# 'Public foreplay' or programmes for government? The content of the 2015 party manifestos

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the content of the 2015 British general election manifestos using manually-derived Manifesto Project estimates and computer assisted text analysis (CATA). It analyses the parties' policy emphases, investigates their ideological positioning and movement, and further compares their policy agendas with voters' concerns. It finds the three main parties moved slightly leftwards but continued to agree on the broad thrust of economic policy. It also finds that, while the economy dominated the manifestos, there was considerable differentiation in respect of other issues. Finally, the parties appeared to downplay the issue of immigration despite its importance to the public.

## Acknowledgements

Ahead of the 2015 British general election, most commentators had expected a repeat

of the 2010 result: a hung parliament and negotiations to form a new coalition (see,

for example, Orchard 2015). The publication of the party manifestos during the

campaign had been greeted accordingly. Thus, for the journalist Andrew Rawnsley

(2015), the manifestos were best regarded 'as opening positions for post-election

bargaining.' For the former Cabinet Secretary Gus O'Donnell, who had brokered the

2010 negotiations, the manifesto launches were akin to 'public foreplay' between the

parties (quoted in Watt and Wintour 2015). Yet, thanks to the vagaries of the voting

system, there would be no need for negotiations. To widespread surprise, David

Cameron's Conservative Party won a wafer-thin parliamentary majority and a

mandate to govern alone. Their manifesto now mattered in a way that most people had

not quite expected.

This paper analyses the content of the 2015 manifestos. It goes further than

earlier studies by extending its analysis to seven parties: the Conservatives, Labour,

the Liberal Democrats, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the Greens,

the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru. Manifestos are authoritative statements

of parties' medium-term policy priorities. They contain pledges for action, or inaction,

and are usually presented as embryonic programmes for government. Contrary to

media hype, they are also often largely implemented (Royed 1996; Bara 2005). Since

they are published ahead of every election, they are ideal subjects for the purposes of

mapping parties' shifting agendas and ideological positions.

The paper draws on Manifesto Project estimates and computer assisted text

analysis (CATA) to produce reliable inferences about the parties' policy emphases in

2015. It compares the parties' left-right ideological positions and locates their

movements in an historical perspective. It analyses the parties' policy agendas in 2015

and compares them to those in 2010. Finally, it investigates whether or not the manifestos reflected voters' concerns about the 'most important issue' as reported in opinion polls. In the process, the paper increases our knowledge and understanding of the 2015 general election, which was fought against the backdrop of five years of austerity and coalition government, a weak economic recovery, and a fracturing United Kingdom. More broadly, the paper sheds light on programmatic competition in the contemporary British party system. Voters can now choose from among a wide range of policy agendas; but party competition is still relatively constrained, at least in broad ideological terms.

**Programmatic competition and the 2015 manifestos**

Manifestos are staple features of British elections. Most voters may never look at them, but manifestos are read by journalists and reported extensively across different forms of media. Parties use them to influence media coverage and the agenda of election campaigns. They also use them to present their policies to a mass audience and to differentiate themselves from their rivals. This differentiation may take the form of parties taking explicit 'for' or 'against' stances on 'positional issues'; or it may take the form of parties varying their emphases on 'valence issues', where the main question is which party is best able to deliver almost universally desired outcomes (Stokes 1963). By devoting more attention to some topics over others, parties can signal their priorities, seek to promote a reputation for competence and even cultivate their 'ownership' of issues (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996).

Manifestos are also central to ideas about government mandates. In theory, if not always in practice, winning parties can claim the right to implement their manifestos, and voters can subsequently judge them on the basis of how successful

they are in doing so. As the Liberal Democrats found after reneging on their 2010 pledge to abolish university tuition fees, breaking manifesto promises can greatly damage a party's reputation. Given their potential effect on public opinion, it is not surprising that parties generally invest considerable time and effort in both preparing and presenting their manifestos (Bara 2006).

Our analysis of the 2015 general election manifestos covers seven parties. The British party system has been fragmenting in recent decades (Quinn 2013), a process that continued in 2015. Indeed, the 'effective number of electoral parties' (Laakso and Taagepera 1979) on polling day was 3.8, the largest number ever in a British general election held under full universal suffrage. Reflecting the editorial judgement that underpinned ITV's televised seven-way leaders' debate, we analyse the manifestos of the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, UKIP, the Greens, the SNP and Plaid Cymru. All seven parties were defending seats at the election; all won at least one seat on polling day.

The seven manifestos varied considerably in length. The longest was the Green Party's *For the Common Good*, which came in at over 40,000 words. The Liberal Democrats' unimaginatively titled *Manifesto 2015* was the next longest at 34,000 words, followed by the equally unimaginatively titled *The Conservative Party Manifesto 2015*, at 30,000 words, and UKIP's *Believe in Britain*, at 27,000 words. Labour's *Britain Can Be Better*, the *Scottish National Party Manifesto 2015* and Plaid Cymru's *Working for Wales*, all weighed in at around 18,000 words.

In analysing the content of the 2015 manifestos, we pursue three lines of inquiry. Our first reflects the well-established notion that parties compete on the basis of ideologically distinctive programmes and by locating themselves at different points along a 'left-right' policy continuum (Downs 1957; Bartle et al. 2011). The 'left' is

usually linked to the goal of achieving greater political, social and economic equality, and a corresponding acceptance of the need for a large state to enhance the welfare of ordinary people. The 'right' is usually associated with the goal of promoting greater individual responsibility and economic freedoms, and a corresponding wish to reduce state activity. The favoured policy instruments of the major parties have changed over the decades, but those advocated by Labour—such as higher levels of government spending on welfare and increases in taxation—have generally been consistent with a more left-wing position, while those advocated by the Conservatives—such as lower levels of government spending and lower taxes—have generally been consistent with a more right-wing position. Accordingly, we ask if the manifestos reveal any pronounced left-right movement in the party system between 2010 and 2015 and, if so, how this movement compares with broader ideological changes since 1945.

