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RESEARCH NOTE/NOTE DE RECHERCHE

CHES Canada

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Abstract

The ideological and issue positions of parties are known to shape citizens' political attitudes and voting behaviour. One important way to obtain estimates of parties' positions is to ask experts to place parties on salient ideological dimensions. The Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) has been collecting such estimates for democracies in Europe and elsewhere. CHES Canada adds to this project by providing estimates of party positions and characteristics of Canadian federal parties and provincial parties in Ontario and Quebec. This note introduces this new data source, clarifies how the data were collected and illustrates how the data can be used to (comparatively) study party politics in Canada.

Resumé

Les orientations idéologiques des partis et leurs prises de position sur différents enjeux influencent les attitudes et le comportement électoral des citoyens. Une méthode pertinente pour obtenir une estimation des positions des partis consiste à demander à des experts de situer les partis sur différentes dimensions idéologiques. Le projet Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) a recueilli de telles données pour les démocraties en Europe et ailleurs. CHES Canada s'inscrit dans ce projet en fournissant des estimations des positions des partis et des caractéristiques des partis fédéraux canadiens et des partis provinciaux de l'Ontario et du Québec. Cette note de recherche présente cette nouvelle base de données, clarifie la manière dont les données ont été collectées, et illustre comment les données peuvent être utilisées pour étudier de façon comparative les positions des partis au Canada.

Keywords: political parties; expert survey; Chapel Hill Expert Survey; Canadian poiltics; ideology; issue positions

Mots-clés: partis politiques; sondage d'experts; Chapel Hill Expert Survey; politique canadienne; idéologie; enjeux

Introduction

Spatial theory is one of the most influential approaches for understanding party competition and voting behaviour (e.g., Adams et al., 2005; Downs, 1957). To test

the implications of this theory, which assumes that parties and voters take positions in a common political space, scholars require estimates of the positions of parties on some dimensions. Furthermore, to account for the possibility that party competition is multidimensional (Hooghe and Marks, 2018; Koedam, 2022), scholars ideally have information about parties' positions on multiple ideological divides. Different strategies can be used to obtain said estimates, but one of the most common approaches is to ask experts to place parties on different ideological scales.

Previous work has shown that expert surveys provide estimates of parties' ideological positions that correlate strongly with estimates from other sources, such as voter perceptions[1], party platforms or estimates from projects developing Voting Advice Applications (VAA) (Bakker and Hobolt, 2013; Dalton and McAllister, 2015; Ferreira da Silva et al., 2023).[2] While other approaches thus provide estimates that are equivalent to those obtained from expert surveys, the latter have a number of distinct advantages, explaining their wide use in the field. Specifically, expert surveys are comparatively inexpensive (Hooghe et al., 2010), can be administered quickly and can include items on more abstract dimensions and issues than what is common in voter surveys.

The Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) has been collecting information on parties' ideological positions in Europe since 1999 (Jolly et al., 2022), providing scholars with estimates that have been used to describe the dimensionality of party systems in Europe (Rovny and Edwards, 2012) and the dynamics of party competition over issues (Koedam, 2022; Rovny, 2012). The data have also been combined with individual-level survey data to examine the links between party positions and vote choice (De Vries and Hobolt, 2012) or between the party system and voting behaviour (Bakker et al., 2021).

The CHES project originally focused on European party systems, but in recent years, the team has expanded its geographical coverage to Latin America, Australia, and Israel. These expansions not only imply that researchers interested in party competition in these countries now have access to estimates of parties' positions in these settings, but they also create opportunities for comparative research into the structure of party competition across regions (Martínez-Gallardo et al., 2023).

Here, we present the data from a new addition to the project: CHES Canada. This research note serves two goals. First, to introduce original data from an expert survey on the ideological positions of political parties in Canada—including the main federal parties as well as provincial parties in Ontario and Quebec. Second, to provide an initial comparative evaluation of the Canadian party system to that of other multiparty and multidimensional European democracies.

Data Collection and Measures

By searching websites of political science and government departments across Canadian universities, we compiled a list of 99 academics[3] with an interest in Canadian politics, party politics and elections. These experts received an email invitation to the survey about Canadian parties, offered in English and French.[4] At the end of the survey, the experts were asked if they had expertise in Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario or Quebec politics and would like to fill out a shorter version of the questionnaire focused on provincial parties. A total of 44 experts participated

in the main survey. We also received a sufficient number of responses from experts in Ontario (10) and Quebec (14) to release expert estimates of parties' positions in these provinces.[5] The data were collected between 5 December 2022 and 20 January 2023, with the survey asking experts to indicate parties' "current" positions.

