How did the crisis affect party preferences? The case of the British party system.

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Abstract: While it is obvious to say that the current economic crisis has influenced the political agenda everywhere, particularly in the so-called "Western world", it is not so predictable how this issue has affected the dynamics of party competition. This paper wants to shed light on the implications of the economic and financial crisis for the patterns of party competition in Great Britain through an analysis of the policy positions of eleven political parties in four elections (1997-2010). This study has been carried out through a content analysis which differs significantly from the leading experience of the Comparative Manifesto Project; for example, analytical categories have been established, with the purpose to avoid the shortcomings which come from the adoption of the CMP's method. This paper allows us to see a growing polarization between party economic preferences, in particular in those relating to the welfare state, although its programmatic salience has remained relatively stable. This has an important potential, as far as it regards, for instance, the formation of political coalitions and to interpret the fate of party preferences expressed during the election campaign once they are processed in the "black box".

Introduction

According to the famous theory of Stein Rokkan, the cleavage between capital and labour led to emergence of new parties or, where a relatively structured party system already existed, it led to a substantial change in the programmatic goals of such parties, on the basis of a conflict which opposed the interests of entrepreneurs on the one hand, and the working class on the other (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). The purely economic nature of such a cleavage had been an useful analytical tool to understand the dynamics of party competition for much of the twentieth century, but following the dramatic changes occurred in the recent decades it may be the case to ask if the economic policy is still an issue able to discriminate between parties, as well as asking what is the importance attached by them to it.

The economic history of the United Kingdom, as it is well-known, has been so particular that is possible to distinguish its process of industrialization from those occurred in the other advanced economies. In fact, as Ian Budge et.al. argue:

"Unlike France, Germany, Japan and Russia, industrialization took place with minimal direct intervention by the central state. Private capital was the driving force in (...) the construction of infrastructure and in the development of manufacturing and extractive industries (... and) the government had been reluctant to (intervene) until the Great Depression and the World War II" (Budge, Crewe, McKay and Newton, 2003).

Moving to an historical period closest to us, we can say that the British economic policy had experienced a long period of low programmatic contraposition between the political parties, which lasted from the 40's until the advent of Thatcherism, in the late 70's. The so-called "social-democratic consensus" was characterized by a convergence between the economic policy agendas of the Labour and the Conservatives, and comprised a broad range of issues, such as:

- the welfare state and the NHS, with a commitment to the expansion of both the sectors according to the levels of the overall economic growth;
- the mixed economy, which comprised both private and state-owned industries, especially in the fields of a "natural monopoly" of supply (coal, electricity, telecommunications etc.)
- the acceptance of the power and the role played by the main pressure groups, namely finance, general businesses and trade unions;
- the desirability of a Keynesian economic policy, which was driven by the necessity to find an acceptable balance between both the control of inflation and the control of unemployment.

As it is well-known, the social democratic consensus was undermined by the rise of the New Right - through the exaltation of economic orthodoxy, monetarism and privatization - which played an essential role in increasing the British party system polarization to an unprecedented level. Later, the so-called "Third way" developed by the New Labour in the mid 90's has contributed to make the policy positions of the British parties far less predictable from those that are generally assumed through the adoption of a one-dimensional paradigm which opposes a political "right" to a political "left".

Having described in broad lines the underlying trends in the British economic policy, it is time to introduce the second topic of this paper: the welfare state. Manuela Naldini (2006, 20), following Flora and Heidenheimer (1981, 5), reminds us that the term "welfare state" combines two of the most ambiguous terms of the English political vocabulary, since their evolution appear so intertwined with the peculiarities of the process of modernization in each country that is very hard to come up with a single and adequate definition able to represent the political reality. However, we can accept the Briggs' definition of the welfare state as:

"a state in which power is organized (...) and deliberately exercised (...) to direct (or correct) the social and market forces in at least three directions (...) provide individuals and their families a minimal income; reduce the individual and family insecurities during particular contingencies (elderly, unemployment and so on); provide to all citizens, without class and status distinction, the best possible set of social services (Briggs, 29)."

The British welfare state has its historical origins in the need to give a concrete answer to the consequences of the economic crisis of the 30's and the Second World War, and its date of birth can be traced back in a number of acts enacted between 1942 (Beveridge Report on Social Security) and 1948 (adoption of the National Assistance Act and the National Health Service Act). As happened in the case of the economic policy, the advent of Thatcherism put an end to the social democratic consensus, and started the process of the dismantling of the welfare state.

Maurizio Ferrera defines the British welfare state in the period 1945-1980 as "universalist mixed", a deviation from the ideal type "pure universalist" founded on the principle of citizenship (Ferrera, 1993, 101). However, the system has moved away from the Ferrera's categorization because of the general convergence of the political parties around the principles of the "mixed-welfare" in the recent years. This evolution is of a particular interest because, as Costanzo Ranci argues:

"The concept of "mixed-welfare" challenges (...) not only the traditional idea of an unlimited growth of public intervention, but it challenges also the neoliberal approaches that sustain a privatization of the welfare state; even in those countries in which a privatization of the welfare state has been attempted (as in the US and in the UK) the close interdependence between the State and the Third sector has determined perverse effects that have obstructed it" (Ranci, 1999, 207-208).
Moreover, as Liebfried and Pierson (1995) underline, the increasing role played by the EU has undermined its members' sovereignty and autonomy, because of the necessity to accomplish both the creation of the common market as well as the regionalization of the welfare state.