While focusing on a single policy continuum makes for simplified models of party competition, it can conceal a great deal of how parties distinguish themselves and appeal to voters. In this vein it is often suggested that talk of 'left' and 'right' masks two dimensions, a dominant one that is principally concerned with economic activity (socialism versus capitalism), and a secondary dimension concerned with social issues (libertarianism versus authoritarianism) (Kitschelt 1993; Webb 2000, pp. 115-127). Evidence from Britain and elsewhere suggests that while positions on these two dimensions are generally connected, parties make differentiated movements along each of them from election to election. Given the importance of the economic context in 2015, a point we return to shortly, there is an added case for analysing the parties' positions on these two dimensions. In addition to investigating party movement along a single left-right dimension, we thus ask if the 2015 manifestos reveal any distinctive ideological movements in respect of economic or social issues.

Our second line of enquiry focuses in greater detail on the parties' policy agendas and the issues that were most salient in the 2015 manifestos. Parties' priorities at any election are likely to reflect some combination of their programmatic preoccupations and the immediate political context. In terms of the former, for instance, Labour is culturally committed to championing the National Health Service, among other things, whereas the Conservatives are similarly committed to maintaining law and order and promoting business and commercial opportunities. Likewise, the Liberal Democrats have long been committed to political reform, the Greens to environmentalism, UKIP to withdrawal from the European Union, Plaid Cymru to greater autonomy for Wales and the SNP to Scottish independence.

In terms of the 2015 political context, the economy loomed large. Since 2010, the Coalition Government had pressed ahead with a programme of 'austerity' and fiscal retrenchment. Chancellor George Osborne had framed austerity as a necessary response to an out-of-control deficit. Yet, as a number of commentators have noted, his strategy was also highly political; it was about defining the debate on economic policy in such a way that benefited the Conservatives and highlighted Labour's apparent past profligacy (Gamble 2015a). Despite the rhetoric, there was actually an easing up on the cuts after 2012, which were ultimately less draconian than those proposed by Osborne's Labour predecessor, Alastair Darling (Gamble 2015b, p. 160). In the event, the Coalition failed to achieve its goal of eliminating the deficit by the end of the Parliament, thanks in part to a faltering economic recovery and lower than anticipated tax receipts. Nevertheless, Osborne had largely succeeded in framing the broader economic debate as one about how best to tackle the deficit. All the parties could be expected to devote substantial chunks of their manifestos to economic issues in a bid to establish their positions within this debate.

At the same time, the parties could be expected to differentiate themselves over other issues. There were certainly a large number of politically salient issues to address, ranging from welfare reform, NHS reorganisation and changes to student finance, though immigration, fuelled by Cameron's earlier pledge to reduce net annual migration to below 100,000, to Britain's membership of the European Union, the subject of a promised referendum. Meanwhile, the result of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum prompted talk of further constitutional changes.

Our third and final line of inquiry again relates to the parties' policy agendas in 2015 but this time focuses on the relationship between the manifestos and public opinion. From a normative perspective, public concerns ought to be reflected in the content of manifestos, since, as John May (1978, p. 1) notes, democracy involves 'a necessary correspondence between acts of government and the wishes with respect to those acts of the persons who are affected'. At the same time, and in line with power-seeking models of party competition, parties can be expected to emphasise the policies and issues that they think will most resonate with voters.

Measuring voters' policy concerns is not straightforward, but it is conventionally done by asking survey respondents what they believe to be the most important issues (MII) or problems facing the country (Wlezien 2005; Bartle and Laycock 2012). For example, the polling organisation YouGov regularly asks people to identify the three most important issues facing the country 'at this time'. On the basis of respondents' answers, as reported in YouGov's (2015) 'Political Tracker', three issues tended to dominate between 2010 and 2015: health, immigration and especially the economy.

In one sense, there are problems with comparing MII responses and manifestos, since the former tend to reflect voters' short-term views while the latter

reflect parties' medium-term policy priorities. There are limits to how much of a correspondence we should expect. Yet such responses are still an indicator of the prevailing public mood, including at the point when manifestos are drawn up. Moreover, political strategists are certainly aware of MII data, and it is a key indicator of public opinion that they might be expected to respond to. For these reasons, we ask how far the parties' policy agendas corresponded with answers to a range of MII survey questions asked in early 2015.

**Data and methods**

To answer our questions, we employ two well-rehearsed content-analytic methods: (a) those developed by the Manifesto Project, which involve the manual coding of texts according to a well-established scheme; and (b) our own computer assisted text analysis (CATA) of the manifestos.

The Manifesto Project provides a framework for the comparative analysis of texts. At the heart of this framework is a list of 56 distinct categories representing major themes and policy areas (see Budge et al. 2001, pp.181-184). The whole manifesto is first divided into 'quasi sentences', portions of text expressing a unique argument, which are then counted under one, and only one, of the 56 categories. The resulting frequency distributions are then standardised as percentages of all quasi sentences. By employing this coding scheme, researchers can compare manifestos across space and time, either in respect of single categories or groupings of (theoretically-related) categories (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006). Indeed, the resulting data have been used in countless studies, including of British elections (see, for example, Budge 1999). Estimates are already available for the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats (formerly Liberals) between 1945 and 2010 (Volkens

et al. 2015). The 2015 estimates we analyse are merely the latest entries in an ever-growing dataset.

In addition to the Manifesto Project data for 2015, we also analyse our own CATA-derived data. The need to engage with a second content-analytic approach stems from the fact that the Manifesto Project categories cannot be compared directly with answers to MII survey questions. The clearest example of this problem is the issue of immigration, which does not have a separate category in the Manifesto Project coding scheme. Since we wish to create estimates of issue salience that are directly comparable with the response categories used by academic and commercial pollsters, we need to construct our own categories. In this paper we use HAMLET II, software that enables users to analyse word frequencies across texts, identify the occurrence of key words and then create dedicated vocabularies based on these words (Brier and Hopp n.d.). HAMLET II also enables users to designate their own coding unit (such as a sentence or a paragraph). As with CATA more generally, there is minimal human intervention in building the coding categories and establishing the estimates, making the measures extremely reliable.

