Does it make a difference if the government is from the left or the right?

A qualitative answer with numbers.

Jean Crête

Nouhoun Diallo

Département de science politique

Université Laval

Do political authorities deliver what they promise to do? Does it matter for the citizenry that a particular group of individual controls the government? Those questions are obviously not only pertinent in all States whatever their characteristics (Finer 1997), democratic or not, but on the longer run strictly essential for the survival of the State organization.

In his *Framework for Political Analysis* David Easton (1965) did capture many of those core ideas when he suggested that coming from civil society and its environments support and demands fuel the political system. Three main characteristics of the system, the community, the regime and the authorities are described as the objects of support. His work became central to all students of political support (Norris 1999; Dalton 2004). On the demand side, things have not been as clear.

Demands it should be recalled «are articulated statements, directed toward the authorities, proposing that some kind of authoritative allocation out to be undertaken.» (Easton 1965 : 120). To parallel the support side of the equation, we can divide the demands into three large categories. Some demands are relative to the community, some to the regime but most aim only at the allocation of values in the normal flow of policies.

All demands bring stress to the system but in some cases, as Easton put it, «when the authorities are unable or unwilling to meet the demands of the members in some determinable proportions (at least of those members who are politically potent), ultimately we could expect that this situation would breed a high degree and ever-

increasing state of discontent». This is the kind of situation which are modelled by Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) in their study of the origins of dictatorship and democracy. What are the conditions which guarantee the people that the authorities will walk as they talk? The answer, they try to demonstrate, rests with the equilibrium in the regime.

Easton (1965: 120) goes further and states: «Under certain circumstances parts of the membership might even seek to break away from the community in some kind of separatist movement». Alesina and Spolaore (2003) demonstrate the logic of this argument in a formal model. These models deal with the policies directly impacting the regime or the community.

The third level of demands is what we call the normal policy flow. Some citizens will want more services and will be ready to pay higher taxes to finance the services. Other prefer to deal themselves with any problem they may encounter and do not want to pay taxes. The number of profiles of policy preferences is almost endless.

In a liberal democracy political parties are the main institution through which demands are formulated and aggregated to be channelled to the authorities. Those authorities are themselves selected by those same political parties. During the second part of the twentieth century political parties have been characterized on a left-right continuum. Some have, at least implicitly, claimed that this division of parties between left and right had become irrelevant at least in term of policies. All policies are converging. Some others claim that the political arena remains central in orienting the public policies. In

short, the responses of the system to the demands have been grouped in two main categories: the convergence school and the «politics matters». The convergence school, as its name implies, states that with time public policies of different interconnected systems will converge. Shaped by the same environments, confronted by the same difficulties, facing the same demands, systems will tend to respond the same way. For the school of politics matters, the way things are handled by the authorities, which is itself influenced by the characteristics of the community and its culture, does produce policies which are, or could be, different (Imbeau et Lachapelle 1994). Both schools, the convergence and the politics matters, deal with demands which can be reasonably met by the authorities without drastic changes in the community or the regime. In other words, they deal with the «normal» or «routine» demands to allocate values in a liberal democracy. If policies converge, the choice of party for a voter, in term of policies is meaningless and for sure there is no need for shrouding (see Breton this book, chapter 1). If politics matters then the voter has a choice, but do the parties cover their true colors as Breton implies? In other words do the parties of the right implement right wing policies and vice versa for the left? Those are the two questions we will investigate using the Quebec case for a test.

In Quebec, a party realignment occurred in the late sixties which lead to the creation of a new axis which presumably cut across the already existing left-right continuum. The new continuum distributes the voters along an axis which has at the one end Quebec independence and at the other end the full integration into Canada. Because voters from then on did align themselves along this new continuum, it had been argued that the left/right division had lost its meaning in Quebec. So there are two fundamental reasons

why we should not find a meaningful relationship between a left-right classification of government and public policy: party convergence and, in the case of Quebec, a more powerful dimension, independence-integration. These two factors would explain policy differences.

In this chapter, we examine the policy statements of the Quebec governments over a period of forty years to try to determine if the policies do vary with governments on the left-right axis. The approach is descriptive and more qualitative than quantitative. As Imbeau et al. (2001: 2) commented, one key hypothesis of partisan theory is that there exists a law-like tendency for policy to move in response to election outcomes, operationalized in terms of the left-right party composition of the government. Policies have been mainly measured in economic terms like spending (total spending, spending in specific domain of policy, spending as a proportion of GDP, etc. For a review see Imbeau (2001)). Here, we will examine non-monetary measures.

