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Bilateralism or the median mandate? An examination of rival perspectives on democratic governance

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Abstract. Michael McDonald and Ian Budge have recently advanced an interpretation of democratic governance based on what they term the 'median mandate'. This perspective locates the key element of liberal democracy in a close correspondence between government policy and the policy preferences of the median voter on the left-right scale. The cross-national evidence they produce in favour of this interpretation is impressive, but it largely hinges on a method for measuring the median voter position in each election that relies on the positions of the various parties in the election and the vote shares they received. This article examines the validity of the median mandate hypothesis when median positions are measured more directly from public opinion surveys (particularly, the Eurobarometer and Comparative Study of Electoral Systems series). The findings show that choice between distinct alternatives, rather than conformity to the median, more accurately characterises governance in democratic systems.

Introduction

Political competition in liberal democracies is often seen in terms of two sides vying for power. This is a natural interpretation in two-party systems, to be sure, but it also holds a great deal of currency in the more ubiquitous multi-party systems of the democratic world. Long buried is the myth that equates multipartism with the generation of governments lacking clear connections to the electorate; as Sartori (1976) observed some time ago, many multiparty systems function on the basis of a competition between two readily identifiable sides or blocs. In contrast, the multiparty systems that do not display this bilateralist dynamic, Sartori's 'polarised pluralist' systems, are relatively few in number. This is due in part to an inherent process of selection: since polarised pluralist systems are much less adept at providing effective choice or effective governments, they tend not to survive very long.

The evidence that bilateralism is the dominant pattern in multiparty systems is abundant. In Western Europe, not only has it prevailed in several countries for decades, but the classic cases of unstable multipartism have either given way to it (as in France, Germany and Spain) or have evolved toward

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something that increasingly resembles bilateral competition (Italy). Today, systems in this region are almost exclusively characterised by a fundamental competition between two sides, usually associated with the left and the right.[1]

Countries that have undergone recent democratic transitions are more open to other patterns, but even here an evolution toward two-sided or bilateralist politics is also in evidence, as the cases of Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic in Europe, and South Korea and Taiwan in Asia, attest. This is not to say that bilateralism has been established in every country that has undergone a democratic transition – it is difficult to find two viable sides in the Russian political landscape, for example – but its absence appears to reflect the limited or unconsolidated nature of some transitions. Consistent with the idea that other patterns tend to be less viable, the predominant pattern of party competition in the most successful transitions is bilateral.

The bilateralist nature of party competition evident in so many liberal democracies provides a feature that is often regarded as central to the viable functioning of democracy: meaningful choice among alternatives. What makes a choice meaningful is that the alternatives on offer differ from each other in clearly perceptible ways. However, this is not the only element of liberal democracy that might be regarded as important or essential. Most understandings of the concept also incorporate, *inter alia*, the idea that outcomes should reflect the preferences of popular majorities. Unlike bilateralism, however, the principle of majority rule appears at first sight to be more honoured in the breach than in the observance. An examination of 471 postwar governments in twenty democracies, for example, found that just 43.7 per cent consisted of majority governments based on electoral majorities (McDonald et al. 2004: 5–9).[2]

This would seem to undermine severely the democratic credentials of many governments, but there may be another way in which the principle of majority rule is realised. For many observers (e.g., Huber & Powell 1994; McDonald & Budge 2005; Blais & Bodet 2006), the majority-rule principle can be satisfied if (a) political competition takes place predominantly along a single dimension (usually the left-right dimension), and (b) government policy is aligned with the position of the median voter on that dimension. The justification for this stipulation is the well-known Median Voter Theorem (Black 1958), which holds that in a one-dimensional policy space the median voter position is the one position that is preferred by some majority of voters to any other position that might be chosen. Thus, when the two conditions are met, it means that the policy stance the government implements is majority-preferred to any other policy stance that has relevance for that political system.[3]

There is impressive evidence that governments often do meet the conditions of this understanding of majority rule. An extensive investigation of

democratic systems by McDonald and Budge (2005; see also McDonald et al. 2004) found not only that parties generally order themselves along a single left-right dimension on major issues, but also that the left-right policy positions of governments tend to correspond in a one-to-one fashion with the positions of the left-right median legislative party (the party to which the median legislator affiliates), which in turn correspond one-to-one with median voter positions. Their conclusion is that elections confer a 'median mandate' on governments, which is generally acted upon.

The median mandate interpretation clearly represents an intriguing new perspective on democratic governance and its conformity to the principle of majority rule. It suggests that the policy outcomes Downs (1957) famously anticipated for two-party systems are achieved in all systems via a different mechanism: parties do not move their own policy commitments to the median; they simply implement the median, despite those commitments. This, however, raises a fundamental question: If government policy gravitates to the middle of the left-right spectrum, how is it possible for two sides to offer meaningful choice? In other words, how can the median mandate co-exist with bilateralism?[4]

For some, the answer is that it cannot; either the policy choices offered electorates are fraudulent because government policy ultimately matches the policy preferences of the median voter or they are meaningful because government policy deviates significantly from the median voter position. To put it in these stark 'either-or' terms is to overstate the dilemma, however, for there is a third possibility. Both principles can be satisfied simultaneously if bilateral changes in government – for example, the replacement of a government of the left by one of the right or vice versa – are generally preceded by corresponding changes in the position of the median voter.

Meaningful choice among alternatives and majority rule via a median mandate thus can co-exist, provided public opinion as a whole proves to be sufficiently labile. Undoubtedly, the median opinion has some capacity to change, even within the lifetime of a single government. One can readily imagine that widespread discontent with a government's policies does, at times, provoke noticeable shifts in the median position, either directly or by providing the raw material that allows an opposition party to deploy its persuasive powers effectively.[5] Yet do changes occur of sufficient magnitude and rapidity to match bilateral transfers of power? McDonald and Budge's finding of a one-to-one correspondence between government and median voter positions would seem to suggest that they do, but this evidence is less than definitive. As they note: 'We cannot have a high degree of confidence when predicting where along the Left-Right dimension a single government will be even with knowledge of where a median voter is located. The unpredictability

of single election-government results (residual variance) was too large for high confidence' (McDonald & Budge 2005: 135). In other words, the general tendency for government policy to align with the median voter position does not mean that a close correspondence exists between the two when individual governments are examined.[6]

If this disconnect at the level of individual governments were simply a consequence of random measurement error, it would suggest that the nature of the relationship is correctly assessed, even if its strength is under-estimated. However, there are grounds for querying the nature of the relationship as well. The concern has to do with the very indirect way McDonald and Budge adopted to measure median voter positions. A relatively direct measurement strategy would be to calculate these positions from public opinion surveys that ask respondents to locate themselves on a left-right scale, but McDonald and Budge (2005: 113–114) chose instead to estimate them from the positions that parties adopt and the proportions of votes they attract. It is not difficult to imagine that this method may, at times, introduce higher levels of measurement error.

