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as an Enduring Dimension
of Political Competition

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CONCEPTUALISING THE LEFT-RIGHT CONTINUUM AS AN ENDURING

DIMENSION OF POLITICAL COMPETITION

Jocelyn Evans

Introduction

In this paper, I wish to try and connect three fields of political science whose common ground, I feel, provides mutual reinforcement of their respective bases, and yet whose treatment in the literature is seldom comprehensive. The areas are voting behaviour, the Left-Right continuum as regards its continued existence, and the basis of the content of Left and Right. The comparative political literature deals with the first two topics, usually describing the Left-Right continuum as "tenacious" or "adaptable", but providing little explanation as to why this should be so over time. Any proof of its continued validity, moreover, is normally restricted to answering the question "Are Left and Right still valid today?" with "Yes, because people still provide a self-placement on the continuum" or occasionally with the addendum "... and party policies can still be satisfactorily ranked Left to Right". These might well be important aspects of the validity question, but at the intellectual level, it does not seem very satisfying to derive the basis for its continued use simply from two empirical examples. Political theory, on the other hand, describes Left and Right as important political labels, and tries to engage in an intellectual dissection of their meaning. However, why they are important - who uses them and to what purpose - is again taken as given, rather than explained. In an exact reversal of the comparative political dilemma, the intellectual level is very much present, but as a

description of a concept which is extremely prevalent at the mass level, it more often than not lacks a practical conceptualisation.

Many would question the necessity and relevance of considering the more philosophical theoretical level if we are considering the comparative application of the Left-Right continuum. I would agree that its direct relevance to the analysis of voting behaviour, for example, in terms of Left and Right, is limited; however, in terms of the continuity of Left and Right as common labels of description, their function and underlying continuity must be demonstrable. As we cannot satisfactorily hope to study Left-Right placements comparatively and across time since the birth of the continuum some two centuries previously, we must look at the theoretical basis of the concept, and test its validity at various points in time. Only then can Left and Right be said to be a continuous and persistent political paradigm. Thus, by looking at the common ground of the three aspects as applied by the two approaches, I hope to demonstrate the mutually reinforcing explanations that they provide, and show both how and why Left and Right continue to function today as a description of democratic (and indeed other) political behaviour.

Left and Right: demise or continuity?

Despite the myriad predictions of its demise, the Left-Right continuum is still seen by most as the dominant political labelling device not only in advanced industrial democracies, but also in recently developed Latin American countries, and to a certain extent in the nascent democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. The overwhelming trend in the first cases, at least until recently, has been towards a negative analysis of Left and

Right. It has hinted at their imminent loss of validity, but to date the predictions have never followed the requisite path. In 1996, Left and Right seem to be still with us, maybe not as strong as ever, but certainly not surpassed by another dimension of competition. Many possible replacements for Left and Right have been suggested: materialist versus post-materialist, gender, public versus private consumption, state versus private employment, establishment versus anti-establishment, industrial versus post-industrial (Dalton, Beck and Flanagan, 1984; Franklin, Mackie and Valen, 1992). Yet, none of these have become established as global dimensions of political competition, let alone the dominant axis.

Despite this pattern, those experiencing democracy for the first time, or encountering its resurgence, have used it as a rung on the ladder to developing stable political systems. Along with constitutions, parties and electoral systems, Left and Right seem to hold the status of vital ingredients to any nation trying to join the Free World club. In many cases, the terminology was already present in these nations, but representing a radically different scenario. For example, in the Soviet Union, Right represented the state ideology of communism, and the further Left one moved, the more one headed for the scaffold of dissidence and espousal of Western ideology (Maximov 1995:3). In other cases, its adoption has confused matters considerably, since the main line of competition in the country has been something other than Left and Right as they are popularly conceived - for instance, a battle between "return to authoritarianism" and "change for democracy" - or an issue not lying on the continuum, usually nationalism, has provided the focus for a party or parties' electoral campaigning (Huber and Inglehart 1995; Lane and Ersson 1996).

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It is difficult to identify a starting-point for the "Left and Right are outmoded" school of thought. Certainly, in the 1950s, such catalysts as the recent triumph of democracy over totalitarianism, the condemnation of the Soviet regime - and thus, of the Left, guilty by association - as evil, and the lack of a moderate Left camp led to the proclamation in America by many thinkers of the End of Ideology, as Bell termed it in his magisterial work (Bell 1960). The exhaustion of the older humanistic ideologies would give way to new and more parochial, or locally relevant ideologies.[1] Whether or not the renewal of Left radicalism in the United States subsequent to the early 1960s can be described as "parochial" is open to debate; however, leaving this aside, it is clear that Left and Right are still relevant in the American case, to the extent that the old liberal-conservative axis is being increasingly replaced by the European terminology, and even the disparate and emotional label "Extreme Right" is being adopted for groups as diverse as the Michigan Militias, David Duke, and the Moral Majority.

In Europe, any such trend is harder to identify. The bipartism of Britain could have been undergoing an identical fate, with the ideological Siamese twins composing Butskellism. However, in Italy, the threat of Communism and American support for its opponents may have meant that Left and Right were not to be the basis of political conflict at the national level, but in part because of this, politics at the regional level was heavily divided between Communist and Christian Democrat zones[2], and within the ruling DC itself one could speak of a Left-Right split between factions. In France, a Communist party which had initially been ostracised to the extent of its Italian counterpart, may have split the Left camp with its refusal to ally with the moderate SFIO in the 1960s and early

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1970s. However, this split in no way denied the Left's existence as an opposing force to the Right. Even in West Germany, Konrad Adenauer's domination of the political arena until the mid-1960s hardly diminished the political viability of the Left - rather, it strengthened it, by forcing a period of ideological reconstruction and moderation before time in government.

Ironically, it would be in the Scandinavian social democracies, such as Sweden, that the disappearance of the Left was the strongest possibility. With the success of these Left-of-centre governments for an extended period of time, the label "Left" itself seemed to be losing validity: we should not forget that the applicability of an axis faces a dual threat - the discrediting of one camp, or the predominance of the another. If the opposition fails to win power or contribute significantly to the policy process, its role as an ideological camp will gradually cease to be of importance. In the above cases, while the social democratic system was functioning to the nation's benefit, the Right had little practical ideological input, other than its place in the corporate system, and had the success continued, would have risked becoming a vestigial ideology. Luckily for the Right, but unfortunately for social democracies, when the affluence ended, the ideological conflict between Left and Right returned.

