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The Big Crunch

A Mapping of the Swedish Party System from 1991 to 2010

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Abstract:
Previous research claims that there has been a narrowing of distance between the Swedish political parties. Typically, such research into political distance has primarily focused on studying voters rather than the political parties themselves. In this article, the author conducts a longitudinal analysis of Comparative Manifesto Project data to determine if, and to what extent, the political parties have converged ideologically on a Left-Right continuum in the period 1991-2010. After first unraveling the concept of political distance, the author moves on to explain why the ideological dispersion of political parties is an important and consequential characteristic within party systems. Furthermore, the author argues that the Left-Right ideological scale continues to be a highly useful model with which to conceptualize and study this characteristic. The author then discusses the methodological approach and explains why quantitative manifesto data, often overlooked in favor of voter interview data, is deemed a valid and reliable material for measuring the ideological positions of political parties. The findings are that there indeed have been over all tendencies of ideological convergence between the blocs and that, in terms of how political parties are dispersed on a Left-Right ideological continuum, by 2010, the Swedish party system (the Sweden Democrats excluded) had become much less polarized than it had been in 1991.

Keywords: left, right, Left-Right, ideological distance, Swedish party system, polarization, convergence, divergence, ideological continuum, ideological scale, political distance
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1. Introduction

Research into voter perception of political distance between the Swedish political parties has tried to make the point that Sweden is witnessing a “dissolution” of party bloc politics and a “weakening” of the polarization within the party system (Oscarsson, 1994: 169). More recent studies have also noted that the Left-Right ‘bloc’ structure continues “to be dismantled” (Aylott & Bolin, 2015: 738), and that the ideologies of the dominating Swedish political parties are in an ongoing process of “approximation” (Ryabichenko & Shenderyuk, 2013: 115).

Conversely, many academics have highlighted the possible consequences of varying degrees of party system polarization. Anthony Downs (1957: 145) for instance assumed that political systems in which voters are “massed within a narrow range” of a Left-Right ideological scale are more likely to achieve stable and effective governments than systems in which the voters are more dispersed. More recently, it has been suggested that party ‘polarization’, that is, how parties are “dispersed along an ideological continuum” (Dalton, 2008: 916), is an important factor for the level of voter turnout (e.g. Dalton, 2008). Conversely, studies which have tested the impact of polarization versus ‘fractionalization’ (the effective number of parties in a system) seem to suggest that the former is more important than the latter for the general levels of democracy in a given country (e.g. Wang, 2016). Other academics have even argued that increasing levels of ideological convergence between a party system’s ‘mainstream’ parties could be a factor in explaining the recent rise of populism in Western European countries (e.g. Carter, 2005: 141).

Hence, drawing from the previous literature on the topic of party system polarization, a narrowing of distance between the political parties is herein viewed as a consequential, and potentially problematic, trait within party systems. The main purpose of this study is therefore to map and investigate the evolution of the distance between the parliamentary parties in Sweden in order to determine if, but also to what extent, such a convergence has taken place.

What methodological approaches are available for investigating distance between political parties? Over the years, political scientists have made numerous attempts at mapping and explaining the political distances between parties; in Sweden, many of these studies have traditionally focused on examining interview data (Oscarsson, 1994: 144). According to Oscarsson (1994), the study of political distance can be carried out on two levels: on the electorate level and on the party level. Oscarsson (1994: 169) found that the distance between the Swedish parties had narrowed since 1979; this was concluded after studying Swedish voters’ “second most favourite party”, as well as the voters’ perceptions of average distance on a “like; don’t-like” scale, from 1968 to 1991. While these findings are interesting, and serve as an important point of departure for this study, research that is preoccupied with the study of political distance through interview data on the electorate level risks overlooking some potentially interesting findings that could be produced by studying the parties themselves. Also, on a conceptual level, investigating voter perceptions to measure party distance raises questions of operationalization and validity. For example, Oscarsson’s (1994) study examined perceived change in distances rather than actual ideological change at the level of the parties; the distance between parties is thus derived by means of extrapolation from studying the voters rather than the parties themselves. While similar approaches have been commonplace in Swedish party system and electoral research (e.g. Oscarsson, 1994; Särlvik, 1968; Särlvik, 1970; Walter, 1993), studying the opinions of...
voters only tell us how the distance between the parties are perceived by the electorates. While unlikely, it is of course plausible that such perceptions might wholly differ from that of the actual party policies.

Fortunately, there are alternative approaches with which we are able to avoid the issues levied above. When studying the possible ideological convergence between Western and Eastern European political parties, Mats Öhlén and Martin Karlsson (2013) chose to use quantitative data compiled by the Comparative Manifesto Project. Because the data set contains information on individual party's ideological positions for every election, they deemed one of this method’s strength to be that it allowed for “systematic longitudinal” analysis (Öhlén & Karlsson, 2013: 72-73). Such an approach seems favorable since it also examines ideological positions at the level of the party, rather than the individual voter.

Consequently, the present study deviates from the “old tradition” (Oscarson, 1994: 144) in Swedish party system and electoral research. Rather than using data from interviews on the level of individual voters, it seeks to produce substantive and reliable findings on the evolution of the political distance between the main political parties with a longitudinal analysis of quantitative manifesto data. Hence, the main aim is to determine whether the left and right parties in the Swedish party system have converged ideologically: How has the political distance between the Swedish political parties changed over time, between 1991-2010? Is this potential change in ideological distance indicative of an ideological convergence between the left and right parties? Is such a convergence the result of both sides being drawn toward the ‘middle’ of the ‘Left-Right ideological scale’? Or is it the result of a unilateral pull in which one side, more so than the other, is increasingly moving ideologically toward the opposite side on the ‘Left-Right ideological scale’? These are the main research questions which underpin this study.

The nature of this study is purely explorative, but the hope is that the findings can be used as a point of departure for future studies aimed not only at analyzing potential discrepancies between voter perception and actual party policy, but also at determining the underlying causes of ideological convergence and its potential effects.

The paper is divided into four chapters. In the first, I start off by discussing the concept of political distance and how it can be operationalized for empirical research. I then move on to explain why the ideological dispersion of political parties is an important characteristic within party systems, and I also argue that the Left-Right ideological scale continues to be a dominant and useful model with which to conceptualize and study this characteristic. I also review the relevant literature. In the second chapter I discuss the methodological approach and explain why quantitative manifesto data, often overlooked in favor of voter interview data, is both a valid and reliable material for measuring the ideological positions of political parties. In the third chapter I present the findings of my longitudinal analysis. In the fourth and final chapter I summarize the findings, and then conclude with a discussion on possible implications as well as raise some methodological and theoretical concerns.

1.1. Political Distance

Perhaps it should be conceded that talking of how one can measure ‘distances’ in party system ‘space’ does sound like an unusually awkward way of expressing competition between political parties; however, if one accepts the salience of ideologies in party competition, envisioning the individual political parties as ‘nodes’ on a spatial ideological scale can be, I argue, conceptually helpful. Traditionally, such a conception of the
party system has been dominated by the so called "Left-Right dimension" (Mair, 1996: 24). In the remainder of this chapter I discuss how the spatial term of ‘distance’ in party system space is understood and operationalized in the present study. I will also argue that, notwithstanding the criticism which has been directed toward it over the years, the Left-Right ideological scale is still a useful and important gauge for measuring the distance between the political parties in the Swedish party system. However, for the purpose of establishing something of theoretical point of departure, I start off by giving an answer to the most basic, but perhaps therefore also the most fundamental, question: what is meant by ‘political distance’?