The purpose of this article is to re-assess the validity of McDonald and Budge's claim that democratic governance conforms to the median mandate in light of these concerns. The investigation will begin by examining McDonald and Budge's (2005: 113–115) objections to estimating voter medians directly from survey data. The investigation will then turn to the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES 2003, 2007) surveys, which, by asking respondents to locate both themselves and the parties of their political system on the same left-right scale, provide a means of tackling these objections. The outcome of re-assessing the relationship between voter medians and government positions with these data will be an understanding of how democracies function that is substantially different from that conveyed by the median mandate thesis.

Voter medians measured indirectly and directly

The indirect method that McDonald and Budge utilise for estimating median voter positions derives from a standard formula for determining the median when cases are grouped into a number of discrete, ordered categories. It was first adopted for the present purpose by Kim and Fording (1998, 2002), and modified slightly by McDonald and Budge to take account of a particular, fairly rare circumstance.[7] The method will produce correct results when, first, voters vote for the party that is closest to their own left-right position; second, the positions adopted by parties correspond to the mean positions of their voters; and third, the voters for the median electoral party (the party receiving the median voter's support) are uniformly distributed along the left-right scale.

When one of these conditions is not satisfied, it does not automatically mean that the median will be incorrectly estimated: it may be that the violation is inconsequential or that multiple violations offset one another extremely well. Nevertheless, there can be no guarantee that fortunate circumstances such as these will always save the day. Given the risk that the assumptions of the Kim-Fording method may be violated in non-trivial ways, it is appropriate to consider how else voter medians might be estimated.

The obvious alternative is public opinion surveys that ask respondents to place themselves on a left-right scale. In these surveys, respondents are typically presented with a 10-point (1–10) or 11-point (0–10) scale and are required to represent their positions in terms of an integer value. This latter constraint is unfortunate, since it means that identifying the position of the median individual will yield an integer value that is likely to be rather uninformative (usually just '5' or '6'). A better procedure would be to interpolate median values using the formula from which Kim and Fording developed their method. The principal change in this application is that the intervals are evenly spaced ranges around the integers of the scale (e.g., the interval around '3' extends from 2.5 to 3.5), rather than ranges around estimated party positions. Arriving at a non-integer median value still requires the assumption of a uniform distribution among respondents in the interval containing the median, but neither of the other two assumptions of the Kim-Fording method – that voters select the party closest to them and that each party locates itself at its voters' mean position – is relevant.

Despite the advantage of separating the estimation of voter medians from party choices and party positioning, McDonald and Budge (2005: 114–115) have two major objections to the use of survey data for this purpose. Their first objection relates to coverage. The Kim-Fording method requires information only on party positions and vote percentages in each election; consequently, by utilising the extensive codings of electoral manifestos undertaken by the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) (Budge *et al.* 2001; Klingemann *et al.* 2006) to calculate positions, they were able to estimate voter medians for a wide range of democratic elections. In comparison, surveys that ask respondents for left-right self-placements and vote choices are considerably less abundant.

Being less abundant is not the same thing, however, as being so rare as to preclude meaningful analysis. The left-right self-placement item hardly fits this latter description since it is usually included in the Eurobarometer series of public opinion surveys (Schmitt & Scholz 2005), which covers European Community/Union countries from 1973, and is almost always included in the CSES (2003, 2007), a wide-ranging collection of national election studies beginning in 1996. As for the vote choice item, its availability is more restricted in the Eurobarometer data, but this may not be of much consequence. The item

is used to identify voters so that a median *voter* position can be calculated, but it is not clear that the median mandate, should it be operative, would drive governments to respond to the median voter position rather than the median citizen position. Governments may not be able to separate out the positions of voters from non-voters when they develop policy and, even if they can make the distinction, it is certainly conceivable that they might prefer to respond to the entire citizenry, rather than to leave out presumed non-voters.[8]

Another consideration is that distinguishing between voter medians and citizen medians appears to be of very little practical importance. This can be demonstrated with the aid of the Mannheim Eurobarometer Trend File, 1970–2002 (Schmitt & Scholz 2005), which combines the results of almost all of the existing Eurobarometer surveys. This file contains 125 country surveys in which both the turnout item and the left-right self-placement item are present. If median voter self-placements are calculated for these cases, it turns out that they correspond extremely closely to median self-placements calculated across all respondents (they correlate at $r = 0.978$ and differ, on average, by just 0.06 units). This implies that basing an empirical analysis on median citizen positions rather than median voter positions would have very little, if any, discernable effect on the findings. It has a huge effect on data availability, however, since median citizen positions can be calculated for a great many more cases in the Mannheim trend file (342 versus 125).

The second and more fundamental objection that McDonald and Budge raise to the use of survey-based estimates of median positions is that these estimates 'would not be up to the task of providing a good match to the party-position data' (McDonald & Budge 2005: 114). The measure of party positions that McDonald and Budge utilise, originally introduced by Budge and Laver (1992: 26–27), is based on the prevalence of left-wing and right-wing issues in party electoral manifestos; this makes it possible to capture the reality that party systems are noticeably more left-wing in some countries (e.g., Norway) than in others (e.g., Australia). Since government positions are calculated from the positions of the parties that compose them, these also show 'meaningful cross-national variation' (McDonald & Budge 2005: 114). In contrast, 'voters in surveys report that they are on the left, in the centre, or on the right within the context of their own country's political space, rendering their self-placements suspect for any comparative analysis and, more damning for present purposes, for matching to the party position data that do contain valid cross-national differences along the Left-Right dimension' (McDonald & Budge 2005: 115).

