R^2$’s.

[Figure 1 about here]

The first issue is whether such a static representation as portrayed by the mean values, in the face of the over-time variation of each party’s position, is a reliable characterization. It is not. Regressing the observed positions onto the party mean values reveals a slope of 1.0, as required by definition. The $R^2$, however, is only .649. That means that slightly less than two-thirds of the systematic variance in the data is coming from differences in means across parties. The remaining one-third is either noise or real movements in party positions. If the movements are all or mostly noise, then the CMP is not an especially reliable statement of static party position taking. If it reflects all or mostly real party dynamics, then static portrayals of party positions—e.g., as would result from classifying parties by their families or scoring them by expert surveys— are not valid statements of where parties stand across time on the left-right dimension.

To investigate the extent to which party movements around the party means reflect systematic change versus noise I employ Hausman’s approach to measurement error. Hausman reasons that predicted values ($Y$-hats) from regression analysis provide a statement of an outcome without measurement noise, because the noise of the measurements is relegated to the error term of the equation (Hausman 1978; see also Pindyck and Rubinfeld 1991, 160-62; Johnston and DiNardo 1997, 153-56). In the context of the CMP data, I have first estimated the dynamics of party positions by estimating a
separate autoregressive equation for each of 81 parties. I then use the predicted positions, Hausman $Y$-hats, as my set of smoothed estimates and relate them to the actual CMP party left-right positions.

Considered over all 81 parties throughout the post-war period, the association between the predicted values generated by applying the estimated dynamics and the observed CMP data has an $R^2$ of .806. This is a reliability estimate for the data. Eighty to 81 percent of the observed variance is reliable; the balance, 19 to 20 percent, is error variance. We can go one step further. Over all 81 parties, there is an estimated $R^2$ of .649 for association between the mean and the observed data. Therefore 64.9 percent of the variance in the CMP data records stable differences across party positions, 15.7 percent records change, and 19.4 percent records error. By implication, 19.5 percent of the reliable variation throughout the post-war period is reliable dynamic variation (i.e., \([.157/.806] \times 100\)).

This might seem a convenient place to stop thinking about measurement error and move back to the substantive consideration of accurate representation, but it is not. There remains an important question as to the sources of the estimated measurement error.

The label “measurement error” tends to make one think first of a faulty instrument, but that is not necessarily the inference one should draw. When Philip Converse originally estimated and later elaborated his thesis of non-attitudes among the American mass public, he did so by estimating the degrees of measurement error in mass attitudes (Converse 1964; 1970; Converse and Markus 1979). Having found a good deal of error, Converse indicted the public’s unstable attitudes as its source. It was not until a decade later that Chris Achen pointed a finger at the survey instruments as a source of the error (Achen 1975; see also Pierce and Rose 1974; for a discussion of this issue and a third interpretation see Erikson 1979, especially 90-91 and 110).

An inferential difficulty arises when trying to decide between noise attributable to a faulty instrument versus noise attributable to erratic behavior, because measurement models are constructed on the back of behavioral models. A model used to uncover measurement error requires one to have in mind a model of ‘true behavioral change.’ That is what permits one to separate noise in the measurements from change in the behavior (Heise 1969). In effect, the assumption says that when behavior truly changes it does so systematically (i.e., in predictable ways, usually via a Markovian process). It then
adds by implication that to the extent behavior is not predictable the remaining portion of the measured signal is noise.

Taking account of these dual possibilities, it is interesting to ask which is a more plausible interpretation of the CMP record of party left-right positions. Few party scholars doubt that noise comes into the CMP scores from the loose way in which words are used, misinterpretations by a coder of a manifesto, the exclusive reliance on 26 left-right CMP categories and exclusion of the 30 others, coding transcription errors, and input errors (see Volkens 2001). But, also, few party scholars doubt that party positions sometimes change in erratic ways. Seldom does one find characterizations of parties as totally solid, dependable, and (if one will) reliable political actors. More typical are characterizations such as these. A party “cannot be defined in terms of its principles” (Schumpeter 1942, 283). Parties are “ever hungry for new members” (Michels 1949, 374). Parties are motivated by a specific goal of maximizing votes (Downs 1957, 30). Parties engage in a political strategy that “appears to center on finding out what the public wants to hear and marketing the product accordingly” (Farrell and Webb 2000, 122).