1. Theoretical and methodological tools to estimate the economic preferences of the political parties

The most used techniques to locate political parties in specific points of the political space(s) can be divided in three groups: mass surveys (Sani and Sartori, 1978), expert surveys (Castles and Mair, 1984) and the content analysis of the election manifestos (Budge et.al. 2001; Klingemann, Hofferbert and Budge, 1994). However, it should be obvious that the reconstruction of one or more political spaces does not depend only on the choice of a particular technique, but rather a far greater role in the final result is played by the theoretical background of the political scientist. In fact, through the adoption of the above mentioned techniques we can both reconstruct a one-dimensional political space (as right-left) and a multidimensional one (such as authoritarian-liberal or materialism-post materialism), but the reliability of the results can be in any case quite unsatisfactory. The expert surveys, although they are considered as cheap, quick and reliable (Volkens, 2007, 110-116) are heavily influenced by the party's policy records (Dinas and Gemenis, 2010, 428). Moreover, the expert surveys offer ambiguous results because they "extend snapshots to other chronological periods" (Volkens, 2007, 113). In other words, the recourse to such a technique to determine the party policy positions in each election would be rather problematic.

The other possible technique that can be used to achieve this goal is the content analysis. As it is well-known, the mainstream approach is the one developed by the CMP (Budge et.al. 2001; Klingemann, Hofferbert and Budge, 1994, Werner and Volkens, ). However, as I argued elsewhere, the CMP's procedure presents several theoretical and methodological shortcomings (Zulianello, 2012):
- it reconstructs a stereotyped linear political space, that opposes a "right" and a "left", in which, for example, "peace" is considered as a leftist issue and the "civil rights" as a rightist one;
- it dichotomizes many categories in an unacceptable way. For example, a policy statement as "education is important" is considered as an indicator of an "expansion" in this policy space;
- it does not allow to gather properly important issues, such as those relating to immigration, which does not find an adequate destination in the CMP's codebook;
- it presents several shortcomings in the selection of the "relevant" parties to be included in the analysis, as Werner and Volkens themselves admit;
- it operates an unacceptable distinction between the so-called policy means and policy goals, but it seems evident that the former can, in many cases, be considered as actual policy goals.

Table 1 – The importance of the policy "means"

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<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Policy “mean”</th>
<th>Policy goal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Party</td>
<td>Reduction of the MP’s number; Cut to the ICT</td>
<td>Public debt reduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Party</td>
<td>Increase of the “green” taxation; Local taxation reform</td>
<td>Public debt reduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal democrats</td>
<td>Freezing of the public sector wages; Defence expenditures cut</td>
<td>Public debt reduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKIP</td>
<td>Withdrawal from the EU ; Cut of the QUANGos</td>
<td>Public debt reduction</td>
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As we can see in the table 1 to the same policy “goal” can correspond several policy “means”, which are indeed policy goals in themselves. That said, we can briefly describe the methodology that we have developed to carry out this study (for an extensive discussion, see Zulianello, 2012). To take into account the above mentioned shortcomings of the CMP’s technique: i) we have created a greater number of analytical categories, which include also some that are "neutral", that is, able to gather the pure rhetorical policy statements such as "education is important" and similar; ii) we have not operated a distinction between policy goals and policy means, which are considered as equally important; iii) we have reconstructed a multidimensional political space in which each policy area can be considered as autonomous from the others; iv) we have included in the analysis all the parties that have been able to present a certain number of candidates (1/6) during the legislative elections. Each policy space is represented in the terms of percentage of reference of an election manifesto to a pole or the other of the continuum; for example, in the figure 1, we can say that the party A takes a position that is very closed to that of the "minimal state", because its positive references to the growth of public expenditure are just the 20%, while the 80% is constituted by positive references to the free market.

**Figure 1 – How to evaluate a party position in the policy space**

![Figure 1 - Evaluation of party position in policy space](image)

The other main difference from the CMP’s approach is theoretical. In fact, the CMP is based on the Robertson's "saliency theory" (1976), which states that parties compete by emphasizing the issues in which they perceive themselves as "strong", and that the main party's goal is to try to force its competitors to pay attention on its own favorite issues. Despite we accept the Robertson's theory, we think it is the case to include in the theoretical framework also the positional element. In fact, in a linear space, the attempt to determine the "actual" party positions would be very unsatisfactory, in particular if we consider that it would be the result of a simple summation of policy statements which belong to quite distinct policy areas. Instead, through the reconstruction of a plurality of policy spaces, we can obtain a series of party positions which take their meaning in *that specific* policy space. Through our theoretical and methodological approach then, we can determine, in each policy space, both the importance attached by each party to a particular issue - that is salience, and it is expressed as the % of the content the election manifesto - and the party position - that is the percentage of positive references to a particular pole, for example "state intervention in the economy".
2. The two faces of salience: society and party system