On one level, the concept of political distance can be defined as a tool with which we can discern political similarities and differences (Oscarsson, 1994: 142). However, as Oscarsson (1994: 142) points out, such an abstract ‘spatial’ concept is not as easy to define within the context of empirical research. We are thus forced into the realm of semantics: what is really meant by ‘distance’ in this sense (or ‘differences’ and ‘similarities’, for that matter)? For instance, in everyday life, words such as ‘close’ or ‘far away’ are not merely used to express distance in the literal, or perhaps rather more accurately, the physical spatial sense. On the contrary, we often use such concepts to discern distances on the more theoretical and abstract level; being “close to solving a problem” (Oscarsson, 1994: 142) is a common example of this. Conversely, the concept of ‘distance’ can act as an “efficient thought tool for facilitating and clarifying correlations and mutual relationships between objects, phenomena or people” (Oscarsson, 1994: 142). Consequently, how we interpret the concept of ‘political distance’ becomes dependent on the method used to measure it: put in another way, it is not until it is "operationalized for empirical research that it is filled with concrete substance” (Oscarsson, 1994: 142).

Because of the high levels of abstraction inherent to the concept, one should perhaps not find it surprising to learn that there exist a multitude of ways with which one can operationalize and measure the political distance between political parties. In fact, not only are there many different ways with which to infuse the concept of ‘political distance’ with a specific meaning, there are also many different methods of analysis with which the concept can be used. According to Oscarsson (1994: 143), the study of political distance can be carried out on two levels: at the electorate level and at the party level. At the level of the electorate, most studies focus on how voters perceive distance in politics. Conversely, at the party level, the parties themselves are studied. While interviews is the standard operating procedure when studying voter perceptions, content analyses of party programs or magazines are more common in research at the party level. Another possible approach is to study how the party representatives vote in parliamentary proceedings. Moreover, occasionally, when researchers want to find out the “degrees of similarity and proximity in political views between electorate and the elected” (Oscarsson, 1994: 143), both levels are studied.

The present study sets out to measure political distance at the level of the parties. The unit of measurement used is the parties’ placements on a Left-Right ideological scale and the empirical data is gathered from the CMP data set based on quantitative content analyses. This should allow for a systematic and consistent analysis of the change in ideological positioning which has potentially occurred over a measured time period. However, because there are alternative approaches that also lay claim to being good measurements of political distance—for example the like-dislike scale (see Oscarsson 1994)—how can we be sure that the Left-Right ideological scale is a sound way to operationalize political distance in party system space? In other words, does this study atta-
ch a sensible specific meaning to the concept of ‘political distance’ that can be used in empirical research?

### 1.2. A Framework for Studying Party Systems

The questions raised above merit further discussion. First of all, are ideological positions valid measurements for political distance? Secondly, what does the specific ideological positions of political parties really tell us?

Much of Down’s (1957) theories concerned the ‘spatial’ alignment of political actors along a Left-Right ideological scale. For example, in proportional representation systems, such as the Swedish, only a small proportion of the votes is necessary in order to gain mandates in parliament; as a result, many different political parties are often formed. According to Downs, in order to compete in such a system, new political parties must formulate policies that sufficiently differ from those of the already existing parties; consequently, new parties can only form as long as the distribution of voters along the ideological continuum has not yet been “saturated” (Downs, 1957: 145). To refer to such states of saturated voter distribution, Downs used the concept of ‘political equilibrium’: a state in which there is no longer enough “ideological ‘room’ between existing parties to support others significantly different from them” (Downs, 1957: 145).

Since Downs’ influential work in the late 1950s, numerous studies have adopted similar, ‘spatial’, conceptions of competitive party space. Many of these spatial models can be said to “converge on a common framework for studying party systems” (Dalton, 2008: 900). Such a framework usually involves conceptualizing the political parties as aligned on an ideological continuum, or scale. While conceding that the reduction of party competition down to a single continuum can be an “oversimplification” (Dalton, 2008: 900), Dalton nevertheless maintains that such a framework provides “a good first approximation of the nature of party competition” (Dalton 2008: 900). Thus, following both Downs (1957) and Dalton (2008), and many others in between, for the purpose of investigating the general distance between parties in, and thus the quality of, the Swedish party system, political parties are here conceptualized as being dispersed on a single ideological continuum.

### 1.2.1. The Importance of Diversity

So far, I have argued that the specific placements of parties on an ideological continuum can actually tell us something interesting about the nature of competition within a party system, but what happens when there is convergence or divergence between the parties’ placement on such a continuum? In other words, does the degree of polarization within party systems matter? Although there is little consensus with regards to exact causal effects, many different studies have attempted to affirm the importance of polarization within party systems. Of course, because he saw both voters and parties as rational actors solely interested in trying to maximize their own gains, Downs (1957) imagined that party policies were formulated, or ‘supplied’, merely to meet the demands emanating from the electorates—strictly as means of gaining votes. Hence, following a Downsian interpretation, a convergence of ideological distance between parties is simply the natural response to a narrowing of ideological distance in the electorate. From such a perspective, because it is simply mirroring the ideological substance within the electorate, a shrinking party system is not necessarily problematic; in the case of multiparty systems, Downs in fact envisioned benefits in terms of a more stable and effective government (Downs, 1957: 145). However, Downs’s presumptions of
causality have been challenged. In fact, Dalton (2008) even argues that the presumption that the character of party system polarization should reflect the dispersion of the voters is “not empirically correct” (Dalton, 2008: 908); on the contrary, the two seem to be almost unrelated.

More recent studies have instead focused on investigating the effects that varying degrees of party system polarization can have on voting behaviour and even general levels of democracy. Lachat (2008: 687) for instance argues that—though mediated by party identification and by political sophistication—polarization reinforces ideological voting. Dalton (2008: 900) on the other hand suggests that both voting behaviour and the broader characteristics of a political system are more directly influenced by the degree of polarization rather than the sheer number of parties within it; quality thus appears more important than quantity. If polical parties are seen as “channels of expression that allow citizens to vote their preferences” (Dalton, 2008: 916), Dalton argues that polarization, or in other words, how the parties are dispersed along an ideological continuum, strengthens that process more so than the effective number of parties operating within the system. Hence, independent of the sheer number of parties, greater ideological diversity should make it easier for voters to “translate their Left-Right orientations into a party preference” (Dalton, 2008: 912). Similarly, in an attempt to clarify the relationship between party system characteristics and democracy, Ching-Hsing Wang (2014) tests Dalton’s claim concerning the importance of polarization within party systems with the use of OLS regression analyses. In countries with already high levels of democracy, Wang observes that the relationship between party systems and democracy seems to suggest that higher levels of polarization can produce higher levels of democracy; conversely, the pure number of parties in a party system appears to exert “neither positive nor negative influence on democracy” (Wang, 2014: 697). While “conservative” about the findings of his study, Wang nevertheless posits that what appears to matter most is the quality rather than the quantity of the party system; in other words, what matters is the degree of ideological divergence within it:

[…] the key is whether the existing parties can effectively reflect different social values and reconcile conflicting groups in a country […] I would argue that if competing parties have the same or similar ideology, then it will be hard to come up with policy change and innovation. On the contrary, ideological divergence is likely to be transformed into the power to change so as to improve democratic governance (Wang, 2014: 697).

