

Media as Data Source for the
Analysis of Democratic Processes: Theoretical
Considerations and Empirical Challenges*

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Abstract

Media play an important role in democratic systems as well as in democratization processes. In addition to their control function of the justice, government and parliamentary action, they control a good part of public information. Therefore, they may be key players in agenda setting processes. In consolidated democracies, characterized by programmatic linkages between political actors and the electorate, the today's key role of media in the political process is to establish and ensure the link between the political supply and demand side. Hence, media represent a rich source for scholars investigating in mechanisms behind the political mobilization. But how can information of programmatic positions be extracted? In this paper, I give an overview of recent theoretical and methodological approaches in the concerned field. A comparison of different widely used measurement techniques shows that results heavily depends on employed techniques.

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1 A Dynamic Field of Research

1.1 Introduction

Media play an important role in democratic systems and in democratization processes too. In addition to their control function of the justice, government and parliamentary action, they control a good part of public information, therefore they may be key players in agenda setting processes. When exploring emerging democracies, there are clear reasons why we must have an interest in media – but what about consolidated democracies? In consolidated democracies, the nowadays key role of media in the political process is to establish and ensure the link between political actors and their electors. While it is today easy to analyze the global role of media, the analysis of the mechanisms behind political communication in the public sphere remains a crucial task. In this paper I will present and compare different analytical approaches.

1.2 Media Transformation in the Western Context

Media has undergone important transformations during the last 50 years. Until the 1960s, during the *first age of political communication* as Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) called that period, the most important media were party-dependent press and state-led radio broadcasting. Party-dependent press satisfied local and political interests of the electorate of each party while state-led broadcasting provided news from the world. In North America and most European democracies, radio and television broadcasting was monopolized, so the state expanded its control over media by introducing television during the 1960s. A new era began, the *second age of political communication*, characterized by an increasing speed of the availability of information, by an increasing importance of images, by the withdrawal of party-dominated press, and, finally, by the paradox that state-led media became the most important platform of political information while they were committed to provide neutral and independent news (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999).

The response from the private side – from the “vibrant society” as Tocqueville would say – was the introduction of so-called “supermarket tabloids” as like *The Sun* in the UK or *Bild* in Germany. They contributed to both too, accelerating public communication and shifting the focus of the the public attention from ideological debates toward images. But the big difference between the classic press and the new tabloids was their political independence. Instead of party offices, economic-oriented editors took over the control of contents. Their goal was to make money by satisfying the public demand. People like gossip

and sensations – the tabloids were the first media actors which discovered that. But tabloids were not limited to sex and crime. In seek for good stories, they invented a new style of journalism : the investigative journalism, which reinforced the private media’s power compared to its state-run competitors.

Today, we assist in the development of an new age. On one hand, media are characterized by their omnipresence and increasing diversity. On the other hand, political actors get professional, their public information is soaring shaped by lobbyists, spin-doctors and communication consultants. Hence, scholars like Swanson and Mancini (1996) developed new theoretical frameworks for the analysis of electoral campaigns which account for implications of the transformation as described above, for example the increasing personalization of campaigns (see e.g. Manin, 1995, 279ff.), the development of autonomous and independent communication structures and political parties with weaker ties to their electorate than ever before.

1.3 Structural Conflicts and Political Mobilization

As Seiler (1980) resumed in very simple words the Lipset and Rokkan’s (1990, 1967) perspective 30 years ago: “each party roots in a social conflict”. If that is true, we will find behind every party a social group with its collective identity, its organizations, its particular view of the world and particular political claims. In a polity with a structure-based party system, political orientation is quite easy because every body knows what a party stands for. But the today’s political reality looks sometimes different. We know a lot of parties which doesn’t fulfil the structuralist criteria. In some Western European party systems, decreasing importance of traditional cleavages and the parties’ hunt for the median voter led to weak and blurry party programs (see e.g. Lijphart (1968) with his concept of the *depoliticized democracy*), in spite of their traditional appeal. Dominant parties in emerging democracies claiming in their manifestoes for nothing else than national unity offer very little too.