It is well-known that parties are considered to act, *inter alia*, as gatekeepers, since in all societies emerge needs, which can be expressed as inputs to the political system (Easton, 1965, 88). Inputs can be politicized through a process of articulation, in which individuals and groups make requests to the "black box", while through a process of aggregation the same inputs can be translated into political preferences, that are usually more comprehensive, and they are gathered into alternative programs by the political parties (Almond and Powell, 1988). Parties, in other words, browse and aggregate a (certain) number of issues, many of which are organized by the interest groups and the media, and (re)presented to the voters in form of more or less coherent "packages" of legislative proposals and policy statements. To combine the social and party dynamics of issue creation, circulation and reproduction, we have chosen to make a distinction within the concept of salience, in order to identify the policy fields where the parties are more responsive to societal demands and those in which they are the less. By doing so, hence, we can distinguish on the one hand the salience of a social issue, defined as the importance that voters give to a topic and, on the other, party salience, which refers to the importance given by parties to the same issue(s). To assess the former we have chosen to adopt the Issue Index data elaborated by IPSOS-MORI, through which we can have an important indicator of what is perceived as the single most important issue by the voters in each election.

3. The social salience of the economy and the welfare state

Having distinguished the social salience of an issue from the party's one, we can observe the trend of the perceptions of the "general state of the economy" as the single most important issue in Great Britain (table 2).

Table 2 – Trend of the general state of the economy as the single most important issue in the period 1997-2011

Source: Ipsos-MORI "The most important issues facing Britain today"

The trend that emerges from the observation of the table 2 is quite clear. In the period between 1997 and 2007 the social concern about the general economic situation had always been relatively low - around 20% - with the exception of a temporary increase during the financial crisis in the Russian Federation (august 1998) which, however, ceased to be perceived as a "reason of concern" in few months. As it was expectable, the low salience trend registered for the period 1997-2007 started to be drastically reversed since the second semester of the 2007, as consequence of the well-known impact of the economic and financial crisis. In September 2008, the issue became socially acute for the impact played on public opinion by the bankruptcy of several economic and financial giants, such as Lehman Brothers, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, AIG, and it should not be forgotten that in the same year the economic crisis made one of its most famous British "victim": the Northern Rock. It is important to underline that in 2008 the issue "general economic situation" emerged for the first time as the second most important issue and that in the same year it reached its highest value since 1992. The social salience of this issue saw a further strengthening in 2009, reaching a pick of 70%, before easing in the first three quarters of the 2011 in a share between 50% and 60%, and then presenting another pick of 70% in the second quarter of 2011. In addition to the data about the social concern toward the economic situation, we can see that the importance of the issues relating unemployment and inflation have been increasing in the last four years, especially if we compare these data with the trend of substantial stability of such issues registered for the period 1997-2007. In the case of the welfare state we have to consider two different IPSOS-MORI indicators: the welfare as social security and pensions in general (PEN) and the National Health System (NHS) (table 3).

Table 3 – Trend of the welfare state and NHS as the single most important issues in the period 1997-2011

Source: Ipsos-MORI "The most important issues facing Britain today"
The first result that we can obtain from the observation of the table 3 is that throughout the period 1997-2011 the NHS is considered as a far more important issue than the welfare as social security by the majority of the respondents. The social salience of the NHS presents two picks above the 70% (January 2000 and February 2002); in both the cases the picks are due to Tony Blair's statements in favor of an increase in public spending in the health system, but in February 2009 its social salience reached its lowest level since December 1985. The welfare social salience, instead, reached a significant pick in January 1998 after the proposal of Tony Blair and Harriet Harman to exclude the most well-off from the benefit system, although it must be stressed again that the systemic trend is one of low social salience, with the exception of some isolated events.

4. The impact of the crisis on the dynamics of party competition

4.1 Economic policy

Having described the social salience trend of the welfare and economic issues, we can begin our analysis of the policy preferences of the British parties. The analysis of the competitive dynamics in the economic policy presents a great number of critical points, especially if we attempt to rebuild a political space through the recourse to dichotomous categories. In our codebook are present some categories that are able to assess the relative importance of a particular issue in the political platform of a certain party, that is salience, but at the same time, they do not present a positional meaning, that is, it is not possible to determine its "opposite": this is the case of agriculture (agri_pesc), general economic objectives (obi_eco), and technology and infrastructure (tecn_infra). It follows that the above mentioned categories can only be used to determine the salience of the economic policy for each party, but they cannot be included in a "truly" positional space. That said, in our codebook we have many other categories able to determine both party position and salience: budg_lib, inc_subs, lib_imp, ril_ind (free market pole); bank_fin, corp_conc, lobb_lobb, marx_an, mix_eco, naz_stat, pian_eco, prot_eco, reg_mkt, stato_eco (state intervention pole).

With the regard to the party salience given to the economic policy we can see two general trends (tab.4). First, in the period 1997-2005 we can observe a gradual decrease of the importance attached by parties to economic policy, which moves from the average of 20% registered in 1997, falls to 13% in 2001 and then remains stable in 2005. This trend is confirmed by salience given to the question by the "relevant" parties (Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats) which follow the systemic trend in each election. In the 2010 election campaign however, we assist to a reversal of such a trend: the portions of election manifestos concerning the economic policy grows substantially, and reaches 19%. It is important to emphasize the continuing growth of the importance attached to economic policy by the Green Party in the period 1997-2010, in line with its attempt to go beyond its status of "single-issue party". Although with a less linear one, we can observe a similar trend even in the political platforms of other "single-issue" parties, such as the regionalist Plaid Cymru and the eurosceptic United Kingdom Independence Party.