If respondents who share the same ideological views place themselves at different points on the left-right scale, or place themselves at the same point on the scale when they hold different views, the left-right self-placement item

would suffer from what is known as 'differential item functioning' or DIF (Golder & Stramski 2007: 11). It is easy to imagine that these types of non-comparable responses will occur frequently if respondents from different countries judge the left-right scale relative to their own systems. As evidence for the presence of DIF, McDonald and Budge (2005: 115) report that if three especially deviant cases (France, Italy and Spain) are excluded, there is no cross-national correlation between median positions calculated from Eurobarometers taken in the 1980s and the 1990s. Apparently, the countries covered by these surveys do not differentiate themselves consistently in these terms.

A re-examination of this relationship, using the Mannheim Trend File data and the interpolation method for calculating medians, tells a different story, however. For the twelve countries for which data are available for both decades in the Mannheim Trend File, the cross-national correlation of median voter self-placements in the 1980s with those of the 1990s is in fact very high ($r = 0.87$, $p < 0.001$), as is the corresponding correlation for median citizen self-placements ($r = 0.82$, $p = 0.001$).[9] Granted, these correlations would be lower (albeit still positive) if the cases of France, Italy and Spain were excluded, but they are left in here because McDonald and Budge's justification for leaving them out – that they have highly deviant medians – does not hold: although they do stand to the left of other countries, they are not especially isolated from them.[10]

Thus, it is not immediately evident that survey-based medians are inappropriate for comparative analysis. Nevertheless, McDonald and Budge's suspicions are warranted in one respect: these estimates of citizen medians are unrelated to either voter medians or government policy positions, as they measure those variables. The data that sustain this conclusion come from the Median Voter and Governments datasets included with the most recent release of CMP data (Klingemann et al. 2006). In the Median Voter dataset, median voter positions are calculated using the Kim-Fording formula, with party positions estimated by the Laver-Budge formula. The policy positions of governments in the Governments dataset are weighted means of the positions of the parties in government, using the same Laver-Budge party positions as before and parliamentary seat shares as the weights.[11] These measurement procedures match the procedures employed by McDonald and Budge (2005: 113–115), with the minor exception of not including the slight modification they introduced to the Kim-Fording formula.

Government policy positions estimated in this way show substantial variation across the 470 governments for which both they and Kim-Fording voter medians are available. Assuming that the government positions are normally distributed (which visual inspection sustains), the standard deviation of 18.6 implies a 95 per cent confidence interval that ranges from a situation in which

the average government party's manifesto has left-wing themes outweighing right-wing ones by two-fifths (39.9 per cent) of the entire document to a situation where the imbalance favours right-wing themes by a similar amount (32.9 per cent). Moreover, a one-way analysis of variance shows that most of this variance (82.1 per cent) is within, rather than across, countries. A similar picture emerges for the Kim-Fording median voter positions: the standard deviation is 15.0 and 59.5 per cent of the variance is within-country. This suggests that the two variables might be aligned, which is indeed the case: consistent with McDonald and Budge's analyses, median voter positions and government positions correlate very well ($r = 0.663$) across all 470 cases and reasonably well ($r = 0.505$) for the smaller subset of cases ($N = 154$) for which Eurobarometer-based estimates of citizen medians can also be calculated.[12] In addition, the regression of government positions on voter medians yields results that depart only modestly from a one-to-one relationship.[13]

The Eurobarometer-based citizen medians contrast sharply with this image. Most of the variance in these medians (62 per cent) is across countries, not within them. This suggests that countries differ appreciably in their citizen medians, which tends to undermine the argument that respondents centre their evaluations on their own systems. More importantly, it also implies that these medians are unlikely to line up well with the other two variables. Correlations bear this out: the Eurobarometer-based medians do not correlate significantly with either the Kim-Fording voter medians ($r = 0.144$, $p = 0.158$, $N = 98$) or the CMP-based estimates of government position ($r = 0.054$, $p = 0.504$, $N = 154$).

There is a range of possible interpretations of these results. One possibility is that the median mandate relationship does not emerge when median positions are measured from respondent self-placements because the cross-national variation they display does not accurately reflect national differences in political opinion, as McDonald and Budge (2005: 115) suggest. A less charitable view of citizen capabilities would hold that the relationship is absent because citizens' left-right self-placements are random or incoherent in some sense. This would leave the evidence for the median mandate thesis intact but undercut its normative foundation: if citizens cannot locate themselves on a left-right scale in a meaningful way, there may be no democratic purpose served by governing in accordance with the left-right voter or citizen median. The major alternative would shift responsibility to the system: the relationship may have failed to appear because governance in democratic systems is not bound tightly to public opinion as expressed by its left-right median.

It is very difficult to navigate among these alternatives since they are based on such differing data sources: on the one hand, self-placements on a left-right scale that may be poorly understood by respondents and/or non-comparable across contexts; on the other, an indirect method of measuring medians from

voting choices coupled with a particular formula for calculating party positions using data from a particular method of content-analysing party manifestos.[14] The upshot is that we find ourselves in a situation where measurement concerns becloud a very central issue in the understanding of contemporary democracy – does government policy conform to the median mandate or not? Fortunately, the more thorough investigation of the capacity of citizens to think in left-right terms that occurs in the CSES (2003. 2007) surveys affords some relief from this dilemma. In the next section, we consider what the CSES data can reveal about the median mandate hypothesis and thus the nature of liberal democracy more generally.

Government policy and voter medians from the CSES surveys

The finding that citizen medians as estimated from left-right self-placements in Eurobarometer surveys are unrelated to CMP-based estimates of government policy opens the door to a variety of interpretations, as we have seen. At one extreme is McDonald and Budge's view that survey-based calculations of medians do not provide suitable measurement of the underlying concept. At the other extreme is the possibility that government policy is largely or entirely independent of voter or citizen medians – in other words, that the median mandate hypothesis is fundamentally wrong. These extremes are diverse enough in both their empirical and normative facets to establish the importance of determining what, exactly, is going on.

