

## Choice versus sensitivity: Party reactions to public concerns

MICHAEL D. McDONALD<sup>1</sup>, IAN BUDGE<sup>2</sup> & PAUL PENNING<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Political Science, Binghamton University (SUNY), USA;* <sup>2</sup>*Department of Government, University of Essex, UK;* <sup>3</sup>*Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

**Abstract.** Most discussions of democratic theory assume that parties should offer clear choices to voters but also show themselves sensitive to public concerns. Under certain circumstances, however, party convergence on these may preclude electoral choice, thus creating conflict between two democratic ‘goods’. We examine possible tradeoffs between choice and responsiveness, and see which actually occur in 16 postwar democracies. Party policy positions turn out to be more strongly related to party ideology than popular concerns, thus privileging differentiation and choice over sensitivity and responsiveness. Implications for democratic theory and practice are considered.

Through its standing institutional arrangements, above all through elections and party competition, democracy is supposed to bring government into line with popular preferences. Doing so is a major element in its claim to be ‘government of the people, by the people and for the people’. Parties are crucial to this process as they formulate the policy priorities presented to electors that are then applied in government (Aldrich 1995; Klingemann et al. 1994).

There are two ways that parties can bring publics and governments into line, both prefigured in Anthony Downs’ (1957: 103–113) discussion of how they might rationally expect to attract votes. The first is by maintaining consistency with past policy, thus creating long-term differences with other parties. A consequence is that parties confront electors with clear choices between contrasting programs. Electors can then vote for the party that appears most suitable for them under prevailing circumstances. The availability of such choices is a basic stipulation of mandate theory (Sullivan & O’Connor 1972; Kavanagh 1981; Le Duc et al. 1996: 344, 352–353), itself a standard ‘vision’ of how representative democracy works.

There is another, more direct way in which parties could translate popular preferences into official policy. This is the one Downs (1957: 109–112) ultimately puts forward in his account of two-party competition. Both parties converge on the preferences of the median voter, thus leading to parties aligning themselves directly with the wishes of the popular majority. This strategy, if the parties get it right, certainly ensures the conformity of government policy to majority preferences, since whichever party is elected will carry these

through in order to maintain its credibility (Downs 1957: 108–110). What is missing is electoral choice, as both parties will offer voters nearly identical policy alternatives.

In government, as well as elections, parties can adopt divergent or convergent strategies on the many problems that confront them. Even where public opinion does not act as a clear guide, there are technical solutions approved by experts and bureaucrats. Parties could adopt these as optimal and likely to be generally approved, or they could opt for different ideologically colored diagnoses of the problem situation (Castles 1982) thus opening up possibilities for retrospective electoral choice on the basis of the government record.

Choice and responsiveness both seem desirable properties of democratic party systems. However, one may get in the way of the other. The next section considers the range of possible relationships between them. There is no *a priori* basis on which we can identify a dominant mode. However, we can specify the main possibilities in ways that permit later assessments with comparative evidence. The results have theoretical implications for democracy that we consider in the conclusion.

### **Patterns of party response**

We have suggested that party convergence on majority preferences or technical solutions can deprive voters of choice between distinct policy alternatives. This need not always happen, however. Figures 1a and 1b sketch two reactions that parties might have. In the first case, Figure 1a, parties show themselves to be responsive *and* to be offering a programmatic choice. In the second case, Figure 1b, parties show themselves to be responsive *but* to be offering no programmatic choice. The figure illustrates relationships between party stances on an issue (vertical or Y axis) and problem impact and concern on the part of the public (horizontal or X axis). In this hypothetical system there are three parties – one on the Left (L), one in the Center (C) and one on the Right (R). Of course the presentation is made in three-party terms only as an example. It would apply with equal force to a two-party system, and it would generalize easily to a greater numbers of parties.

The three-party example sketched in Figure 1a shows that there is no necessary conflict between responsiveness and choice. Here we have parties that adjust their position on the problem in light of public concern about it and its objective impact, but they also maintain stable policy differences based on ideology. The Left party is always more preoccupied with the issue (which might be government planning against unemployment). The Center is consistently less, and the Right least so. However, as the underlying problem becomes more

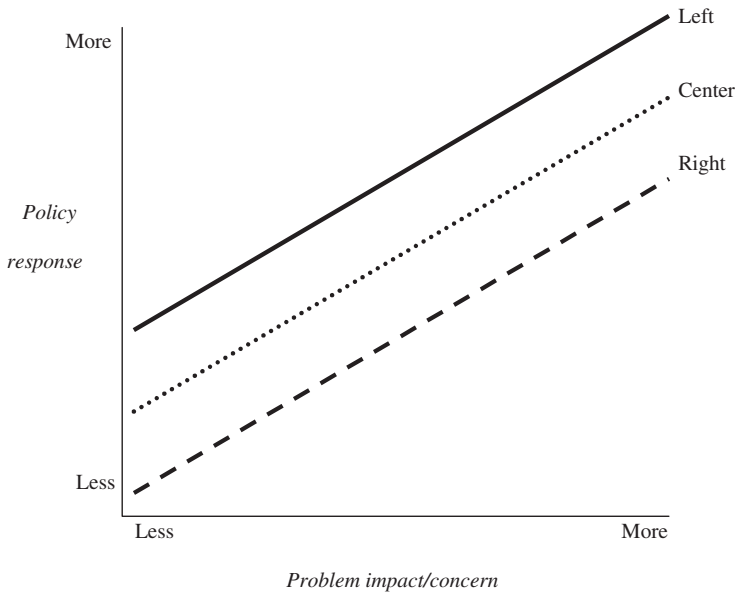


Figure 1a. Responsive parties: Two possible reactions to problems: Responsive parties offering a choice to electors.

