

Extended abstract on paper (work-in-progress):

“Communicating values left, right and centre: Creating consistent ideological identities through the communication of core political values “

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to qualitatively explore whether political parties across the ideological scale present their value-based ideological identities consistently across central value statements.

Introduction

Although many aspects such as party leader image and specific policy positions may contribute to the final decision of the voter (e.g. Dean and Croft, 2009; Strömbäck et al. 2012), the paper posits that the communication of a clear and consistent *ideological identity* through references to the party’s “most deeply held values and core commitments” (Buckler and Dolowitz, 2009:13; see also Panebianco, 1988) represents a significant variable in a party’s electoral success as this inevitably relies to some extent on voters’ awareness of the party and what it stands for (Walgrave and Nuytemans, 2008). Indeed, communicating political values is central to the electoral success of political parties as people tend to vote for the party whose values best mirror their own (e.g. Feldman, 1988; Goren, 2005; Kilburn, 2009; Schwartz et al. 2010). Thus, it is a central task for political parties to communicate a consistent set of core political values defined as “overarching normative principles and belief assumptions about government, citizenship, and society” (McCann, 1997: 564) as these not only form a central part of the party’s ideological identity, but also function as key heuristic cues for voters who “once they have learned them, do not then have to relearn them over time“ (Smith and French, 2009: 212-213).

The overall paradox motivating the paper is that despite the key role of political values in defining the political party to the electorate, it seems that many contemporary parties in western democracies are increasingly downplaying references to their core values and adopting a catch-all rhetoric to appeal to the large group of volatile, disloyal and undecided middle ground voters (e.g. Green, 2007; Kirchheimer, 1966; Whiteley et al., 2005). A recent example is the British Labour Party who abandoned key parts of its core values when it transformed itself into the catch-all party of New Labour (Evans and Tilley, 2011; Evans and Neuendorf, 2013; see also White and de Chernatony, 2002). By becoming catch-all parties, parties risk communicating inconsistent ideological identities which is said to contribute to the overall decline in the levels of party loyalty (e.g. Lupo, 2012) and thus ultimately affects the level of political participation which is rapidly decreasing in most western democracies (Dalton and Weldon, 2007). As emphasised by Walgrave and Nuytemans (2008), parties are value-bound organisations that cannot simply move from one direction to another if they wish to maintain the trust and support of the electorate. Rather, political parties must adhere to their ideology and values and offer stable choices to voters who would otherwise be confused and not know who to vote for (2008: 202) (see also Johns and Brandenburg, 2014; Smyth, 2006).

Contribution of the paper

For decades, scholars have emphasised that political values play a central role in the party's ideological identity (e.g. Bonotti, 2009; Buckler and Dolowitz, 2009, 2012; Panebianco, 1988) while an increasing number of scholars have also focused on the current challenges for political parties in communicating stable ideological identities and core values to an increasingly volatile electorate (e.g. Henneberg, 2006; Johns and Brandenburg, 2014; Lupo, 2012). However, although some scholars have explored political values from a specifically communicative perspective (e.g. Doherty, 2008; Nelson and Garst, 2005; Sowinska, 2013) the main thrust of research into political values is still carried out with the aim of positioning parties against each other on the left-right continuum and exploring the ideological changes in parties over time (e.g. Budge et al. 2001; Gabel and Huber, 2000; Laver and Gerry, 2000; Volkens et al. 2010).

The main contribution of the paper is thus to add empirical knowledge to the sparse research into the communication of political values by qualitatively exploring whether political parties present their value-based ideological identities consistently across central value statements.

The main argument motivating the paper is that in order to achieve electoral success parties need to communicate distinct and strong identities through their values (see Johns and Brandenburg, 2014; Smyth, 2006; Walgrave and Nuytemans, 2009). In order to achieve a new understanding of the role of values in communicating the political party as an organisation, the paper posits that we need to bring together fields as different as political science and organisational communication. By exploring how a party's value communication rhetorically contributes to constructing and communicating the party's identity as an organisation, we may come one step closer to an explanation as to why some parties succeed in communicating clear and consistent ideological identities that resonate with voters while others do not.