If we shift the analytical focus from the party system level to the individual party one, we can identify other important dynamics relating to the importance given by the political actors to the economic policy. First, in the group of the "relevant" parties we observe that whereas the 1997 election shows a clear distinction between the salience attached by the Liberal Democrats (14.4%)
and the couple Labour-Conservatives (21.0% and 23.4%), starting from the 2001 election we see a substantial programmatic realignment due to the increasing importance given to the economic policy, which leads to a significant downsizing of the difference in salience among the three major parties, phenomenon confirmed in the election of 2010, despite the remarkable growth of the average party salience.

Table 4 – Party salience of the economic policy in four elections

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<td>BNP</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>12.4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>CONS</td>
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<td>11.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>ED</td>
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<td>11.8</td>
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<td>10.9</td>
<td>11.1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>24.7</td>
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This convergence trend seems confirmed by the data emerged from the analysis of the program of the coalition government: a 16.7% which takes a middle position between the 17% of the Conservatives and the 15.4% of the Liberal Democrats. Secondly, in the first election analyzed the Tories expresses the greatest salience among the "big three", while in the subsequent elections they have always been overridden by the Labour, and in 2001 even by the Liberal Democrats. This peculiar trend allows us to consider as discontinuous the Tories' interest to compete in the economic policy, while we cannot say the same for the Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

The regionalists Plaid Cymru and Scottish National Party confirm their programmatic similarity even in the economic policy, aligning to the systemic trend of de-emphatization in the period 1997-2005 and to the re-emergence of the issue in 2010, while the Green Party presents a linear and growing trend for the whole period considered. The English Democrats presents the lowest salience registered in 2010 (11.8%) while Respect-The Unity Coalition can be considered as the most "economic party" in the system, with a percentage of 15.8% in 2005 and of 27% in 2010. Finally, the British National Party and the United Kingdom Independence Party align themselves to the
systemic trends: de-emphatization in the period 1997-2005 followed by a significant growth in the last election.

We have previously stated the fact that, despite a high heuristic value of some policy statements, we cannot use all the analytical categories that are present in our codebook to collect the information about party economic preferences. The policy space is thus reconstructed through the use of eleven categories, seven of which can be considered as preferences for the state intervention in the economic life, while four gather the positive evaluations of the free market (tab.5).

Our choice to redefine the economic policy space in the terms of a contraposition between a polarity representing "extreme" free market positions and another one representing "extreme" preferences for the state intervention in the economic life, allows us to go beyond the traditional left-right dichotomy and to build a space of competition which presents a logical pertinence between its constitutive elements, avoiding the preconceived visions and the stereotypes that derive from the recourse to the traditional approach to the study of party competition.

Figure 3 gives us a first graphical representation of the phenomenon of de-emphatization of the economic issues in the period 1997-2005 and the re-emergence of its relevance during the 2010 election campaign (salience is represented by the circumference of each party's circle). Now it is time to discuss the different locations taken by parties along the economic policy space, and we begin our discussion with the so-called "big three". We can distinguish the positions taken by the Liberal Democrats and Labour from those of the Conservatives: the first two parties are located in positions rather close to the midpoint of the continuum but on the side of "state intervention" whereas the Conservatives, despite a slight shift in the balance between the latter and the free market in the period 2005-2010, are clearly located in the opposite portion of the policy space. Significantly, the relative positions of the big three remain unchanged over time: in a decreasing order of preference for a "state intervention" in the economic life we find Liberal Democrats, Labour and Conservative Party. Despite the stability of their relative economic policy positions, we can observe how the economic crisis have influenced the dynamics of party competition: an unprecedented emphasis is accompanied by a general, though in some cases rather weak, movement away from marked "free market" positions towards the midpoint, which stands for "mixed" economic policy preferences.

In the first three elections the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats took positions that are quite close to each other in the midpoint of the policy space, slightly oriented toward the state intervention polarity, while in 2010 the positive references to the economic management grew from the 59.4% to the 71.2% in the case of the former and from the 61.4% to the 85.1% in the case of the latter. Thus, for the first time, we register an important distance between their policy positions, which had been previously rather low. Of a particular interest is the position taken by the coalition government: its preferences are largely those of the Conservative party, and the trade-off between the two parties appears to favor the former instead of the latter.

The Scottish National Party and the Labour Party appear to be, in all the elections here considered, as economic "nearbies", since in each case we can register similar movements along the policy space with the partial exception of the 2005 election campaign. If the strategy of the Scottish National Party seems fairly linear and constant over time, the same can be said of its Welsh "equivalent", the Plaid Cymru. In fact, its position in the side favoring state intervention is very clear, with a substantial stability that is very unlikely to find in the case of those parties that do not take the most extreme positions along this policy space.
Figure 2 – Party positions in the economic policy space (% of positive references to the state intervention in the economy)