These examples give a first hint as to the persistence of the Left-Right continuum. Although one side may be weakened, for a considerable period of time even, it is unlikely that it disappear altogether, as it represents the chief source of opposition to the currently ascendant ideology. Were it to disappear entirely, the ascendant side would suddenly become not only dominant, or even predominant, but unique - in such a way, democracy

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itself would have disappeared. Thus, the first reason that we might give for the continuity of Left and Right is that these concepts reflect the fundamental choice that is necessary to a democracy. Whatever variation occurs, the choice must still exist, rather than a monopoly. There must be contestability; competition, as has been pointed out (D'Alimonte 1989; Bartolini 1995) is not a necessary condition for democracy, as in theory there is no reason in a democracy that the same voters cannot choose the same parties in every election. It is simply that the possibility of choice must be present. Why the dualist model implied by Left and Right should be the only viable format of choice within a system, I shall deal with later.

For the moment, however, I wish to dwell on the aspect of variation that the examples of France and Italy presented. The idea of ideologies varying along an axis in terms of becoming more extreme and moderate also derives from the late 1950s, as conceptualised in Downs' work on political systems functioning according to market principles (Downs 1957). Until then, parties had ideologies which varied as amendments were made: if a party modified its stance on a particular issue, this did not push it in any particular direction with regards to its rivals. Any comparisons were simply and qualitatively made, in terms of, for example, Communists being more radical in their proposed implementations of Marxist theory than, say, Socialists. No higher, abstract benchmark existed against which parties could be judged at the national level, either against their competitors or their predecessors, and certainly not cross-nationally. We might refer to such modelling as essentially static. This is not to say that the concept of space did not exist in politics until the 1950s. Clearly, the use of Left and Right implies a

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space of some kind - there must be a distance between two extremes for them to exist in the first place. Furthermore, there are examples of political behaviour prior to the model's formalisation which imply space, such as seating arrangements in Parliaments, sitting closer to one's political allies than one's enemies.

More fundamentally, such behaviour as coalition-building and consensus-building again imply space, but were not conceived in such terms. For example, the growth of Socialist parties, after their decision to function within the bourgeois institutional framework, but their desire to distance themselves from the other parties implies space. Similarly, the classification of parties with whom coalitions could be formed and those with whom they could not possesses the same underlying theme. The reasons in practical terms would be differences or similarities in ideologies - but again, any notion of space would be limited to an ideology being "too distant" or "sufficiently close" for agreements or pacts. Any formal notion of space was absent - without the spatial benchmark of Left and Right in generalised model, one could not say how much nearer or how further one party was than another.

Downs' was the first attempt at spatially and dynamically modelling party competition, using a Left-Right scale of "more/less government intervention in the economy" as its scalar definition, and providing an explicit formalisation of political space. Whilst this was based upon an American-style system, which preferred the use of liberal/conservative as its ideal-type extremes, the same axis was potentially employable in the case of European political systems. From this has stemmed all of the rational choice work, including that in the European field.[3] Furthermore, this dynamic use of Left and

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Right (or liberal and conservative) provided support for the idea that both sides are mutually dependent: separate ideologies can only exist if neither is seen to have a clear advantage over the other (Popkin 1991:210). The moment that one is perceived to outperform the other(s), it/they must converge on the successful ideology, or perish.

In terms of comparative electoral theory, the challenge is marked by the Silent Revolution (Inglehart 1977), followed by the expansion of the concept away from the materialist/post-materialist cleavage to a more generalised model of dealignment and realignment (Dalton, Beck and Flanagan, 1984). Their model provided convincing evidence that a combination of social mobility, new social-classes such as the white-collar workers, increased standards of living for society's lower echelons, and new issues represented by new parties meant that the traditional social class basis for competition and ideological ordering was crumbling, and would either remain in a state of flux - the post modernist theory (Lavau 1986; Betz 1992) - or would realign along a changed axis.

To contend that social-class voting is still overwhelmingly prevalent, or that the Left-Right continuum has not been modified, would be foolhardy in the extreme. Clearly, the changes of the past three decades have had an impact on its content, and consequently on parties' positions in ideological space, in exactly the same way that changes have affected parties and the contents of Left and Right before the concept of ideological space had been invented. For instance, Downs' axis may have been determined by more or less government intervention, but it is only since the Reagan and Thatcher years that the Right has become linked with free market liberalism. If we go further back in history, the contrast is naturally greater: under the original Left-Right schema of the French Ancien

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Régime, free market ideals were represented by the Left, as a radical ideology opposed to the étatist conservative Right. Clearly, we should not expect the Left-Right continuum to remain fixed in its format in the long or even short term. This view of the Left-Right continuum, and especially its close proximity to the class cleavage, has been responsible for much of the confusion over its existence, its continuity and its supposed decline.

Continua and cleavages

The Left-Right continuum is not, and never has been, the class cleavage. This statement in itself serves to illustrate a very important, though often neglected difference between the continuum and cleavages. Dominant schools of thought in political science, such as the psychological school, have explained voting behaviour and party linkage by social group characteristics, and the best means of defining social groups has for the most part been social class (Lipset 1960). When combined with the Marxist conception of the working-class pitted against the bourgeoisie, this would provide a solid basis for seeing one aspect of voting behaviour being determined by the class cleavage.[4] Furthermore, the introduction of universal suffrage and the rise of Labour parties in the early part of the century had meant that, in countries such as Britain, class became an overriding factor for the explanation of voting. With no notable linguistic, agrarian or religious groups or divides, class became the sole cleavage to affect voting. In other countries, such as France, Belgium and Switzerland, for instance, religion and language played a greater role, and were indeed better explanatory variables for voting than class. Class seemed only to be the best predictor of voting behaviour when other cleavages were absent (Lijphart 1979).