Here we arrive at an important point of departure for the present study. There is earlier evidence to suggest that there has been a narrowing of the voter’s perception of political distance among the Swedish political parties; as was argued above, such convergences within party systems matter and can be, at least theoretically, problematic. If political parties are supposed to reflect the voices of the public, it seems reasonable to expect that a certain degree of variation needs to exist between the parties in order for them to effectively reflect the variation within the electorate. Hence, it is likely the case that both voter behaviour and the more general levels of democracy in a given country are affected by the apparent degree of polarization within the party system. Examining and mapping if, and to what extent, the Swedish political parties have converged ideologically should therefore be both a relevant and important focus for the study of politics.
1.2.2. The Left-Right Dimension

So the ideological positions of political parties matter, but is the Left-Right scale really the most appropriate unit of measurement: what about the so called ‘new issues’? Have they not come to challenge the salience of the Left-Right scale? In the following section I discuss and deal with these concerns. In the end I summarize the main points made so far in this introductory chapter.

According to Peter Mair (1996: 25), when it comes to policy competition at the level of the parties, the Left Right dimension is dominating. Considering the policy connotations of the Left-Right dimension in particular—principally the direct government intervention in the economy versus commitment to free enterprise—the ‘dominance’ of it, not just in Sweden but throughout western European democracies, is hardly surprising; as Mair points out, “all western European democracies share an effectively common notion of citizenship, including social citizenship, and are led by governments which have all taken on a broadly equivalent set of obligations towards the citizenry” (Mair, 1996: 25). Thus, because all political parties must formulate policies that deal with issues of employment, taxation, industry and the welfare state, it firmly entrenches the Left-Right dimension in the policy competition of the political parties in any given party system.

However, there is some controversy surrounding the ‘dimensionality’ of the Left-Right scale. As Freire (2015) remarks, a dividing line appears to be separating those who view the Left-Right dimension as unidimensional, for instance “redistribution and state intervention for the left, [versus] competition and markets for the right” (Freire (2015: 46), with those who view it as also encompassing other criteria for differentiation: such as religion and ‘new politics’ (Freire, 2015: 46). Such debates notwithstanding, Mair (1996) points out that the Left-Right division has proven to have a remarkable capacity to absorb many of the ‘new policy’ issues such as “gender rights, ecology, and quality of life” (Mair, 1996: 26). Furthermore, he remarks that, “in short, left-right divisions, which predated but at the same time were cemented by the political mobilization of the working class in early twentieth-century Europe, and which came to focus principally on the question of the degree of government intervention, have proved sufficiently flexible to endure as well as to absorb, and have thus acted as a fundamental force for continuity” (Mair, 1996: 27). Similarly, in a recent study, Dahlberg and Harteveld (2016) found that the Left-Right ideology was still useful in Sweden as a “cue to parties’ specific positions on explicit issues” (Dahlberg and Hartveld, 2016: 176).

While we cannot not hide from the fact that the Left-Right continuum has some inherent problems—its apparent bluntness perhaps being the most salient—the point is not that the Left-Right continuum provides us with a detailed picture of certain cleavage structures or differences in specific policy issues. Rather, the point is that the scale is expected to “summarize [emphasis added] the issues and cleavages that structure political competition in a nation” (Dalton, 2008: 900). Indeed, the Left-Right dimension has been called the “core currency of political exchange” (Klingemann et al., 2006: 65); it is a, if not the, principal way with which voters conceptualize party system competition. Thus, in terms of measuring the general levels of ideological diversity available to the electorates, tracking the parties’ placements on a Left-Right continuum is expected to do just that. A narrowing of distance between political parties on such a scale then becomes indicative of a decrease in ideological diversity, which, for the purpose of this study, is what is interesting. While it does not provide us with a detailed idea of which policy issues or cleavage structures have converged the most, it should be
able to provide a broad picture of party competition and how it has evolved within the Swedish, or any other, party system.

To summarize, within the theoretical framework of the present study, the Left-Right ideological scale is used to measure political distance between the political parties in the Swedish party system. The scale is understood as a continuum onto which the political parties can be placed on the basis of their policy output: is it indicative of a left or right alignment? Furthermore, because polarization appears such an important characteristic of party systems, it should be highly warranted to investigate how the dispersion of the competing political parties on this continuum has changed over time. Thus, spatial terms, such as ‘distance’ and ‘convergence’, can be particularly useful in helping us conceptualize the parties’ competitive placements as ideological ‘nodes’ on a Left-Right continuum. Hence, a convergence, that is, a narrowing of the distance between the parties in the party system ‘space’, is here conceptualized as the narrowing of such nodes on the left-right ideological scale.

However, it can be argued that ideological alignment is not everything when it comes to political distance; indeed, because of how it presents a total, or ‘overall’, picture, Oscarsson (1994: 143-144) argues that political distance is better measured through voters’ perceptions of how much they like each party. This argument notwithstanding, such ‘general’ pictures of distance can be provided by the Left-Right scale. From the perspective adopted by this study, the Left-Right scale is viewed as the dominant dimension for competition among parties; not just indicative of a specific cleavage structure, it should provide a reasonable conception of political distance between the parties in a given party system, and thereby also the degree of polarization within it.

1.3. Literature Review
Traditionally, Swedish research into political distance and party systems has been marked by studies conducted at the level of the voter. According to Oscarsson (1994), Bo Särlvik has been a prolific early author in the field; in the 1960s and 1970s Särlvik used several different types of measurements and analytical techniques to study voter opinions of political conflict structures (e.g see Särlvik, 1970). In order to measure distance and dimensions within the party system, Särlvik (1968) used the concept of ‘party change’ as a unit of measurement. Departing from traditional theories on party competition (e.g. Downs, 1957), one of the aims of the analysis was to determine whether or not the ‘electoral currents’ in the Swedish electorate gave credence to the conception that there existed a sense of “grannskapskonkurrens” (Särlvik, 1968: 41): the sense that parties’ compete for votes against their most proximate rivals on an ideological continuum. Särlvik sought to construct a “geometric representation of the Swedish party system” (Särlvik, 1968: 41) from the interview data and considered such a potential map to be a representation of “stimuli for preference formation” (Särlvik, 1968: 41). According to Oscarsson (1994: 144), the results of Särlviks studies were testament to the salience of the Left-Right dimension in Swedish politics around 1970.

In his article Ett krympande partisystem? (in English: A Shrinking Party System?) (Oscarsson, 1994), Henrik Oscarsson sought to investigate how voters perceived the political distance between the Swedish parties. Two measurements were used for this: the voters' second hand preferences, as well as average distances; the first was used to reveal to which party the political distance was the shortest, and the latter measurement was based on how the voters scored the parties on a like-dislike scale. The results clearly indicated that the political distance between the Swedish parties had grown
narrower between 1968 and 1991. The convergence of the two biggest parties, the Social Democrats and the Moderates, was especially salient: hence the suggestion that Sweden is witnessing a “dissolution” of party bloc politics and a “weakening” of the polarization within the party system (Oscarsson, 1994: 169). Nonetheless, it was also noted that, “if political proximity is an essential prerequisite for parties to cooperate in i.e a coalition government it is not far fetched to presage future government coalitions across the bloc” (Oscarsson, 1994: 170).

Subsequent literature on the political distances within the Swedish party system appears rather scarce. There has been some research aimed at examining specific theories of voter preferences (eg. see Gilljam, 1997; MacDonald et al., 1991; MacDonald et al., 1998). In what he called a “reappraisal” (Gilljam, 1997: 12) of the ‘new directional theory of issue voting’, Mikael Gilljam sought to investigate its plausibility as a challenger to “one of the giants within electoral research, namely, the Downsian proximity theory” (Gilljam, 1997: 5); doubtful of the methods used in earlier testing of the proficiency of the directional theory, Gilljam conducted his own analysis. The aim was to determine the effects of changing the respondent’s party placement from a constant to a variable. The results indicated that the directional theory seemed far from being the successful challenger it had laid claim to. It was also noted that the “old and venerable proximity theory […] is still the number one giant within electoral research” (Gilljam, 1997: 12).