1997

2001

2005

2010

Riferimenti positivi all’intervento statale nell’economia
By looking at the figure 2 it is also easy to identify two parties that take positions that differ clearly from those of their competitors: the Conservatives and the United Kingdom Independence Party. These two parties are clearly and constantly located on the side in which the positive references to the "free market" are more than those to the positive role played by the state in the economic life. On the opposite side of the continuum there is the tendency of the Green Party and Respect-The Unity Coalition to guard the extreme polarity of the continuum, that of the state intervention, although there is a fundamental difference between them: the former stood in this position in the period 2001-2005 and then moved slightly away in 2010, while the latter continues to guard the pole even in the most recent election. Finally, it remains to be evaluated the pattern of economic preferences of the British National Party and English Democrats. In the first case, the competitive trend seems to be that of a progressive diversification of preferences in the economic policy, with a decided shift toward the midpoint of the continuum between 2005 and 2010. Because of its recent birth, we cannot identify a specific competitive pattern for the English Democrats, although it is interesting to note that this late-comer party took position in 2010 in the most densely populated area of the policy space, where there is a clear preference for an intervention by the state in the economic affairs.

4.2 Welfare policy

Our investigation of party economic preferences would be rather unsatisfactory and incomplete if we would not include a policy area to which any party pays a great importance: the welfare state. To gather the information about party positions in this particular policy space, we have opted for the creation of four analytical categories: general references, positive references, negative references and references to mixed (public and private) ways to deliver the welfare services. It is important to clarify what we mean here for expansion and reduction of the welfare state, in order to avoid the pitfalls which derive from the operationalization of such a topic as is done by the Comparative Manifesto Project. Since in some cases the dichotomization of an issue produces a "positive" and a "negative" sets of preferences which is rather unsatisfactory, our procedure allows us to find a proper destination both for the general references without positional value (welf_gen) as well as for those which do possess a clear positional meaning (welf_pos, welf_neg, mixed_welf; soc_just).

Addressing the welfare policy is a rather complicated task because the references to the increase or to the reduction of the expenditure or the range of services are relatively few, and a lot of information could be lost through an incorrect operationalization of the problem. Then, we have decided to reconstruct this area of competition in the terms of a contrast between an increase or a reduction of the role of the state, which refers both to the preferences regarding expenditure and services, and above all, it is able to define which actor (private or public) is consider as "better" in the actual functioning of the welfare state. In short, the continuum is delimited by two distinct poles: on the one hand there is an extreme preference for a state intervention in the welfare state, while on the other we find the policy positions of those parties which prefer a "withdrawal" of the state from the welfare system. The point is relevant because, as we will see, there are very few policy statements that imply a reduction in the welfare expenditure or services, but we have, instead, several policy statements that can be included in the "mixed" category, that is a partnership between the public and private sectors. In these cases, there may be a reduction or an increase in public spending or in the range of services offered, but the crucial point is that, in both the cases,
they give us important information about a change in the "balance" between state and society functions.

Table 6 – Party salience of the welfare policy in four elections

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It is not easy to identify a clear systemic trend from the table 6. The average party salience is 10% in 1997 - result influenced by the absence of references to the issue by the British National Party's manifesto of that year - it goes to 14% in 2001, increases of two points in 2005 and then lows to 12% in the 2010 election.

The relevant parties according to the Sartori's criteria present a continuous realignment in the attribution of significance to the welfare policy: on the one hand, the big three are generally more interested in competing in this policy space than the competitors, although there are some temporary exceptions; on the other, the relative importance attached to the welfare state by them is quite irregular. Indeed, in 1997 the major emphasis was expressed by the Conservatives, in 2001 by the Labour, by the Liberal Democrats in 2005 and again by Labour in 2010. Among the big three we can observe that whereas the Liberal Democrats and the Labour present an irregular trend, the Conservatives show a substantial programmatic stability, which is interrupted only by the peak of the 2001 election. The election program of the coalition government dedicates nearly equal attention to the topic as that emerged from the analysis of the Conservative's manifesto of the 2010, and this is accompanied by a significant spatial proximity between the Government and the Tories'
policy positions. In the period 2001-2005 the Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party show a rather similar emphasis trend, although it is important to note that for the former "the importance" of the welfare in 2010 is 4.9% higher than that of the 1997, while in the case of the latter the difference between the first and the last election is only slightly positive: + 0.2%. A relatively constant and linear trend emerges from the Green Party's manifestos which, with the exception of the 1997 data, has increased the salience attached to the welfare to a level that makes this party the most interested in competing in such a policy space. The British National Party and the United Kingdom Independence Party appear less interested in competing in the welfare policy than their competitors. This consideration can be extend as well as to the English Democrats, which dedicates only the 5.8% of their election manifesto to issues relating to the welfare state.

In sum, from a party system perspective, then, the trend of emphatization of the welfare policy in the 1997-2005 was substituted by an irregular process of de-emphatization in 2010. Now it is the case to assess whether the irregular saliency pattern is accompanied by a trend towards convergence or polarization in positional terms (fig.3).