The survey largely followed the structure of 2019 CHES-Europe, including questions about the positions of parties on economic issues, postmaterialism, overall ideology (left-right) and a host of specific issues, among others immigration, taxes and rural/urban interests (see Appendix A for the full list of items included). In addition to a measure about parties' positions on enforcing public health measures (taken from a CHES-Europe COVID survey), we added two issues to the survey that we thought were particularly salient in the Canadian context: decentralization to provinces and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. For all the dimensions and issues, experts were asked to rate parties on a 0–10 scale.

For the main ideological dimensions (economic issues and postmaterialism), as well as a select number of issues, experts were also asked to indicate to what extent they thought each party blurs its positions on the dimension, how divided it is on the dimension, and how salient the dimension is for a party. Finally, the survey asked about a number of party characteristics (see Appendix A for details).

The provincial surveys were substantially shorter, and only included questions about the main ideological dimensions. Appendix A lists all the questions that were included in the survey and details the answer options.

After processing and cleaning the data, we aggregated experts' responses to obtain a party-level dataset with averaged estimates of parties' positions on the different ideological and issue dimensions, as well as their characteristics. For the main ideological dimensions, the dataset also includes the standard deviation of experts' placements of a party.[6,7]

The Canadian Political Space

Using the CHES Canada dataset, we can describe the structure of party competition in Canadian politics. Here, we focus on parties' positions on the two main ideological dimensions: economic left-right and positions on postmaterialist issues. In line with earlier work, we refer to the latter as the GAL-TAN dimension (Hooghe et al., 2002; Jolly et al., 2022).[8] Figure 1 illustrates where experts position the parties in this two-dimensional space, with federal parties shown as circles.[9] The experts distinguish between two main blocs of parties. A first bloc of parties includes the Conservative Party of Canada (CPC) and the People's Party of Canada (PPC). These parties are positioned economically to the right and take more traditional positions on the GAL-TAN dimension. All other federal parties are positioned economically to the left while taking more liberal positions on the GAL-TAN dimension—with the Bloc Québécois (BQ) being slightly more centrist. Within each bloc, economic left-right is the main dimension distinguishing between parties. In particular, the New Democratic Party (NDP), the Green Party (GPC) and the Liberal Party (LPC) all take similar positions on the GAL-TAN dimension but differ in terms of their economic positions. It is noteworthy that, as is common in many European party systems as well (e.g., Lefkofridi et al., 2014), the parties are aligned along a diagonal structure, leaving the left-TAN and right-GAL quadrants empty.
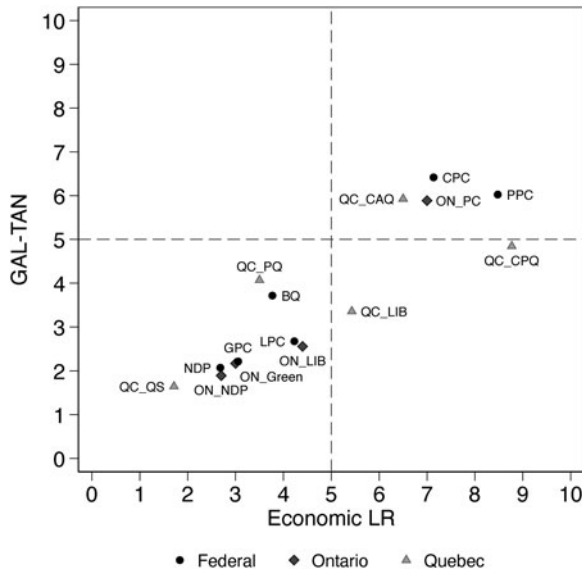
Figure 1. Positions of Federal and Provincial Parties on the Economic Left-Right and GAL-TAN Dimensions.

Figure 1 also shows the positions of parties in Ontario (diamonds) and Quebec (triangles) in this two-dimensional space. A comparison of party positions in both settings clarifies that the party system structure differs substantially between provinces. The Ontarian party system resembles the offer at the federal level most strongly, a finding that is consistent with the fact that there are strong organizational connections between the federal parties and the provincial parties in Ontario (Pruysers, 2014). Figure 1 shows that party competition differs in Quebec, notably because the space includes parties that combine economically right-wing with culturally progressive positions. Furthermore, Figure 1 shows that parties in Quebec have more distinct profiles than Ontarian or federal parties, given the absence of clear ideological blocs.

Applications

The previous section illustrates how the CHES Canada data can be used to describe the structure of party competition at the federal and provincial level. Figure 1 did so with a focus on the two main ideological dimensions, but this analysis can be extended to a large number of included issue dimensions. Below, we present two initial applications, one using individual-level and one using comparative party-level data.