The CSES surveys constitute a valuable tool in this quest because they ask respondents not only to locate themselves on a left-right scale, but also to place the major political parties on the same scale. This feature opens a number of doors. First, it affords some means of estimating the extent of manifestly incoherent or meaningless responses. If a respondent self-locates at the middle of the scale, for example, does it mean that the respondent believes herself or himself to be a centrist in policy matters or might it merely indicate that the respondent cannot manage, or be bothered with, the task at hand? If that respondent has also placed every political party at the same location, the answer becomes much clearer. Second, the feature allows us to assess the capacity of respondents to make accurate judgements concerning the left-right positions of parties, which is a considerably more stringent test of the meaningfulness of responses. Third and perhaps most important, it allows us to assess, and perhaps to allay, McDonald and Budge's concerns about the use of survey-based estimates of voter medians for comparative analysis.

The analysis will be conducted using the election surveys included in the final versions of Modules 1 and 2 of the CSES (2003, 2007) data, with two

major exceptions. The first concerns the type of political system in which the election took place. We shall be following McDonald and Budge (and many others) in estimating the policy positions of governments from the weighted mean positions of their member-parties, with legislative seat shares as the weights. This procedure makes sense, however, only if the government depends on legislative support. In systems where this is not the case, cabinets may be chosen to reflect the views of the head of the executive, while government policy may ultimately involve compromises between those views and somewhat different views prevailing in the legislature. For this reason, presidential systems (defined as those in which the cabinet does not depend on legislative support) are excluded.[15] The second exception consists of systems for which respondents were not asked for left-right party placements or did not include placements for all government parties. All told, the useable data cover some 39 legislative elections.[16]

Measurement issues

Let us begin with the first issue: the possibility of meaningless answers to the voter self-placement item. Across all respondents in the 39 surveys under investigation, just 1.9 per cent placed every party at the same left-right position; moreover, in none of these surveys did this rate exceed 10 per cent.[17] Thus, our first question is answered in a highly encouraging way: the overwhelming majority of respondents in all the surveys under investigation were willing to differentiate parties in left-right terms. Yet the more critical issue is, with what success?

One way to assess the degree of success is to calculate the mean positions that respondents allocated to parties[18] and compare these means with party position estimates from some more authoritative source, such as experts. Although, as Powell (2009: 3) notes, 'there is no way to be sure that the local experts and the citizens really have the same things in mind when they assign themselves, or parties, a position', a high degree of correspondence between the two sets of estimates would certainly allay serious doubts on that score. The experts that will be used are the CSES principal investigators themselves, who provided position estimates for parties in 37 of the 39 elections in our reduced sample. The major advantage that these expert estimates have over others that might be utilised is that they are based on the same elections as the respondent-based estimates; they are thus election-specific rather than 'generic'. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that the researchers in question were very well informed about the elections they were investigating.

On the debit side is the fact that, typically, just one investigator provided estimates for each election. This means not only that individual biases or errors

may have appeared in the estimates, but also that two other possible sources of divergence are introduced. Since experts, like respondents, were constrained to give integer placements, non-integer values were only produced in the rare instances when there were two or more experts whose estimates could be averaged; respondent-based estimates, in contrast, are invariably averages and are therefore free to take on a great many more values in the scale's range. These differences are likely to have been accentuated by another feature of the measurement instrument's design – its boundedness. Because the expert estimates almost always are based on the response of a single individual, they can and do assume values along the full range from 0 to 10; respondent-based estimates, as averages of hundreds of individual responses, are extremely unlikely to obtain or approach the ends of the scale (in fact, the range is from 0.59 to 9.06). Although these considerations are likely to weaken the connection between the expert and respondent-based placements, the correlation is nonetheless a very impressive $r = 0.891$ ($p < 0.001$, $N = 214$).[19]

This correlation does not establish that respondents and experts have given parties similar positions in an absolute sense, only that they generally allocate them similar relative positions. In fact, Golder and Stramski (2007: 19) have found that the party positions estimated by CSES experts differ significantly from mean respondent estimates in 90 per cent of cases, with one-quarter of these differences being greater than one point on the 11-point left-right scale. It is not clear, however, how much of the divergence is the consequence of DIF. Since the expert estimates almost always reflect the judgement of a single individual who was obliged to provide only an integer estimate, some of the error may lie with them rather than with the respondent-based estimates. In addition, the averaging of respondent estimates may simply have produced a modest regression toward the mean, which would affect the assessment of the relationship between government positions and voter medians only marginally, if at all. Consistent with this possibility is the fact that the standard deviation for respondent-based positions (2.00) is nearly as large as that for their expert counterparts (2.21).[20]

In general, then, the available evidence indicates that respondents, in the aggregate, can accurately place the major political parties in their systems on a left-right scale and that these placements may not be especially plagued by differential item functioning. This suggests that respondents can achieve similar results with their own policy positions, but it would be useful to establish this conclusion more firmly. Doing so might seem impossible – what basis (apart from having located all parties at the same position) could one have for challenging the left-right position a respondent identified for herself or himself? There is, nonetheless, a way in which we can cast some light on this matter. This is to calculate the mean self-placements of the voters and/or

supporters for the various parties and compare them with the experts' party position estimates. This comparison could only work if parties are located roughly in the middle of the distribution of their voters' or supporters' preferences (an assumption the Kim-Fording method also makes). A finding that very little correspondence exists between these sets of estimates would not, therefore, be conclusive evidence that respondents cannot locate themselves accurately on the left-right scale; it might simply mean that party positioning reflects other factors. It turns out, however, that we need not be concerned about ambiguous results.