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In a case such as Britain, it is easy to understand why the Left-Right continuum became confused with the class cleavage: as the sole division in a society where political mobilisation and thus voting behaviour was determined by such variables, we would expect the two to match each other very closely. However, in Britain this was not always true. For example, in the early and mid-nineteenth century, the main ideological blocs were composed of Reformers v Anti-reformers, who were concerned with the extension of suffrage to the middle-classes. Clearly, before the Reform Act of 1832, when the franchise was extended, the basis for conflict could not be class. However, even subsequent to the change, class again was not responsible:

"Class as a stratum,... class in the colloquial sense, cannot really be used to describe voting patterns or to explain them." (Vincent 1967:61)

Instead, the new voters, often tenants of property, would vote in accordance with their landlord's wishes - not least because their voting behaviour was openly recorded in poll books. In fact, this seems to be have been the ethos behind the extension of suffrage in Britain, at least until the twentieth century: the vote was extended precisely because the lower strata would not vote along class lines, but would remain deferential in their vote and submit to the "natural" order of the more competent higher strata deciding what was in the lower strata's best interest (Shields 1955; Moore 1976).

Clearly, after the introduction of universal suffrage, the social and political context changed completely, not least by the advent of mass parties, and class did become a very important factor in voting behaviour. But similarity and proximity do not mean equivalence. We need only refer to the case of working-class voters supporting the Tories

for this to be demonstrated (Nordlinger 1967). In Britain, the fact that the vast majority of governments have been Conservative, despite the numerical advantage of the working-class over the middle- and upper-classes means that either the working-class enjoyed a peculiarly high abstention rate (which is to a certain extent true), or also that a substantial group within the working-class voted for the Right-wing party. Amongst other reasons, an enduring deferential belief in hierarchy and the ruling-class was responsible for this - an ultra-conservative attitude indeed - and again, by definition, the class cleavage was not playing any role in this behaviour. Indeed, any nation with a large and enfranchised working-class and Right-wing governments will almost certainly have displayed the same tendency (Downs 1957:121). Historically, working-class voters for the Christian Democrats in Germany and the Conservative bloc in France have displayed the same mentality, with the added effect of a strong traditional link - which declined during the post-war period through the ubiquitous process of social fragmentation and secularisation - between the Catholic church and parties of the Right (Berger 1982).[5]

Religion in France, in point of fact, has been seen as the best predictor of voting behaviour. We could talk of a cross-cutting cleavage, bisecting the class cleavage as a dimension of competition according to which many voters based their vote. For example, a member of the working-class would vote for a conservative Right-wing party, traditionally linked with the bourgeois social group, because he was a practising Catholic. Similarly, a member of the professional class who also belonged to the Protestant minority, would vote for a Left-wing party because of his non-Catholicism.[6] But, in terms of the Left-Right continuum, such a cross-cutting situation does not occur. Both the class

cleavage and the religious divide are combined in the Left-Right continuum to represent the political system, parties and voting behaviour as a whole. In theory, Left is no more working-class than the lawyer who votes this way, nor is Right more bourgeois than the devout Catholic coal-miner. Otherwise we are simply equating the two dimensions once more.[7]

The question of why certain cleavages are stronger in some countries than others does not concern us overly here (although I shall refer to it later). What is of concern is my third point, namely of the crucial difference between the cleavage as a conflict division, and the Left-Right continuum. Their very names present their diversity: the former is a divide, a dichotomy, with a clear barrier at the centre. The latter, on the other hand, is a fluid continuum which, despite possessing a barrier which divides Left from Right, is capable of providing a sliding-scale of positions, whether ranking parties, voters, ideologies or issues. A centre position on a cleavage is, or should be, impossible. One is either Catholic or Protestant/Muslim; one lives either in the centre or the periphery; one is either working-class or bourgeois; one belongs to one linguistic community.

Clearly, some of these can be breached, for example intermarriage between linguistic communities, or a new social class which does not fit working-class/bourgeois categorisation. But, in contrast to Daalder's theory (1984:104), I do not believe that these can be incorporated into a cleavage. A new cleavage may develop, if the hybrid group is large enough; the old cleavage, however, will disappear. Alternatively, no new cleavages may develop and the whole system may become highly fragmented. However, the disappearance of cleavages and the possible increase in social fragmentation should not

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logically entail the disappearance of Left and Right, and indeed, the evidence seems to point to this fact - the cleavages of the 1920s identified by Lipset and Rokkan are increasingly blurred, but the Left-Right continuum which seemingly encompassed their entirety continues. This opposition of cleavages and continuum provides an explanation for why the materialist/post-materialist divide which Inglehart initially termed "cleavage" never became embedded as a powerful dimension of competition: the mere fact that it was measured with a scalar coefficient by ranking the importance of a series of statements meant that it was not a cleavage from the start. Cleavages, as dichotomies, cannot be measured according to scales; as such, they respond very badly to change, unlike the Left-Right continuum which, conversely, seems highly adapted to change. As one author claims, "... the left-right semantics have an impressive absorptive power" (Knutsen 1995:86).

Unlike cleavages, we cannot point to groups in society and say "This group is Left" or "This group votes for the Right". According to the characteristics of Left or Right voters, we may be able to say, "There is a probability of x that this group is Left", but this can only ever be a probability. Granted, the same applies in practice to some cleavages, but in theory, there should be a perfect split. In theory, no such split exists between Left and Right in social terms. This difference derives from the basis of the two dimensions. Cleavages are social divisions which have been mobilised for political ends by elites (Schattschneider 1975; Sani and Sartori 1983). The division exists already within society, whether or not it provides any basis for conflict before the machinations of the elite. The Left-Right continuum, on the other hand, does not exist in society. No division exists

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between Left and Right in any society, until the terms are activated by being given ideological meaning. The terms are so deeply entrenched in political and social consciousness that it is easy to overlook this simple fact: Left and Right do not formally exist - their existence is wholly determined by their being imbued with intellectual content. The Left-Right continuum requires a value-set to exist.