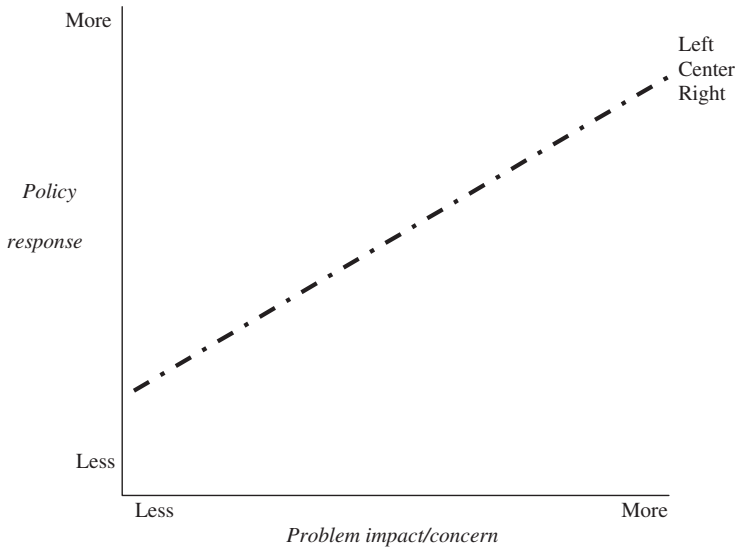


Figure 1b. Responsive parties: Two possible reactions to problems: Responsive parties which do not offer a choice to electors.

serious and public concern grows, all parties consistently rank the policy higher among their priorities. They are both sensitive and responsive as democratic parties are supposed to be, but they also maintain clear differences; whatever increased attention parties as a whole give to the policy response the Left always gives more. Thus an elector could well vote for L at level 3 of the problem, but vote for R at level 9 if he or she felt that some, but not excessive, government planning is desirable to confront the problem. This situation provides optimal payoffs for democracy, since the two 'goods' get provided without mutual inhibition. Parties both respond to problems and provide electors with an opportunity to influence the level of response.

Figure 1b shows, however, that this need not always be the case. Here we have parties that react in the same way to problems and concerns. Responsiveness is maintained at a high level as parties adjust their priorities. As all parties respond in exactly the same way, however, there are no voting choices to be made with respect to the issue. Voting for the Left will produce the same effect on government as voting for the Right. This is the kind of reaction that would be produced by convergence on the median in a quest for votes or by accepting the same technical advice from bureaucrats. To the extent that governments and oppositions are often urged to 'sink their differences' in face of emergencies, 'keep party politics out' and adopt 'commonsense solutions' to purely technical problems, we might expect this mode of reaction to be fairly widespread.

On the other hand, parties are ideologically motivated entities that often feel that they already know the optimal solutions to problems (Page & Shapiro 1983). This might lead them to ignore public concerns or technical advice in favor of maintaining a consistent ideological stance. In that case, we have one of the two situations shown in Figure 2. Hewing to the party line eliminates responsiveness, but provides clear electoral choice. In Figure 2a, parties offer consistent policy priorities that clearly differentiate them not just in the present, but also historically. Electors clearly know what parties stand for not just in terms of current policy, but also in the long term, covering possibly their government record.

If parties shifted from one priority to another, as hypothesized in Figure 2b, electors would have choices on current policy in any one election, but would hardly be able to deduce party positions from past record or know where they would be three years on. Where they knew little of the issue, this would deprive them of a valuable reference point for rational decision. Because of frequent policy shifts, voters might well discount parties' ability to stick to the promised policy in government (Downs 1957: 104–110). This is a situation in which parties' sudden shifts – possibly due to vote-seeking or other opportunistic considerations – undermine both responsiveness and choice.

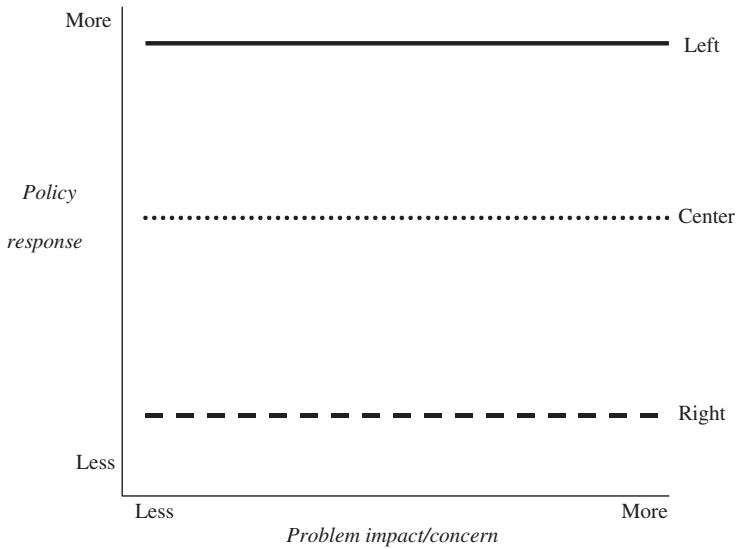


Figure 2a. Unresponsive parties: Two types of choice options to respond to problems: Unresponsive parties offering reliable choice to electors.

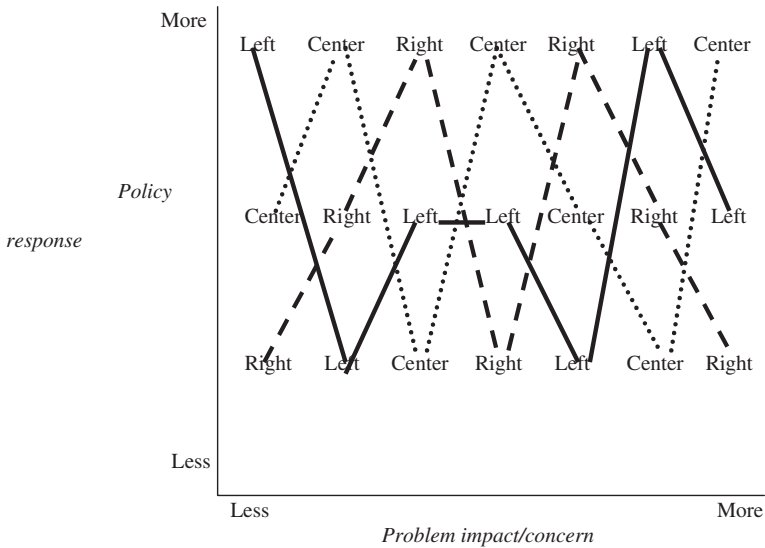


Figure 2b. Unresponsive parties: Two types of choice options to respond to problems: Unresponsive parties offering unreliable choice to electors.

A more optimistic and possibly more realistic scenario is sketched in Figure 3. There is, after all, no reason to believe that all parties act in the same paradigmatic way to rising public concern. This might take time to trigger a response (C). Parties could also react differently, choosing to respond to a problem (L) or to ignore a problem (R). These stances clearly differentiate the parties, triggering some response in two cases and offering clear choices between all three. Ideology interacts with public concern to produce a particular level of response, but also guarantees differentiation and choice as the problem becomes more severe.

Figures 1, 2 and 3 span a range of possible relationships between party responsiveness and policy choice. Which predominates (if indeed any does) or whether they vary by policy area, party family or country are questions that have important implications for how we think of party roles in democracy. At an abstract level, we can specify the alternatives but not decide which prevails. To do so we need evidence, examined below, before we return to the theoretical question of how exactly democratic parties mediate between publics and governments.