First, the data can be combined with individual-level survey data from the Canadian Election Study or provincial election studies. By doing so, scholars can, for example, assess whether the positions of parties on specific issue dimensions broadly match the preferences of their electorates on these issues. By matching individual-level survey data and CHES estimates, researchers can get a sense of
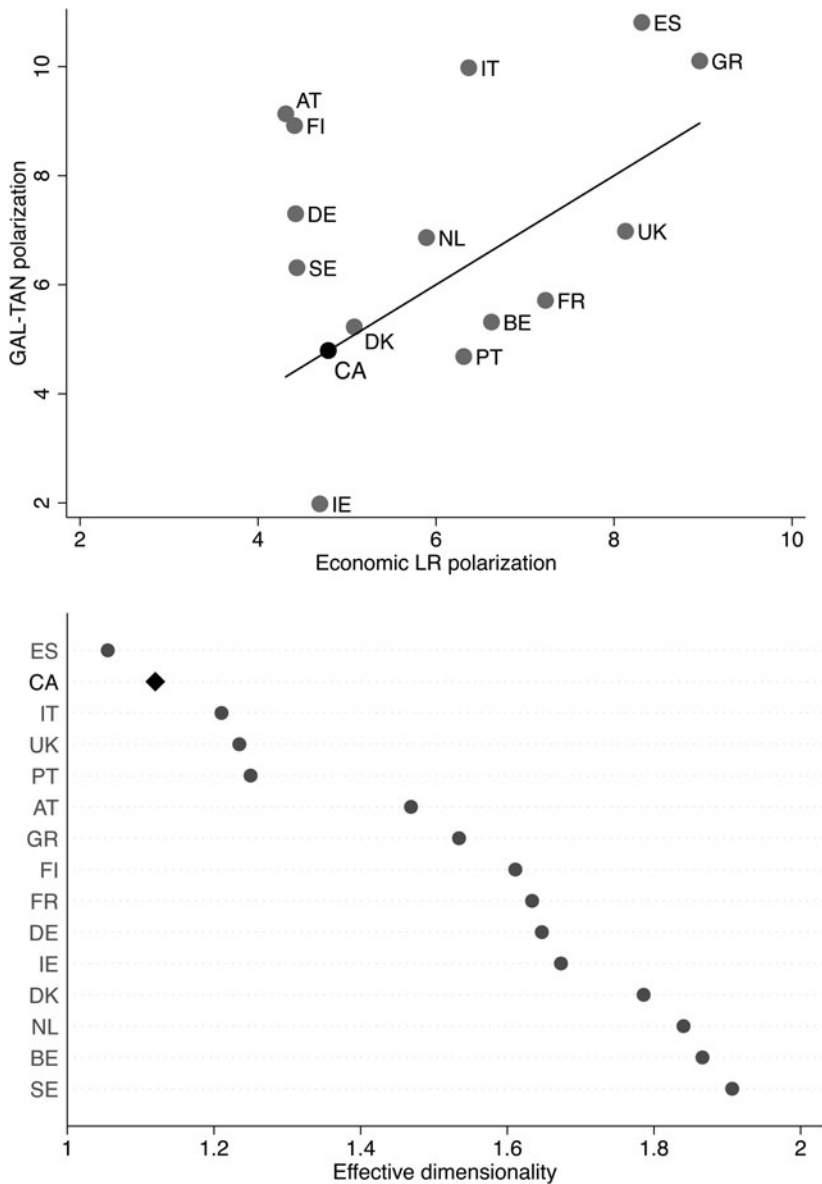
Figure 2. Canadian Party Polarization and Dimensionality in Comparative Perspective.

how ideologically sorted voters are. To illustrate this approach, we use data from the 2021 Canadian Election Study (CES; Stephenson et al., 2022) to obtain estimates of the policy preferences of voters of the main parties on income redistribution. The CES asked respondents "How much do you think should be done to reduce the income gap between the rich and the poor?", with answers ranging from much more (= 1) to much less (= 5). This measure of voters' positions on income

redistribution can be matched with the CHES estimates of parties' positions on redistribution (coded so 0 = strongly favours redistribution, 10 = strongly opposes redistribution). Combining both types of data, we find that voters' average preferences on the need to reduce the income gap maps well onto parties' positions on the issue of redistribution (Pearson correlation of 0.99). This implies that Canadian voters are effectively sorted into parties based on their opinion on this issue (for more details, see Appendix B).

Second, given that the CHES Canada questionnaire is similar to earlier CHES surveys, the data can easily be merged with CHES data from other countries and regions of the world. For example, scholars can evaluate how polarized or multidimensional the Canadian party system is compared to other countries. To illustrate the potential of combining data from different CHES modules, we merge the CHES Canada data with those from the most recent CHES-Europe wave (2019).