For the purposes of exploring the relationship between the manifestos and public opinion, we first identified 22 categories that reflected responses to MII questions posed by the British Election Study (BES) and two commercial polling organisations, YouGov and Ipsos MORI in the spring of 2015.[1] We then developed a dictionary to measure the salience of these categories. Each category had its own exclusive set of entries in the form of appropriate synonyms, abbreviations and relevant word-strings derived from the manifestos. The combined dictionary contained some 740 entries. Following the same protocol as the Manifesto Project, our coding units were quasi sentences: we used HAMLET II to identify the number of

quasi sentences in each manifesto associated with each category (i.e. contained at least one relevant entry). Having obtained the estimates, we then refined our list of categories, reducing the number to 16 for analytical purposes. Three of the original set were aggregated with other categories, and three others were omitted because of their very low salience.

**Long-term ideological movement**

Our first line of inquiry focuses on what the 2015 manifestos reveal about the broad ideological positions of the parties, including their movement since 2010. We address these questions by drawing on Manifesto Project data and the standard summative 'left-right score' based on 26 of the 56 categories (Budge et al. 2001, p. 22). Because of the way the score is constructed, a higher value indicates a more right-wing position, while a lower value indicates a more left-wing position.

The left-right scores for the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats in 2015 are presented in Figure 1, as are their scores in every election since 1945. The long-term trends are already well known. The Conservatives have always been above and thus to the right of Labour, while the Liberal Democrats (the Liberals before 1992) have generally been somewhere in between the two larger parties. The data also show the relative convergence between the two main parties in the immediate post-war period, during the period of 'consensus', and the divergence that occurred from the late 1970s, as Labour moved to the left and the Conservatives moved to the right. They also show how the same parties converged once again in the late 1990s, a period that has been characterised as a post-Thatcherite consensus (Heffernan 2000)

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

In terms of the 2015 scores, it is clear that all three parties moved leftwards relative to their 2010 positions, with the Liberal Democrats moving closer to Labour and away from their erstwhile coalition partners. Labour's leftwards movement was widely anticipated, although its 2015 manifesto was still to the right of most other post-war Labour manifestos. The Conservatives' leftwards shift, by contrast, seems at odds with many commentators' perceptions, not to mention the rhetoric of austerity. Yet the movement reflected in their manifesto is less surprising once you look beyond the rhetoric. Further spending cuts outlined in the 2014 Autumn Statement, which Labour claimed would reduce government spending to the levels of the 1930s, were subsequently softened in the pre-election March Budget (Gamble 2015b). Osborne then promised to return spending levels to those of 2000, before New Labour rapidly increased public expenditure, and the Conservatives repeated this pledge in its manifesto. Moreover, amid the promised savings, the Conservatives committed themselves to spending extra money on the NHS, not to mention protecting pensions, education and foreign aid. It is also worth pointing out that even though the Conservatives moved leftwards, they had been further left in the past, notably in their 1955, 1959 and 1964 manifestos.

Because there are no comparable data for other parties, we display separately the left-right sores for all seven 2015 manifestos. On the basis of the Manifesto Project estimates, as Figure 2 shows, the Greens were the most left-wing party, with Plaid Cymru, the SNP, Labour and the Liberal Democrats successively to the right. The Conservatives were the most right-wing party, even more so than UKIP. UKIP's apparent moderation was perhaps a reflection of their targeting 'left behind' working-class voters, as well as Eurosceptic Tories (Ford and Goodwin 2014). As we shall see,

UKIP's manifesto focused a great deal on the NHS and healthcare, subjects likely to appeal to traditional Labour voters. Interestingly, the gap between the two 'extremes', the Conservatives and the Greens, was 28 points; by contrast, the gap between the Conservatives and Labour in 1983 (see Figure 1) had been 68 points. Despite the recent proliferation of parties, the ideological space they covered in 2015 was relatively constrained. This feature of the election can perhaps be attributed to the economic context, and especially the Conservatives' success in framing it and establishing the limits of credible policy alternatives.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

We now drill down to investigate the parties' positions and movements in respect of the dominant economic and secondary social dimensions. Following the methodology of Michael Laver and Ian Budge (1992, p. 24), we combine different combinations of Manifesto Project categories to construct separate scales that reflect a party's commitment to a neo-liberal economic agenda and the extent of its social conservatism.[2] These measures do not undermine the validity of the left-right scores; rather, they enable us to explore independently the social and especially the economic aspects of programmatic competition.

Figure 3 shows the changes in the three main parties' stances towards economics, where a higher-score represents a more neo-liberal approach and a lower score represents support for a more regulated economy. The long-term trends broadly mirror those of the left-right scores, with all three parties shifting slightly away from a neo-liberal agenda between 2010 and 2015. At the same time, the relative proximity of the parties' economic positions, which has been a notable feature of elections from

1997 onwards, continued. Indeed, the relative proximity is perhaps further evidence of Osborne's successful framing of the economic debate (Gamble 2015a) Apart from in 2005, the gap between the Conservatives and Labour has never exceeded two points. The movement of the parties makes it difficult to describe the economic consensus as Thatcherite, but there is still a consensus of sorts.

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Figure 4 maps the long-term changes in respect of social conservatism, where a higher score means the manifesto was more socially conservative. From a long-term perspective, the main parties' scores have generally been more volatile than their economic scores. As with the parties' general economic policies, recent elections have also been marked by a degree of relative consensus. Yet, in marked contrast to the consensus around economics, the 2015 election saw a notable divergence between the three parties on this dimension. The gap between the Conservatives and Labour on this measure grew to 13 points, while that between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats virtually tripled to 24 points.

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Figure 5 charts the positions of all seven parties on both the economic and social dimensions in 2015. The Conservatives emerged as the most socially conservative, even more so than UKIP, which was perhaps surprising given David Cameron's past efforts to 'modernise' his party's image (Bale 2010). The Greens emerged as the most socially liberal. The Liberal Democrats and the Scots and Welsh

nationalist parties were also on the more socially liberal end of the scale, while Labour occupied a half-way point between the two most extreme positions. The chart also reaffirms the general consensus around general economic policy, with UKIP and the SNP broadly in line with the three main parties (three points covered these five parties). Only the Greens and Plaid Cymru adopted notably different positions. The five-point gap between Plaid and the Conservatives was more than twice as great as that between the SNP and the Conservatives, while the Greens were nearly eight points distant from the Tories.

FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

**Issue salience in 2015 and 2010**

Our second line of inquiry concerns the parties' policy agendas in 2015, which we again analyse with Manifesto Project data. We focus initially on the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats, since Manifesto Project estimates are also available for these parties in 2010 (they are not presently available for the other parties). Table 1 accordingly reports the ten most salient Manifesto Project categories for the three parties' 2015 manifestos, whereas Table 2 does the same for their 2010 manifestos. In both tables the percentages refer to the number of relevant quasi sentences as a proportion of all quasi sentences.

TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

The first point that stands out from the two tables is the slight increase in the range of categories covered in the lists. The three parties' top-tens in 2015 covered 17

categories, compared with 14 in 2010. Nine of the 17 categories in 2015 were also present in the 2010 set, while four categories (Health and Welfare: Positive, Internationalism: Positive, Law and Order and Technology and Infrastructure) were common to all three parties' policy priorities in both elections. The second point that stands out from Tables 1 and 2 concerns the changing overlaps between different pairs of parties. In 2015, the Conservatives and Labour had seven categories in common, compared with six in 2010, whereas Labour and the Liberal Democrats had seven categories in common in both elections. More interesting is the reduction in the overlap between the Conservatives' and Liberal Democrats' priorities. In 2010, the soon-to-be coalition partners shared nine top-ten categories; in 2015, the soon-to-be former coalition partners had only six in common. The divergence in priorities, especially the Liberal Democrats' increased commitment to democracy, the environment, human rights and internationalism, may well have been a reflection of the party's wish to differentiate itself more clearly from its coalition partner.

Table 3 reports the ten most salient Manifesto Project categories for UKIP, the Greens, the SNP and Plaid Cymru in 2015. In terms of the overlaps between pairs of parties included in Table 3, the three centre-left parties had six top-ten categories in common, with the Greens and the SNP sharing six categories, the Greens and Plaid Cymru sharing five, and the SNP and Plaid sharing seven. The more right-wing party, UKIP, had three categories in common with all its centre-left rivals. However, UKIP also had three categories in its top-ten list that did not overlap with any of the others: Europe: Negative, National Way of Life: Positive and Military: Positive. The prominence of these categories was an obvious reflection of its distinctive programmatic preoccupations and attempt to tap into general notions of patriotism.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

What Table 3 does not show is the overlaps between all the parties analysed in 2015. No fewer than 24 categories featured across all seven top-ten lists, but only three issues featured in all seven parties' most salient set of categories: Health and Welfare: Positive, Market Regulation and Social Justice. The focus of these categories is almost certainly a reflection of the parties' responses to the effects of 'austerity' and associated public concerns. Table 3 also does not show the overlaps across probably the two bitterest inter-party divides in contemporary British politics, that between the Conservatives and UKIP, who compete for votes on the right, and that between Labour and the SNP, who compete for votes on the left. Eight categories featured in both the Conservatives' and UKIP's lists, while Labour and the SNP also had eight most-salient categories in common. By way of contrast, Labour had fewer priorities in common with its other centre-left rivals, the Greens (five) and Plaid Cymru (six).

**The manifestos and the 'Most Important Issue' in 2015**

Our final line of inquiry concerns the correspondence between the manifestos and what pre-elections surveys suggested were the 'most important issue' (MII) for voters. Table 4 reports in rank order the ten most important issues from the three surveys that we drew on to measure voters' concerns immediately prior to polling day, those fielded by the British Election Study (BES), YouGov and Ipsos MORI. All organisations employed slightly different questions and methods but all consistently found that the economy, immigration, and health—in that order—were perceived to be the most important issues facing the country. Table 4 also reports in rank order the

ten most salient issue categories, derived from HAMLET II, across all seven manifestos.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

It is immediately apparent from the rankings that the economy was generally the most prominent issue in the manifestos, just as it was generally said by survey respondents to be the most important issue. In those manifestos where the economy was not ranked first—in the SNP and Plaid Cymru manifestos—it was ranked second. On this point, at least, voters' and parties' priorities were in accordance.

It is also immediately apparent that the emphases in the manifestos did not always accord with voters' other pre-election priorities, especially immigration and health. While these two issues consistently ranked second and third in MII responses, they were generally much less salient in the manifestos. The highest ranking for immigration was in the UKIP manifesto, which arguably reflects UKIP's status as a niche party on this issue, where it was ranked twelfth (not shown). Other parties devoted relatively less attention to the issue, perhaps in a bid to downplay it and thus deprive UKIP of support as part of a 'dismissive strategy' (Meguid 2008). When it came to addressing healthcare and the NHS, only the Liberal Democrats came close to reflecting public opinion, with health being the third most prominent issue in its manifesto. None of the other party manifestos ranked this issue higher than fourth (the Greens). A similar story could be told for welfare, which figured prominently in the YouGov and Ipsos MORI measures, and poverty, which emerged as one of the more important issues in the Ipsos MORI and BES results. These two categories featured far less prominently in the manifestos, however. Welfare, which included pensions,

was ranked joint third in the SNP manifesto but otherwise received little attention. Poverty's highest ranking, seventh, came courtesy of the Liberal Democrats.

If the manifestos placed less emphasis on some issues that seemed important to respondents, they also discussed at length some topics that were seemingly far-removed from voters' pre-election concerns. All seven manifestos devoted considerable space to the constitution, a subject that was especially close to politicians' hearts after the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. The relevant CATA category covered references to a range of matters, such as devolution, decentralisation and local government, as well as topics such as 'English votes for English laws'. Perhaps not surprisingly, the constitution was the most prominent issue in the SNP's and Plaid Cymru's manifestos, ranking ahead even of the economy, but it was also the second-ranked issue in all but one of the other manifestos (it was the third-ranked issue in the Green manifesto). On this issue, in marked contrast to immigration, the major parties appeared to be following an adversarial strategy in their response to the once niche but increasingly mainstream Scottish and Welsh nationalists (Meguid 2008; McAngus 2015).