As it is difficult to mobilize electors without program, both cases are problematic for the concerned parties and their polities. In the first case we can observe increasing electoral volatility, decreasing electoral participation (see Penning, 1998; Mair, 1998, 172) and/or the emergence of new parties while the second case leads first to a political deadlock and then – if democratic rule is respected by political leaders – to the emergence of a new structural conflict between the establishment and the opposition. The last change of power in Senegal gives a good illustration of the second case: Wades victory in 2000 and the great success of his PDS at the parliamentary elections one year later

was mostly due to one single claim: “Sopi” – the appeal for a change (see e.g. Creevey, Ngomo and Vengroff, 2005). But the second case may also lead political leaders to choose another way to stay in power. Instead of satisfying public demands and orienting electors, they mobilize electors by providing individual benefits. In other words: they buy votes.

So programmatic linkages may be replaced by clientelistic linkages (see e.g. Mainwaring and Scully, 1995; Mainwaring and Zoco, 2007; Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007) – what may conduct a polity towards a defective or delegative democracy (see e.g. O’Donnell, 1994).

1.4 How Media Deal with Conflicts

Political conflicts are a great source of news for media. But the role of media is not reduced to simply report political conflicts, it goes further. First, media can influence voters’ preferences by filtering information. While party-dependent media filtrate information by their political interests and the demand of their partisans, independent and demand-oriented media filtrate by commercial interests. As political conflicts attract a lot of readers, media will cover them, in either case because it is hard – if not impossible – to monopolize media in a democracy. Second, clientelistic mobilization represent a political conflict and a good story too. So media monitor the democratic process in general, even if they are demand-oriented and independent from political groups or parties.

2 Media as Link between the Supply and Demand Side of the Political Sphere

2.1 Media as central actors

Some call them electors or citizens, others call them civil society or “the public” – ignoring their denomination or the actor’s perspective which reflects in these terms, we always talk about people which transfer power by electing candidates or voting for a party.

Under the assumption of a political competition characterized by programmatic linkages and free media, media cover political conflicts, offer a broad audience to political actors and comment political processes. In other words: media provide all information required for the formation of individual’s preferences to the public sphere. But media don’t play *postillion d’amour* in an unique sense. They also give a voice to the “man in the street” and discover new issues. By

interlinking the supply to the demand side, media connect political actors with the people, and vice versa.

2.2 Manifesto vs. Media Data

There are different ways to capture the political supply side. Expert surveys, roll call data, coded party manifestoes or media data are the most common ways to access information about issue-positions of political actors. Expert surveys are always biased due to the nature of experts while media represent a very complex world. Party manifestoes are accessible and in comparable, nearly pre-coded form. So many factors which may influence the data are excluded by the nature of the source when working with manifestoes. One of the most important data collections of the political supply in the world, the data of the *Comparative Manifesto Project*, CMP (see Budge et al., 2001; Laver and Budge, 1992) is build upon manifestoes. The strength of the CMP-data is their comparability and reproducibility. But who reads manifestoes – except some scholars which are paid to do so?

Media have one great advantage: they are public. The information which influences the voter’s choice may be captured by an analyst too. So let’s have a closer look on two approaches among the different techniques to extract data from media.

2.3 Media Data: From Words to Numbers

Media data can be gathered either on the article’s or the sentence’s level. In the first case, a coder has to identify the most important political claim (see e.g. Koopmans und Statham, 1999) of each article and to code it with a broad range of descriptive variables as like the political actor or variables about the general context in which a claim is embedded. In the second case, each text is split up in its most semantic structure. Both approaches root in Downs’ (1957) theory of the issue-oriented voter, allow the reconstruction of the public information at a given moment and are widespread approaches in political sciences. The great advantage of core sentences coding is that only little information get lost during the coding work because it needs very few assumptions while important criteria are required to identify the most important claim of an article. But how does it work?