Since the 2000s, we have seen new literature on party system polarization and its potential effects (e.g. Arzheimer & Carter, 2003; Carter, 2005; Lachat 2008; Dalton 2008; Wang, 2014). The use of manifesto data is still an overlooked approach; studies still seem to favor the use of voter perceptions and expert interviews. There are, however, some noteworthy exceptions (eg. Arzheimer & Carter, 2003; Carter, 2005). In Extreme Right in Western Europe: Success or Failure? (Carter, 2005), Elizabeth Carter dedicated a portion of her book investigating the effects of ideological convergence—among mainstream political parties in different party systems—on the prevelance, or rather the electoral success, of right-wing extremist parties. Utilizing Comparative Manifesto Project data to examine ideological convergence, it was found that “high levels of ideological convergence between the parties of the mainstream left and the parties of the mainstream right are associated with high right-wing extremist party scores” (Carter, 2005: 141). Keeping with the theme of polarization within party systems, and returning to the more conventional approach of interview data and expert surveys, Romain Lachat (2008) examined the impact of party polarization on the level of ideological voting in Western Europe; indeed, the results confirmed that party polarization “reinforces the impact of ideology on the vote” (Lachat, 2008: 694-695).

We have also seen some recent case studies into specific elections. Nicholas Aylott and Niklas Bolin (2007) described and explained the 2006 parliamentary election results. Remarkong on its changing character, they noted that the Swedish party system “had come to increasingly resemble a de facto or ‘modified’ two-party format” (Aylott & Bolin, 2007: 632); however, further development toward a two-party format seemed unlikely given the proportional election system and the, then apparent, ‘obstacles’ to an alliance of the left. In a later study (Aylott & Bolin, 2015: 738), the same authors remarked that the left-right dimension was being complemented by “one on which issues of immigration and national identity are debated”. These results also suggested that the Left-Right ‘bloc’ structure continued “to be dismantled” (Aylott & Bolin, 2015: 738). While Aylott and Bolin considered a grand coalition between the Social Democrats and the Moderates an unlikely prospect, they posited that “the smaller Alliance parties” may open up to the possibility of cooperation with the Social Democrats (Aylott & Bolin, 2015: 738).
Finally, there have been studies on the typology of the Swedish party system, notably across the Baltic Sea. In their article *The Transformation of the Swedish Political Party System in the Late 20th/Early 21st Century*, Arkady Ryabichenko and Marina Shenderyuk (2013) aimed to develop a ‘typology’ of the Swedish party system. The authors noted that Sweden had gone from a system historically dominated by the Social Democrats, to one now dominated by two parties: “the transformation of the Swedish political party system 1988—2012 manifested itself in the crisis of Swedish social democracy, the rise of the right-wing Alliance to power, and the success of the Swedish Democrats in the 2010 parliamentary election” (Ryabichenko & Shenderyuk 2013: 114-115). The results also suggested that there was an ongoing process of “approximation” (Ryabichenko & Shenderyuk, 2013: 115) of the dominating parties’ ideologies.
2. Method

2.1. Material
The data used in this study is sourced from the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) (see Volkens et al., 2015). The CMP collects and analyzes parties’ election manifestos using the method of quantitative content analyses. It has analyzed over 1,000 party manifestos from all over the world from 1945 until today. CMP provides necessary empirical material for the study of policy position and ideological movements at the level of individual political parties; thus, it holds important data useful for the research aims of the present study.

Table 2.1. below (found in Klingemann, Volkens & Bara, 2006: 5) shows which dimensions were used in constructing the Left-Right measure in the CMP data set:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Right emphases</th>
<th>Left emphases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Military: positive</td>
<td>Decolonization, Anti-Imperialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom, Human Rights</td>
<td>Military: negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constitutionalism: Positive</td>
<td>Peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Authority</td>
<td>Internationalism: Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Enterprise</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Incentives</td>
<td>Regulate Capitalism, Market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protectionism: Negative</td>
<td>Economic Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Orthodoxy</td>
<td>Protectionism: Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Services Limitation</td>
<td>Controlled Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Way of Life: Positive</td>
<td>Nationalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Morality: Positive</td>
<td>Social Services: Expansion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law and Order</td>
<td>Education: Expansion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Harmony</td>
<td>Labour Groups: Positive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The scale is meant to be able to draw on “holistic information over all the categories” (Klingemann et al., 2006: 6) and reflect tendencies in the manifestos as a whole.

The use of party manifestos as the sole empirical basis for an analysis is not without a certain amount of controversy; consequently, this section addresses and deals with some of the critique targeted towards the CMP. One criticism hoisted against it concerns how it occasionally positions parties on the Left-Right scale in ways that run against expert judgments or ‘party family’ classifications; this has led some academics to question the plausibility of the scoring (e.g. Pelizzo, 2003: 67). Moreover, because parties often tend to eschew their most “extreme” ideas in their manifestos in order to attract more voters, another related claim concerns how “extremist parties” often end up aligned more moderately on the left-right scale than expected (Klingemann et al., 2006: 109). However, according to Klingemann et al. (2006), such criticism can be understood against an expectation that party programmes “must stably reflect an underlying ideology” (Klingemann, 2006: 109). In fact, rather than shedding doubt on its validity, such discrepancies in the party’s ideological positions can be seen as a testament to the strength of the CMP data set: “[manifestos] reveal party movement and change over time, as well as variation in the extent to which individual members of the same party family may formulate policy on the basis of ideology” (Klingemann et al., 2006: 109). Regarding the positioning of extremist parties, this should not be an issue as the present

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1 For question regarding the data used please contact the author: h14magtr@du.se
study only concerns itself with measuring the change in ideological positions of the Swedish non-populist, established, political parties.

An alternative method is to study voter perception of party distance. Such an approach was actually discussed, and subsequently dismissed, in the introductory chapter. While potentially interesting in its own right, it examines perceived ‘distance’ rather than actual ideological change. The present study is concerned with how the ideological distances have grown or narrowed at the level of the parties; thus, for the purposes of this study, measuring voter perceptions would be inappropriate. Voters’ opinions only tell us how the distance between the parties are perceived by the electorate; while unlikely, it is plausible that such perceptions differ from that of actual party policies. Conversely, one of the strengths of the CMP data set is indeed how it allows analyses to be “based on the parties’ own authoritative policy pronouncements and attempted dialogue with electors rather than other people’s judgements about where they stood” (Klingemann et al., 2006: xii). As a case in point, Lachat (2008) argues that voter perceptions of political parties has inherent bias. Thus, when analyzing the effects of polarization, in his case on the level of ideological voting, Lachat felt that there exists a risk of a spurious relationship “when the polarization measure is based on average voters’ perceptions” [original emphasis] (Lachat, 2008: 688). It is, however, interesting to note that Lachat solved the problem using an expert survey on party positions rather than manifesto data. Another alternative to using manifesto data is to conduct survey studies of party supporters. However, as is argued by Öhlén and Karlsson (2013: 172), studying the attitudes among party supporters merely measures what type of supporters each party has rather than the actual policy positions of the individual party; furthermore, the same authors suggested that comparisons between CMP data and expert interviews have shown the former to be reliable (Öhlén & Karlsson, 2013: 173).