### Choices parties offer

A first cut at deciding whether parties are responsive – and therefore move around and overlap in terms of policy – or instead offer fixed and stable alter-

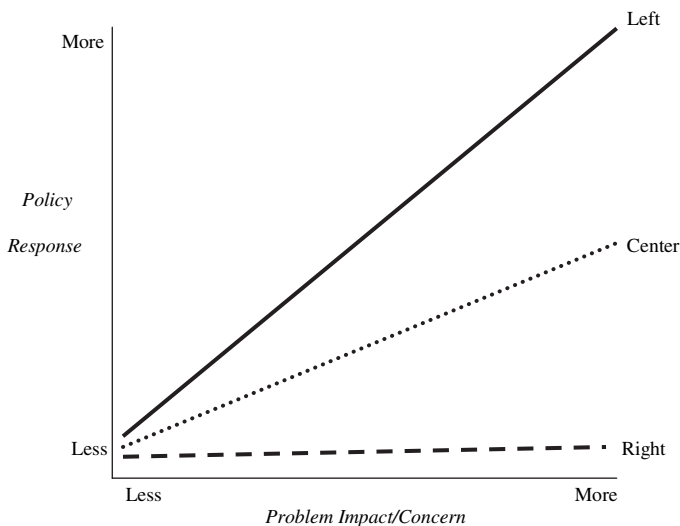


Figure 3. Conditionally Responsive Parties.

natives to electors, comes from examining four central policy areas over the postwar years. These policies are responses to the four issues nominated consistently by electors as the most important facing the country (employment, inflation, welfare and foreign affairs). They cover the policy areas already identified as subject to political influence. Policy responses include support for: (1) government planning, (2) a market economy, (3) welfare and (4) peaceful international cooperation. We are interested in the extent to which party policy positions here are generally distinguished from each other or move around concurrently – possibly in response to electors' concerns.

Party scores on these policies come from analyses of their postwar election programs. Since these are directed towards voters, they are eminently suitable for deciding whether parties differentiate themselves in elections or converge on popular concerns. Actual scores and means are from Volkens (1994) and are similar to those reported in Budge et al. (2001: Appendix 5), where the construction of each indicator is described.<sup>1</sup> Our data cover 71 parties in 16 democracies over 10 to 15 postwar elections up to 1992. The 1992 end date is chosen since considerable changes took place in many party systems after that date, with Italy as the most spectacular example, but Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, New Zealand, Sweden, Norway and the United Kingdom also being affected.

Given the enormous amount of information available on parties' issue positions over 16 countries, we measure their distinctiveness by comparing the mean postwar policy positions of parties within a country and estimating the confidence intervals surrounding them. The comparative findings are best approached, however, through the example of British party positions on the market economy given in Figure 4. This shows quite a lot of policy movement over the postwar period, which opens up the possibility that parties may be responding to electoral concerns. Over the whole period, Labour support for the market is consistently muted, while Conservatives are generally in strong support. Liberals track the Conservatives in the early period and Labour in the later one. The two main parties seem to offer reasonably distinct alternatives, even though Liberal positions overlap them.

We can follow this illustration through to the corresponding entry for British parties and market support in Table 1. British parties have offered two clear and consistent policy alternatives. The entry is based on the fact that the Conservative postwar mean of 6.3 on the issue contrasts strongly with Labour's 1.2 – so strongly that the two are statistically significantly different from one another. The Liberals at 3.5, on the other hand, overlap with the Conservatives and hence are not counted as offering a really distinct alternative – justifiably in view of their track record in Figure 4. The attribution of distinct policy positions to Labour and Conservative fairly summarizes

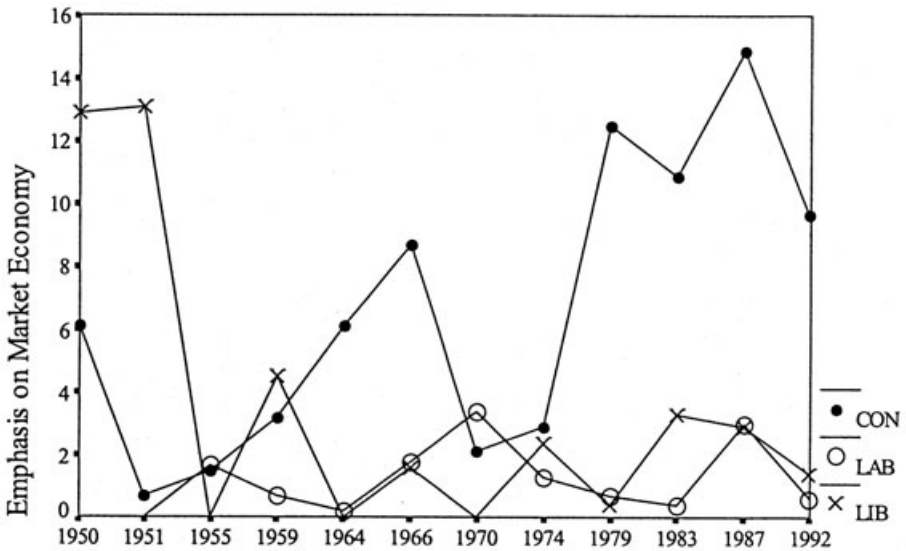


Figure 4. British parties: Postwar support for a market economy.

their overall postwar record, though inevitably smoothing over episodes of leapfrogging in 1955 and 1970.

Table 1 gives a summary record of the within-nation policy distinctiveness for 71 parties from 1950 to 1992. An entry of 0 indicates that parties have been offering no statistically significant distinctive choice on a policy issue; an entry of 2 indicates that parties have been offering two policy options, and so on. In the majority of countries, parties do offer generally distinct choices. Most often this is the result of one or two parties standing distinct from a close-to-common option of all the rest, where a 'close-to-common' option is determined by the fact that the party positions are not statistically significantly different from one another.<sup>2</sup> Clusters of parties with similar policy preferences occur most often in the multi-party systems. Despite their greater numbers of parties, therefore, these party systems do not offer many more actual policy options on the individual issues than, say, the two American parties, with their two generally distinctive positions. The issues where parties differentiate themselves most are support for the market and support for welfare.