For this reason, such dimensions as were cited in the introduction, for example, could never replace the Left-Right continuum: some could become established as cleavages, and be incorporated into, or even form the bulk of the ideological content of Left and Right. Others are simply attitudinal scales, like the materialist/post-materialist axis. Neither format could actually replace Left and Right. The actual content of the continuum will evidently include the relevant political issues which form the basis for competition between the major political actors in any system at any given time. Any issue which is not included in the epistemology of Left and Right will either exist only as a reason for voting for an outside party on a different dimension or will not play a role in determining the nature of political conflict. In the case of the confusion between Left and Right and the class cleavage, the bulk of political conflict at the time being based upon the redistribution of wealth to the working-class, the Left-Right absorbed these issues, and thus came to resemble closely the class divide (apart from the exceptions I have highlighted above). Before the advent of universal suffrage and the Labour Party in Britain, for instance, the Liberal Party would nowadays be classed as the party of the Left. Both parties claimed to represent the interests of the working-class after the extension of suffrage; but beforehand, such issues did not appear as relevant (or indeed from the

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parties' point of view advantageous) to political conflict, and therefore were not considered.[8]

If, then, the Left-Right continuum is such a simplification of relevant political issues along a single axis, three questions spring to mind. Firstly, are there underlying themes which may be discerned amongst the historical and contemporary issues which define Left and Right? Secondly, and connected to this, to what extent does the Left-Right continuum's continuity restrict and mould the issues which it defines? Thirdly, why should there necessarily only be one dimension, rather than a multiplicity reflecting the different issues?

Thematic continuity of Left and Right

It would seem reasonable to expect an underlying conceptual basis to Left and Right. If none exists, its initial formation would have been a purely random choice of defining characteristics, and one would expect that sudden changes to its content would occur, with no guiding criteria affecting what becomes Left and what becomes Right. The example of defence of the free market might seem to indicate that such allocation is arbitrary, and subject simply to the context of the period. However, this seems an unsatisfactory conclusion: the continuity of use of the terminology, if not the spatial metaphor, would surely indicate that an element of conceptual continuity is also present. Furthermore, their roots would indicate once more that it is not the class cleavage that provide Left and Right with thematic continuity. This cleavage is the product of our century; Left and Right are the product of over a century before. As we have already

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noted, the dominance of the class cleavage in the past is unsurprising in many cases, but in no way implies equivalence. What, then, can provide an indication of the basis to the continuum, and how can this add to our understanding of the implementation of the continuum in the field of comparative politics?

The literature on the actual semantic content of Left and Right is copious, but within it there seem to be some fundamental trends in the literature. I feel that three suffice to illustrate the general theoretical direction of such work. Probably the most eclectic attempt to conceptualise Left and Right, and to delve to their very root, has been provided by Laponce (1981). In his work, he attempts to place them not only politically but also historically, socially, and even biologically. Some of his assumptions and conclusions are arguable to say the least, and his belief that any interpretation of the terms he gives will "take their own respective value from the very valence of politics within one's overall perceptual system" (1981:44) seems to be an excuse for his own, very often Left-biased analysis.[9] However, despite these possible short-comings, he does provide a couple of very useful indicators as to the nature of Left and Right.

He cites nine possible categories of meaning elements within definitions of "Left" and "Right", including societal values, social change, political ideologies and parties and affective understanding. These are comprehensive to the point of universality, but from them he derives four generalised symbols of difference between Left and Right: Left symbolises egalitarianism, poverty, free thought and temporal discontinuity; Right contrasts these with hierarchy, wealth, religion and temporal continuity.[10] Whilst one might question the veracity of all four symbols when applied to different nations and time-

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periods, the idea seems to concur with the impression that the nature of political conflict is essentially dyadic, with Left and Right symbolising the polar extremes of radicalism and traditionalism respectively. Laponce's temporal characterisation of the two extremes provides further hints as to the nature of Left and Right:

"Under the influence of positivism and Marxism, the left became oriented to the future at the exclusion of the past; the paradise to come ceased to be seen as a revival of the paradise lost" (1981:118).

This view is echoed by Lukes in his paper "What is Left?" (1992):

"... [the left] makes the assumption that there are unjustified inequalities which those on the right see as sacred or inviolable or natural or inevitable and that these should be reduced or abolished" (1992:16)

Lukes makes the point that it is unsatisfactory to use the tag "traditionalist" to describe the Right, as the Left too has become steeped in tradition. "Conservative" too runs into trouble, as this seems to imply inaction, whereas more precisely the Right engage in trying to produce a state of affairs which they perceive as the "natural order", an activity which may in the short term require intervention. One might say in fact that Left is defined by Right, inasmuch as the former offers to iron out the particular inequalities that the latter defends. As such, the impossibility of one existing without the other reappears: the Left cannot fight against inequalities that are not previously defined; the Right does not need to defend inequalities that are not in question. This the author considers when he asks,

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"... whether the left needs the counterweight of the right. Here the evidence of history suggests that rectification needs parity: that where the left occupies the whole of political space, it subverts its own project." (1992:18)

I shall return to this idea of fundamental conflict later. However, earlier in the paper, Lukes provides an interesting definition of the continuum itself which reflects the idea of the axis embodying the sum of all relevant political conflicts in a single dimension:

"... perceiving political divisions in left-right terms has both reflected and constituted the politics of representative democracies by means of an exceptionally versatile metaphor that embodies the principle of endemic and legitimate conflict between alternatives of equal standing" (1992:11).

I agree that Left and Right "reflect" the politics of representative democracies (and also of other regimes) as a metaphor, but I do not agree that they have "constituted" politics. A metaphor is designed to simplify a complicated or involved concept without recourse to explanation. We may well be trying to explain the concepts behind Left and Right at the moment, but in its designated role as a simplifying reflection of political conflict, it is not meant to form part of the political process itself. I would contest the claim that at any point have Left and Right themselves constituted political conflict. When such terminology is used, it is meant to imply the many ideological attitudes and beliefs that a political actor may hold. Such an actor does not think "I must move more to the Centre of the spectrum", or if he does, it is simply a shorthand way of saying "I must moderate my attitudes and beliefs, or policies".