Thus, rather than deriving its results and conclusions by means of extrapolation from studying party supporter attitudes or voter opinions, this study chooses to measure the ideological convergence of the political parties by means of comparing quantitative data over the parties’ actual ideological positions; the latter approach appears preferable both in terms of validity and reliability. The material is valid because it is reasonable to assume that the ideological substance that underpin a party’s manifesto is representative of the ideological position of the party itself. Conversely, because the data is based on quantitative content analyses, it should also be a more reliable approach than qualitative judgements of party policy; as Klingemann et al. (2006) points out, “[quantitative content analyses] provide a superior basis for tackling problems of selection, reliability and validity, or at least specifying them clearly so they can be taken into account in evaluating results” (Klingemann et al., 2006: xvi). Thus, the CMP data set is deemed to be the most appropriate material for the present study.

2.2. Procedure

The method used in this study is based on longitudinal analysis of the ideological positioning of the political parties in Sweden. The main reason for choosing a longitudinal design is that it enables many points of comparison over time. Analyzing trends in ideological convergence would of course not be possible by making readings at one point in time only. Conversely, in order to measure such trends we need access to greater numbers of observations to allow the ideological positions of every party to vary. Thus, the use of data compiled over several years is judged to be the most reasonable approach.
Why was the specific period 1991-2010 chosen? Considering, for example, Oscarsson’s (1994: 169) claim that the political distance between the Swedish parties of each ‘bloc’ has grown narrower since 1979, is 1991 really the ideal starting point? While a longer time period axiomatically provides information on longer running, and perhaps therefore more interesting, trends than a shorter time period, one of the main arguments against using 1979 as a point of departure is that the CMP presently does not provide any manifesto data for the Christian Democrats before 1985 and the Green Party (MP) before 1988. The point in time after which there is consistent data on all current (the Sweden Democrats excluded) parliamentary political parties for every subsequent election is 1991. Starting at 1991 therefore provides us with the longest consistent time series possible, which should be preferable in terms of validity. Moreover, while it would be preferable to conclude the time series with an analysis of the most recent Swedish general election manifestos, as of April 2016 the most recent data provided by the CMP data set only covers the 2010 election manifestos. These things considered, 1991-2010 is deemed the most appropriate time period for an analysis.

A few words should also be devoted to the apparent exclusion of the Sweden Democrats from the analysis. Indeed, in recent elections, the party has definitively proven itself a force to be reckoned with. Hence, the choice for exclusion was far from arbitrary. Three points, I argue, can be made in favor of such an exclusion. Firstly, while popular support for SD has grown rather drastically since the party first won seats in parliament in 2010, it saw quite limited electoral success between 1991 and then. Secondly, since no manifesto data exists before then, adding a new party to the analysis at the 2010 point would break the continuity of the investigated time series. The aim is to provide consistent results of trends in ideological positions, and the biggest parliamentary parties are thus chosen to provide such consistency; in fact, the same argument can be used with regard to New Democracy, which was also excluded from the analysis. Thirdly, the Sweden Democrats, and indeed New Democracy, are parties judged to be ‘populist’. It is true that, with continued electoral success, research must begin taking the Sweden Democrats into consideration to determine the party’s role in the party system as well as position, and consequences of such a position, on the Left-Right ideological scale. However, based on the reasons argued above, inclusion of the party into the present analysis of ideological convergence of the Swedish political parties would not just feel arbitrary; it would also be inappropriate.

For the analysis, the ideological positions, or ‘score’, of each party on the Left-Right ideological scale in the CMP data set is examined for every year an election has been held in Sweden. In order to highlight more general trends, the mean scores of the left and right ‘blocs’ are first presented and compared to each other and then compared to the mean score of all parties combined. After the general tendencies of each bloc have been established, the evolution of individual party positions are presented in order to determine how particular parties have converged or diverged, and which parties have had the most major changes in party distance on the micro level. The research questions that underpin this study regard the extent to which there has been an ideological convergence between the left and right parties in Swedish party politics; while the convergence between the two blocs is interesting for the purpose of establishing general tendencies of ideological convergence, the evolution of individual parties position’s on the ideological scale is important for a more detailed picture of how the ideological distances in the Swedish party system have changed over time.

In SPSS, for every year that an election has been held within the measuring period, a reading is taken of each party’s value on the ‘right-left ideological scale’ variable. In
presenting the results, descriptive statistics is used together with line diagrams to make the overall trends and changes in ideological positions easier for the reader to conceptualize. Also, in order to facilitate the process of explaining possible levels of convergence between the parties and party blocs, an ‘index of convergence’ is constructed. The original ‘right-left ideological scale’ in the CMP data set ranges from a value of -100 to a maximum of +100; negative scores represent left leanings, whereas positive scores represent right leanings. Such a range is useful for the purpose of constructing line diagrams, but less practical when talking of and trying to conceptualizing varying degrees of ideological convergence. Consequently, for every point of comparison, the score for each variable (either ‘party’ or ‘party bloc’) is read and the difference between each variable is subsequently divided by 100. The resulting quotient is then subtracted from 1 thereby creating an ‘index’ of the level of convergence between the two investigated variables; this index ranges from a minimum value of 0 to a maximum value of 1. Higher values (closer to 1) indicate high levels of convergence; low values (closer to 0) indicate low levels of convergence.

The ideological range of the party system should also be interesting to include in the analysis: if there have been overall tendencies of convergence between the left and right parties, there is a good possibility that the distance have narrowed between the party located most towards the left and the party located most towards right. Hence, this range, derived from the difference in Left-Right ideological score between party that scored the lowest and the party that scored the highest, will also be presented for each election year. For example: in a given election, if the party furthest to the right scores 10.00, and the party furthest to the left scores -10.00, then the range of the party system is 20.00 for that year.

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2. For each individual party’s Left-Right score for every election, see the table in the Appendix on page 29
3. Findings

This chapter presents the results from the longitudinal analysis of manifesto data. The line diagrams the track movements of either individual party or party bloc positions on the Left-Right ideological scale from 1991 to 2010. Each point on the vertical axis is marked off by a line, effectively creating a scale onto which the values of the parties and party blocs can be placed for every election year as ‘nodes’. In order for the diagrams to depict movements across ideological space as clearly as possible, the Left-Right ideological scores move on the horizontal axis; consequently, a party with lower scores is literally positioned to the left of a party with a higher score (for each individual party’s Left-Right score for every election see the table in the Appendix on page 29). The level of convergence will be measured using an index based on the difference between the parties’, or blocs’, Left-Right ideological scores. An index closer to 1 indicates that the two compared ideological positions are in closer proximity to each other than an index closer to 0. This is a measure of the degree of similarity in the Left-Right ideological score of two compared parties or blocs and is typically referred to as an “ideological convergence index”, or occasionally simply as “the index”.

3.1. Mean Scores of the Left and Right Blocs: 1991-2010

The first graph (Graph 3.1 below) illustrates the results from comparing the mean scores of the left bloc of parties (the Social Democrats, the Green Party, the Left Party) with the right bloc of parties (the Moderate Party, the Liberals, the Centre Party, the Christian Democrats) on the Left-Right ideological scale. The broken line indicates the mean score of all parties combined.

In 1991, the specific distance between the blocs in 1991 yields an ideological convergence index of .64. Venturing forward, a narrowing of distance between the blocs
is first noted in the 1994 elections. At this point, we see the index increase from .64 in 1991, to .73 in 1994. Furthermore, as Graph 3.1 clearly illustrates, in 1994, both blocs aligned more towards the right on the Left-Right scale. However, while the right bloc scores did indicate a similar, albeit slightly less dramatic rightward move from 12.14 in 1991 to 23.81 in 1994, the left bloc displayed the greatest difference in mean score between these two elections: shifting from a score of -20.52 in 1991 to -3.25 in 1994. Thus, while it is evident that the ideological distance between the blocs narrowed in 1994, the data also suggests that the resulting convergence can be mostly attributed to the dramatic rightward shift in position of the left bloc that year.