2.4 Coding Semantic Core Sentences

This approach has its origins in early theoretical elaborations by Wittgenstein (1984 [1921]) and was first implemented into concrete coding instructions by Osgood (1956) and Axelrod (1976). Recently, it has been renewed for the analysis of party systems (Kriesi et al., 2008 and 2006; Kleinnijenhuis und Pennings, 2001; Kleinnijenhuis and de Ridder, 1998; Kleinnijenhuis, de Ridder and Rietberg, 1997). Additionally, Franzosi (2004: 60f.) has provided theoretical and empirical evidence that the method – he calls it ‘story grammars’ – is a useful device for the social sciences in general. It is an inductive approach to capture the full complexity of the political debate without imposing theoretical expectations on the data, which constitutes a common problem for content analysis.

The basic idea of this method is that both the latent and the manifest content of every written document can be described as a network of relationships of objects. In our project (Kriesi et al. 2008 and 2006) we identify relationships between ‘political objects’, i.e. either between two political actors or between a political actor and a political issue (see the example below). Each sentence is reduced to its most basic semantic structure (the so-called core sentence), consisting of a subject (political actor), its object (issue or another actor) and the direction of the relationship (predicate) between the two (using a scale ranging from -1 to $+1$ with three intermediary positions). To illustrate the coding scheme, an example is given below.

Coding Example

A given text:

Election campaign United Kingdom 2001, *The Times*, April 18th:
“In his most vitriolic speech yet against the Government’s plan, Mr Livingstone, the Mayor of London, encouraged Londoners yesterday to challenge every general election candidate on the doorstep about the Public-Private Partnership (PPP).”

will be coded as shown below (table 1).

Table 1: Coding semantic core sentences

RELATION	SUBJECT	DIR.	OBJECT
Actor-Actor	Ken Livingstone (Labour)	-1	Government (Labour)
Actor-Issue	Ken Livingstone (Labour)	-1	PPP (economic liberalism)

As this simple example shows, nearly the complete information will be conserved. With each sentence, additional information can be coded. Coding media data for content analysis is a time-consuming and boring work. But this approach is – due to its closeness to the source data – well suited for automatization, so coding speed increases rapidly (see Wüest, Bünzli and Frey, 2007) and offers new possibilities.

Most content analysis has been conducted on written sources, on newspapers in particular. But the same coding scheme can also be applied to spoken words and allows extensions in order to get additional data as like data on images or framing.

3 Representation of Political Conflicts

A common element among all representations of political conflicts is ‘distance’ as a metaphor to describe allies and opponents. Allied actors are close, opponents are far. The ‘closeness’ between two actors may be the result of their mutual attraction, but also of common interests or other underlying information describing common or distinctive traits of actors. So this metaphor may be applied to any kind of relationship. In political science it is widely used because of its straightforwardness, intelligibility, and flexibility.