The authors so far seem to emphasise the dyadic nature of the conflict, despite its being labelled as a continuum, which suggests a lack of central divide as one might find in a cleavage. Though we are dealing with a continuum, there is also a dichotomous aspect to the axis, as well we might expect with a model of conflict. Bobbio, in his work on Left and Right, conceives it as "originariamente dicotomico" (1994:67) but also introduces the idea of a "Terza via" - a Third Way:

"Praticamente una politica di Terza via è una politica di centro, ma idealmente essa si pone non come una forma di compromesso tra due estremi, ma come un superamento contemporaneo dell'uno e dell'altro, e quindi come una loro simultanea accettazione o soppressione." (1994:39)

Such a definition does not apply to those Centre parties which clearly do fall between the two polar stools, and whose programmes are simply hybrids of Left and Right. Similarly, this view of the "Third Way" is, I feel, explicable in simpler terms. This is in fact a case of a party or parties offering an ideology in terms of issues and solutions which do not fit the current bulk of political conflict according to the continuum. If they are successful in convincing a majority of the voting population that these are indeed the issues which should determine political conflict in society, then there will be a gradual shift of Left and Right to incorporate these issues. Debate over their resolution will then form the direction of political conflict.[11] Only if the issues are incorporated to the exclusion of all others will the Third Way party assume a permanent role as a major party.

If the issues are successfully adopted by other parties, however, the inertia of the system may well ensure that the Third Way party becomes redundant and disappears or is

marginalised, unless it adapts its policies to match the policies represented by the Left-Right continuum (Sartori 1976:340). This has been the fate of what Bobbio terms "il caso attuale più interessante" (1994:41) - the Green parties. Originally parties which seemed to offer a Third Way, for the most part their issues have been adopted by "traditional" parties, and their position is now losing political strength due to their own inability to adapt to the issues already present on the continuum: the economy, social welfare, etc.. The constraints of the existing content of Left and Right determine the extent of the integration of new parties, just as much as parties can determine the content of the continuum.

Once again, though, we see the emphasis upon the dyadic nature of conflict. Bobbio admits as much when he says, "Nella guerra, sia esterna sia interna, non c'è posto per il Terzo." (1994:66) The essence is that in all conflict, there exists a juxtaposition of amicus/inamicus. No matter how many actors are involved, in the end the conflict will reduce to two opposing sides. As politics is just another "luogo di antagonismo" (1994:66) there is no reason that the same logic should not apply.[12] I shall return to the implications of this dualism later.

What themes from these considerations can help us to characterise the Left-Right continuum, and its underlying themes so far? Firstly, its very basis is as a descriptive metaphor, which allows us to condense a potentially limitless number of issues, attitudes and beliefs into a single scale. Unlike the other dimensions of conflict commonly used in comparative political research - cleavages - it is not a theoretically unbreachable dichotomous divide, but rather a highly adaptable spectrum of political beliefs and

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ideology, which changes temporally as the defining salient issues of political conflict develop. Secondly, in terms of its underlying themes, the constant aspect seems to be that of rectification, whether by redistribution of wealth, in Marxist terms, or otherwise. This is applicable to a class interpretation of conflict, but also encompasses non-class interpretations such as the struggle between the Reformists and anti-Reformists of the nineteenth century. The Left harks forward to developing a society where there is greater egalitarianism, whereas the Right favours the maintenance of the *status quo*, or a return to a more hierarchical (though purportedly fair) society. In European nations over time, Downs' scale of more or less intervention in the economy is not accurate: this may well be true of Left and Right on Britain in the 1980s, for example, but is not true of France until the late 1980s, state intervention and planning being as much a mainstay of the Right's economic heritage as the Left. We must broaden this definition, to denote simply the Right's desire to engage in whatever activity helps it to maintain the social status quo most effectively, or to return to the situation before the intervention of a Left-wing government.

The constraint of Left and Right

To move to the second question, namely to what extent the Left-Right continuum determines the content of issues which are encompassed within it, the identification of an underlying theme helps us to answer this. Because the Left-Right does have a logical foundation, the inclusion and position of issues along the continuum cannot be arbitrary, but must match the historical background of issues already found on the continuum. For parties, for example, this means that any new issues adopted into their manifesto must fit

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more or less with the existing issues. Parties are normally unable to adopt a stance which is not in keeping with their general ideological position: their adaptations must evolve in accordance with their current ideology - for example, a Left party should not be able to suddenly espouse a Right-wing policy. If it does so, presumably for the sake of winning votes, it risks losing its current supporters, who themselves have voted for it because it represented best their salient attitudes, whether or not these match their overall ideological position; nor will it attract sufficient new support, due to other parties having a more solid basis in this ideological area. This basis is what allows voters to identify with a party, through their association with its stances on various issues. As a result, parties will normally emphasise the issues which they feel will provide the greatest returns in terms of votes, whilst all the while being tempered in their choice by their historical train (Klingemann, Hofferbert and Budge 1994). Only in the specific case of extreme disenchantment with one side's ideology, plus belief in the opposition's ideology, but disenchantment with the parties which possess it, would such a move have any chance of success.[13]

This would seem to be the reason why Downs and subsequent rational choice theorists have ruled out the possibility of parties "leapfrogging". But, rather than use a complicated game theoretical approach, we can simply say that parties are restricted in their manoeuvring by the ideological baggage which accompanies them, and that any attempt to change radically will lose them credibility in the eyes of the voting public. Once again, Left and Right metaphorically demonstrate this - the parties are not attached to the Left-Right continuum, but their positions and development are simply reflected in it. For

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new parties entering the political arena, the constraints are much the same. Their issue-stances and nascent ideology will be judged according to the existing positions on the continuum and of the other parties. If they chooses to isolate themselves from these, and not "descend onto the spectrum" then they will be restricted to a small pool of voters. However, once on the continuum, they will inevitably be classified as Left or Right.[14] As we have already seen with the enfranchisement of the working-class, once the issues become useful in political conflict, the other parties will adopt them, and make their stance known.

The surprising thing about the constraint exercised by the Left-Right continuum, and its relevance to voters' political behaviour is that, despite lacking any sophistication, mass publics are able to use it to identify their own political position, and follow the semantic definition very closely. Apparently, in other words, "A majority of respondents, although placing themselves on the Left-Right scale, show no conceptual and ideological understanding of what Left and Right mean." (Mavrogordatos 1986:5). But, as recent research has shown, this lack of sophistication does not prevent the public from correctly identifying their own positions, the rough positions of parties, and the policies that the parties support (Noelle-Neumann 1994). As passed down by elites and intellectuals as a model of complex attitudes and ideology, the mass public have adapted the notions of Left and Right, and seem to be engaging in complex behaviour, when really their knowledge of the underlying complexity is for the most part close to zero. This should not surprise us - the literature has long discriminated between different levels of sophistication among mass

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publics and elites (Converse 1964). Whether the mass publics are reacting to cues from elites or not, their following of the Left and Right labels is still constantly precise.