Since the 1994 election, the movements of the right bloc’s mean position, moving from its highest score of 23.81 in 1994 to its lowest score of .89 in 2010, is indicative of a consistent migration towards the centre of the scale. However, relative to prior elections since 1994, there was a peak in volatility for the right bloc in the 2006 election, when the mean position moved 10.18 units to the left. For the left bloc, the movements over time, particularly between the 1994 and 1998 elections, were more volatile; the mean score went from a high score of -3.25 in 1994 down to -25.19 in 1998. Consequently, the results indicate that both blocs moved towards the left in 1998; however, because the left bloc made a bigger leap towards the left than the right bloc, causing the relative distance between the blocs to effectively increase, there was concurrently a situation of divergence between the 1994 and 1998 elections. While the left bloc again moved slightly to the left in the 2002 election, it was to score higher in the two elections that followed; the left bloc moved from -26.02 in 2002 to -17.88 in 2010, indicating a recent movement towards the centre of the scale.

Thus, having tracked the movements of the blocs over time, the findings suggest overall tendencies of convergence in the period 1991-2010. The level of convergence started at .64 in 1991 but went up to .73 in 1994 as the ideological distance between the two blocs narrowed. However, with an ideological convergence index of .58 that year, levels of polarization between the blocs then reached a peak in 1998. Notwithstanding, after the 1998 election, the Left-Right ideological distance between the two blocs only narrowed; in subsequent elections, the index increased from .60 in 2002, to .72 in 2006, to .81 in 2010. Also, while the blocs converged steadily after 1998, it was not until the 2006 election that both blocs moved towards the centre of the Left-Right scale. In both the 2006 and 2010 elections there has been a situation convergence in which the left bloc has moved towards the right and the right bloc has moved towards the left. Moreover, the results indicate that the right bloc’s mean position on the scale, which shifted from 23.81 in 1994 to .89 in 2010, aligned itself further towards the left in every subsequent election following 1994; compared to the left bloc, the right bloc also experienced a more consistent movement over time towards the centre. Finally, although it made a 4.00 units move to the right between 2006 and 2010, the mean score position of all parties was nevertheless aligned more towards the left in 2010 compared to 1991. Thus, in conclusion, the results indicate over all tendencies of convergence between the blocs between 1991 and 2010, as well as a total mean score realignment towards the left on the Left-Right ideological scale.

However, it is interesting to note that the two blocs, notwithstanding the left’s more intensely volatile period between 1991 and 1998, in fact share similar ranges in movement during the investigated time period; when we compare the maximum and minimum scores of the two blocs, we find that the left bloc had a range of 22.78 units, whereas the right bloc had a range of 22.92. Similarly, the standard deviation of the mean score positions was 8.49 for the left bloc, and 8.51 for the right bloc. Consequently, while the right bloc showed what appeared to be more consistent
tendencies of movement over time, the results indicate that the right bloc ideological position was in fact slightly more volatile than the left bloc in the period 1991-2010.

3.2. Individual Party Scores Within Each Bloc: 1991-2010

The above analysis, consisting of the change in mean position of the two blocs, is specifically aimed at revealing more general movement trends since 1991. However, while interesting and useful for the purpose of establishing a broader picture of the investigated time period, ‘blocs’ are certainly not everything when it comes to party system competition; hence, the evolution of the individual parties’ position can hopefully tell us more about what lie behind the general tendencies presented above.

The second and third graphs (Graph 3.2.1 and Graph 3.2.2 on the next page) illustrate the results from investigating the parties individually. Graph 3.2.1 shows the results from within the left bloc and Graph 3.2.2 shows the results from within the right bloc. The broken lines again indicate the mean score of all the parties.

In 1991, with a Left-Right ideological score of -6.15, the Social Democrats was positioned to the right of both the Green party, which scored -12.64, and the Left party, which scored -42.75. Within the right bloc, in the 1991 election, while the other right bloc parties were all grouped in relatively close proximity around the centre, the Moderate party, scoring 43.75, was a clear outlier.

In 1994, rather unsurprisingly, we find that the rightward movements that occurred that year, in both the left and right bloc, are also seen reflected in the individual party positions within each bloc. All parties within the left bloc moved towards the right this election year. By far, the position of the Social Democrats was the most volatile and should thus account for the majority of the mean score rightward realignments that occurred within the left bloc in 1994. With the exception of the Moderate Party, the right bloc parties followed suit. Astonishingly, the Moderate Party, with its score changing from 43.75 in 1991 to 40.20 in 1994, was the only party within either bloc to move towards the left this election year. Thus, though of course concurrent with the major rightward realignment of the Social Democrats, one main reason for a convergence in 1994 can be attributed to the fact that the Moderate Party was the only party that did not follow the general tendencies of rightward realignment that year. Consequently, in 1994, there was not only a situation of convergence in which the Moderate Party approximated the positions of its neighbours within the right bloc, but also one in which the Moderate Party narrowed the positions of all the left bloc parties as well as the mean score position of all parties combined.

In 1998, we recall that, albeit slightly more pronounced in the left bloc, the movements of both blocs turned towards the left. How were those tendencies reflected in the movements of the individual parties within each bloc that year? Indeed, all of the left bloc parties moved towards the left in 1998; by far the most volatile within the left bloc that year, the Green Party moved 29.86 units to the left in the 1998 election. Within the right bloc, the Centre Party, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals also moved towards the left, remaining in similar proximity to each other. Once again, moving only 2.77 units towards the left, the Moderate Party showed least volatility within the right bloc, or compared to any other party for that matter. Thus, the diverging mean score positions of the two blocs that occurred in 1998 can be mostly attributed to a strong movement towards the left within the left bloc, of especially the Green party but also the Social Democrats, combined with a relatively low volatility within the right bloc; while continuing a trend of very slight leftward realignments since 1991, the position of the Moderate Party appeared especially inert.
In the 2002 election, not only did the Social Democrats’ score represent the most volatile movement within its bloc that year, but it was also the only left bloc party to move towards the left. The Left Party’s position, moving 2.69 to the right, was again the least volatile. The Green Party, having made a big leap to the left just prior between 1994 and 1998, changed to a rightward trajectory in the 2002 election and realigned in a
position to the left of the Social Democrats but to the right of the Left Party. Consequently, not only did the Social Democrats’ 2002 score represent the most volatile movement within its bloc that year, but it was also the only left bloc party to move towards the left. Within the right bloc, save for the score of the Liberals, the 2002 election saw comparatively minor movements. However, the Liberals, the most volatile within the right bloc, moved 13.62 units to the left from 14.29 in 1998 to .93 in 2002. Hence, in light of the Social Democrats unilateral leftward move within the left bloc, coupled with the apparent inertia of the Moderate Party, the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats that year, the results suggest that the slight convergence (index increasing from .58 to .60) occurring in 2002 can mostly be attributed to the rightward realignments of the Green Party and the Left Party, as well as the Liberals move to the left.