Defining left and right

The notion of left and right summarizes the polarization produced by the conflict between the principles used to allocate values in society. Laponce (1981) suggests that the notion of left/right rests on some stable contents. The left promotes equality between citizens, favours the people, and promotes free thinking. On the other side, the right accommodates hierarchy, favours the rich and support religion. For Laponce some issues are not by themselves on the left or the right. It is the case with internationalism and nationalism.

These characteristics of the left or the right are shared by many other authors. For example Revelli, according to Laver (2001), lists on the left side the following concept: change, equality, autonomy, mass, rationalism and on the right, stability, hierarchy, heteronomy, elites and irrationalism. Still others like Bobbio (1996) add to the list in refining between the far left, the left, the right, the far right, etc. The conceptual definition of the dyadic opposition of Left and Right is not easily made, but there is a general recognition of what it is. Furthermore, at the operational level (more about it below), tools have been devised to recognize what goes to the Left and what to the Right.

Policies

Government activities take many forms and avenues. Typologies have been build to allow the student of public policy to organize and manage the quantity of information relative to the governments activities. One such typology (Imbeau et Lachapelle 1994: 4) divides the activities in six operational categories, one of which is the discursive activity. In the Quebec political system, two of those discursive activities are particularly formal and important. The government inaugural address which is under the immediate responsibility of the Prime Minister and the Budget speech which comes under the responsibility of the Minister of Finance. In this latter case, the speech has, for some purpose, the power of the law as, for example, when the minister of finance announces a change in the level of taxes. The inaugural address does not do that. The inaugural address, known in the Westminster parliament as the Speech from the Throne, declares and details what the government policies will be for the next few months. In this parliamentary system, the Inaugural address is much more than the State of the State

(or the State of the Union at the federal level) in the American system. Indeed, in the Westminster model of government, and it is particularly true when the government is from a single party which commands a majority in the legislature, the Prime minister controls the legislature. So his or her statements of the government's intentions are paramount.

The inaugural addresses take place at the beginning of a session of the National Assembly. The number of sessions during a term in office is more or less at the discretion of the Prime minister. Even if the calendar of sessions and time between sessions have changed over the years we can count on one regular (as opposed to special sessions called to deal with a specific emergency) session per eighteen months on average. In this study covering the period from the twenty-sixth legislature (1960) to the thirtieth legislature (2006) we count thirty-seven Throne speeches. Those speeches document the policies of the twelve governments which have governed Quebec from 1960 to 2006.

Coding the speeches.

Of the four main techniques to code texts, the quasi fully automated technique as used by Diermeier et al. (chapter ?? this volume), the semi-automated technique used by Charbonneau (chapter ?? in this volume), the classification with a dictionary and the classical content analysis based on human judgment we used the latter with the support of QDAMiner as Süerdem (see chapter ?? in this volume) does. Two main reasons

explain why. First our observations cover more than four decades of speeches and we wanted to use them all but both the quasi fully-automated and the semi-automated techniques required supplemental observations, to train the software in one case or calibre the model in the other case. Second, with the technique of the dictionary, the problem of changes overtime may become difficult to deal with as the meaning of words change with time. To avoid these pitfalls we used a technique based on the substance of the speeches. The technique has its disadvantages – see Charbonneau (chapter ??) and Süerdem (chapter ??), but also many advantages (see Katznelson et Lapinski 2006; Mayhew 2006).

To code the speeches along a Left-Right continuum we have used the coding scheme of McDonald and Mendes (McDonald et Mendes 2001). Their scheme rests on the codification developed by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) to study and compare party platforms. The CMP is well documented (Volkens et Hearl 1990; Laver 2001) and the coding scheme has been used in many countries including Quebec (Pétry et Landry 2001; Pétry et Collette 2006) to code party manifestos.

The coding scheme lists 56 categories fitting within seven policy domains : (1) Foreign Affairs, (2) Freedom and Democracy, (3) Government, (4) Economy, (5) Welfare and Quality of Life, (6) Government, and (7) Social Groups. McDonald and Mendes review the literature on the use of this scheme to locate the party platforms on a left-right axis. Each category, sometimes with a pro or con orientation, is associated to the left or to the right. For example, within the domain "Freedom and Democracy" freedom is associated with the right while democracy is associated with the left. Within the domain

"Government" a statement pro decentralisation is associated to the right. Some of the categories have not been attributed to the left or right as it is the case for «culture» or «agriculture and farmers». Sixteen of the 56 categories were not attributed to the left or the right. In our analyses the statements fitted into 29 of the 40 left-right categories[1]. In other words there are items listed by McDonald and Mendes that we did not encounter in our reading of the speeches.