Not only does the continuum adapt, therefore, to issues as they evolve politically, but also it has the potential of working at a series of levels, from the simple to the increasingly complex. For the politically unsophisticated masses, the axis functions simply at the Left and Right level. Uninterested in the finer points of political ideology, they resort to the metaphor in its simplest guise. Again, we must be careful of staying within the context of metaphor. Very few voters, I feel, will vote for a party because they are Left or Right - this implies a sophistication which is able to describe what Left and Right imply, and thus which party most suits this pattern of beliefs and attitudes. Rather, there is a constant reiteration of the chosen party's position, and of other parties' positions, and thus the voter comes to position himself accordingly. As the old psychological school explained, social context and conditioning help determine the political attitudes of an individual, and thus the choice of party and position, whether Left or Right would seem likely to derive from the same source.

Unidimensional by necessity: competition and availability

So far, we have explained how the Left-Right continuum functions as a simplifying metaphor for a complex array of attitudes and ideological positions. The continuum functions at many levels, and it is up to us how deep into these descriptions we choose to delve. The political scientist will wish to consider all levels of the axis, whilst the average voter will have little use for anything more than the labels themselves. However, so far, we

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have not explained why the retention of unidimensionality is so important. We have seen the theoretical dualism of conflict, but why this should be important when looking at actual political behaviour in a system is not so clear. The need for simplicity for mass publics is ascribed by some as a reason for the unidimensional aspect: being politically unsophisticated, the argument runs, the public are in need of the simplifying metaphor to allow them to make their choice. I feel that this is more an effect of the simplicity, rather than a cause. The Left-Right schema being simple, political elites exploit it to try and win over voters to, or keep voters on their side. Moreover, the use of the continuum by the public to describe their own political positions is by definition not at the intellectual level. The main reason for this recourse to a single dimension at the intellectual level is competition.

If one only wishes to map the positions of parties and voters in terms of specific issues, then it is possible to use as many scales as there are issues. Clearly it is also more accurate. However, if one wishes to study the interaction of parties, and their quest for voters, then it is only possible to conceive of such competition in terms of a single axis. Indeed, this is all that is necessary. If we work on the basis that a voter will possess a number of salient issues on which he will base his vote, then, for the sake of clarity, we can say that the party whose sum of issues match most closely the issues which determine a voter's choice will be the party for which he votes. We would also expect this voter's self-positioning on the Left-Right continuum to correspond most closely to the party for which he votes. This does NOT imply any of the following:

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• We can calculate the saliency of each issue, and then provide a prediction of any voters' behaviour.

• Salient issues can be ascribed beforehand.[15]

• A voter will necessarily vote for the party closest to his self-identification on the continuum.

It should now be clear why we must depend upon a single dimension of competition. If we cannot calculate the saliency of issues beforehand, then we cannot hope to predict which issues will be the ones on which a voter will make his choice. The best we can do is to provide an overall dimension of competition, and see how well voters' choices fit the model. For the bulk of voters, ideological consistency will assure that their vote is cast for the party nearest to them on the continuum. For these voters, the idea of multidimensional competitive space is redundant anyway - if all of their issue-stances lie in roughly the same ideological position (if only to the extent of being on the same side of the axis, if we are talking about a two-party system) the saliency of issues will have little effect on the eventual outcome.

However, for voters whose attitudes and issue-positions are not consistent - as Downs said of parties (albeit American ones) "... each party is leftish on some issues and rightish on others" (1957:116) - even though multiple axes might map their individual stances better, the inability to ascribe a greater saliency to one or other of the issues means it is impossible to predict, by calculation at least, how they will vote. In a situation where voters have more than one issue which may determine their vote, and it is possible to have variation in saliency of these issues, it is impossible to say which way he will vote unless a

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hierarchy of saliencies is known. All that can be done is to try to observe a number of voters with the same issue-stances, and try to observe a pattern in their voting behaviour. From this, some sort of saliency can be qualitatively inferred, though again, not calculated precisely.

Alternatively, we can approach the problem from a different perspective: one of the main criticisms of the Left-Right continuum being that an increasing number of voters do not obey its logic, we can try to identify those voters whose self-placement on the axis does not match their voting choice, and then try to identify the salient issues and choices in their behaviour. We would presumably expect to find an issue or issues incongruent with the pattern of issues normally encountered on whichever area of the axis he has placed himself. Because of the saliency of these issues, these have overridden the bulk of issues which have caused him to place himself as such on the axis, and caused the unexpected or deviant behaviour. This may either be a switch from one party to another across elections - classic volatility - or may even be a long-term commitment to one party, whilst providing a divergent self-placement. Clearly, we would expect the former to be more prevalent than the latter: in the latter case, if voters are taking their cues from parties, a long-term commitment to a party would entail a gradual convergence with its Left-Right position. Such behaviour should not deny the validity of Left and Right, as long as we can identify the incongruent issue(s) within the ensemble of issues. If we take into account Downs' dictum on the mixed bag of issues which compose parties', and undoubtedly voters' issue-positions, we should inevitably conclude that any voter, given the right circumstances, is capable of such behaviour.

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In other words, borrowing from Bartolini's terminology (1995), one might say that, in theory, every voter is available. That is, every voter might change his vote from one party to another under the correct circumstances. Clearly, in practical terms, not every voter will defect from the party they voted for in the previous election. Indeed, Bartolini defines available voters as a subset of the entire voter population, from which a further subset of volatility, defined by available voters who change, can be taken. How one defines "available vote" is open to discussion - intention of vote, floating or undecided voters are a couple of possible methods. However, in issue terms, we would define the available voter as that voter whose issue-stances are not consistent amongst those issues which are salient to his voting choice. The unavailable voter, conversely, should be one with a high consistency of salient issue-stances. We might say that the consistency of all issues would determine the availability of the voter - however, as only the salient political issues are responsible for voting behaviour, we can restrict our model to these issues alone.