2006 was the first election year that both blocs converged; the left bloc moved to the right, and the right bloc moved to the left. Also, there was a peak in volatility for the right bloc that year. To account for this, we again look at how the individual parties aligned that election year. The Social Democrats’ decreasing score in 2006 is indicative of yet another realignment towards the left of the scale. Continuing its trajectory since 2002, the position of the Green Party moved to the right between 2002 and 2006. The Left Party, again showing the least amounts of volatility within the left bloc, moved 2.32 units to the left. Examining the movements within the right bloc, the most salient in terms of volatility, by far, was the Moderate Party. With its comparatively low standard deviation of 2.93 since the 1991 election (the corresponding value for the Social Democrats was 17.77), shifting its position 34.10 units from 38.06 in 2002 to 3.96 in 2006 represented an extreme leftward realignment for the Moderate Party. Indeed, both the Christian Democrats and the Centre Party followed suit and also realigned to the left that year; however, these were relatively minor changes compared to the the Moderate Party. Once again the exception within the bloc, the Liberals moved 13.62 units to the right and approximated the position it had in the 1998 election (14.29). Thus, having examined the scores of the individual parties, the results from the 2006 election indicate that the bilateral convergence of the mean score positions of both blocs occurring in that year, as well as the salient leftward mean score realignment of the rightbloc, are explained chiefly by two things: a pronounced leftward relocation of the Moderate Party’s position, from a consistent outlier within the right bloc, to in 2006 scoring left of the Liberals and aligning in close proximity to its other right bloc neighbours, coupled with a concurrent rightward realignment of the Green Party.

Finally, in 2010, by scoring -32.27, an 8.11 unit move to the left and its lowest score in the investigated time series, the Social Democrats concluded their trend of consistent leftward realignments seen since the 1998 election. Conversely, though to varying degrees, both the Left Party and the Green Party continued on their respective rightward trajectories. The Left Party 2010 election score was its highest in the time series; moving from -35.98 in 2006 to -12.20 in 2010 it also represented the most volatile score of any party that year. Save for the Liberals, only comparatively minor changes occurred within the right bloc in 2010. However, the first right bloc party to do so since the Christian Democrats in 1991, the Liberals, moving from 14.55 in 2006 to -4.80 in 2010, placed to the left of the mean score of all parties (-4.30 in 2010). Thus, the continued convergence between the blocs that again occurred in 2010 can be mostly attributed to the high levels of volatility of the Left Party and the Liberals that year; while the score of the other parties remained comparatively inert, both the Left Party and the Liberals moved towards the opposing side of the scale in 2010.
Having analyzed the entire time series for the individual parties within each bloc, the results indicate a consistent leftward realignment of the Social Democrats since 1994. Since 1998, the Green party has moved towards the centre of the scale. Similarly, the Left Party, having never previously scored higher than -27.27, moved to the right in 2010 and approximated the position of the Green party. Relative to the left bloc parties, the Liberals, the Christian Democrats and the Centre Party moved rather consistently, in close proximity to each other throughout the time series and slightly to the right of the mean score position of all parties. The Moderate Party, on the other hand, was a persistent outlier, reliably placing to the right of the other right bloc parties since 1991 up until the 2006 and 2010 elections, when it finally moved to the left and approximated the positions of its bloc neighbours near the centre of the scale.

![Graph 3.2.3 (above) – The Ideological Range (both left and right bloc parties included) on Offer: 1991-2010](image)

Finally, on a more general level, the data also revealed that the distance between the party furthest to the right, and the party furthest to the left have narrowed significantly during the measured time period; as illustrated by Graph 3.2.3 above, in 1991 this distance was 86.5 units, whereas in 2010 it had decreased to 40.41.
4. Conclusions

4.1 Summary of Findings
How has the political distance between the Swedish political parties changed over time, between 1991-2010? Is this potential change in ideological distance indicative of an ideological convergence between the left and right parties? The findings from the longitudinal analysis of manifesto data from 1991 to 2010 suggest that overall there have been tendencies ideological convergence between the two blocs. It was found that the Left-Right ideological distance between the left bloc parties and right bloc parties narrowed during the investigated time period. Although the distance between the blocs reached a peak in 1998, ever since the 2002 election there has been a consistent tendency of convergence. From examining the movements of individual parties, it was found that the Green Party and the Left Party had more right leaning scores in 2010 than they did in 1991 and that the Moderate Party, the Liberals and the Centre Party had more left leaning scores in 2010 than they did in 1991; indeed, while not all parties converged since 1991, most did. By far, the Moderate Party and the Left Party converged the most of any two parties during the investigated time period.

Another question regarded whether there had been a unilateral pull towards one side, or whether the parties on either side of the bloc divide had moved towards the middle. While both blocs moved towards the centre of the Left-Right scale in the 2006 and 2010 elections, the right bloc parties, on average, moved more towards the left than the left bloc parties moved towards the right. This resulted in the Left-Right mean position of the Swedish party system slightly shifting towards the left in the period from 1991 to 2010.

To summarize, the following three things were noted in the changing character of the Swedish party system since 1991. First, the left and right bloc parties converged, effectively decreasing the level of ideological diversity within the party system. Second, the Left-Right mean position of the Swedish party system moved to a more leftward position in 2010 compared to 1991. Third, the distance between the party furthest to the left and the party furthest to the right decreased significantly during the time period.

Finally, in terms of how political parties are dispersed on a Left-Right ideological continuum, this study concludes that, by 2010, the Swedish party system (the Sweden Democrats excluded) had become much less polarized than it had been in 1991.

4.2 Discussion: The Big Crunch – Paradoxes in the Swedish Party System and the Limitations and Possibilities of Manifesto Data
Is the Swedish party system heading towards a political ‘singularity’ and if so should this be cause for concern? In Oscarsson’s (1994) study he concluded that the Swedish party system had shrunk since 1979, and, in terms of how the parties placed on the Left-Right continuum, the results from the present longitudinal analysis point towards a similar trend in the period 1991-2010. Indeed, the parties are narrowing each other. Of course, being purely explorative in nature, it was never the ambition of this article to analyze the effects of this convergence. However, because of the impetus given to the potential effects of decreasing levels of party system polarization, a short discussion I feel is warranted on the possible implications of these findings. I end the chapter by raising some methodological and theoretical concerns.

The Sweden Democrats was excluded from the present analysis. However, this is not to say that the party lacks current societal relevance; far from it. The party has without a doubt been successful in recent elections. Hence, one first possible outcome of ideologi-
cal convergence between parties is precisely that it might create a vacuum in the party system space for right-wing populist parties to exploit. For example, if the Downsian concept of party system ‘equilibrium’ still has any bearing, then the leftward move of the Moderate Party in 2006 might be one plausible explanation for the increased electoral successes of the Sweden Democrats; following this view, the Sweden Democrats would have filled the void created by the Moderate Party move towards the centre of the scale. While such an interpretation might seem like premature conjecture, there has in fact been literature on the subject suggesting that increased ideological convergence between mainstream parties correlates with increased electoral success of right-wing extremist parties (see Carter 2005). I thus propose that future studies investigate this correlation further. Although likely explained by a number of factors, surely, the ideological changes of the established political parties must be factored in among them when we are trying to account for the recent electoral successes of populist parties throughout Europe. Manifesto data might very well be utilized for such research aims.

Second, voter turnout is expected to be effected by the degree of polarization within the party system. Research has found polarization to be empirically more important than fractionalization in explaining levels of voter turnout. According to Dalton (2008, 912-914), the logic behind this should be clear; in multiparty systems, where the parties are compacted in close proximity, the voters are left with limited choices, and because of this, it may be difficult for the voter to find a party that matches his or her own political views. Given the convergence that was found to have occurred between the Swedish political parties in this study, it should be interesting to note that, according to Statistics Sweden (SCB, 2016), Swedish voter turnout has been steadily on the increase in the period 2002-2010. This appears rather paradoxical and should warrant future studies into the relationship between polarization and voter turnout within the Swedish context. Furthermore, given that much of the previous research on the subject of polarization has been dominated by voter perceptions (e.g Dalton, 2008; Wang, 2014) or expert surveys (e.g Lachat, 2008), it would be especially interesting to see studies that did so using manifesto data. Such studies could perhaps test and compare the effects of of polarization—as an independent variable—using both voter perception and manifesto data.