Given that there is as much, perhaps more, reason to credit the observations of party scholars who see erratic party positions as erratic behavior than to credit my own, one-time suspicions of noise in the CMP data, it proves to be an interesting exercise to allow the erratic behavior into serious theoretical consideration.

**Representational Consequences of Positional Volatility**

Let us move away from purely methodological concerns by going directly to theoretical considerations in a way that provides full control over measurements and behavior. This is accomplished by simulating the representational process. Simulations allow one to specify the dynamics of party position taking with complete knowledge (no error) and to assign voters a simple deterministic policy voting decision rule—i.e., each voter supports the closest party along the left-right dimension. The results, perhaps as surprising as the empirically based results using the CMP data, show that in the context of volatile parties the crucial mechanism in the representational process is voter choice. By offering varied choices, at least one party will usually be positioned in the vicinity of the median voter. That leaves it to electors to make the choice on the basis of policy packages on offer. When they choose the closest party, the theoretically expected electoral consequences are responsive, unbiased, and, mostly, congruent representation. In much the same way that
models of under-informed parties indicate party policy offerings are drawn toward the median voter as a byproduct of random searches for a winning position (McKelvey and Ordeshook 1985, 492-95), positionally volatile parties can create accurate representation with electors as the centripetal force.

For the sake of brevity I report simulations of 1000 elections for only two-party systems\(^1\)—the most difficult circumstance to find accurate representation—and evaluate the accuracy of collective representation for positionally fixed versus volatile parties. The highest quality representation exists when (1) the left-right positions of policies are directly responsive to the left-right position of median voters—i.e., a slope of 1.0, (2) there is no bias—a zero intercept, and (3) congruence is exact—the average distance between policy and median voter positions is zero.

The simulations place a Left Party at –13 and a Right Party at +13. Parties are assumed to take (1) fixed positions marked by their own central tendency, and (2) to move around that central tendency with standard deviations of 13. As for electorates, they are assumed in the long run to have a mean and median position of zero. The median voter movements involve both a more volatile electorate, with a standard deviation of five, and a less volatile electorate, with a standard deviation of two.

The representational consequences for parties at fixed positions and a more volatile electorate are shown in Figure 2. A median voter to the left of zero elects the Left Party at policy position –13. Likewise, anytime the median voter is to the right of zero, the electorate elects the Right Party at +13. Considered in detail the consequences for representation have a totally unresponsive outcome to any elector movement except that which goes from negative to positive or vice versa. At the transition point of zero, the movement is an overly responsive 26 points. Generalizing about the details across all elections by summarizing the movements, the linear equation at the top of the scatterplot indicates that a one-unit movement by the median voter, on average, translates into more than a two-unit movement in the policy position of the elected party \((b = 2.08)\).\(^2\)

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1 Elsewhere, with others, I report simulated results for three-party systems (see McDonald, Paskeviciute, Best, and Cremona 2004).

2 Intuitively one might be inclined to think that the slope would be 3.25. The mean MPP policy values \((Y)\) are –13 and +13, and these are obtained for a mean MV position \((X)\) of –4 when MV is less than zero and +4 when MV is greater than zero. Drawing a line through the mean Y’s and X’s would produce a slope of \((26 / 8)\) or 3.25. However, the general linear tendency takes account of the non-responsiveness from 0 to 18 by treating the within-segment MV variation as if it were measurement error. Since 36% of the MV variation is in the ranges 0 to –18 or 0 to +18, the proportion of as-if error is .36. Therefore the estimated slope is \([3.25 \times (1 – .36)]\) or \([3.25 \times .64]\) or 2.08.
words, responsiveness is 2.08 to 1.0, and, given the small and statistically insignificant intercept, there is no bias.