Unfortunately, as we have already shown, it is impossible to ascribe the saliency of issues to voting behaviour beforehand, nor can we say which issue will have the highest saliency. We must therefore approach it from an alternative perspective - that is, to define the group of available voters, and then consider their issue-stances in an attempt to infer saliency. For such an approach, the definition of "available voters" is of tantamount importance. We cannot simply use the standard floating voter, as we must define the two parties between which the voter may or may not move - a floating voter is simply undecided. Asking a voter which party would have been his second choice is closer, but

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this is restrictive, and to rank order more than two or three would be prone to inaccuracy. The best way would seem to be to ask which parties would the individual consider voting for. This way, we can see the possible availability of voters to each party and, unlike the second choice method, we do not restrict the respondent to a single or possibly unreliable response: voter x may have party a as first choice, and party b as second, but this does not mean he is unavailable to parties c or d.[16] Whether c or d are the third choice is unlikely to be clear, and even if it were, we are more interested in the long-term availability provided by issue-stances, than a probably short-term arbitrary decision between two low-ranked parties.

From this selection of voters who have professed to being available to other parties, we can then analyse their attitudes and thus try and identify the salient issues which render them available. A precise way of doing this (though, as noted earlier, restricted to providing a model of availability between only two parties) would be to profile the issues of the average unavailable voter for each of the two parties, and then to compare these with the profile of the available voter. As such, the combination(s) of salient issues which produce the availability should be identifiable. To perform all of these comparisons, however, we need to be sure that there is a common reference-point for the voters, the party positions and the individual issues. Such a reference-point, I suggest, can only be provided by the Left-Right dimension.

Implications and conclusion

• As the comparative political literature has shown, Left and Right still function satisfactorily as a means of classifying parties, via manifesto analysis of issues; and of classifying the positions of voters. For the most part, there is a congruence between the positions of parties and of voters (Klingemann 1995). For those that apparently deviate from the logic of the axis, we might expect to find explanatory potential in the issues which have produced their party choice, and which might in fact be in accord with the party's Left-Right position (though clearly not their own). These changes may come to represent a fundamental evolution in the social profile of the continuum (van Deth and Geurts 1989) or may simply represent a short-term fluctuation.

• As the political theory literature has shown, there is a fundamental continuity in the underlying thematisation of Left and Right which is as equally applicable today as ever. Indeed, its whole applicability is based upon the peaceful conflict of opposing ideologies in competition for political power, and the gradation of conflict between those intent on upholding the status quo, and those intent on changing it. As such, as long as political conflict exists, the possible opposition of Left and Right will similarly be present.

In combining these two approaches, we are presented with a more satisfactory model of the Left-Right dimension, which neither of the two can produce on their own. In fact, the comparative political approach concentrates mainly on the more detailed levels of the continuum, with the ranking of issues and party positions in relation to their voters, and only uses a more basic approach when describing voters' use of Left and Right as an all-encompassing descriptive label. On the other hand, the theoretical approach looks more

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at the upper layers of the dimension, its describing historical trends in political thought, and its adherence to the most basic concept of opposition and conflict.

If we were to list its different layers, we might rank them thus:

1. Fundamental dichotomy between two opposing extremes (amicus/inamicus; Yes/No; 1/0; black/white).

2. Adapted dichotomy between separate historical manifestations of opposing political extremes (liberal v conservative; Whigs v Tories; radicals v traditionalists; working-class v bourgeois).

3. Generalised continuum ranking ideological aggregation of parties and voters within single historical manifestation (Parti Communiste Français; Forza Italia; British Labour Party; GOP; voters)

4. Individualised continuum ranking ideological position of single issues (privatisation; welfare; immigration; European construction).

Under this schematisation, the split between the dichotomy and the continuum is clear, and the reason for such a seemingly paradoxical coexistence of the two styles of dimension can be explained in the following way. As progressively more detailed levels of the Left-Right dimension are encountered, there is a simultaneous disaggregation of issues. For example, a Left-wing political party may well turn out to have certain Right-wing policies, but this only becomes apparent at the more detailed level of analysis. Thus, as more and more subdimensions are formed, with party (and voter) positions on them, the dichotomy becomes less clear, and a more fluid dimension is essential.

The problem of the Centre is also clarified to a certain extent. Leaving aside the Third Way (which, as we have seen, tries to exploit a non-position on the spectrum) a Centre party will have a range of issues, some to the Left, some to the Right. The summary position of these is towards the Centre in terms of the party's ranking. But, when the aspect of conflict is introduced, the dichotomous aspect to Left and Right appears. If the Centre party coalesces, it will choose one side of the conflict. If not, it will have to choose at each successive issue over which there is conflict, sometimes siding with one bloc, sometimes with the other. The only way it can avoid this, say in parliamentary votes, is to abstain constantly, thus eliminating the essential element of conflict. In short, the continuum is a detailed subdimension which plots the formalised space of a political arena, before the element of conflict is introduced.

Despite these apparently rather sweeping claims that I have made for Left and Right, it is important to remember that these labels form nothing more than a model. No matter how fundamental this continuum may be to describing political behaviour, it is still only a model whose raison d'être relies entirely upon its utility and clarity. In other words, why is the Left-Right continuum so useful? In what way can it help political scientists to explore and analyse political behaviour? Can such a macro-scale model provide us with any new or relevant insights into politics?

There would seem to be two fundamental reasons for the value of the Left-Right continuum. Firstly, as we touched upon in the opening section, it is a valuable tool for the cross-national and cross-temporal analysis of political behaviour. Indeed, without the axis, we would be hard pressed to identify similarities in all nations at all times that could be

used to provide a comparable benchmark. The notion of party families would be lost; party programmes would stand isolated much as they did before the advent of Downs, and any attempt to compare them would remain purely descriptive; voting behaviour could never be described in terms of party competition, but simply as unrelated incidents with voters changing their choices arbitrarily. Whenever we speak of party competition, volatility, ideological change, or of any party type, we are implicitly vindicating Left and Right.