The mean positions of voters for the various parties were calculated from the party choices respondents made in the last legislative (lower house) election and their left-right self-placements. Provided at least 20 respondents voted for a given party, the mean left-right position of its voters was calculated. Supporters were identified from a question asking respondents to identify the party they felt closest to, and the mean supporter position for each party was constructed in a parallel fashion. The limit of 20 responses to establish a mean position – imposed to ensure estimates are not based on excessively small numbers of responses – essentially removes very minor parties from the comparison. For the remaining parties, the mean positions of their voters are very closely connected to their positions as estimated by the CSES investigators ($r = 0.886$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 140$). The connection is even stronger for party supporters ($r = 0.907$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 141$). An examination of the standard deviations of these estimates again indicates that their ranges are reasonably comparable, once due allowance is made for the effects of averaging voter/supporter positions.[21]

The fact that, in the aggregate, voters and supporters for the various parties locate themselves very close to where the CSES investigators locate their parties suggests that the left-right self-placements generally make a good deal of sense.[22] Of course, when we ask where respondents place parties, or where the voters and supporters of the various parties place themselves, we are considering averages that may encompass a substantial measure of individual-level error. This type of error must also be present when we calculate a median voter or citizen position. The important point, however, is that the aggregate result – the median position – is likely to be just as accurate as the party position estimates. Indeed, it may even be more so since individuals are likely to know more about where they themselves stand in left-right terms than where the various parties stand. Even if this were not the case, one would expect that, just as the individual-level error in party placements must be largely off-setting for the mean values to be as accurate as they are, so the calculation of voter or citizen median positions is likely to benefit from off-setting errors as well. While some individuals may place themselves too far to

the left and others too far to the right relative to other citizens, there is every reason to expect that these errors will largely cancel each other out when a median value is computed.

We now have some vital pieces of evidence with which to address the most important challenge in evaluating the median mandate thesis, McDonald and Budge's concern that survey-based estimates of voter medians suffer from differential item functioning (DIF). The first piece of evidence is that respondents, on average, place political parties on the left-right scale in a fashion that appears to be largely consistent with expert placements. This makes the existence of DIF considerably less likely, given that expert placements tend not to suffer from it, as McDonald and Budge (2005: 114) acknowledge. The second piece of evidence is that respondents, again on average, locate themselves at or near the left-right positions of the parties they voted for or feel closest to. This correspondence between party placements and the self-placements strongly suggests that respondents interpret the left-right scale in the same way when they place themselves as when they place parties. It follows, therefore, that if we use these party positions to construct estimates of government positions, then both government and voter median positions in any given system will be measured on a common measurement instrument. As we shall see in the next subsection, this provides the key tool for tackling the issue of whether DIF thwarts our capacity to assess the median mandate hypothesis.

The median mandate thesis re-considered

As noted above, the dependent variable in this investigation – government position – will again be estimated by the weighted mean left-right position of the parties in government, with legislative (lower house) seats shares constituting the weights. All governments that emerged from legislatures elected in elections covered in our data set are included. The party compositions of some of these governments are provided in the CSES data; in other cases, compositions were taken from government websites and other publicly available sources. The seat shares of the parties are provided in the CSES datasets, although in some instances corrections had to be made to eliminate double-counting (i.e., the attribution of all seats in an electoral coalition to all of its members).

The key difference is that the party positions that will be used in the calculation of government positions are the mean estimates of respondents.[23] These same estimates, together with vote percentages, will also be used to calculate the Kim-Fording median voter positions. The vote percentages are provided in the CSES datasets, although some corrections for double-counting were again required. The more direct measure of voter medians is calculated

from the left-right self-placements of respondents who identified themselves as having voted in the most recent national elections, using the interpolation method as before.[24]

The central variables in the analysis – government positions and the two measures of median voter positions – now have a common measurement basis since they are all derived from a process in which the respondents to each survey placed themselves and the parties of their system on the same left-right scale in a consistent fashion (on average). If our earlier failure to find a relationship between median voter self-placements and government positions were a consequence of the use of differing measurement instruments (Eurobarometer surveys for the former, CMP manifesto data for the latter), this should no longer be a problem. The regression results reported in Model 1 of Table 1 are consistent with this diagnosis since they now show a moderately strong relationship between the two variables. Another change that fits the diagnosis is that a sizeable bivariate relationship also appears between medians based on self-placements and medians estimated using the Kim-Fording method ($r = 0.659$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 59$).

What has not changed, however, is the fact that the Kim-Fording estimates still show a significantly stronger relationship with government positions. This can be seen in the noticeably higher explained variance in Model 2, which presents the results of the corresponding regression using Kim-Fording estimates of the voter median. In fact, when government position is regressed on both measures (Model 3), the Kim-Fording version clearly dominates, eliminating any significant effect conveyed by the survey-based version.

From a McDonald-Budge perspective, Model 3 might appear to provide further evidence that left-right self-placements elicited from public opinion surveys yield inadequate measurement of left-right voter medians. Inadequate measurement cannot simply mean *inaccurate* measurement, however, since we have seen that medians measured in this way are accurate – at least as accurate as the survey-based estimates of party positions that form the basis for the estimates of government positions (and Kim-Fording voter medians) used in this analysis. However, might it still be the case that DIF, in the form of a centring of estimates on each system's policy space, has caused the relationship to be under-estimated? Let us consider this possibility more closely.

If respondents in a given survey judge their own left-right position relative to the policy space of their country, then presumably they do the same when they estimate left-right positions for the various parties of their system. This means that if centring has occurred, it should affect both government policy positions and voter medians. Thus, a system in which both government and the public are relatively rightist or leftist by international standards might appear to be much more centrist on both variables. Whether this centring affects the

Table 1. The regression of government position on median vote position, CSES datasets

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coefficient	(Standard error)	Coefficient	(Standard error)	Coefficient	(Standard error)
Intercept	–8.147*	(4.265)	–2.624*	(1.300)	–4.938	(3.630)
Survey-based voter median position	2.635**	(0.801)	–	–	0.639	(0.822)
Kim-Fording voter median position	–	–	1.524***	(0.240)	1.337***	(0.292)
Adj. R^2	0.314		0.535		0.546	
N	48		48		48	

Notes: The dependent variable is government position. Survey-based median positions are calculated from respondent self-placements; Kim-Fording medians are calculated from party positions and vote shares. Standard errors are clustered by country. * $p < 0.05$ in a one-tailed test; ** $p < 0.01$ in a one-tailed test; *** $p < 0.001$ in a one-tailed test.

overall relationship between the two depends on how it manifests itself and on the nature of that relationship.