If we compare the systemic pattern shown in figure 2 with that of figure 3 we note that, whether in the economic policy there is a clear tendency towards the area of the continuum in which there medium to strong preferences for the state intervention in the economic life, in the case of welfare policy the picture is far more heterogeneous and contradictory. In 1997 the competitive space occupied by the Liberal Democrats, Labour and the Conservatives was extremely short, ranging from the 48.1% of the Conservatives to the 62.4% of the Liberal Democrats, with the Labour taking a position very close to that of the former (51.5%). In the 2001 we assist to a quite significant change: while the centrist tendency of the Conservatives is confirmed (54%), we assist to strong movements by both the Labour and the Liberal Democrats in direction of strong positions for the state intervention (82.8% and 79.8%). In the 2005 the Conservatives remain close to the midpoint (45.6%), while there is far more distance between the Labour and the Liberal Democrats because of an increased preference for the "state" by the latter, which moves considerably to the right pole of the continuum (92.2%), while the former moves towards the center (68.2%). The 2010 election presents a double trend: the Conservatives move to a marked "pro-market" position, while the Liberal Democrats, though presenting again a clear set of preferences for the state intervention in the welfare policy, they move from its extreme pole (80%), whereas the Labour confirms the position already expressed in the 2005 (66%). It is important to underline that in 2010 the polarization of the welfare policy reached an unprecedented level, because of the movement of the Conservatives, and this is evident if we compare this policy space with that of the 1997 election, which was far less polarized. As we anticipated previously, we note that the policy preferences of the Tories have a massive impact on the content of the coalition government in terms of salience as well as in positional terms. Indeed, the Government's position (40.3%) is very close to that of the Conservatives (36.2%) but very far from that of the Liberal Democrats (80.1%). Finally, we observe that the same intensity of preferences for the state intervention emerged in the case of the economic policy is confirmed in that of the welfare: in a decreasing order, Liberal Democrats, Labour and Conservatives.
Figure 3 – Party positions in the welfare policy space (% of positive references to the state intervention in the welfare system)

1997

2001

2005

2010

0% Riferimenti positivi all’intervento statale nel settore del welfare 100%
A more coherent and homogenous spatial trend can be found in the cases of the British National Party, Green Party, Plaid Cymru, Respect-The Unity Coalition and Scottish National Party. These parties have maintained throughout the whole period strong preferences for the expansion of the state role in the welfare policy, and it is interesting to note that these orientations correspond to that of the economic policy space, with the partial exception of the British National Party. Finally, the English Democrats and the United Kingdom Independence Party do not consider the welfare policy as a competitive priority; the latter presents quite schizophrenic movements along the continuum, and takes position in the area of "minimal state" in the 1997 and 2005 elections, whereas in the 2001 and 2010 elections the party occupies a median position in the policy space, quite close to that of the English Democrats.

Conclusions

In this paper we have tried to investigate the impact of the economic and financial crisis in two competitive spaces: economic policy and welfare policy. In both the cases we see important differences from the general trends registered for the period 1997-2005 on the one hand and the 2010 election on the other. The economic policy, after a trend decreasing importance attached to it by the British parties until 2005, it reached an unprecedented salience in the last election, though despite this "revival" the party system polarization decreased, with the result of a systemic convergence around the policy positions which support some kind of state intervention in the economic life. It appears that the second effect of the economic crisis, along with the recognition of the necessity of State's role, is that the real differences in the policy goals of parties are to be found in the welfare policy. As we have seen, such a policy space presents a far more polarized situation than that of the economy, in particular for the new (and more radical) position taken by the Tories along the continuum. This has important consequences also for the welfare policy agenda of the coalition government, which appears to be a simple reflection of the Tories' welfare preferences.

References


List of the election manifestos coded

1997

BNP “British Nationalism: an idea whose time has come”
Conservatives “You can only be sure with the Conservatives”
Green Party “The green alternative for a better quality of life”
Labour “New Labour because Britain deserves better”
Liberal Democrats “Make the difference”
Plaid Cymru “The best for Wales. Plaid Cymru’s Programme for the New Millenium”
SNP “Yes we can. Win the Best for Scotland. The SNP General Election Manifesto”
UK Independence Party “1997 General Election Manifesto”

2001

BNP “Where we stand!”
Conservatives “Time for Common Sense”
Greens Party “Reach for the future”
Labour “Ambitions for Britain”
Liberal Democrats “Freedom, Justice, Honesty”
Plaid Cymru “The Party of Wales Manifesto 2001”
SNP “Heart of the Manifesto 2001”
UK Independence Party “2001 General Election Manifesto”

2005

BNP “Rebuilding British Democracy”
Conservatives “Are you thinking what we’re thinking?”
Green20 Party “Real Progress. The Real Choice for Real Change”
Labour “Britain forward not back”
Liberal Democrats “The Real Alternative”
Plaid Cymru “We can build a better Wales”
Respect “Peace, Justice, Equality”
SNP “If Scotland matters to you make it matter in May”
UK Independence Party Manifesto “We want our country back”

2010

BNP “Democracy, Freedom, Culture and Identity”
Conservatives “Invitation to join the Government of Britain”
English Democrats “2010 Manifesto”
Her Majesty’s Government “The Coalition: our programme for government”
Green Party “Fair: is worth fighting for”
Labour “A Future Fair for All”
Liberal Democrats “Change that Works for You. Building a Fairer Britain”
Plaid Cymru “Think Different. Think Plaid”
Respect “Homes, Jobs and Peace: Manifesto for a Hung Parliament”
SNP “Elect a local champion. Don’t just vote for a politician”
UKIP “Empowering the people”

Codebook

Economic policy space

Agri_pesc    Agriculture
Support for agriculture and farmers; any policy specifically addressed to this productive sector; fisheries; general references to the rural world.