[Figure 2 about here]

Congruence results are shown in the histogram. They average 9.0, meaning that for any given election the policy position of a median party in parliament and electorate’s median voter have an expected difference of nine units. Median incongruence is 9.6; half the outcomes are above 9.6 and half are below. Furthermore the probability that the two actors are within six units of one another is only .160. Briefly stated, one sees an overly responsive relationship, no bias, a typical mismatch between nine and 10 units, and a low probability that the match is within six units.

Figure 3 shows the relationship and congruence results for a situation when party positions vary. The relationship is certainly less orderly than when parties stand at fixed positions. Disorder, notwithstanding, the quality of representations is mostly enhanced when party positions vary. The associated equation shows responsiveness is now close to one-to-one, \( b = 1.07 \), and there is no statistically significant bias.

[Figure 3 about here]

Average incongruence is nearly the same as when parties are at fixed positions, but median incongruence is 7.6. One of two important differences in the congruence results is that the probability of close congruence is considerably higher when parties vary. The probability that the policy and median voters are within six units of one another is .401 (compared to .160 for fixed parties). The downside is that varying party positions hold an almost one-in-four chance that incongruence will exceed 13, which never happens in our simulations using fixed party positions.\(^3\) Therefore, while there is a risk of high incongruence when party positions vary, varying versus fixed party positions create more direct the responsiveness, leave bias at essentially zero, and increase the probability of good congruence.

Does the accuracy of representation change in a less volatile electorate? Some details are different, but relative comparisons stay much the same. For parties at fixed positions competing in a less volatile electorate, the relationship is

\[
\text{MPP}_i = .05 + 5.20 \text{ MV}_i + \varepsilon_i \\
( .25 ) ( .12 )
\]

\(^3\) It could happen, but that would require the electorate to move more than five standard deviations. Such an outcome has about a 3 in 5 million chance.
Bias is unaffected compared to the more volatile electorate; it has the same numerical value, .05, which is statistically insignificant. Responsiveness more than doubles, however, which makes more than doubly responsive something that was overly responsive to begin with. Congruence is worse; average incongruence grows to 11.4, and its median value is 11.6. The probability of being less than six units apart falls to one in a thousand. In short, with fixed party locations, decreasing electoral volatility increases responsiveness, leaves bias unaffected, and reduces congruence.

In the case of varying party positions, low electorate volatility also makes responsiveness overly responsive, but the increase is only to a value of 1.32. The relationship involving varying parties is

$$\text{MPP}_i = -0.54 + 1.32 \text{MV}_i + e_i$$

(37) (18)

Relatively speaking, parties with varying positions are still more directly responsive than were parties at fixed positions. Furthermore, average congruence is better with varying as compared to fixed parties. Mean incongruence for varying parties is 9.2 versus an average of 11.4 for fixed parties, and median incongruence is 8.0 compared to 11.6. Also, the probability of the median party in parliament being within six units of the MV is .395 for varying parties, compared to only .001 for fixed parties.

To summarize, the quality of representation in two-party systems is expected to be reasonably close to directly responsive and unbiased when parties have distinct central tendencies around which their left-right offerings to voters vary. At any given election, however, one can expect a mismatch between the policy position offered by the winning party and the location of the median voter. And, under the circumstances specified, one has to expect that in one of four elections the mismatch will be especially large.

Is it plausible to characterize electors as purely deterministic policy voters? Probably not: for one thing that would require them to know the left-right location of parties while the parties are moving around; for another, it means that electors are not from time to time attracted to one party or another on the basis of the leader’s appeal. We can ask: (1) what are the consequences when electors have no information about

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4 The more than doubling of responsiveness follows from the facts that the mean values of MPP are $\pm 13$ while the mean values of MV are now $\pm 1.6$ instead of $\pm 4.0$ when MV is above or below zero. Therefore, the relationship runs generally from (-1.6, -13) to (+1.6, +13), which has a slope of 8.125. But, as before (see fn. 2), the as-if error in MV amounts to .36 of the total variance, and $.64 * 8.125 = 5.20$. 


party positions other than their central tendencies, and (2) what happens when electors base their decisions on leadership appeals rather than pure policy considerations?