Of the others issues that featured prominently, education ranked at least fifth in all but the SNP's manifesto (where it was sixth). For Labour, the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru, it ranked third. Jobs (including unemployment) also generally figured prominently across the manifestos, with this issue ranking third in the Labour and SNP manifestos, and fourth in the Green Party and Plaid Cymru manifestos. The attention devoted to this issue may well be a reflection of the four parties' left-of-centre ideological positioning; it was also in accordance with the importance attached to unemployment in the pre-election opinion polls. Finally, both the Greens and the Liberal Democrats placed considerable emphasis on environmental

matters in their manifestos, which was in keeping with their past reputations on the subject. The environment was the second-ranking issue in the Green's manifesto and joint third in the Liberal Democrats'.

In summary, the issue agenda for the political parties, as measured by our CATA categories, was far broader than the reported concerns of most voters. Manifestos of course have to address such a range of policies; they are, after all, potential programmes for government. At the same time, the comparisons also show that, with the exception of the economy and constitutional matters, the parties tended to vary their issue priorities (which the 2015 Manifesto Project data also show). In many cases, these priorities were reflective of the parties' long-term commitments, as exemplified by the prominence of Europe and the environment respectively in the UKIP and Green Party manifestos.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The 2015 general election was one of the most fascinating elections in recent times. It was fought against a backdrop of significant economic, social and political change. It resulted, to widespread surprise, in the return of single-party majority rule. The complexity of party competition, which partly explains the outcome, only adds to the fascination. Seven parties played a significant role in the election, albeit in different ways and in different places. The SNP contested just 59 seats, all in Scotland, and won 56 of them; UKIP fielded 624 candidates across the UK yet won just one seat. Similarly, Plaid Cymru fought only in Wales, winning three seats, whereas the Greens fought nation-wide, yet picked up a single seat. Meanwhile, the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats did their best to win as many seats as possible and secure a place in government (and avoid annihilation in the case of the latter).

Our analysis of these parties' manifestos extends our knowledge and understanding of the 2015 general election. The latest Manifesto Project estimates suggest that, despite or perhaps because of the Coalition government's programme of austerity, the three main parties all moved slightly leftwards. The Conservatives' manifesto was the most right-wing among the seven we examined, and the Greens' was the most left-wing. The Manifesto Project estimates also confirmed an ongoing degree of consensus around economic policy, with only the Green Party and Plaid Cymru deviating much from it. Meanwhile, the fragmentation of the party system was reflected in the diversity of policy agendas. Only three Manifesto Project categories were common to all the parties' ten most-salient lists. That these categories included support for welfare, justice social and market regulation, helps partly to explain the general leftwards drift in the main parties' manifestos. Finally, the CATA-derived data we report confirms both the general salience of economic considerations and the reluctance of most parties to talk about immigration. On this issue, and some others, there was a notable gap between voters' apparent preoccupations and the parties' priorities.

Our analysis also provides insights into the changing nature of party competition and elections in Britain, including some of the challenges facing parties. To some extent, the prominence of the economy in 2015 reinforces the conventional wisdom that elections are largely about 'the economy, stupid'. Yet other issues and policies were also important in 2015, as the MII, Manifesto Project and CATA data make clear. Indeed, for some parties, and certainly for some voters in some parts of the UK, there were other issues that trumped economic considerations. The state of the economy will always exert a major effect on electoral outcomes, but James Carville's message to Bill Clinton need to be updated. To win over some voters in

some places, parties need to focus on 'the economy *and public services*, stupid' (Crewe 2001). Success in other places may mean 'the economy *and public services and immigration*, stupid'. Elsewhere, it may even mean 'the economy *and public services and independence*, stupid', or 'the economy *and public services and the environment*, stupid'. Needless to say, it is virtually impossible for any one party to address this diversity of concerns. The genie of multi-party politics is unlikely to be put back in the bottle any time soon.

The relative consensus that pervades party programmes also makes it difficult for parties to court voters and refute the frequently-heard charge that 'they're all the same'. Even as multi-party politics increases the range of policy agendas on offer to voters, the ideological distance covering the parties remains historically small. With David Cameron planning to step down as prime minister and party leader before the next election, it remains to be seen whether the Conservatives move leftwards under his successor. Cameron was quick to promise a 'One Nation' government following his re-election, yet deficit-reduction is still central to the Conservative's governing narrative. Much will depend on the state of the economy: if the hoped-for growth and proceeds of growth fail to materialise, further cuts will be needed to eliminate the deficit. The swelling ranks of Labour Party members, meanwhile, responded to their second successive general election defeat in 2015 by electing Jeremy Corbyn, its most left-wing leader in decades. His election signalled a potential sea change in Labour's ideological direction. Assuming he continues as leader, the 2020 Labour manifesto could look very different to those of recent years. British politics might even witness the emergence of a clearer ideological and economic-policy choice. If so, the next election could be even more fascinating—and mobilising—than the last.

**Notes**

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[1] The YouGov data ('The Sun Survey Results') came from an online survey fielded between 27 and 28 April 2015. The question was: 'Which of the following do you think are the most important issues facing the country at this time? Please tick up to three'. The Ipsos MORI data come from its 'Issues Index April 2015'. The question was: 'What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?' The BES data came from Wave 5 of the 2014-2017 British Election Study Internet Panel, in particular the responses of a 'core sample' that the BES team advise using for cross-sectional analysis. The question was: 'As far as you're concerned, what is the SINGLE MOST important issue facing the country at the present time?' While drawing on three sources of MII data increased our evidence base, it also presented challenges. Because the different pollsters used different response categories, we had to merge some categories in order to maximise comparability. The pollsters' use of different methodologies was less problematic since our analysis rests on the rankings, not the percentages.

[2] Our social conservatism scale omits the Manifesto Project category 'Government Effectiveness'.