Finally, we recall that, because he found the distance between the parties to have narrowed, Oscarsson (1994) felt that it was not far fetched to "presage" (Oscarsson, 1994: 170) future cross bloc government coalitions. While recent elections have proven such a coalition to still be off the table, it is interesting to note that, in 2006, the same year that the right bloc alliance coalition was formed, the manifesto data confirms that the Moderate Party approximated its bloc neighbours Left-Right ideological positions; indeed, in 2006, political proximity within the right bloc very much seemed to go hand in hand with cooperation! Unfortunately, we are, as of May 2016, still only left to speculate on what the 2014 election manifesto data might reveal. Considering, however, how Sweden did in fact witness a left bloc alliance in 2014, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the Social Democrats and the Green Party approximated each others Left-Right ideological positions that election year. Also, given that Aylott and Bolin (2015: 738) was able to speculate on a future cross bloc alliance between the smaller right bloc alliance parties and the Social Democrats, it appears likely that the Social Democrats ceased its leftward trend and instead moved to the right in 2014. However, such hypotheses will be left untested until more recent manifesto data is published. It is, in any case, interesting to note that while the Swedish party system has witnessed a weakening of ideological polarization, its bloc structure appears surprisingly intact: should ideological convergence not weaken the cleavage between the blocs rather than reinforce it? Is this yet another paradox? Maybe. However, as the ideological distance
between the blocs narrows, in order for the parties to more effectively and convincingly claim that they are different from the opposing side, perhaps it should be expected that parties within either side of the divide feel its necessary to join forces. An aim for future research could therefore be to examine whether the likelihood of within-bloc alliances in fact increases as levels of polarization decreases. Following this line of reasoning, another suggestion would be to determine whether the right bloc alliance, offering a more clear and plausible government alternative, may have attracted more voters to the polling stations; could this help explain the seemingly paradoxical increase in voter turnout in the period 2002-2010? Without a doubt, the Swedish Party System raises many questions for future research to answer! In what is left of this chapter, I want move on to address some methodological and theoretical concerns as well as talk about what may be done differently come future studies.

As with any study, the findings must of course be considered in light of both theoretical and methodological limitations. Examining how the parties scored on a Left-Right continuum was, within the theoretical context of this article, deemed to be a valid unit of measurement of political distance at the level of the parties. This does not, however, mean that there cannot be room for improvements come future studies! Indeed, I suspect that it is at the conceptual level that the present study has the potential to attract the most criticism. While I used both reason and previous research to affirm the validity of it, like any operationalization, the Left-Right measure is not perfect. It is definitely true that investigating how the parties score on additional, separate, policy issues—for example culture or welfare—would provide a more detailed picture of the competition structure in the party system. It is also true that additional dimensions to the political spectrum, i.e authoritarian versus libertarian, if added, could provide even deeper insight. Hence, while it was never the ambition for this study to provide a detailed idea of which policy issues or cleavage structures have converged the most, it should be conceded that the broad and summarizing nature of the Left-Right scale has limitations. In future studies, scores on separate issues could for example be correlated with the Left-Right values to test the Left-Right dimension’s salience and usefulness in party system research. However, as it currently lacks data on specific policy issues in several elections for some parties, this would require the CMP data set to be enriched further. Thus, party system research should greatly benefit from the Manifesto Research Project team managing to further develop the separate economic and cultural variables, as well as variables for authoritarian versus libertarian policy.

Finally, we turn to a discussion about competing levels of analysis. One argument in favor of the chosen method of analyzing manifesto data was that it offered a more valid way with which we could measure the concept of political distance. I reasoned that voter's perception, because it only is a measure of how the voter perceives the distance between the political parties, does not measure ‘actual’ political distance. While this is certainly true, one may very well ask whether measuring ‘actual’ political distance between parties, in this case using quantitative manifesto data, provides any real benefit over measuring voter perception: if research can determine that a certain party is placed to the left of another party within the context of scientific inquiry, does this really matter when the actual voter may in fact perceive the situation differently, and is likely to base his or her behaviour on their subjective perception of the parties rather than the findings of political scientists? If polarization is expected to affect voter behaviour, it is of course reasonable to assume that the effects of varying degrees of polarization is something that the voter must perceive in order to react upon. It should in other words be theoretically possible for political parties to change their policy without this change registering in the electorate. Of course, concurrent with the general public's decreasing
interest in politics, and political parties in particular, such a view should give further
credence to arguments in favor of studying polarization at the level of the voter, rather
than at the level of the parties: if voters are paying less attention to, and losing trust in,
political parties, what then is the point of studying the ideological substance expressed
in their election manifestos?

Indeed, what is the point? Is studying political distance at the level of the parties all
but an exercise in futility? My answer, perhaps rather unsurprisingly, is firmly in the
negative. I argue that three points can be made here. First, if nothing else, studying
actual party policy can be a first step to understanding the potential discrepancies
between voter perceptions and ‘actual’ ideological positions based on election
manifestos. As mentioned earlier, future studies could (for instance) test the correlation
between levels of voter turnout with degree of party system polarization in a country
and compare the results from using voter perception on the one hand, and manifesto
data on the other. Such research might either affirm or dismiss the validity of using
manifesto data to examine the effects of party system polarization. Secondly, following
Downsian proximity theory, we should be able to presage the electoral successes of
political parties by comparing how voters place themselves on, for example, a Left-
Right ideological scale with how parties place on the same scale based on manifesto
data. Believing that we can not expect voters to react to what is expressed in election
manifestos seems to be an incredible pessimistic view of the current state of politics.
Surely, what political parties say in their election manifestos continues to be one of the
principal sources from which voters learn about the ideological substance permeating
them and should thus be expected to not only resonate back to but also have effects on
the behaviour of the voters. Finally, even if one were to concede that voters are
becoming ever less interested in political parties and what they say, this of course does
not mean that we should simply brush aside election manifestos and their place in party
system research; far from it. The late Swedish political scientist Lennart Lundquist
described civil servants as ‘demokratins väktare’ (in English: ‘the guardians of
democracy’) (Lundquist, 1998). Perhaps this epithet can be extended to also include the
political scientist: in a situation where the people are becoming less interested in
politics, is studying what political actors say or do not becoming more important than
ever?


## Appendix

Table (below): The Left-Right Ideological Scores of Individual Parties Based on Comparative Manifesto Data in the Period 1991-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>S</th>
<th>MP</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>KD</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>-6.15</td>
<td>-12.64</td>
<td>-42.75</td>
<td>43.75</td>
<td>-4.55</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>5.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>23.79</td>
<td>-6.25</td>
<td>-27.27</td>
<td>40.20</td>
<td>13.95</td>
<td>19.27</td>
<td>21.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>-3.52</td>
<td>-36.11</td>
<td>-35.95</td>
<td>37.43</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>11.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>-18.32</td>
<td>-26.09</td>
<td>-33.66</td>
<td>38.06</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>10.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Comparative Manifesto Project. Available at [https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/](https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/)

**S** = Social Democrats,

**MP** = The Green Party,

**V** = The Left Party,

**M** = The Moderate Party,

**KD** = The Christian Democrats,

**L** = The Liberals,

**C** = The Centre Party.