Secondly, the Left-Right continuum provides a highly adaptable model for analysing political behaviour - an adaptability made all the more valuable by the simultaneous constraint which it exercises. Because it is a multilayered schema, a range of issues, beliefs and attitudes can all be held within it. Consequently, when a voter seems to contradict his or her own self-placement, for example, the axis can still provide an underlying cause for this action. The voter as part of the mass public places himself as befits his general political outlook. However, if a particular issue which does not fit the general outlook becomes of overriding importance, the apparently illogical behaviour can be explained by delving deeper into the continuum. The voter himself will not be aware of the underlying logic of his action, but the increased detail provided by the continuum can highlight this logic all the same.

In isolated cases, such illogicalities do not provide much of interest to the political scientist. However, if such deviation occurs in greater numbers, the Left-Right tool serves to illustrate not only the underlying logic, but also the underlying dynamic of this deviation, and the possible evolution that this may cause in the continuum itself. For it is in

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these widespread deviations that the adaptability of the Left-Right continuum lies. As parties adopt issues which seem initially in contradiction with the rest of their programme, or which do not have a place on the continuum, so in the long run these issues come to define what is Left or Right. Similarly, as groups of voters transfer their vote from the "traditional" party to the "protest" party, if such transfers remain constant, such groups become associated with a differing part of the spectrum.

For example, when the Front National in France is described after the 1995 presidential elections as "the new party of the working-class", the label may seem a contradiction. The Front National is a party of the Extreme Right, and the working-class have been the supporters of the Left? Is the Front National becoming a party of the Left? Clearly not. Rather, working-class voters are increasingly basing their voting choice on Right-wing issues, such as immigration, law and order, *inter alia*. Similarly in Austria, the runaway success of the Haider's Freedom movement among the old blue-collar class does not establish the party on the Left: its reactionary anti-European, anti-immigrant stance is simply of heightened relevance to an increasingly disenchanted section of society. But if we do not have the Left-Right schema with which to analyse the movement of the voters, or of the issues relevant to their choice, it is difficult to see how we can make sense of these trends, let alone foresee how they will evolve within the system (and simultaneously change the system).

But to accept the validity of the Left-Right continuum is not enough. When voters have moved away from their traditional parties, dealigned or "fragmented" society, they have in the past been seen as threatening the validity of Left and Right. In fact, by moving

against the bulk of political behaviour, varying the content but adhering to the underlying themes, we should probably work on the assumption that they have in fact reinforced the axis. If the continuum does indeed possess remarkable absorptive power, its strength must best be illustrated by those that prompt its change.

NOTES

1 This theory has been reinforced most recently by Fukuyama in "The End of History", where he endows liberal democracy with the status of "best possible system", thus eradicating the need for any sort of ideological debate or development.

2 Though whether this was more a secular/clerical divide between the Communists and the Catholic Church is open to debate. With the Church strongly backing Democrazia Cristiana, and the latter pushed to the Centre by the fascist MSI, I feel that it fits a broader definition of the Left-Right continuum.

3 See particularly Budge, Crewe and Farlie (1976), and, more recently, Klingemann, Hofferbert and Budge (1994).

4 Though we should remember that the use of Left and Right was an interpretation of the Marxist conflict, and not a Marxist concept itself.

5 In Britain, such an effect might have been noticeable in large cities with Catholic populations, such as Liverpool and Manchester. However, it would be difficult to isolate this from the more general deference displayed by much of the British working-class in general.

6 I admit that this example is cheating slightly, referring to a Catholic/Protestant divide, rather than the Church/Secular cleavage. However, it is true that the religious cleavage being a better predictor of vote was more due to working-class Catholics moving to the bourgeois party than middle-class voters turning to the Socialists: I simply wished to make the point that such behaviour can theoretically occur on both sides of the cleavage.

7 As Inglehart explains: "[To] define the Left as that portion of the spectrum supported by the working-class... is a circular and rather fruitless definition of the Left-Right continuum..." (1984:32)

8 This may appear as an ultra-elitist statement, ascribing the entire accommodation of political ideology on the Left-Right continuum to the designs of the existing political class. Not at all: certain groups may find themselves in a position to become part of the conflict, but decide to distance themselves from the "old" style politics in an attempt to maintain some sort of specificity. In the case of Britain, one of the reasons for the long delay between the extension of suffrage and the rise of the Labour Party, and more generally why working-class issues did not come to dominate the continuum until the post-war period was the reluctance of the working-class to become embroiled in Westminster politics. The unions remained the mainstay of working-class representation, and it was only after intense negotiation that they contemplated entering into a political alliance with the Fabians and other political groupuscules. The risk of such a move is to become politically marginalised. Eventually, such issues are absorbed, or the issue soon becomes irrelevant.

9 For example, he plots the evolution of Left and Right from Up and Down in the Chinese myth of Mount Pou-Tchean, the pillar of the universe, together with the Christian and Muslim dichotomies of Left/evil versus Right/good. He then explains that politics, which challenges these traditional religions and social orders, automatically swaps the positions of good and evil (1981:92) I feel that few members of the Right would subscribe to his view that they represent the forces of evil on the sole basis of this analysis.

10 His incorporation of religion as a facet reflects my own view that this issue is present within the Left-Right schema, rather than a separate dimension.

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11 If, however, the Central Third way is meant to suggest the fascist solution, as Lipset suggested (1960) then Left and Right will become redundant anyway.

12 Thus, the much criticised view of Duverger (1951) that the stable party system is the two-party system would seem to a certain extent to be vindicated, although it would be more accurate to say two-bloc system. Only systems with artificial constraints on conflict, via consensus-building instruments, seem to exist in a non-dyadic format.

13 The current situation in Britain could be cited as a rare example of this. The discrediting of the Conservatives as politicians, rather than the discrediting of their ideology, combined with Tony Blair's pushing Labour ever rightwards, seems to match the criteria. However, whether such a move is successful in the long term is a moot point, and will only be seen after the next General Election.

14 As have the Green parties begun to be seen as Leftist in their viewpoint (the label New Left now disappearing). See Kitschelt and Hellemans (1990) on this point.

15 The problem with many approaches to saliency theory (in particular see Budge and Farlie (1983)) is that they identify a set of issues which will influence voting behaviour before the elections. It is impossible to ascribe such saliency to issues with any precision, nor is it possible to say whether voters will rate the saliencies equally or rank them.

16 In practice, the number of viable options is evidently affected by the number of parties in the system.

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