The circumstance we are particularly interested in here is the one in which the median mandate hypothesis holds and a one-to-one relationship exists between the two variables. If this is the case (and other types of measurement error are not too distorting), one would expect the presence of centring to cause data points to be clumped somewhat closer together than they should be along the 45-degree slope that describes the relationship. In this scenario, the nature of the relationship would be preserved intact, even if its strength is mis-estimated. Of course, if the centring is so extreme that all points get jumbled together in the middle, little or no relationship may be evident. Given that this centring affects both variables, however, what should not happen is what we observe in Figure 1.

This figure presents the scatterplot of the relationship between government positions and median voter self-placements. It reveals that government positions – for both single-party and coalition governments – are generally much more extreme than voter medians. Indeed, as the regression slope in Model 1 of Table 1 indicates, a system whose voter median is located one unit to the left

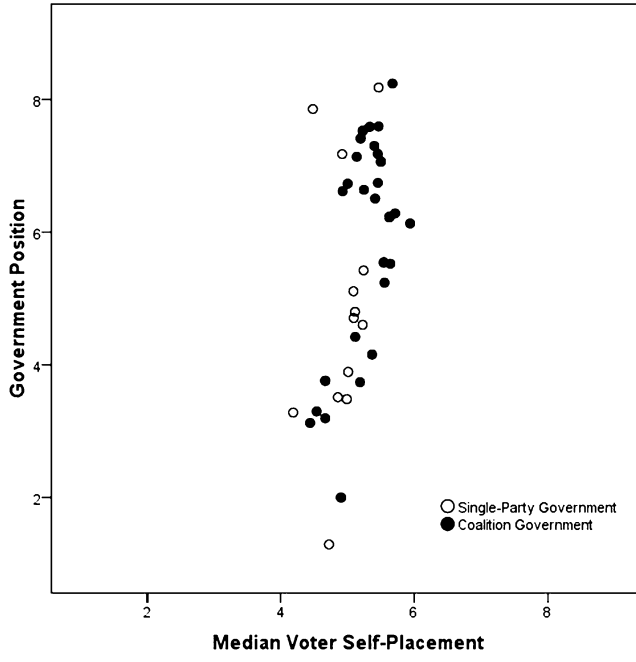

Figure 1. Scatterplot of the relationship between government and median voter positions, CSES datasets.

(right) of another's would be expected to have a government that is located more than two and a half (2.635) units to the left (right). Further investigation indicates that in a majority of governments, not only does the government position as a whole deviate from the median voter self-placement, but the policy positions of all parties in the government lie on one side of that median position. In these cases, the government does not straddle the voter median at all.[25]

This much greater range in government policy relative to voter medians fits poorly with a median mandate interpretation. Under that interpretation, a tendency for respondents in each system to judge their own and the various parties' positions in a relative rather than an absolute sense ought to have caused both voter medians and government positions to regress towards the centre of the left-right scale in roughly equal degrees, which is manifestly not the case. To the contrary, the pattern portrayed in Figure 1 is much more consistent with a bilateralist interpretation in which meaningful choice is provided through a competition between two distinct policy alternatives. Model 1 indicates that public opinion as reflected in the median voter self-placement still has an effect on government policy, but not in a one-to-one sense. Instead, small differences in public opinion are associated with much larger differences in government policy.[26]

The Kim-Fording formula re-considered

If it is true that voter medians and government positions are not as intimately connected as proponents of the median mandate thesis believe, why do such different results appear when medians are estimated with the Kim-Fording measure? It cannot be a function of differing methods of estimating left-right positions since the discrepancy occurs even when all variables are based on respondents placing themselves and the parties of their systems on the same left-right scale – a task which, in the aggregate, they do extremely well. Let us therefore look at the measure itself.

We have seen that the Kim-Fording measure, because it estimates voter medians indirectly from vote choices rather than from direct evidence of voter positions, relies on certain assumptions. None of these assumptions is strictly necessary to an accurate estimate of a voter median, but their collective presence is sufficient to generate it. Evidence presented earlier shows that one of the assumptions – that parties are located at the mean left-right position of their voters – seems to be largely met in the CSES data. The second assumption – that individuals in the median category or party are uniformly distributed along the left-right axis – is common to both methods of calculating medians used here and is unlikely, therefore, to be the source of the differing

results they provide. This leaves the third or 'distance minimisation' assumption – that voters vote for parties located nearest their own positions.

Based on the opinions of respondents to the 39 CSES surveys used here, this condition, too, might seem to be largely satisfied. Leaving aside (as always) those respondents who placed all parties at the same spot, four-fifths (80.5 per cent) of respondents to these surveys report having voted for the party to which they felt closest in the most recent election. To be fair, respondents may have been interpreting closeness in a less literal sense than 'distance along the left-right scale'. If so, it may explain why this rate differs so much from the actual rate of voting for the least distant party, which is just one-third (33.3 percent). This latter calculation is based on party positions as estimated by all respondents to each survey; if the expert estimates of party positions are used, the rate rises modestly to 40.3 per cent. By either set of estimates, it appears that the majority of respondents who voted in the most recent election did not vote for parties positioned closest to where they have placed themselves.[27]

Whether this is the chink in the Kim-Fording measure's armour cannot be determined with certainty, given that distance minimisation facilitates, but is not strictly necessary to, accurate Kim-Fording estimates. It simply appears to be a likely suspect at the present time. Whatever the reason, however, the evidence derived from the CSES surveys suggests that the Kim-Fording method of estimating voter medians exaggerates their volatility and does so in a way that causes them to appear to be more closely linked to government policy than is actually the case.

Conclusions

On available evidence, the left-right policy positions of governments possess a great deal of variability. We have already seen that the 95 per cent confidence interval for government positions in the CMP's Governments dataset is very large (–39.9 to +32.9) and the same can be said for the CSES-based government positions: it ranges from 1.96 to 9.06 on the 0–10 scale. While this variability fits comfortably within a bilateralist framework that focuses on two sides competing for, and alternating in, power, it presents a considerable challenge for proponents of the median mandate interpretation. Meeting that challenge requires that voters' or citizens' median positions move in tandem with government positions, but it seems inherently unlikely that so fundamental an anchor as an electorate's overall left-right orientation could prove to be as labile as the shifting stances of its various governments.