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FIGURE 1: *The major parties' left-right scores, 1945-2015*
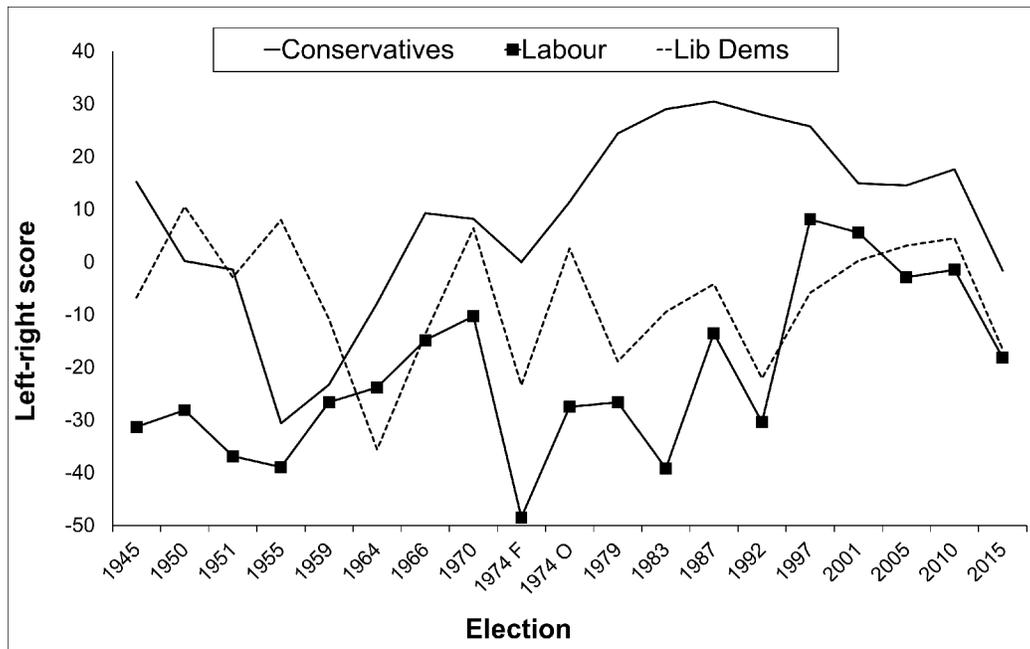


*Note:* Based on data from Volkens et al. 2015.

FIGURE 2: *Seven parties' left-right scores, 2015*
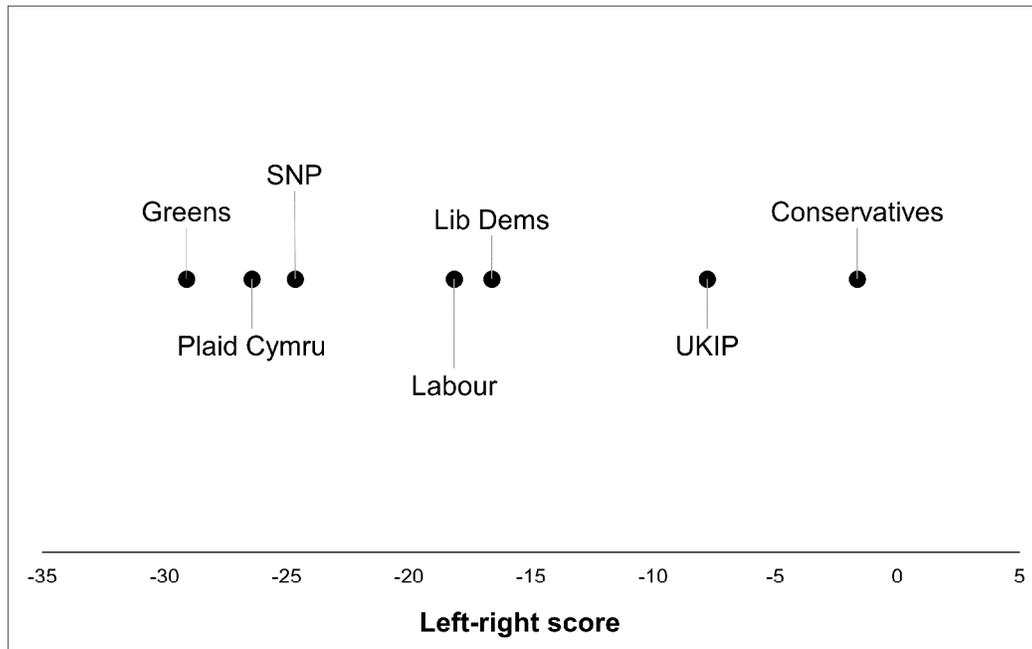


*Source*: Based on data from Volkens et al. 2015.

FIGURE 3: *The major parties' liberal economics scores, 1945-2015*
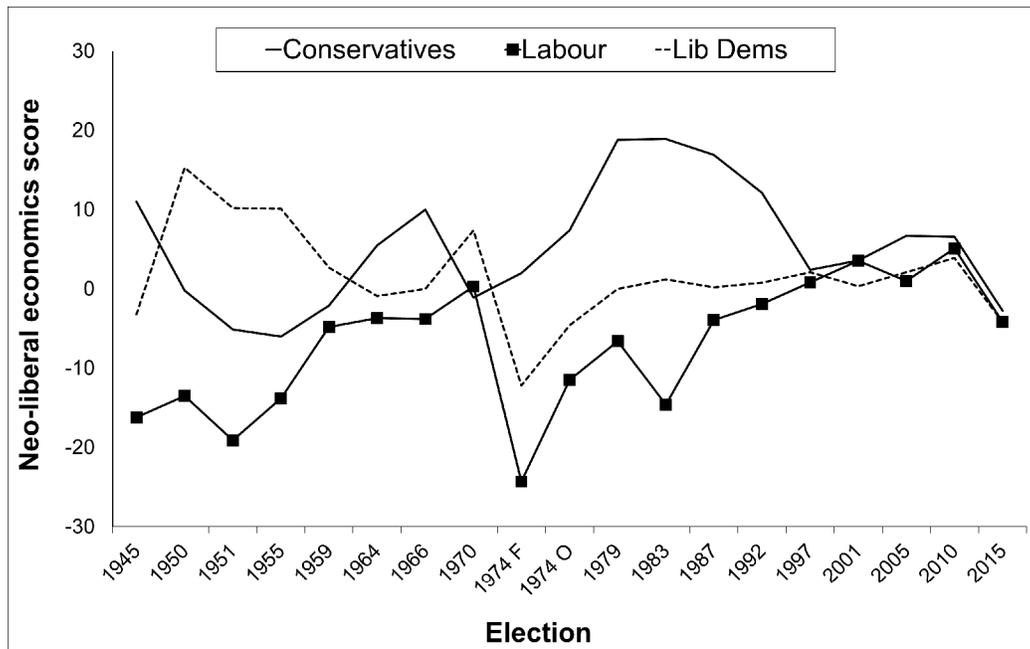


*Source*: Based on data from Volkens et al. 2015.