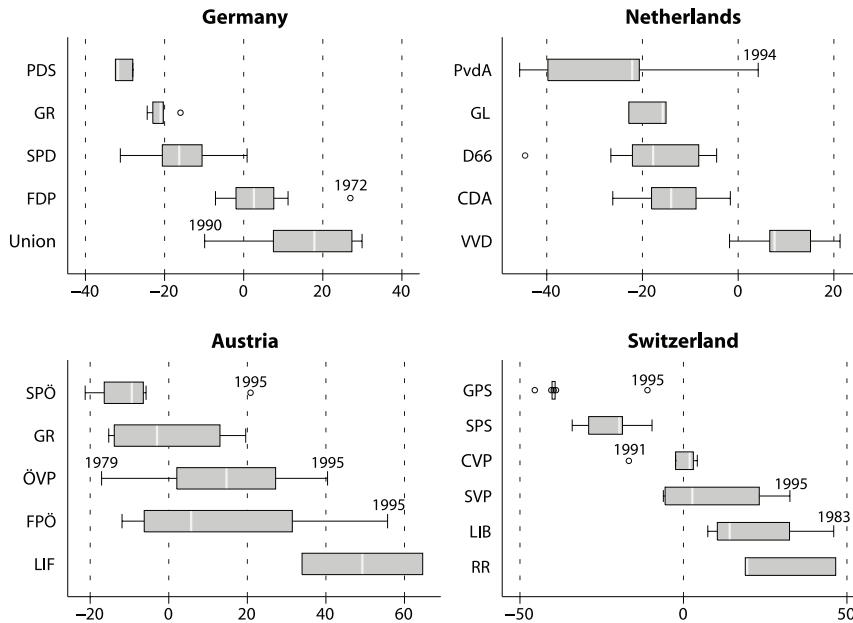
3.1 What We Are Used to See

The most common representation of a political conflict consist of a single-dimensional space based on the traditional economic cleavage ranging from the left to the right. This representation of a single-dimensional space roots in the french revolution and has been conceptualized and vulgarized in political science by Downs (1957) fifty years ago. Figure 1 gives a typical example of this kind of representation.

Figure 1 is a nice graphical representation of the *right_left* variable of the CMP-dataset¹ which is perfectly consistent with our expectations. We find socialist and social democratic parties as well as green parties on the left, the christian democrats in the middle of the scale and conservative and right-wing parties on the right. The only exception is Germany, but as christian democrats has no competitor on the right, the right space is controlled by liberals and

¹Source: data-CD shipped with Budge et al. (2001); the operationalization of this variable is identical with the variable used by Laver and Budge (1992), see appendix III, *Description of Manifesto Data Set*, Seite III.10.

Figure 1: Party positions in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and Switzerland on the left-right scale according Budge et al. (2001) from 1970 to 1998



christian democrats – what fits perfectly with the Downsian model of party competition.

But unfortunately, it shows only a part of the story. Important assumptions by the authors strongly influenced the data. The most important was the idea that every political conflict and every issue may be absorbed by the party system. Second, the data bases on manifestoes. But act political parties and candidates in accordance to their manifestoes? Election campaigns are characterized by tactical decisions while manifestoes reflect strategic guidelines. So we should be cautious in interpreting this figure. According to Kitschelt (2003, 1994), the political space in European countries is nowadays structured by two orthogonal conflict dimensions – the traditional economic cleavage and a quite new cleavage defined by a libertarian and an authoritarian pole.

3.2 Other Methods and other Data Offer different Sights

Semantic core sentences may be combined with a huge variety of analytic approaches. The most common way to explore these data starts with grouping issues into categories. As relations between actors and issues are conceptually

described as a network of relationships, we can deal with these data in the same way as with any kind of network or relational data. The following example of a spatial representation has been created by using data from the research project *National Political Change in a Globalizing World*² and a weighted metric multi-dimensional scaling model (WMMDS)³. Before proceeding to the WMMDS, relationships between actors and issues has been aggregated by election campaign (year), parties and 12 issue categories. As the mean values of the ‘relationship’ can be interpreted as ‘distances’ or ‘dissimilarities’, they have been reported into a matrix of distances – comparable to distance charts on road maps – which served as input for the scaling procedure (see Kriesi et al. 2008 for a detailed description of data and methods).