In fact, they are not. In sharp contrast to the CSES-based government positions, the 95 per cent confidence interval for the CSES voter medians has

a range of less than 0.2 points (as does the citizen median). This suggests that there will be a degree of disjuncture between voter/citizen medians and government policy that cannot be attributed to measurement error. This investigation has found that such a disjuncture is very much in evidence. As Figure 1 shows, voter median positions cluster much more closely to the middle of the left-right scale than do government positions, consistent with a bilateralist interpretation that sees government policy as fluctuating at a pace and to an extent that public opinion does not match. Granted, this is a cross-sectional 'snap-shot' rather than a dynamic picture, but it is difficult to see how the pattern could plausibly be explained in any other way.

There are two avenues that might be used to rescue the median mandate hypothesis. The first is to argue that actual government policy may cling to the middle, regardless of what government parties claim to stand for. This is a difficult possibility to put to a direct test since it would require the ability to convert the actual policy outputs of each government into a single left-right position.[28] For present purposes, however, the key point is that it offers scant comfort for proponents of the median mandate interpretation because it would undercut that interpretation's democratic credentials. Whereas the evidence of a fairly volatile voter median moving in close alignment with government policy points to the simultaneous satisfaction of the democratic principles of electoral responsiveness and meaningful choice, this interpretation holds, in effect, that parties are unwilling or unable to do in government what they promise on the campaign trail. If the voter median is realised in this way – by undermining meaningful choice – it would hardly be good news for democracy. In fact, it is difficult to see how one could talk of a 'mandate' at all.

The other approach is to take the long view of the relationship between voter medians and government policy. As noted earlier, McDonald and Budge (2005: 135) admit that the connection between Kim-Fording medians and government positions is not close enough to permit accurate estimation of the positions of individual governments. Yet they also go on to observe that: 'Over time, however, governments and median voters line up in something close to a one-to-one alignment.' What they mean here is that the 'distortions' between government and median voter positions tend to cancel each other out when they are averaged over many governments and elections.

This is a frequent theme in their work, but if taken too far, it threatens to undermine their whole thesis. Obviously, if a country has substantial experiences with both left-wing and right-wing governments over a stretch of time and if one averages government policy across this period, the mean is going to fall in the middle, where the median voter position, also averaged over this period, will lie. However, this could occur even if no single government ever advocated a policy that was anywhere near the position of the median voter at

the time it was in power. In fact, it is exactly what one would expect if a country experienced a significant level of bilateralist alternation over the decades. In other words, this aggregated evidence that they have advanced to support a median mandate interpretation of democratic governance is fully compatible with a bilateralist interpretation.

Keynes (1971 [1924]: 65) aptly captured the problem with adopting this kind of perspective in his famous comment that: 'In the long run, we are all dead.' 'Economists,' he went on to say, 'set themselves too easy, too useless a task if in tempestuous seasons they can only tell us that when the storm is long past the ocean is flat again.' Taking too long a view of the voter-government nexus similarly misses much that is important about democratic governance. Median voter and government positions may average out over the long term and thereby resemble each other, but it still makes a great deal of difference whether policy tracks movements in median voter opinion closely, government by government, or whether small changes in public opinion tend to provoke much bigger changes in policy stance. The evidence presented in this article indicates that the latter interpretation better captures the shorter-term dynamics of democratic government.

Notes

1. The dividing line between left and right need not always be the same. The German Free Democrats allied with the left (the Social Democrats) from 1969 to 1983 before switching sides and aligning with the Christian Democrats. Nevertheless, each election in this period offered the electorate two clear choices.
2. This is my calculation, based on McDonald et al.'s (2004: 6, 8) finding that 12 of 110 governments in single-member plurality systems and 194 of 361 governments in proportional representation systems have this property.
3. This is the most common, but not the only, criterion that might be used. Golder and Stramski (2007) suggest that citizen/government 'congruence' might alternatively be defined in terms of the average absolute distance between citizens and government or in terms of the similarity between the distributions of citizen and representative preferences. These alternatives can lead to outcomes that better meet an intuitive understanding of congruence, even though they may not satisfy the criterion of being majority-preferred to all other alternatives.
4. The contrast between systems where parties (and hence governments) are median-seeking and systems where parties maintain and implement clear alternatives is captured, in the two-party context, by Katz's (1997) distinction between 'downsian' and 'binary' democracies. In this context, the question becomes, can the central traits of downsian and binary systems coexist in a single system?
5. The intermediary role of party elites in moving public opinion is suggested by Esaiasson and Holmberg's (1996) finding that elite opinion generally precedes public opinion in Sweden.

6. McDonald and Budge go on to argue that over time, average government position and average median voter position tend to be in alignment. Because averages can conceal so much, this is a very questionable defence of the median mandate interpretation. I shall return to this point in the conclusion.
7. The method divides the left-right scale into intervals, each associated with a party. The intervals are defined by the mid-points between the positions of adjacent parties, for example, if parties A, B and C are adjacent parties positioned at 2, 5 and 7, respectively, party B's interval ranges from 3.5 to 6. The formula for estimating the median position is M (the median) = L + [{(50 – C)/F}*W], where L is the lower end of the interval containing the median, C is the percentage of voters below the interval containing the median, F is the percentage of voters in the interval containing the median and W is the width of that interval. The version McDonald and Budge use introduces a sensible adjustment to the measurement of W in situations where the leftmost or rightmost category contains the median. See McDonald and Budge (2005: 113–114) for more details.
8. It is noteworthy that, in their insightful analysis of the various meanings that might be attributed to the congruence between public and government positions, Golder and Stramski (2007) invariably refer to 'citizens' rather than 'voters'. Similarly, Powell's (2009) recent re-assessment of the congruence issue uses median citizen opinion where possible (i.e., where survey rather than manifesto data are being used to generate the estimates).
9. These correlations are between median values that have been averaged by decade for each of the twelve countries in question. For example, the voter median position for Spain in the 1980s is the average voter median across all elections that occurred in Spain in that decade.
10. Each of the medians for France and Italy stand around one standard deviation below the corresponding overall mean, while Spain is generally around two standard deviations below the mean. McDonald and Budge (2005: 115) had found that they stood 'three to four standard deviations to the left of all the others'.
11. Measuring government positions by the seat share-weighted mean positions of their member-parties is a commonly used method, supported by the very strong tendency for cabinet portfolios in coalition governments to be allocated, in both number and importance, according to seat shares (Browne & Franklin 1973; Warwick & Druckman 2001, 2006).
12. Apart from the fact that Eurobarometer data are available only for European countries that are European Union members, the number of cases is restricted by the need to match Eurobarometer-based data only in years in which a government was formed. For instance, the citizen median calculated for the British government of 1997–2001 uses the Eurobarometers conducted in 1997 (pooled since there are more than one of them) but ignores the Eurobarometer data collected in 1998, 1999 and 2000.
13. The intercept ($a = –0.10$, *S.E.* = 0.94) is not significantly different from zero, at conventional standards, but the slope ($b = 0.82$, *S.E.* = 0.06) is statistically distinguishable from unity. McDonald and Budge's (2005: 108) regression equation also included estimates of the 'normal' government position in each country and the deviation of the previous government from that norm, which may account for the somewhat higher slope ($b = 0.88$, *S.E.* = 0.09) that they report.
14. There are, to be sure, other areas of possible measurement error, such as in the operationalisation of government positions in terms of weighted means of the positions of their member-parties. This type of error, however, would affect estimation of the voter