It is probably more important that parties adopt a generally distinctive position than that they hold fast to their long-term positions at every single election. Their general record is probably what gets through to electors given constraints on communicating every particular twist of policy. What Table 1



*Table 1.* Distinct party policy options on four issues, 1945–1992

	Planning	Market	Welfare	Peace	Total parties
United Kingdom	2	2	2	0	3
New Zealand	2	2	2	0	2–3
Australia	2	2	2	2	2–3
Canada	2	2	3	2	3–4
United States	2	2	2	2	2
Ireland	0	2	2	0	3
Germany	0	2	3	0	3
Austria	2	3	2	0	3
France	2	2	0	2	4
Switzerland	3	2	3	2	4
Netherlands	0	3	2	2	4–6
Belgium	2	2	2	0	3–6
Norway	2	2	3	2	5–7
Sweden	2	2	3	2	5
Denmark	0	2	2	2	6–8
Italy	0	2	0	2	7

Notes: Entries are the number of parties or clusters of parties whose mean score on the issue does not overlap with others in terms of a 0.05 confidence interval. The last column is the number of parties in the country whose programs were coded (all sizeable national parties); this number may vary somewhat for different points in the postwar period.

shows, therefore, is that parties do on the whole offer electors policy choices. Whether they are responsive is less clear. As the British graph shows, the mean policy positions average out a lot of over-time movement on issues. To see whether policy movements respond to problems and public concern, however, we need to relate the two directly.

### **Responsiveness to electoral concerns**

Policy stands provide a basis for inference about party responses to electors, but can hardly provide convincing evidence about the relationship. For this we need to relate party policy directly to electoral concerns. Unfortunately, comparable data on public opinion are hard to get over the full range of postwar countries shown in Table 1. Even confining ourselves to the most widely replicated Gallup question ‘What do you think is the most important

problem facing the country?’ (or close variants of it), we can only cover some time points for nine countries, get reasonably complete time series for four, and really cover the whole postwar period for two: the United Kingdom and the United States. Still, these data do provide a reasonably wide range of cases over which to check relationships.

Relating party election policy on the four issues to public concern about the area in the preceding year we can estimate a simple bivariate equation, for each party,  $i$ , across elections through time,  $t$ :

$$\textit{Party Policy}_{it} = a + b \textit{Concern}_{it} + e_{it}$$

Party emphases on planning are related to the annual average percentage of electors nominating unemployment as the most important problem. Market reliance is related to the percentage mentioning inflation. Welfare is related to the percentage nominating social problems. And, peaceful cooperation is related to the percentage nominating international relations and the danger of war. The policy area matches are justified both in terms of *a priori* plausibility and as giving the best correlations compared to other conceivable correspondence between public concern and party policy.

Choosing the best-matching indicators of policy and concern turns out to be a conservative assumption in light of our major finding from this analysis. There are hardly any significant relationships to be found between electoral concerns and party policy. Over the 60 individual equations that we were able to examine for different parties and policy areas, only three were significant. Varying our measures (e.g., taking public opinion in the year of the election or in the relevant election month) produced no better results. The overwhelming impression is that parties choose policy positions independently of public sentiments at the time of the election.

This conclusion is reinforced by an independent study that went to the length of re-coding the postwar American and British election platforms in terms of the Gallup response categories to permit a more sensitive match between them and public assessments of issue importance (Bara 1999). Again no correlations were found in any of the issue areas examined here. From Table 1 the parties seem to offer choices, and from the present analysis they do not seem responsive.

## Responding to problems

We can hardly stop here. Given the patchiness of some of the evidence, these findings still need to be checked and extended. Particularly as we are dealing with an absence of relationships with public opinion, the negative finding could

reflect data scarcity rather than an actual absence of substantive relationships. Fortunately, there are other indicators to which we can turn. Our initial discussion pointed out that parties make decisions on a whole variety of problems, not just those that concern electors. On these, too, they can opt for a commonly agreed solution, endorsed by experts and bureaucrats if not by the public, or they can stick with their own ideologically colored solutions, giving rise to continuing policy differences between their approaches.

Examining policy reactions to current issues both extends and supports the analysis with public opinion. While some issues have a marginal impact on electors, others – unemployment, inflation and international tensions – affect them centrally. We can see this from Table 2, which shows correlations between the actual seriousness of problems and public concern about them. Generally, electors' concern about unemployment and to a lesser extent inflation mirror the actual situation (or at least the official statistics) quite closely. To this extent, general indicators of unemployment and inflation are functioning as

*Table 2.* Correlations between electoral perception of problem as most important and problem indicator, by country, for varying postwar time periods

Country	(N) (years)	Unemployment	Inflation	Welfare	International peace
Sweden	(7) (1987–1993)	0.940	0.319	0.947	---
Denmark	(6) (1972–1982)	0.841	0.310	0.735	---
Netherlands	(7) (1972–1990)	0.656	0.704	-0.824	---
France	(9) (1960–1972)	0.762	0.279	0.127	---
Australia	(13) (1980–1992)	0.534	0.446	-0.034	---
New Zealand	(41) (1952–1992)	0.937	0.414	0.577	-0.314
United Kingdom	(41) (1952–1992)	0.953	0.725	-0.355	-0.796
Canada	(14) (1968–1992)	0.805	0.907	-0.421	-0.257
United States	(43) (1950–1992)	0.823	0.302	0.168	-0.739

Notes: Number of time points for each country and the period over which they are distributed are given in parentheses. They are determined by the availability of comparable opinion data in each case (percentage nominating a problem as most important, or in Australia, New Zealand and Sweden, as among the three most important). Use of year as an indicator of level of Cold War tensions means that time periods when tensions did not markedly change are not appropriate for analysts and are not reported (---). Entries are bivariate correlations between the 'objective' problem indicator based on official statistics and the average annual percentage of respondents to Gallup and other surveys nominating the problem as (among) the most important. 'Objective' indicators are percentage unemployed each year; average percentage price increase each year; percentage of population aged more than 65; year of postwar period. Because of the non-comparability over time periods, due to missing cases and single as opposed to multiple nominations of important problems, the data cannot be pooled across countries. The most reliable time series are those for the United Kingdom and the United States, followed by Canada and New Zealand.

surrogate measures of public concern. A weaker relationship exists for international tensions, where the level of concern is high during the Cold War era but drops down with general rapprochement and the end of the Vietnam conflict at the beginning of the 1970s. This is particularly the case for the United States and the United Kingdom, two nations that had been centrally involved in the confrontation.

An alternative indicator, however, MIDS (i.e., involvement in militarized inter-state disputes – not shown here) shows little relationship. This is also true for the increase in the dependent elderly population, reflected only erratically or not at all in electors' mentions of welfare as a problem. In these policy areas, it is still worth seeing whether parties respond to problems with agreed technical solutions or divergent diagnoses since their behavior here also affects the choices offered in elections.

Some issues, it appears, are too detailed to concern electors consistently. Overall, however, we can conclude that where electors show themselves concerned, it is with good reason – when levels of unemployment or inflation are high or when international tensions threaten to plunge the whole world into war. This assessment rules out one possible explanation of the parties' observed non-responsiveness: that the public ignores real problems confronting governments in favor of passing issues that do not really demand a serious response. On the contrary, electors seem to concern themselves with central political problems (Marcus & Hanson 1993), naturally enough since they bear the brunt of their effects.

