Qualitative Narrative Analysis

The sheer volume of information contained in party manifestos raises the question of whether to approach the material from a quantitative or qualitative perspective. The former method, employed successfully by the Comparative Manifestos Research Group, has been explained elsewhere on this site. The coding of each platform into a series of distinct policy pledges is inappropriate for many research designs, however (see: Laver and Garry 2000).

As Frankenberg (2006) argues, it is inappropriate to assume that the full meaning and value of political texts can be reduced to a set of numbers. A purely quantitative analysis could not reveal the significance of the *Declaration of Independence* or *Communist Manifesto*, for instance. Gerring (1998: 297) reached a similar conclusion, noting

> it would be unrealistic to expect content analysis to bear the entire burden of analysis on a subject as vast and complex as party ideology. To begin with, one would be forced to scale back the quantity of evidence in a fairly drastic fashion… Second, and perhaps more significantly, content analysis is somewhat less scientific than it appears. Since the meaning of terms is not static or univocal, words do not fall automatically within content analysis categories.

In this sense, platforms may be considered more than a sum of specific policy pledges. Rather, they are “rhetorical texts” with “iconic structure” that contain “rhetorical constructions of political realities” (Smith and Smith 2000: 457).

For these reasons, a “thicker,” more qualitative approach is often pursued, with focus shifting from content analysis to narrative analysis. This involves immersing “oneself in the meat and gristle of political life, which is to say in language. Language connotes the raw data of most studies of how people think about politics, for it is through language that politics is experienced” (Gerring 1998: 298). While its resume is dwarfed by that of the quantitatively-oriented CMP school, the qualitative approach to platform analysis is not without its adherents, whether in Canada

(e.g., Meisel 1960; Jenson 1976; Belkhodja 1999; Weinroth 2004), the United States (e.g., Pomper 1968; Gerring 1998; Holian 2004; Bell 2006) or Europe (e.g., Chhibber and Torcal 1997; Phillips 1998; Smith and Smith 2000).

In each of these studies, platforms were approached inductively – as whole texts, as components of broader campaign discourses, and, broader still, as part of an ongoing historical narrative (Abbott 1992). This follows what Bates et al. (1998: 10-14) refer to as the "soak and poke" method, focusing on "stories, accounts and context," while "extract[ing] formal lines of reasoning [that] facilitate both exposition and explanation."

There is an element of subjectivity inherent in this technique. As Gerring (1998: 298) said of his own, similar approach

> Try as one might, one cannot escape the interpretive nature of any study of ideology. Judgments about an ideology's coherence, differentiation, and stability are necessarily judgments of degree… This does not mean that one must accept the participants' own interpretations of political affairs; it means, rather, that the writer's interpretation must make sense of the text left us by the participants.

By the same token, this does not mean that the reader must accept the author's interpretation on faith. Rather, findings must be

> grounded, as much as possible, in copious quotations from the principals. At times, this may seem laborious. However the inclusion of actual language in a rhetoric-centred study should be seen as equivalent to the inclusion of raw data in a qualitative study; both allow the reader to evaluate the evidence without relying entirely on the author's own authority (Gerring 1998: 298).

Even with the inclusion of this evidence, the author is still vulnerable to charges that he has been selective in 'cherry-picking' data to suit his hypotheses. That is, he may have purposefully omitted or downplayed evidence in

order to bolster his central thesis. The student of rhetoric is not unlike the quantitative scholar, in this sense; both may massage data or falsify results (King, Keohane et al. 1993). Beyond assurances of academic integrity, the author must make every effort to offer access to his data for verification, validation, replication, and further exploration. Therein lies one of the major benefits of the Poltext Project, which provides researchers with convenient, electronic access to primary source materials.

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