The effect of low information on responsiveness recreates the situation seen for fixed party positions (see the slope value in Figures 2). Any movement of the median voter to the left leads to selection of the Left Party and likewise for selecting the Right Party after any movement of the median voter to the right. Voters therefore forego selecting a party closer to the median about half the time in favor of one that is typically on their side of the zero-divide, regardless of how extreme a party is. From that half-of-the-time extreme selection, the voter choice tends towards extremism, creating an overly responsive selection that is less congruent than it needs to be. Responsiveness almost doubles for the more volatile electorate, and it nearly quadruples for the less volatile electorate. In addition, average incongruence is 13 or higher for both more and less volatile electorates, and the probabilities of selecting a party more than 13 units away are greater than .4. The short version of the outcome is that a little information harms accurate representation. If the only information voters have is about the central tendency of party positions, more accurate representation would come from the parties offering fixed positions. Responsiveness and bias would be the same, but standing still would improve congruence.

What are the effects on accurate representation when an electorate selects solely on the basis of personal appeals of party leaders? To find an approximate answer, assume such appeals have no policy bent. Attractive leaders are as likely to come from the Left Party as the Right Party. Further, assume leadership appeals are the sole basis of electoral decisions up to half the time. As a result, electors will make a policy mistake a quarter of the time—i.e., half of their mistaken choices, in terms of the non-policy basis of their choice, will reach the correct policy choice by inadvertence.

Not surprisingly, the consequence of focusing on leadership qualities and not policy is to make the choice less responsive to policy. For both more and less volatile electorates, leadership-only choices half the time reduce responsiveness to just about half of direct responsiveness. In order for the choices to be in the vicinity of direct responsiveness, electors would have to base their decision on non-policy leadership appeals no more than one in four or five elections. With reduced responsiveness in this situation comes less congruence as well. Average and median incongruence are two to three points higher when electors base their choice on non-policy leadership appeals half
the time. As with having too little information, using non-policy information as the basis of choice is harmful to accurate representation.

Of course, as one’s intuition would suggest, were one to combine having too little information all the time and using non-policy information half the time, the result would be something close to direct responsiveness and congruence close to that for the baseline case with deterministic policy voters.

In a world with no measurement error and positionally volatile parties, the type of accurate representation can be expected to be quite similar to found by using the CMP data. Furthermore, the results stand robust in the face of a combination of low information and sometime-leadership appeals. This is no proof-positive that the analysis using the CMP-based measures of voter, parliament, and government positions are leading us to the truth. It is proof-positive, however, that throwing away the measured volatility of party positions due to suspicions that they might contain error is theoretically wrongheaded. Positional volatility could be the missing theoretical link that allows voters the opportunity, over the long run, to keep their governments on track with the expressed preferences of electorates.

Speculation on Sources of Positional Distinctiveness and Volatility
I suppose many would find the idea of gaining accurate representation through positionally volatile parties interesting but unconvincing unless there is a plausible reason to think party positions move around their individual mean value as if by some sort of random process. One possibility comes from a model developed by James Snyder and Michael Ting, based on an informational rationale for parties (Snyder and Ting 2002). In their model the value of a party to a candidate depends on where the party’s policy program is located along something like a left-right dimension. For voters, the value of a party comes from the policy information conveyed by its label—a brand name. At the time of entry, candidates sort themselves according to parties’ general policy tendencies, thereby helping to establish and maintain each party’s policy-related reputation as a central tendency. Diverse candidate positions around a party’s central tendency hold the potential to be the source of within party faction. As candidates-turned-elected-representatives vie for party leadership positions, as long as platforms are selected democratically rather than dictatorially, the policy character of a party is likely to shift to reflect the views of the current winning faction (Snyder and Ting 2002, 102-3).
How plausible is this way of thinking about parties. I submit that among the
three preeminent frameworks used to analyze party activities—an electoral competition
model, a responsible party model, and a diverse coalition model (see Aldrich 1995, 7-
14)—the diverse coalition model, of which Snyder and Ting’s thesis is one version, is the
most plausible. To substantiate this claim let us examine the three in detail.