Electoral realism about at least three of the problems we concentrate on makes it appropriate to analyze relationships between party policies and 'objective' indicators along the same lines as for public opinion. The form of the bivariate equation is, for any party,  $i$ , at election year,  $t$ :

$$\textit{Party Policy}_{it} = a + b \textit{Objective Problem Indicator}_{it} + e_{it}$$

As we have data for all countries and most elections in the postwar period, we were able to examine 240 equations of this type, substituting MIDS for year as an indicator of international tensions. MIDS, measured here as the percentage of world states involved each year in militarized interstate conflict, is a more refined indicator of world turbulence that decision-makers are likely to respond to and that in fact produces better correlations with party policy than year. 'Better' in this context is relative, however, since the major results from this analysis are negative. Only 15 (6 per cent) of equations showed a statistically significant response by parties to developments in each policy area. This is just about what is to be expected by chance over such a large number of cases.

### Modeling tradeoffs between responsiveness and ideological choice

The evidence we have so far leads to a definite if negative conclusion: parties do not respond much in policy terms either to public opinion or to current problems. Our bivariate analyses constitute quite a thorough check on this possibility as they go through the comparative evidence party by party, making full allowance for individual party idiosyncrasies and unique country characteristics. They are incomplete operationalizations of the tradeoffs illustrated in Figures 1, 2 and 3, however, which, among other things, raise possibilities of interaction between ideology and responsiveness. They are also incapable of answering the question: What else *does* drive party policy if not pressures from the electorate or the sociopolitical developments parties have to face up to?

One likely candidate is ideology in the sense of continuing differences between Left and Right, particularly as intervention, planning and the free market are classic areas of confrontation between these political tendencies. The suggestion is that parties already think they can appeal to electors or solve problems on the basis of previous stands on these issues, so there is little need to adjust their policies when concern about them grows. Stable, ideologically derived positions on individual issues then provide electors with a known policy choice that they might not get from more responsive parties.

We can confront all the possibilities illustrated in Figures 1, 2 and 3 with a single regression equation. This takes the form, for each party,  $i$ , at election year,  $t$ :

$$\text{Party Policy}_{it} = a + b_1 \text{Problem}_{it} + b_2 L-R_{it} + b_3 (\text{Problem} * L-R)_{it} + e_{it}$$

where

*Party Policy* is the extent to which a party shows support for the relevant policy in one of the four policy areas under investigation; *Problem* is the corresponding indicator of the seriousness of the problem; and *L-R* represents the Left-Right leanings of the party as measured from the previous election program on the indicator construction reported in Budge et al. (2001: Table 1.1).

The pattern of significant parameters emerging when the equation is applied to our data shows which of the tradeoffs between responsiveness and differentiated choice, illustrated in Figures 1, 2 and 3, actually occurs over our range of postwar democracies. We can infer that a particular model applies when one of five patterns emerges:

1. Common party responsiveness with an ideologically based choice (Figure 1a):  $b_1$  and  $b_2$  are nonzero while  $b_3$  is zero because this tells us there is a common responsiveness ( $b_1$  non-zero) and a consistent distinction across parties based on ideology ( $b_2$  non-zero), but there is no greater or lesser responsiveness according to party ideology ( $b_3 = 0$ ).
2. Common party responsiveness with no ideologically based choice (Figure 1b): the  $b_1$  coefficient is non-zero and  $b_2$  and  $b_3$  are zero because this tells us that the parties respond to problems, but the Left parties are no higher or lower than Centre or Right parties ( $b_2 = 0$ ), nor does Left or Right responsiveness converge or diverge as the contextual pressure builds up ( $b_3 = 0$ ).
3. Ideologically based choice, but no responsiveness (Figure 2a): the  $b_2$  coefficient is non-zero and  $b_1$  and  $b_3$  are zero. This tells us that ideology matters, but there is no responsiveness ( $b_1 = b_3 = 0$ ).
4. Ideologically contingent responsiveness (Figure 3): the  $b_3$  coefficient is nonzero, while  $b_1$  and  $b_2$  may take on a zero or non-zero value.
5. Of course, there is the likelihood that, in certain settings, party behavior is so erratic as to be neither very responsive nor offer a good basis for choice (Figure 2b). In this case no parameter will be significant.

We can estimate the equation both in an aggregate analysis of the pooled data over 16 democracies from 1950 to 1992, and for individual countries over that period. There is a need to analyze the relationships at both levels, to check whether the aggregate results really do apply in the individual case or whether they are just averaging and obscuring dramatically different party responses in the separate countries.

The results at both levels, however, are clear and consistent with each other. Thus the aggregate findings can be quoted without fear of distorting the overall picture. The main one is that party responses in each specific area are more rooted in their ideology than in any other of the factors we have examined. We are not of course claiming that the equations include all of the factors influencing policy responses. Given that the  $R^2$  ranges from 0.11 to 0.27, we could hardly substantiate this. There are many other factors shaping policy that we do not cover. Of those we do examine in the context of responsiveness versus choice, however, ideology is obviously the one most related to policy. Out of our series of hypothetical graphs, Figure 3 is the one fitted best by the empirical findings. Generally the  $b_2$  coefficient for ideology in Equation 3 is stronger and more reliably estimated than the others, as shown in the actual equations with pooled data reported in Table 3. At this level, ideology, largely on its own, is associated with a tenth to a quarter of the variation in the party

Table 3. Regression equations based on pooled data from 16 democracies, 1950–1993: Relating party program emphases in four policy areas to Left-Right ideology, contextual circumstances and their interaction

Policy and context	Regression equation				Summary statistics
	Intercept	L-R ideology	Problem indicator	L-R & D problem	
<i>Economy:</i>					
Planning and unemployment (N = 821)	4.06 (0.28)	0.110 (0.010)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.0050 (0.0019)	R <sup>2</sup> = 0.22 S <sub>e</sub> = 4.17
Market and inflation (N = 907)	6.39 (0.41)	-0.140 (0.020)	0.06 (0.02)	-0.0053 (0.0025)	R <sup>2</sup> = 0.27 S <sub>e</sub> = 6.63
<i>Society:</i>					
Welfare and % population > 65 (N = 847)	6.20 (1.22)	0.110 (0.050)	0.29 (0.10)	0.0019 (0.0042)	R <sup>2</sup> = 0.20 S <sub>e</sub> = 6.52
<i>International:</i>					
Peace and MIDs (N = 829)	2.21 (0.13)	0.050 (0.005)	0.32 (0.12)	0.0054 (0.0058)	R <sup>2</sup> = 0.11 S <sub>e</sub> = 3.39