Theoretical framework

Values are a pivotal identity component in all types of organisations (e.g. Aust, 2004; Cornelissen, 2011), however, they arguably play a particularly important role in the identity of political parties as these are essentially value-based and serve to "politicise citizens' demands, values and interests" (Bonotti, 2011: 21). In short, the party's core political values represent the party's overall concerns, its vision of a better society (White and Ypi, 2010) and its moral "raison d'être" (Buckler and Dolowitz, 2009: 13; Walgrave and Nuytemans, 2009) serving to define the party and differentiate it from others (Buckler and Dolowitz, 2009). In this paper, the party's political values are thus regarded as largely equal to the party's organisational values as these represent the "socially oriented, unique constructs that describe characteristics of organizations, guide action and behavior and serve to differentiate organizations" (Williams, 2002: 220).

While there is no agreement on the exact number and content of political values (Schwartz et al. 2010), most democratic parties share similar political value labels such as freedom and equality. However, the meaning or content which each party attaches to the values vary considerably across the ideological scale (Bonotti, 2010). Also, some parties promote specific values such as patriotism and sustainability which set them apart from

others (e.g. Inglehart, 1997, 2007). Thus, it is the combination of values as well as how the parties interpret them that constitute the party's ideological identity and differentiate it from others.

From an organisational communications perspective, references to an organisation's core values are pivotal components in communicating the organisational identity defined as the "organization's distinctive character discernible by those communicated values manifest in its externally transmitted messages." (Aust, 2004: 523). Having established that the political values are what define the political party as an organization, it follows that in order to explore how the party communicates its identity we need to explore how it communicates its values.

Method

The study is a multiple case study set in a Danish context as Denmark represents a stable and democratic multiparty system which offers a broad spectrum of ideological identities to explore across the ideological scale. The Danish parties located in the opposite ends of the left-right ideological scale (Volkens et al, 2010) have experienced a steadily growing voter support with many centrist parties losing electoral support (Folketinget.dk). As centre parties are supposedly less "ideological outspoken" than extreme parties (Walgrave and Nuytemans, 2008: 194), this could indicate that non-centrist parties communicate their core values and ideological identities more consistently than centrist-parties which is an assumption explored empirically in the paper. Thus, although the case study is set in only one country, the aim is that the findings will be applicable in other multiparty systems with similar party structures across the ideological scale (cf. Hoppman et al. 2010).

The paper incorporates three Danish parties of different ideological orientation, namely the leftist Red-Green Alliance (Enhedslisten), the centre-right Social Liberal Party (Det Radikale Venstre) and the rightist Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) (Volkens, et al. 2010). The sample thus includes three political parties whose formal value statements may be analysed for inconsistent representations of values and ideological identity and incorporates the broad political spectrum based on the assumption that non-centrist parties communicate their ideology and values more consistently than centrist parties (Walgrave and Nuytemans, 2008).

The data chosen are two types of core value statements: political party programmes representing the party's long-term value statement (Hansen, 2008) and party leader speeches representing a "snapshot of ideology in action" (Finlayson and Martin, 2004: 448). These speeches show how party political leaders weigh and prioritise the set of values contained by the party political programme.

To be able to compare the communication of political values in the two genres, the concept of political values first of all needed to be operationalized as there is no existing taxonomy of political values that goes deeper than the overall core value labels (see Schwartz et al. 2010). Thus, the first step was to create a value taxonomy listing the total number of political values across the ideological scale as well as the overall content or features attached to each value. The taxonomy was created by identifying the core political values and their related features/interpretations in six Danish parties across the ideological scale through an inductive

analysis inspired by Thomas (2006). In practise, this meant subjecting the party programmes of each party to repeated and careful re-readings in order to identify 1) the party's political values meeting McCann's definition and 2) each party's specific interpretation of the political values. The developed taxonomy then serves as a framework for a rhetorical analysis of the party programmes and the party leader speeches of the three specific parties mentioned above. By analysing the texts in a specific value framework, it is possible to explore whether or not the parties communicate their values consistently across the two genres ultimately giving an indication of whether the "limited ideological manoeuvring space" of extreme parties (Walgrave and Nuytemans, 2008: 195) translates into a more consistent communication of the party's political values so necessary for gaining and maintaining electoral support.

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