Support, where appropriate, would be provided for farmers who wish to switch away from factory farming to mixed farming and organic production. [English Democrats, 2010, p.7]
Liberal Democrats are proud that we represent a large part of rural Britain. [Liberal Democrats, 2010, p.82]
Investment in community based farming would produce more locally-grown food. [Plaid Cymru, 2010, p.15]

Bank_fin    Bank and financial sector regulation
References to the necessity of a regulation of the banking and financial sectors.

[We will] empower the Bank of England to crack down on risky bonus arrangements. [Conservatives, 2010, p.29]
Ensure that the bonus system can never again encourage banks to behave in a way that puts the financial system at risk or offers rewards for failure. [Liberal Democrats, 2010, p.22]
Restore responsibility for overseeing the UK banking system to the Bank of England [...].
[UKIP, 2010, p. 4]

**Budg_lib** Budget and economic liberism
Traditional economic orthodoxy, such as the reduction of the public debt; positive references to savings; support for traditional economic institutions such as the stock market and the banking system; desirability of a strong currency, tax cuts in general (does not include forms of progressive taxation), simplification of the tax system.

*We have no right to defer the cost of services so that they become a burden for future generations.* [English Democrats, 2010, p.5]
*The level of public spending is no longer the best measure of the effectiveness of government action in the public interest.* [Labour, 1997, 8]
*We will safeguard Britain’s credit rating with a credible plan to eliminate the bulk of the structural deficit over a Parliament.* [Conservatives, 2010, p.5]

**Corp_conc** Neocorporativism
Collaboration of the workers, trade unions and the government in the overall economic planning.

*A solution to the public sector pensions crisis must be found through a National conference with all the players – employers and workers’ representatives.* [BNP, 2010, p.11]
*[We will work] with the trade unions, businesses and others to address the growing disparity between public sector pensions and private sector pensions, while protecting accrued rights [...].* [Conservatives, 2010, p.12]
*Any such moves would follow discussion with employers and trades unions about implementation.* [SNP, 2001, p.10]

**Inc_subs** Incentives and subsides
Any reference to incentives and subsides to the enterprises.

*We will develop effective proposals to ensure the flow of credit to viable SME’s.* [Coalition, 2010, p.9]
*We will support would-be entrepreneurs through a new programme, “Work for Yourself” [...].* [Conservatives, 2010, p.16]
*Plaid would set up a special venture capital fund to give our businesses the funds they need to develop new ideas [...].* [Plaid Cymru, 2010, p.14]

**Lib_impr** Free enterprise
Positive references to capitalism and free enterprise; preference of private companies against state intervention; legislative simplification for businesses, private property rights, personal initiative, absence of obstacles to individual enterprise; privatization; support for the processes of economic globalization.

*Privatisation works.* [Conservatives, 1997, p.19]
*A competitive domestic economy is essential if Britain companies are to succeed in the global market.* [Liberal Democrats, 1997, p.6]
*The SNP is the only party in a generation to enter a General Election fully committed to a reduction in business taxation* [SNP, 1997, p.11].

19
Lobb

Lobbies
References to lobbying regulation.

The BNP will enact legislation forbidding interference in the electoral process by third parties not partaking in an election. [BNP, 2010, p.6]

We will ban MPs from working for generic lobbying companies [...]. [Labour, 2010, p. 62]

[We will] curber the improper influence of lobbyists by introducing a statutory register of lobbyists [...]. [Liberal Democrats, 2010, p.89]

Marx

Marxist analysis
Positive references to the Marxist-Leninist terminology; it covers policy statements not otherwise codable.

Casino capitalism has become more important than making things and providing services

Mix

Mixed economy
Positive references to the creation or maintenance of social ownership, mixed forms of ownership; state-owned industries; social enterprises.

We will give public sector workers a new right to form employee-owned co-operatives [...].
[Coalition, 2010, p. 29]

We want local people to have a stake in local renewable energy projects such as wind farms. [Labour, 2010, p. 58]


Naz

Nationalization
Necessity to maintain publicly owned activities or to nationalize industries or productive sectors; negative references to privatization.

The BNP will oppose the privatization of natural monopolies such as Royal Mail. [BNP, 2010, p.10]

Any privatised facilities should be renationalized without compensation. [Greens, 2001, p.10]

We reiterate our call for the railway system to be brought back into public ownership.
[Plaid Cymru, 2010, p.31]

Obi

Economic goals
Residual category, economic objectives not covered by other categories; references to the general situation of the economy, demographic changes, standards of living.

Our working assumption is that the economy will be in a stable enough condition to bear cuts from the beginning of 2011-12. [Liberal Democrats, 2010, p.15]

Scotland has huge strengths and enormous potential and that must translated into greater prosperity and opportunity for hard-working families and individuals [...]. [SNP, 2010, p.27]

The overarching goal of UKIP’s policies on jobs, enterprise and skills is to promote a new vibrant culture of producing goods and the services related to them. [UKIP, 2010, p.4]

Pian

Economic planning
Positive references to long-term economic planning.

The planning system is vital for a strong economy, for an attractive and sustainable environment, and for a successful democracy. [Partito Conservatore, 2010, p.75]

**Prot_eco Protectionism**
Extension or maintenance of the tariff system to protect the domestic market; measures such as quota restriction; incentives to the export.