Notes: Comparing slope coefficients for ideology, context and the interaction term is not always easy because of the different scales involved in measuring the variables. Thus in the international field, the slope for ideology at 0.05 seems smaller than the one associated with context (participation in Militarized Interstate Disputes), but ideology is measured on a 200-unit scale with an effective range from +60 to -60. The MIDs index only varies by two units. The same contrast holds for Welfare. Thus ideology overwhelmingly predominates in the relationship. Consistent with the situation hypothesized in Figure 4, the Left-Right ideological standing of the parties bears a significant relationship to a party's position. In two policy areas – peace and welfare – the context itself makes a reliably distinguishable difference, which means that at least parties in the Center give different amounts of emphasis when the contextual pressure is running high than when it is running low. Also, three out of four interaction terms suggest some degree of differential responsiveness depending on the ideological stand of the party. It must be noted, however, that the interaction term in the peace equation falls short of statistical significance and the standard errors of all the interaction terms show the effect of differential responsiveness to be variable. Given that it takes pooling of all our data to show these effects, which do not appear in the case of many individual parties or in many countries, we conclude that ideology dominates these relationships.

scores. Given all the other factors that can affect policy stands, this is suggestive evidence of its influence.

The evidence on responsiveness is harder to interpret. In two policy areas, peace and welfare, the severity of the problem makes a reliably distinguishable difference in the degree of support for a policy. In the economic policy areas, government planning and market reliance, the interaction term shows some degree of differential responsiveness to contextual circumstances depending on the ideological tendency of the party. The best that can be said of the evidence on responsiveness, however, is that it is very weak. It takes data on 951 cases – individual parties in elections across 16 nations and 43 years – to uncover these effects, which do not emerge in either the single country or single party analyses, including those with public concern substituted for the problem indicators. The general relationships across pooled data by themselves are of little or no help in anticipating whether any one party in any one nation is responsive.<sup>3</sup>

Coupling the low informational value of the aggregate evidence with the evidence from individual parties, the really important message is that conveyed by the standing differences associated with ideology that do come through in the country analyses. The picture of the parties that our evidence draws is most like Figure 2a where the parties maintain the same policy positions regardless of contextual circumstances. There is one important caveat: some parties in some countries are difficult to distinguish from each other (Table 1) because of the unpredictable variability in the positions they take from election to election. However, they are not responding either to problems or electoral concern; their policy stands vary in ways not covered by our statistical models, which are focused rather than comprehensive.

### **Discussion: Party ideology and electoral choice**

Whatever the theoretical possibilities may be, we conclude that, over the policies covered here, party policy positions on central issues come mainly out of ideology among the influences examined. Via ideology, they are closely related both to past policy and record (Downs 1957: 104–110) and, beyond that, to the basic principles on which parties take their stand. Our comparative evidence on this point is supported by earlier studies of particular countries and parties (Stimson et al. 1995; Niemi & Weisberg 1984: Page & Shapiro 1983).

To some extent the picture that emerges is a flattering one. Parties are principled and consistent, not opportunistic and vote grabbing. Every coin has its reverse, however, and enthusiasts for party democracy might well react negatively to the idea that parties are also inflexible and insensitive to public con-



cerns. This can be explained if we allow for parties having to find their way in a highly uncertain and confusing world. It is often unclear what the optimal policy on current problems is, or how far the public is willing to trade off progress in one policy area for progress in another. Lacking such information, it is difficult to respond by adopting some appropriate policy. What is at issue is what the majority actually *does* think and what *is* appropriate. What else do parties have to guide them here but their principles (i.e., ideology)? This is after all what principles/ideology are for. It is because of the difficulties of estimating popular needs and appropriate responses in specific situations that parties subscribe to an ideology in the first place. As its main function is to provide answers to the central problems of the economy, society and international affairs, it is small wonder that parties react in ideological terms when these areas come under discussion. Parties cannot – any more than the rest of us – react freshly to each new political development. They have to diagnose them in terms of previous experiences and basic assumptions, which then to a large extent define their reaction. As a result, parties maintain enduring policy differences rooted in their divergent ideologies. There are positive benefits for electors from this, which have been overlooked in the preoccupation with Downs' model of two-party competition and its prediction of convergence on majority concerns. These are:

- Reasonably fixed policy positions advocated in successive elections and pursued in government give parties a record and history that substantially reduce information costs for voters. Even the least informed might have the feeling that a particular party stands for the interests of 'people like me', if it usually extends welfare or cuts taxes. These perceptions then guide electors when they vote on other, often technical, matters.
- Reasonably fixed policy positions also offer electors choices and stimulate debate over which choice is best. Automatic convergence on the same policy by all parties would suppress debate. Free discussion plus electoral choice are major defining characteristics of democracy. A blanket consensus over policy would stifle both.

If they did consistently converge, parties would go against their own long-term collective interest. They would rule themselves out as useful reference points, in the policy environment anyway. Suppose parties were perfectly responsive and converged automatically on a 'technically appropriate' or 'majority-approved' solution to problems. Would they not then become irrelevant to democratic politics in policy terms? No issue would need to be voted on, as an optimal solution would already be found. Parties would all be

associated with the same policies (and if they were responsible, they would have the same government record) so there would be nothing to distinguish between them. Where voting was required, it might as well be on the direct alternatives for resolving the issue. Party endorsements would add nothing to electors' information about what the choice entailed.

Seen in this light, party privileging of differentiation and choice over sensitivity and responsiveness seems neither irrational nor suspect. If we are not to rule out disagreement – an essence of politics – altogether, it is surely better that divergences are anchored in stable reference points associated with a record and a known history rather than shifting alliances of unknown provenance and perhaps dubious interests. In this broader sense, parties help to provide translation of majority preferences into public policy. They give voters the opportunity to choose between reasonably clear alternatives, which the electoral winner then has a chance to effect in government – just as government mandate theory says they should.

There is, of course, a difficulty with the mandate in multi-party coalition systems where governments are not necessarily determined by the election. Even in this case, however, voting for a party with clearly defined policies gives it more weight in coalition negotiations and governments, as Barry (1970: 123) stressed. There are other ways in which public opinion influences policy under 'consensus democracy' (Lijphart 1999), but voting for parties that promote policies closest to one's own is surely one of them.

## **Summary and overview**

If choice is a good thing, parties do well to maximize it, even at a certain cost in sensitivity and responsiveness. Our reflections on the possibilities allowed for a range of possible tradeoffs, reflecting ambiguities in democratic theory about the exact relationship between responsiveness and choice. The comparative evidence paints a picture of ideological parties offering choices to electors without much adaptation to changing circumstances. The mainspring of policy flexibility over time comes from electorates switching votes between parties and alternatives, rather than parties adapting to electors' wishes. That puts a burden on electors; they have to know generally where parties stand on issues. However, that burden is modest inasmuch as knowing the general ideological inclination of parties is among the most important pieces of information to have in order to make an informed choice. This is not the only way popular preferences could get translated into government policy, but it is a perfectly feasible and democratic one.