FIGURE 4: *The major parties' social conservatism scores, 1945-2015*
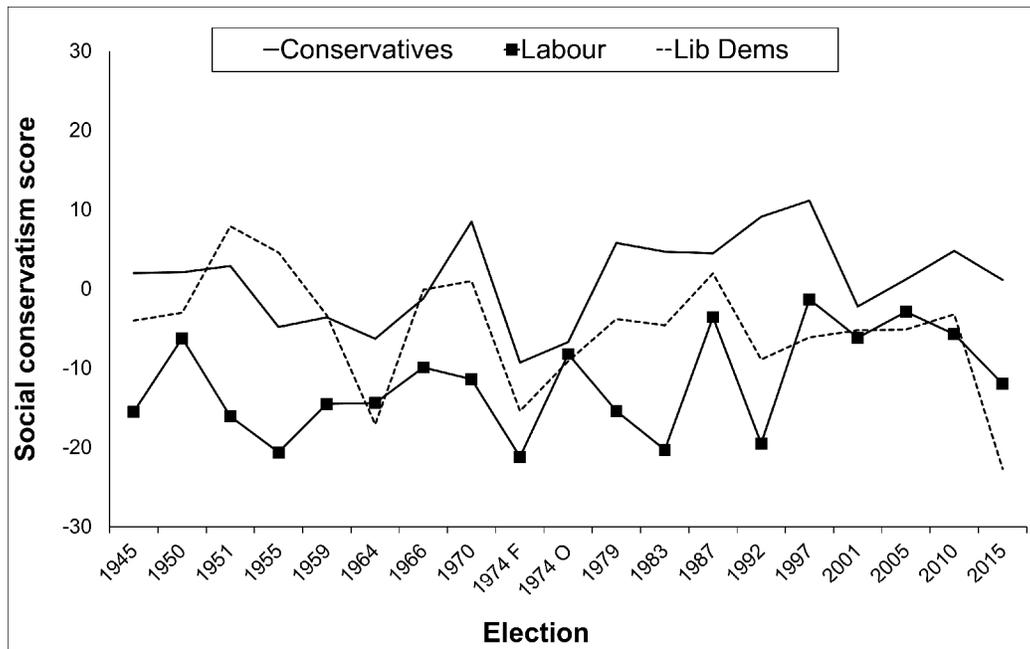


*Source*: Based on data from Volkens et al. 2015.

FIGURE 5: *Seven parties' neo-liberal economics and social conservatism scores,*

*2015*
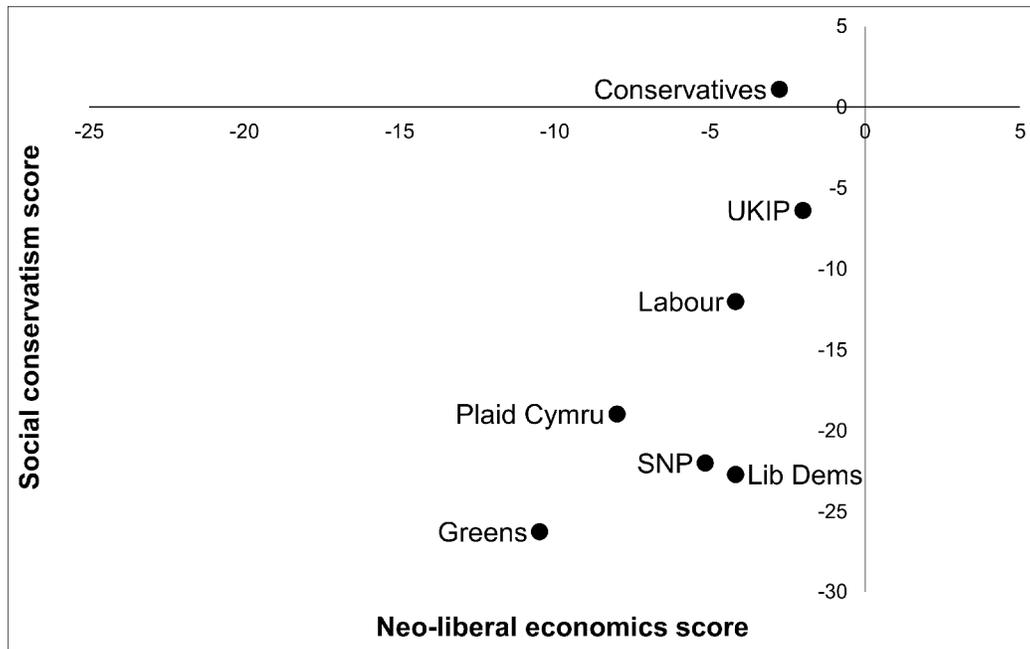


*Source*: Based on data from Volkens et al. 2015.

TABLE 1: *Most salient Manifesto Project categories, 2015*

| Manifesto Project category | Conservative | | Labour | | Lib Dems | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Rank | % | Rank | % | Rank | % |
| Health and Welfare: Positive | 1 | 8.7 | 1 | 12.8 | 2 | 10.1 |
| Law and Order | 2 | 8.4 | 3 | 7.7 | | |
| Economic Planning | 3 | 5.9 | | | | |
| Technology and Infrastructure | 4 | 5.6 | 7 | 4.8 | =6 | 4.5 |
| Education: Positive | 5 | 5.2 | 8 | 4.4 | =6 | 4.5 |
| Market Regulation | 6 | 5.0 | 2 | 8.1 | 5 | 6.4 |
| Social Justice | 7 | 4.7 | 5 | 5.7 | 1 | 15.2 |
| Europe: Negative | 8 | 4.6 | | | | |
| Decentralisation | =9 | 4.2 | 6 | 5.4 | 10 | 3.8 |
| Military: Positive | =9 | 4.2 | | | | |
| National Way of Life: Positive | =9 | 4.2 | | | | |
| Labour Groups: Positive | | | 4 | 6.9 | | |
| Democracy | | | 8 | 4.4 | 8 | 4.2 |
| Economic Orthodoxy | | | 10 | 4.3 | | |
| Environmental Protection | | | | | 3 | 9.9 |
| Freedom and Human Rights | | | | | 4 | 7.5 |
| Internationalism: Positive | | | | | 9 | 3.9 |