Our status as the coolies for foreign capital also leaves us open to blackmail. [BNP, 1997, p.19]

The lion’s share of this investment would go to British-based firms. [UKIP, 2010, p.5]

**Reg_mkt Market regulation**
Regulation aimed at improving the functioning of private enterprise; actions against monopolies and cartels in order to protect consumers, small businesses or the economic competition.

The Little Red Tractor mark denotes high British animal welfare and production standards. [Conservatives, 2005, p.23]

Require airlines to be honest and upfront about pricing, ending the practice of adding hidden charges. [Liberal Democrats, 2010, p.54]

We would promote fair trade, so that trade with developing countries is based on decent pay and conditions, with a fair price paid to producers. [Greens, 2010, p.47]

**Ril_ind Growth of the industrial sector and negative references to the green economy**
References to productivity and its importance to the economy; the growth paradigm; reconstruction of the industrial system of the country; statements of skepticism towards the "green revolution" or the need to change the entire economic system in order to achieve environmental sustainability.

The BNP rejects the "climate change" theory which holds that all western nations need to be stripped of their manufacturing base and pay untold billions to the Third World to build up their industries. [BNP, 2010, p.5]

Our aim is to deliver growth that lasts [...]. [Liberal Democrats, 2010, p.21]

Each fall of 1% in growth costs the Exchequer £20 billion but each rise gains a similar account. [SNP, 2010, p.8]

**Stato_eco State intervention**
Direct control of the government of the system of prices, wages, rents, etc., state intervention in the economy; minimum wage for the workers; fight against unemployment; state intervention in the housing sector. For the regional parties, it also refers to interventionism in the regional economy.

We support the National Minimum Wage because of the protection it gives low-income workers and the incentives to work it provides. [Coalition, 2010, p. 23]

Every government of the major developed economies – of Left and Right – recognises the need to support the economy while growth is still fragile. [Labour, 2010, p.5]

As the public sector is usually the most efficient way to provide excellent public services, we oppose market fundamentalism. [Respect, 2010, p.2]

**Tecn_infr Technologies and infrastructures**
Importance of the modernization of the transport and communication system; importance of science and technological developments in any sector; government projects and spending on infrastructure such as roads, ports, broadband etc.

A Conservative government will begin work immediately to create a high speed rail line connecting London and Heathrow with Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds. [Partito Conservatives, 2010, p.23]

Britain’s Research and Development spend as a proportion of GDP remains near the bottom of the G8. [Liberal Democrats, 2010, p.28]

The SNP will campaign for better transport links for visitors to enter Scotland. [SNP, 2001, p.10]

Welfare policy space

**Jus_soc Social justice**

Social protection for underprivileged groups (for example pensioners); fight against child poverty; references to solidarity, equality in the distribution of the wealth; progressive taxation.

[We will introduce] a Mansion Tax at a rate of 1 per cent on properties worth over £2 million, paid on the value of the property above that level. [Liberal Democrats, 2010, p.14]

At the present over half the tax relief on pensions contributions is paid to the richest 10 per cent of taxpayers. [SNP, 2005, p. 26]

Isn’t it only fair that the very wealthiest in society can and should pay a little extra to help the most vulnerable? [Plaid Cymru, 2010, p.9]

**Mix_welf Mixed Welfare**

Private-public cooperation in the delivery of welfare services; desirability of competition in this sector.

Since 1979, the success of private pension provision has raised the average income of 88pensioners by 60% more than inflation. [Conservatives, 1997, p.6]

Patients requiring elective care will have the right, in law, to choose from any provider who meets NHS standards of quality at NHS costs. [Labour, 2010, p.34]

UK citizens will apply to their GP for vouchers that can be paid to the private health insurer of their choice. [UKIP, 2010, p.7]

**Welf_rif_gen General references to the welfare state**

General references to the welfare state which do not possess a positional valence.

We are committed to making the NHS an efficient organization which provides a high quality service for all citizens. [English Democrats, 2010, p.5]

The SNP believes that the National Health Service is too important to be a political football. [SNP, 2001, p.12]

A vast proportion of social care in the UK is provided by unpaid family carers who save the NHS £87 bn a year. [Greens, 2010, p.13]

**Welf_state_exp Expansion of the state role in the welfare system**

Positive references to the need to introduce, maintain or expand any social service or social security, support for social services such as health care or social housing.

The BNP aims to increase the state pension to £150 per week within the duration of the first Parliament. [BNP, 2010, p.10]
Plaid Cymru gained a commitment from the Welsh Office for nearly £3 million of extra resources to attract new NHS dentists into Wales. [Plaid Cymru, 1997, p.11]
We will also phase out prescription charges for the rest of the population. [SNP, 2005, p.22]

Welf_state_red Riduzione del ruolo dello stato nel settore del welfare
Limited spending on social services and / or social security, reduction or cuts of the public services; positive references to the principle of subsidiarity; cuts to the benefits system.

The BNP will end the £2 billion per year 'health tourism' scandal. [BNP, 2010, p.7]
NHS services must not be made freely available to non-nationals. [English Democrats, 2010, p.5]
Companies will no longer be able to force people to retire before the age of 65 except where specifically justified. [Labour, 2005, p.72]