## Data Appendix

It was desirable to check out the theoretically possible trade-offs against as wide a range of countries, parties and time-periods as possible to avoid drawing idiosyncratic conclusions from a limited set of cases. This concern dominated collection strategies.

### *Public Opinion*

The only issue question that appears in a majority of polls and surveys is: What do you think is the most important problem facing the country? (Sometimes 'the three most important problems'). The Gallup code of responses is fairly standardized. 'Unemployment' appears as a separate category in most countries. We grouped answers referring to financial situation, interest rates, budget, inflation, prices, wages and standard/cost of living under 'inflation'. 'International peace' grouped references to military, alliances, defense, foreign affairs/relationships, peace and aid. 'Welfare' grouped health, housing, pensions, social policy, poverty, welfare, social justice and equality.

Data were obtained from: the Gallup Poll (Gallup 1972, 1978, 1979–1988); the Gallup International Opinion Polls for Great Britain (1937–1975) and France (1939, 1944–1975 (Gallup 1976); and the Gallup Political and Economic Index (1966–1995). In addition, various bodies and individuals furnished information from surveys incorporating the important problems' question: New Zealand: Department of Public Policy, University of Waikato; Australia: Professor Ian McAllister, Australian National University; Sweden: CEIFOS, Goteborg; Denmark and the Netherlands: Steinmetzarchieff Amsterdam; Canada: Carleton University Social Science Data Archives, Ottawa.

### *Party Policy*

Data are taken from the 1994 release of the Comparative Manifest Project (Volkens 1994). The estimates are produced by coding the sentences of party election programs into 57 policy categories, then percentagizing and combining category percentages to score summaries as follows:

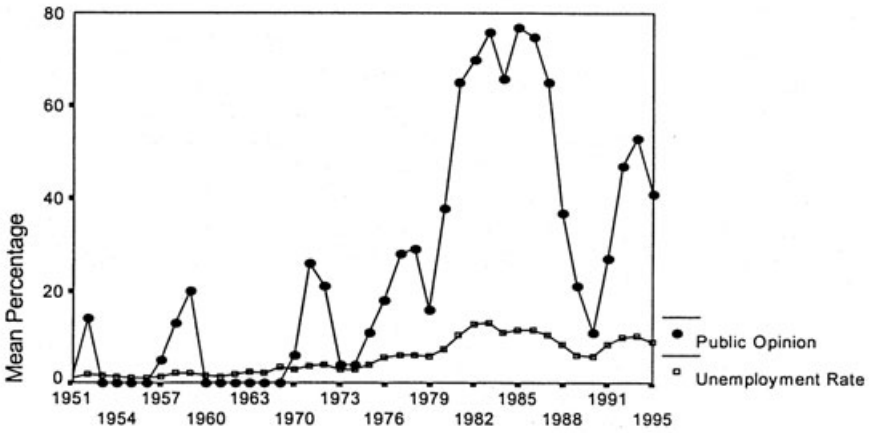
Planning: controlled economy, economic planning, market regulation

Market: free enterprise, economic orthodoxy

Welfare: pro-welfare state, social justice

International Peace: peace, anti-military, anti-special foreign relations

I) Unemployment



II) Inflation

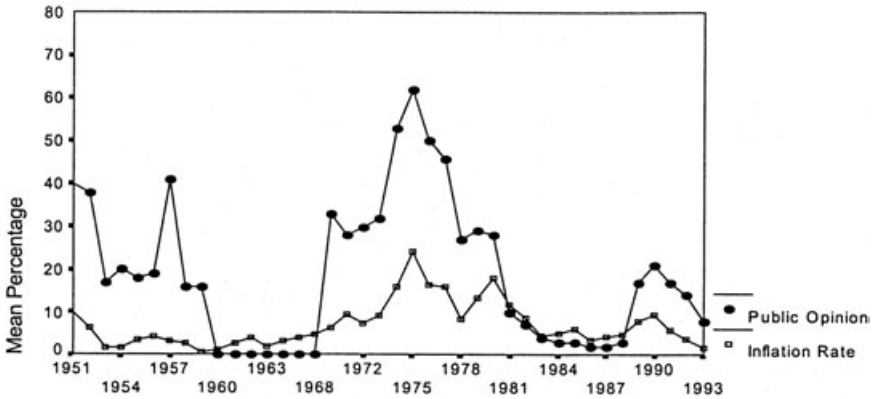


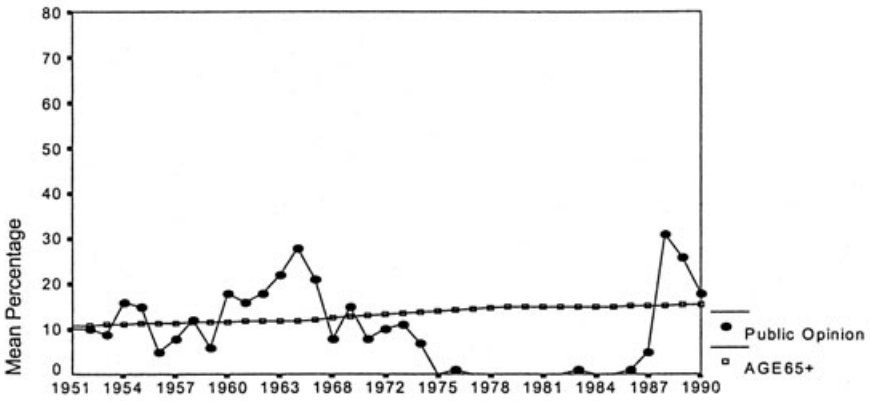
Figure 5. United Kingdom: Average annual percentage of Gallup respondents seeing problem as most important with indicator of the seriousness of problem, 1952–1993.

Percentages are calculated on the basis of all (quasi)-sentences in a manifesto.