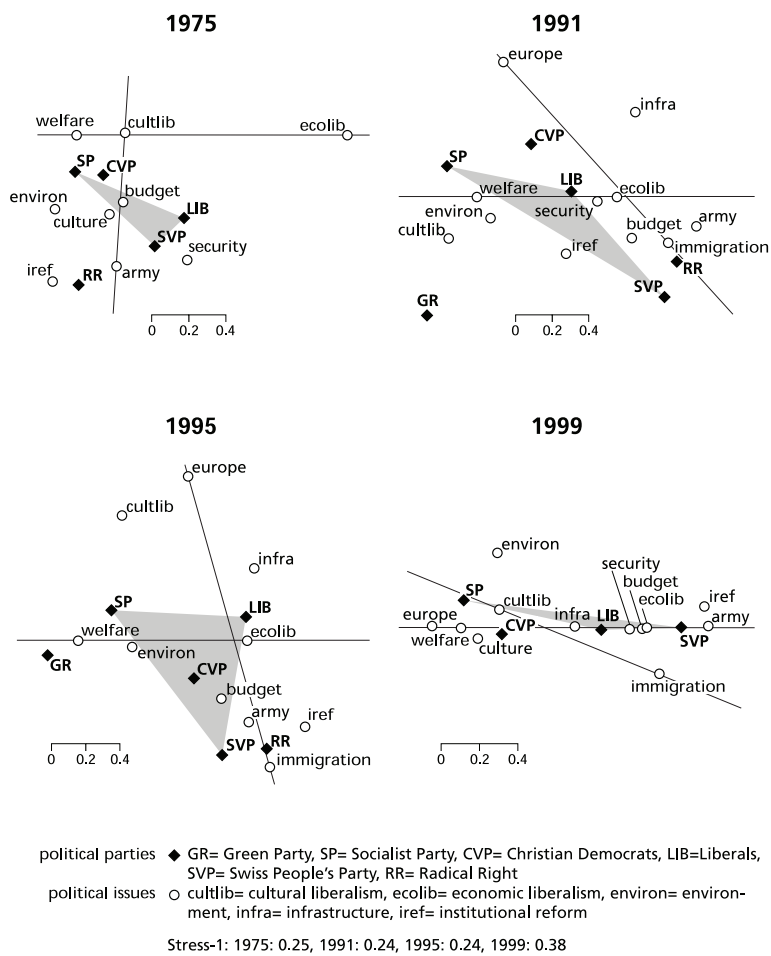
As figure 2 shows, this proceeding gives an insight on the political landscape of Switzerland which differs considerably from figure 1.

First, the political space is in all observed election campaigns two-dimensional. The first of the two dimensions is the well-known left-right axis, in this case defined by the issue categories *economic liberalism* and *welfare*, while the second one is defined by the categories *cultural liberalism* and (anti-) *immigration*. This representation of the political space illustrates perfectly the transformation of the SVP from a traditional-bourgeois and agrarian party toward a rightwing-populist party. In 1975, the dominant conflict was the economic one, while new issues – european integration, claims of new social movements (grouped in the issue category *cultlib*) and immigration issues – structured the party competition in the 1990ies.

²see <http://www.ipz.uzh.ch/npw>

³using the proxscal algorithm implemented in SPSS 13 and newer versions

Figure 2: The political supply side in Switzerland according to Kriesi et al. (2008)



4 Conclusion

When exploring political processes in consolidated democracies, accurate information about the political supply side – i.e. issue positions of political actors – is required. Media provide both information on issue positions and information about the quality of democracy – which constitutes itself a political issue.

Compared to other data of political supply such as expert interviews, manifesto data or roll call data, data of media contents are difficult to gather. But information provided by media is the most important source of information underlying both individual's preferences and choices – and it is accessible to researchers, too.

Among various approaches to extract data from media products, the coding of semantic core sentences has one great strength: data can be gathered without strong assumptions regarding the selection of the coded information. When combining semantic core sentence data with adequate analyzing techniques, discovering new traits of political competition becomes possible.

But the increasing variety of media constitutes a big challenge to social scientists working in the field of content analysis. While it is theoretically possible to extract information carried by images, signs or movies, it remains practically a heavy challenge to do so. So the scientific community needs to improve theoretical frameworks, analytical models, and tools to keep a clear sight of what happens in our democracies.

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