*Source*: Volkens et al. 2015

TABLE 2: *Most salient Manifesto Project categories, 2010*

| Manifesto Project category | Conservative | | Labour | | Lib Dems | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Rank | % | Rank | % | Rank | % |
| Government Effectiveness | 1 | 12.2 | | | | |
| Government Efficiency | 2 | 8.7 | | | 1 | 10.2 |
| Law and Order | 3 | 5.7 | 8 | 3.8 | 9 | 3.8 |
| Demographic Groups | 4 | 5.4 | 5 | 5.9 | 5 | 6.3 |
| Health and Welfare: Positive | =5 | 5.2 | 1 | 8.2 | 10 | 3.7 |
| Decentralisation | =5 | 5.2 | | | 6 | 5.5 |
| Environmental Protection | =5 | 5.2 | | | 3 | 7.4 |
| Technology and Infrastructure | 8 | 5.0 | 2 | 7.3 | 2 | 7.5 |
| Internationalism: Positive | 9 | 4.7 | 9 | 3.6 | 8 | 5 |
| Economic Orthodoxy | 10 | 3.9 | 6 | 4.4 | 7 | 5.3 |
| Education: Positive | | | 3 | 6.7 | 4 | 6.4 |
| Culture | | | 4 | 6.2 | | |
| Labour Groups: Positive | | | 7 | 4.1 | | |
| Incentives | | | 10 | 3.4 | | |

*Source*: Volkens et al. 2015

TABLE 3: *Most salient Manifesto Project categories for other parties, 2015*

| Manifesto Project category | UKIP | | Greens | | SNP | | Plaid Cymru | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Rank | % | Rank | % | Rank | % | Rank | % |
| Europe: Negative | 1 | 16.5 | | | | | | |
| Health and Welfare: Positive | 2 | 15.1 | 3 | 10.8 | 1 | 13.9 | 2 | 11.7 |
| National Way of Life: Positive | 3 | 8.5 | | | | | | |
| Market Regulation | =4 | 5.2 | 5 | 6.8 | 4 | 7.6 | 6 | 6.2 |
| Education: Positive | =4 | 5.2 | 7 | 3.9 | 7 | 4.4 | | |
| Law and Order | 6 | 4.8 | | | 10 | 2.7 | | |
| Military: Positive | 7 | 4.7 | | | | | | |
| Incentives | 8 | 3.7 | | | 5 | 6.1 | | |
| Social Justice | 9 | 3.5 | 2 | 16.9 | 3 | 8.3 | 1 | 13.5 |
| Government Efficiency | 10 | 3.2 | | | | | | |
| Environmental Protection | | | 1 | 19.7 | 8 | 3.6 | =4 | 6.3 |
| Anti-Growth | | | 4 | 7.5 | | | | |
| Internationalism: Positive | | | 6 | 4.3 | | | | |
| Civic Mindedness | | | 8 | 3.4 | | | 9 | 4.3 |
| Nationalisation | | | 9 | 3.1 | | | | |
| Labour Groups: Positive | | | 10 | 2.9 | 9 | 2.9 | 10 | 4 |
| Decentralisation | | | | | 2 | 11.4 | 3 | 7.5 |
| Technology and Infrastructure | | | | | 6 | 5.7 | =4 | 6.3 |
| Multiculturalism: Positive | | | | | | | 7 | 5.5 |
| Culture | | | | | | | 8 | 4.4 |

*Source*: Volkens et al. 2015

TABLE 4: *Most important pre-election issues and most salient issues in 2015 manifestos (CATA)*

| MII: the polls | | | The manifestos | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| YouGov | IpsosMori | BES | Con | Lab | Lib Dem | Green | UKIP | SNP | Plaid |
| 1 Economy | 1 Economy | 1 Economy | 1 Economy | 1 Economy | 1 Economy | 1 Economy | 1 Economy | 1 Constitution | 1 Constitution |
| 2 Immigration | 2 Immigration | 2 Immigration | 2 Constitution | 2 Constitution | 2 Constitution | 2 Environment | 2 Constitution | 2 Economy | 2 Economy |
| 3 Health | 3 Health | 3 Health | 3 Foreign | =3 Jobs | =3 Education | 3 Constitution | =3 Europe | =3 Jobs | 3 Education |
| 4 Welfare | 4 Jobs | 4 Poverty | 4 Education | =3 Education | =3 Health | =4 Foreign | =3 Foreign | =3 Welfare | 4 Jobs |
| 5 Housing | 5 Poverty | =5 Jobs | =5 Health | 5 Foreign | =3 Environment | =4 Education | =5 Health | 5 Health | 5 Health |
| 6 Europe | 6 Welfare | =5 Environment | =5 Jobs | =6 Health | 6 Foreign | =4 Health | =5 Education | =6 Education | =6 Environment |
| 7 Education | =7 Education | =5 Defence | 7 Defence | =6 Defence | =7 Jobs | =4 Jobs | =7 Jobs | =6 Defence | =6 Foreign |
| =8 Crime | =7 Housing | =5 Housing | =8 Europe | 8 Crime | =7 Poverty | =8 Transport | =7 Environment | =6 Environment | =6 Culture |
| =8 Environment | =9 Europe | =9 Constitution | =8 Welfare | =9 Environment | =7 Crime | =8 Poverty | =9 Defence | =9 Europe | =9 Europe |
| 10 Transport | =9 Crime | =9 Foreign | =8 Crime | =9 Poverty | 10 Housing | =10 Welfare | =9 Crime | =9 Housing | =9 Welfare |
| | | =9 Education | =8 Environment | | | =10 Defence | =9 Housing | | =9 Crime |
| | | =9 Europe | =8 Culture | | | | | | =9 Poverty |