*Ideology*

The measure of Left-Right ideology is taken from the same source. The measure is constructed by summing percentage mentions of 13 Right issues and subtracting this from the summed percentage mentions of 13 Left issues

III) Welfare



IV) International Peace

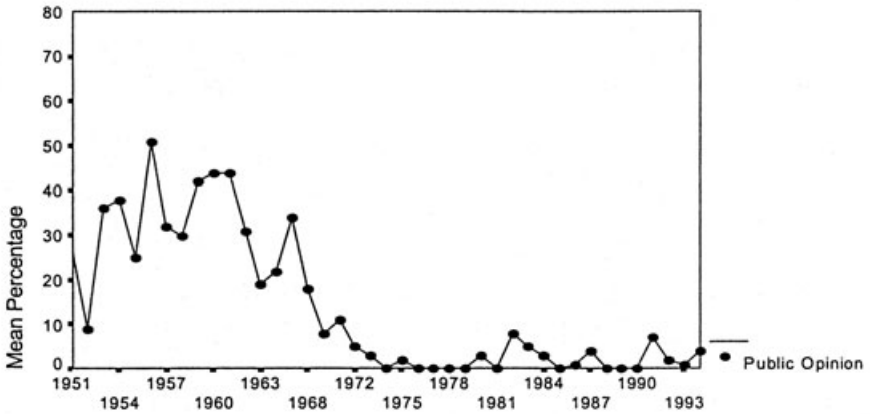


Figure 5. (Continued).

(see also Klingemann et al. 1994: 40). The scores could range from +100 (party totally on Left) to -100 (party totally on Right). The actual range is normally from +60 to -60. Some of the items in the ideology measure overlap with those used to construct policy indices. Hence ideology score in the *previous* election is related to *current* policy to avoid tautology, even though we are checking their tendency to go together rather than causality.

*Problem Indicators*

Sources are: Cross-national Political and Economic Statistics (OECD, various dates), *United Nations Demographic Yearbook* (United Nations, various

dates), Stuart Bremer kindly supplied us with the MIDS indicator. The indicators taken directly from these sources are as follows:

Unemployment: annual average percentage of workforce unemployed

Welfare: annual percentage of population aged 65 and over

Inflation: percentage annual change in the consumer price index

MIDS: number of militarized interstate disputes involving each country in a year (for individual country analyses) and number of countries involved in militarized interstate disputes each year (for aggregate comparisons).

## Notes

1. It may be that a party will sometimes signal its commitment to one side of an issue by making a short dramatic statement about it rather than giving it a substantial amount of attention. It is becoming clear, however, that the debate over party issue position taking and party issue salience (see, e.g., Laver 2001; Budge 2000, 2001) is not the meaningful distinction it may have once seemed. The evidence and, therefore the emerging consensus, is that using issue salience is a valid and reliable means of indicating party position taking (Gabel & Huber 2000; McDonald & Mendes 2001; Laver n.d.).
2. The overlapping versus distinct party mean positions have been evaluated by regressing party scores, within country, onto a set of dummy variables representing the country's parties. Each party was successively treated as the excluded category so that the test of statistical significance recorded which other parties were statistically distinct from the baseline party, assuming homoscedastic party variances. A single cluster is defined as one in which, for example, party A is not different from party B and party B is not different from party C, whether or not party A and party C differ from each other. By this method, the amount of choice shown in Table 1 is a conservative estimate.
3. Because we are not able to conduct a full-scope causal analysis, we do not want to go so far as to conclude that objectively identified problems play no role in the policy positions stances taken by parties. Nevertheless, given that our evidence shows the relationship is somewhere between weak and nonexistent, that taking account of ideology does little to sort out an identifiable direct or conditional linkage with problems, and that the publics identify problems in line with objective indications, leads us to conclude that party responses to problems are not a persistent or in any sense major source of party policy position taking.

## References

- Aldrich, J.H. (1995). *Why parties? The origin and transformation of political parties in America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bara, J. (1999). Tracking Estimates of Public Opinion and Party Policy in Britain and the US. Paper presented at ECPR Joint Sessions, Mannheim.

- Barry, B. (1970). *Sociologists, economists and democracy*. London: Collier-Macmillan.
- Budge, I. (2000). Expert judgements of party policy: Uses and limitations. *European Journal of Political Research* 37: 103–113.
- Budge, I. (2001). Validating the Manifesto Research Group approach: Theoretical assumptions and empirical confirmations. In M. Laver (ed.), *Estimating the policy position of political actors*. London, Routledge, pp. 50–65.
- Budge, I. et al. (2001). *Mapping policy preferences: Estimates for parties, electors and governments, 1945–1998*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Castles, F. (ed.) (1982). *The impact of parties*. London: Sage.
- Downs, A. (1957). *An economic theory of democracy*. New York: Harper.
- Gable, M.J. & Huber, J.D. (2000). Putting parties in their place: Inferring party left-right ideological positions from party manifestos data. *American Journal of Political Science* 44: 94–103.
- Gallup, G. Jr. (1972, 1978, 1979–1988). *The Gallup poll*. New York: Random House/ Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Research Institute.
- Gallup, G. Jr. (1976). *The Gallup international opinion polls*. New York: Random House/Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Gallup political and economic index (1966–1995)*. London: The Gallup Poll.
- Kavanagh, D. (1981). The politics of manifestos. *Parliamentary Affairs* 34: 7–27.
- Klingemann, H.-D. et al. (1994). *Parties, policies and democracy*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Laver, M. (nd). On Mapping Policy Preferences Using Manifesto Data. Unpublished manuscript, Trinity University, Dublin.
- Laver, M. (2001). Position and salience in the policies of political actors. In M. Laver (ed.), *Estimating the policy position of political actors*. London, Routledge, pp. 66–75.
- Le Duc, L., Niemi, R. & Norris, P. (1996). *Comparing democracies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lijphart A. (1999). *Patterns of democracy: Government forms and performance in thirty-six countries*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Marcus G.E. & Hanson, R.L. (eds) (1993). *Reconsidering the democratic public*. University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- McDonald, M.D. & Mendes, S.M. (2001). The policy space of party manifestos. In M. Laver (ed.), *Estimating the policy position of political actors*. London, Routledge.
- Niemi, R., Herbert, G.P. & Weisberg, F. (1984). Do voters think ideologically? In R.G. Niemi & H.F. Wiesberg (eds), *Controversies in voting behavior*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, pp. 1319–2806.
- OECD (various years). *Cross-national political and social indicators*. Paris: OECD.
- Page, B.I. & Shapiro, R.Y. (1983). Effects of public opinion on policy. *American Political Science Review* 81: 23–43.
- Stimson, J., McKuen, M.B. & Erikson, R.S. (1995). Dynamic representation. *American Political Science Review* 89: 543–565.
- Sullivan, J.L. & O'Connor, R.E. (1972). Electoral choice and popular control of public policy. *American Political Science Review* 66: 1256–1268.
- United Nations (various years). *United Nations demographic yearbook*. New York: UN.
- Volkens, A. (1994). *Comparative Manifestos Project: Data set CMP94*. Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum.

*Address for correspondence:* Michael D. McDonald, Department of Political Science, Binghamton University (SUNY), Binghamton, NY 13902, USA  
Tel.: 001 607 777 2946; Fax: 001 607 777 2675; E-mail: mdmcd@binghamton.edu