median/government position relationship regardless of which method of estimating medians is used.

15. The inclusion of these cases would likely bias results against the median mandate hypothesis. For example, the final policy output of the United States government, which typically involves compromises between both parties in Congress, is probably more centrist – and hence closer to the voter median position – than the position of whichever party controls the presidency and hence the cabinet.
16. The elections are Australia 1996 and 2004, Belgium 1999, Bulgaria 2001, Canada 1997 and 2004, Czech Republic 1996 and 2002, Denmark 1998 and 2001, Finland 2003, Germany 1998 and 2002, Hungary 1998 and 2002, Iceland 1999 and 2003, Ireland 2002, Israel 2003, Netherlands 1998 and 2002, New Zealand 1996 and 2002, Norway 1997 and 2001, Poland 1997 and 2001, Portugal 2002 and 2005, Romania 1996 and 2004, Slovenia 2004, Spain 1996, 2000 and 2004, Sweden 1998 and 2002 and the United Kingdom 1997 and 2005.
17. A striking exception to this pattern is Italy (1996), where about one-third of respondents engaged in the practice. This survey could not be included in this analysis, however, because we do not have positions for government parties (the parties identified in the election survey are not coterminous with the parliamentary parties that ultimately emerged).
18. In calculating the mean positions for any given election, the estimates provided by all respondents in that election survey will be used, with the exception of the relatively small number who located every party at the same position. About three-quarters of this group also placed themselves at the same location, indicating a clear pattern of meaningless responses. For the rest, their self-placements may be meaningful, but I adopted the conservative position of excluding them as well from the calculation both of party positions and voter/citizen medians.
19. This result is consistent with Powell and Vanberg's (2000: 401) finding that mean citizen placements, calculated from Eurobarometers, and expert placements based on Huber and Inglehart's (1995) expert survey are very closely related.
20. The regression of expert estimates on respondent estimates produces essentially a one-to-one relationship ($a = 0.13$, $S.E. = 0.22$; $b = 0.98$, $S.E. = 0.04$). Regressing respondent estimates on expert estimates produces a slope noticeably less than one ($b = 0.81$, $S.E. = 0.04$). Visual inspection makes it very clear that the discrepancies are mainly due to some contraction in respondent-based scores at the extremes of the scale.
21. The standard deviation of positions as estimated from their voters' self-placements is 1.72; based on supporters' self-placements, it is 2.03. The standard deviation using expert placements is 2.20.
22. An anonymous reviewer of McDonald and Budge's investigation, which they reprint (McDonald & Budge 2005: 119), argues that median voter self-placements are useless as indicators of voter ideology because they are subject to 'assimilation effects' – that is, voters tend to locate themselves close to their party's left-right position for non-policy reasons. However, since the Kim-Fording measure assumes that the average voter for a party has the same left-right position as the party, if this is a misleading assumption because it is generated by a process of assimilation, then the Kim-Fording estimate of the median will be thrown off as well. Indeed, a world dominated by the assimilation effect would be one in which median self-placements would equal Kim-Fording medians, which is clearly not the case.
23. These means again exclude those who positioned every party the same. Incidentally, the government positions calculated using respondent-based party positions correlate

extremely highly with government positions calculated from the expert-estimated positions ($r = 0.939, p < 0.001, N = 41$), which is further confirmation of the accuracy of party positions as estimated by respondents.

24. Voter medians will be used because Kim-Fording medians are based on voters. None of the results to be reported change materially if citizen medians are used instead.
25. In about two-thirds (64.7 per cent) of all governments, the range of positions represented in the cabinet lies entirely to the left or right of the voter median. If we exclude single-party governments, which have no range at all, and minority governments, which may depend on external support of unknown provenance, it is still the case that most governments (53.3 per cent) do not straddle the median voter position.
26. The pattern is also produced to some extent when Kim-Fording medians are used, as the estimated regression slope of 1.524 in Model 2 indicates. Given the small sample, however, we cannot place too much weight on this result: the 95 per cent confidence interval (1.03 to 2.02) just narrowly excludes 1.0.
27. These figures are based on respondents who voted for one of the parties for which positions were provided by experts or by at least 20 respondents. This means that some parties, generally the smaller ones, were left out. It is likely that, had all parties been included, the rates of voting for the least distant party would be even lower.
28. More indirect evidence does exist, but it cannot be definitive. For instance, McDonald and Budge's (2005: 205–225) analyses of government spending generally reveal a significant causal influence emanating from the position of the median parliamentary party (and often from the government's position as well), but this does not mean that government spending matches the median party's preferences. Moreover, there is substantial evidence that party campaign pledges and coalition agreement promises tend to be acted upon – that is, that government composition does make a difference in terms of policy, which tends to militate against the idea that policy is generally centrist. See Mansergh and Thomson (2007) for a useful summation of this evidence.

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