An idea that sets the first two frameworks apart from one another and from the
diverse coalition framework is the different assumption each makes about party goals.
According to the electoral competition model, in order to understand how parties operate
one assumes they want to win elections. With that in mind, theory develops by
reasoning through to how a party can most effectively compete for votes. Figuring out a
party’s most effective strategy leads to hypotheses about how a party behaves before an
electorate, in parliament, and in government. A party offers policies to electors (e.g.,
Downs 1957) and promotes policies for adoption (Austen-Smith and Banks 1990) that best
secure its chances of winning votes and holding office. Anthony Downs puts the point
succinctly: “The major force shaping a party’s policies is competition with other parties
for votes” (Downs 1957, 102).

The responsible party model is organized around the issue of how parties should
operate (Schattschneider 1942; APSA 1950). The model’s useful analytical function comes
from taking its prescriptive requirements and using them as standards to help figure out
what makes the ‘ideal type’ more or less realizable. It assumes the goal of parties should
be to create policy offerings in accordance with their different images of what is needed
to bring about an improved human condition. One type of empirical analysis that
follows concerns itself with the choices parties offer (Ginsberg, 1972; 1976; Robertson
the choices mean for accurate representation (Huber and Powell, 1994; Powell 2000;
Powell and Vanberg 2000), for government formation (e.g., Laver and Shepsle, 1996;
Muller and Strom 2000), and for actual policies (Budge and Hofferbert 1990; Erikson,
Mackuen, and Stimson 2002). At some times and in some places, parties appear to live up
to the model’s requirements; at other times and in other places they do not. The
evaluations are, at best, conditional.

As I have said, the diverse coalition model, too, is set apart from the preceding
models by the assumption it makes about party goals. It looks at parties as organizations
and finds it dubious to assume they have goals. Rather, parties exist because they serve
the interests of ambitious politicians, who presumably want to win their own elections and promote policies in line with their own preferences (Katz 1980; Aldrich 1995).

Born as legislative factions or organizations sympathetic to the policy aspirations of newly enfranchised segments of society, parties locate themselves on different sides of the dominant cleavage lines in a society (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). This makes it possible for close observers to look across a variety of issues and see policy distinctions between and among the parties (Laver and Hunt 1992). On most issues party leaders and party adherents among the public line up in much the same way (Dalton 1985, Table 3, 282; Iversen 1994, figures 2 and 3, 168-69). Probably for these reasons it is easy for ‘expert’ observers and the general citizenry to characterize party positions along a left-right continuum (Castles and Mair, 1984; Huber and Inglehart 1995; Klingemann and Inglehart 1976). There, too, leaders and adherents align similarly (Dalton, Table 3, 282).

Why do parties line up on different sides? The answer, I propose, follows from how ambitious politicians sort themselves into parties in the first place. It seems entirely plausible to think that ambitious politicians want to affiliate with a party that serves their interests. If one assumes, as is usual, that a politician wants first and foremost to hold elective office, she or he will join a party that best serves that particular goal. In some circumstances, such as American South from 1880 through 1970, only one party provides a realistic opportunity for electoral victory. However, most developed democracies have competitive party systems; in them two or more parties offer reasonable electoral prospects for an aspiring politician. Under competitive circumstances an ambitious politician is expected to join a local party organization providing the best opportunity. Which party that is depends on which side of a line of cleavage predominates in a locale. Assuming politicians have policy ideas that, other things equal, they prefer not to sacrifice to their ambition for office, the choice they face is not a mere either/or proposition. They can move or be assigned to a constituency that offers a good opportunity for election given their policy views, or they can have district lines drawn that match their views to a constituency. Also, where two or more parties offer reasonable opportunities, a simple tie-breaking rule is for a politician to join the party with a program he or she most agrees. By sorting along policy lines at the time of entry, the particular politicians affiliated with a party help to maintain its policy-related reputation and thereby create divergent central tendencies.
Difficult as it is to distance oneself from the notion that parties have goals, theoretically there is not much to commend the idea. The main theoretical problem is the collective nature of a party, meaning goal-based theory requires a unitary actor assumption to keep it afloat. What individuals within a group may want is difficult to read as what the group as a unit wants. A composite of elements needed by each individual to achieve his or her goal does not amalgamate to some fixed value for each composite element as it might apply to each person in a group. Thus, when the issue is to find an ideal policy position, the diverse coalition model implies that the ideal position is a candidate characteristic not a party characteristic. Each candidate has an ideal policy position to offer his or her constituency; a party does not.