The top panel of Figure 2 plots each country by its level of party polarization on the economic left-right (x-axis) and the GAL-TAN dimension (y-axis).[10] A few observations stand out. First, from a comparative perspective, the Canadian party system is not particularly polarized. On both dimensions, but especially with regard to GAL-TAN issues, it mirrors the least polarized democracies in Western Europe. Second, the Canadian party system falls on the diagonal line, which represents a context in which the two ideological dimensions are equally polarized. This may suggest that the two dimensions are strongly correlated, with the same party oppositions playing out on both sets of issues.

Indeed, as already suggested by Figure 1, the bottom panel of Figure 2 confirms the relatively one-dimensional structure of Canadian party conflict. Using the *effective dimensionality* (ED), a measure that captures the relationship between the different dimensions of a political space, we observe that economic left-right and GAL-TAN virtually collapse into a single ideological conflict with an ED close to 1 (for the exact operationalization, see Koedam et al. 2024). This structure is similar to that of the United Kingdom, but in stark contrast to the more complex and two-dimensional party systems of, among others, Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands. This may hint at the role of political institutions, such as the electoral system. Future research can unpack this further.

Conclusions

The CHES Canada dataset is the newest extension of the CHES project. We surveyed Canadian experts about their perceptions of parties' positions on the main ideological dimensions, specific issues and asked them to rate parties on a number of indicators of the parties' characteristics. We plan to continue CHES Canada in the future, collecting data at regular time intervals. In doing so, we aim to be in sync with the CHES-Europe waves (i.e., every four to five years).

CHES Canada data can be used by students of party politics in Canada to describe party competition between federal parties and provincial parties in Ontario and Quebec. Furthermore, given that CHES Canada is part of a large comparative project and thanks to the inclusion of identical questions and measurement instruments across countries, the CHES Canada dataset allows scholars to conduct comparative analyses to assess the similarities and differences between the

Canadian party system and the political space in other democratic settings. The applications that we presented and illustrated in this note offer a glimpse of the many potential ways in which the data can be used by both Canadianists and comparativists.

Notes

1 Even though there is much evidence showing a strong aggregate-level correlation between experts' and citizens' perceptions of parties' positions (Dalton and McAllister, 2015), it should be kept in mind that there also is much heterogeneity in citizens' ideological perceptions. Armstrong et al. (2023), for example, show that individuals' gender, age, level of education as well as their ideological self-placement all structure perceptions of Canadian parties' ideological positions.
2 By triangulating and comparing the estimates of expert surveys, party manifestos and a Europe-wide VAA, Ferreira da Silva et al. (2023) not only show that estimates from different sources strongly correlate but also that divergences between datasets do not vary systematically as a function of party size, party family or country.
3 The number of experts that we invited (99) and who responded to the survey (44) is higher than what is typical in CHES surveys. We purposefully invited a larger number of experts to participate in the survey because we had the double objective to collect information on the positions of federal and provincial parties (in four provinces). In order to recruit a sufficient number of experts in each of the provinces, and because we were anticipating attrition for the provincial part of the survey—that was placed at the end—we sent invitations to nearly 100 experts.
4 Before fielding the survey, we obtained ethics approval from the Comité de la recherche en arts et humanités at Université de Montréal.
5 Despite our best efforts to recruit experts in Alberta and British Columbia, only four and three experts respectively agreed to rate parties in these provinces. While expert survey estimates are sometimes based on a similarly low level of responses, the combination of a low number of experts in these provinces and item non-response implied that for some parties and some dimensions, only one or two experts provided information. Given these small numbers, we decided to err on the side of caution and exclude the Alberta and British Columbia portions of the project from the dataset.
6 See Appendix D for more information on expert disagreement. On the whole, this analysis shows remarkably consistent party placements across issues.
7 Given that there is high agreement between experts overall (see Appendix D), we did not exclude any observations from the dataset before aggregating estimates to the party level. We did verify whether excluding extreme outliers (more than three standard deviations away from the mean) on specific questions affected the estimates and found that the averages including and excluding outliers consistently correlate highly (>0.99).
8 GAL-TAN stands for Green/Alternative/Libertarian vs. Traditional/Authoritarian/Nationalist and represents a composite dimension that bundles different issues, including social values, immigration and law & order.

9 Importantly, these party positional estimates correlate strongly to those derived from alternative expert surveys, both for these dimensions and for corresponding issue items (see Appendix C).

10 We calculate countries' polarization scores, weighted by party vote share, with Dalton's index (2008).

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