We expect two competing candidates facing a policy-interested constituency with partisan pre-dispositions to take positions close to their particular constituency median though separated slightly, perhaps as a reflection of their uncertainty (Downs 1957, 100-02) or to accommodate electors’ partisanship (Erikson and Romero 1990). The most thorough evidence on candidate locations across multiple constituencies comes in relation to House elections in the United States. It corroborates the expectation for candidates. Within a single constituency, Democratic and Republican candidates for the House almost always stand apart (Sullivan and O’Connor 1972). And, in accordance with the ideological leanings of one’s constituency, each set of partisan candidates takes positions different from their co-partisans who have to face different constituencies.

As good as the correspondence between theory and evidence of candidate position taking is, attempts to extend its logic to party position taking have led to predictions not much supported by evidence. Comparative investigations report little tendency for party policy programs to respond to problems of the day, such as unemployment and inflation (McDonald, Budge, and Pennings n.d.), or to public opinion and recent election results (Adams, Clark, Ezrow, and Glasgow n.d.). In U.S. presidential elections, it is difficult to explain party liberal-conservative positions with other variables, showing a “hint” of an effect from Macropartisanship and little evidence of platform response to public mood (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002, 261, n. 17).

By refusing to assume parties have vote and office goals, because they do not have any goals as such, is it not also necessary to refuse to assume parties have ideologies as such? Yes, but that is not to say that parties do not espouse policy programs. They do. Announcing a policy program is among the initial steps taken by virtually all parties
preceding virtually all elections. Why are their announced positions volatile, when set along a left-right dimension? This answer, too, has to do with the sorting process. Because politicians with diverse views sort themselves according to party policy central tendencies, a party is expected to host politicians with a range of views. Within-party differences over policy become a source of party faction. As individuals in each faction vie for party leadership positions, sometimes winning and other times losing, the policy character of a party is likely to shift to reflect the views of the current winning faction. Through such individually based rational choices a party tends to offer policy programs with identifiable mean tendencies and substantial positional volatility over time.

**Conclusion**

Party theorists search for predictable party positions because they assume they exist. Empiricists assume stable positions exist and implicitly rely on that assumption to draw inferences about the representational role of parties. One has to suspect the assumption has important consequences for what one sees and infers. For instance, when it comes to reasoning about the representational consequences of stable positions, one can be led to the following type of conjecture about how parties affect policy in the Westminster Model. “Alternation of parties in office may … make policy trajectories shift dramatically back and forth” (Aldrich 1995, 11). Analyses of representation relying on a stability assumption appear to corroborate that conjecture. Relying on expert survey data of what are effectively measured as stable party positions, G. Bingham Powell reaches this conclusion. “[T]he persistent superiority of the proportional influence designs in linking the citizen median and the policymakers should give pause to those attracted by the idea of the decisive election as a direct tool for citizen control” (Powell 2000, 252).

All of these hypotheses and findings amount for very little, however, if the party position taking is what the CMP data tell us it is—volatile. On what basis, theory or fact, should one choose to ignore that the most thorough record of party positions, the Comparative Manifesto Project, indicates substantial party movements. Should the stability results of expert surveys trump the CMP record? Why not suppose that the stability reported in the results of expert surveys is the consequence of experts reporting what they see as the central tendencies of party positions? When asked about party movements other and perhaps sometimes the same highly informed case-specific experts report volatility (see, e.g., country-specific commentaries in Müller and Strøm 2000).
An important lesson I have learned from working with Ian Budge and the CMP data, which I attempting to pass on here, is that evidence of unpredictable party position volatility does not have to be assigned to the rubbish bin labeled ‘noisy error.’ Letting go of the unfounded stability assumption draws back the curtains to see how party systems, as observed in fact, can contribute to policy representation that democratic theory so dearly values.
References


Table 1: Representational Distortion, Bias, and Responsiveness between Left-Right Positions of Governments, Weighted by Party Size, and Left-Right Position of Median Voters, 20 Democracies 1950s to 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System</th>
<th>Distortion&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Long-term Bias&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Responsiveness&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (std dev)</td>
<td>Mean (std dev)</td>
<td>Intercept (s&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMD</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>17.4 (8.8)</td>
<td>5.6 (19.0)</td>
<td>7.3 (4.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>5.5 (7.8)</td>
<td>3.9 (8.7)</td>
<td>3.2 (2.4)</td>
</tr>
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<td>18.5 (8.0)</td>
<td>10.9 (17.2)</td>
<td>9.2 (4.4)</td>
</tr>
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<td>1.8 (4.4)</td>
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<td>8.7 (18.0)</td>
<td>13.7** (5.0)</td>
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<td>SMD Summary</td>
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<td>6.5 (16.2)</td>
<td>6.5** (1.8)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>1.1 (2.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-0.8 (9.1)</td>
<td>-2.1 (2.0)</td>
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<td>4.9 (15.1)</td>
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<td>1.5 (11.3)</td>
<td>1.4 (7.7)</td>
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</table>

<sup>a</sup> Distortion is the absolute value of the difference between the weighted-mean left-right position of governments (with weights proportional to the number of seats held by each party in government) and the left-right position of median voters. N is the number of governments. Totally undistorted (congruent) systems have a mean equal to zero.

<sup>b</sup> Bias is the average difference between the weighted-mean left-right position of governments (with weights proportional to the number of seats held by each party in government) and the left-right position of median voters. N is the number of elections the weighted-mean left-right position of governments (with weights as above) and the left-right position of median voters. A mean of zero indicates accurate (i.e., unbiased) long-term representativeness.

<sup>c</sup> Responsiveness is evaluated by the linear relationship between the weighted-mean left-right position of government (Y) and the left-right position of the median voter (X). Left positions are negative, centre equals zero; right positions are positive.

*p < .05; ** p < .01; two-tail critical values for intercepts and one-tail critical values for slopes.
Figure 1: Distinctiveness of Choices Offered by Parties along the Left-Right Dimension, by Country over Post-War Period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Left</th>
<th>Center</th>
<th>Right</th>
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<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
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<td>RF</td>
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<td>PoA</td>
<td>D'66</td>
<td>CDA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>PSI</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled by the author from Comparative Manifesto Project data (Budge et al. 2001). Positions are mean values of party CMP left-right positions from the late 1940s through the mid-to late-1990s.

- Indicates difference between positions is not statistically significant, at \(p < .05\)-level in one-tail test.
- Indicates parties within and between shaded cluster that are not statistically different, at \(p < .05\)-level in one-tail test.

\(R^2\) is the proportion of between-party variance relative to total party position variance in a system, OLS estimation using \(k-1\) party dummy variables.
Figure 2: Responsiveness, Bias, and Congruence in Two-party Systems, Given Parties Presenting Fixed Positions

\[ E(MPP_i) = 0.05 + 2.08 \times MV_i \]

\[ (.25) \quad (.05) \]

Mean = 9.0
Std dev = 1.9
Median = 9.6
Pr < 6 = .160
Pr > 13 = .000
Figure 3: Responsiveness, Bias, and Congruence in Two-party Systems,
Given Parties Presenting Varied Positions

\[ E(MPP_i) = -0.54 + 1.07 MV_i \]

(0.36)  (0.07)

Mean = 9.1
Std dev = 7.0
Median = 7.6
Pr < 6 = .401
Pr > 13 = .254