The recording units are themes. A theme is an assertion about one of the 40 subjects (categories). The context unit is the speech itself. The 37 speeches were read in their entirety and coded within the software QDAMiner (Péladeau 2006). At the end of the process, three level of measures were contemplated. A first measure reports the occurrence or not of a code in each speech. A second measure reports the frequencies (number of time a code was used for a given speech). And a third measure reports the numbers of words (per thousand words) coded in a specific domain. The following analysis rests on the first type of measure, that is the matrix of occurrences, because it is the least susceptible to bias in the coding process.

Indices

Two indices were built, one for the left and one for the right. The indices are the sum of occurrences divided by the number of categories. There is an occurrence for a category when at least one statement is allocated to this category in the speech. The 15 items

---

[1] The categories of the left are numbers 102, 107, 202, 204, 403, 404, 406, 408, 409, 410, 411, 412, 504, 506, 701. The categories on the right are 201, 203, 301, 303, 305, 401, 402, 407, 414, 601, 603, 605, 606, 607.

attributed to the left are well correlated (alpha 0.80) as well as the 14 attributed to the right (alpha of 0.82). The net ideology is the result of the subtraction of the Left index minus the Right index.

Results

Convergence?

Graph 1 shows the degree of the left-right ideology of each speech over the period 1960-2006. The y axis goes from right (negative value) to left (positive value) and where zero represents the «extreme» center. It is obvious that there are variations from year to year. There is no indication however that the ideological divide has narrowed over the years.

Graph 1 about here

The trend is toward the right. Had the data sets included information about the policies of the 1950's, the slope could have been different since the governments were then deemed more conservative than those of the following years. The variations around the central tendency indicate that at the end of the period the range of policy ideological positions was growing not shrinking. There is no proof there of merging policies over time.

The political parties and their ideological policy space.

During the period studied here three political parties came to power. The Liberal Party (PLQ), the Union Nationale (UN) and the Parti Québécois (PQ). In the 1960's the Union

Nationale, on the right, faces the Liberal Party on its left. Then from 1970 on, the Liberal

Party faced the Parti Québecois on its left. Of the three political parties only the PLQ has

been there from the beginning to the end of the period. So let's examine first the

ideological position of the PLQ and the UN which disappeared in the seventies . Graph 2

shows the ideological space filled by those parties.

Graph 2 about here

At the beginning of the period, the liberal party can be described as a left wing party. It is

the period known in Quebec as the Quiet Revolution when many social programs were

introduced, education was revamped, the State took over from the Church the social

programs and education, the production and distribution of electricity was nationalized

(1962), public enterprises were created in the fields of finance, mine development, etc.

The PLQ lost the 1966 election to the Union Nationale which had been in power before

1960. Even if the Union Nationale had campaigned against many of the reforms

introduced by the Liberal Party, it did not reverse the policies when it came back to

power. It mainly slowed the process down or, as in the case of health (Castonguay

2005), postponed indefinitely the reforms. However, the new initiative favoured

decentralization and programs for specific clienteles as opposed to universal programs.

When the PLQ returned to power in 1970, it was by then not that much more on the left

than the dying Union Nationale. For the six following years (1970-1976) the PLQ

remained at the center-right. It was then defeated by the PQ. When the PLQ came back

to power in 1985, under the leadership of Robert Bourassa, it moved its policies toward

the center. The successor of Robert Bourassa as leader of the party, Daniel Johnson jr,

brought back the party to the right (Crête 1995: 188) a position consolidated by next leader of the PLQ, Jean Charest. Of the 37 speeches under study here, the two last speeches, expressing the policies of the Charest government, are the two most right wing of the lot.

Graph 3 about here

Turning now to the policy positions offered by the PQ, we see (graph 3) that it occupies, since the seventies, most of the space taken by parties on the left. Those polices are consistent with the party's image. A party relatively close to the trade unions and the «social economy sector». From year to year the policy position has varied, but most of the time it has been on the left with a couple of excursions to the centre-right.

Knowing the time period and the party in power one can roughly predict if the policies will be, compared with the previous government, more on the left or the right. In other words, the label of the party is a good predictor of the direction, left-right, of the policies.

Governments

Twelve governments have presided over the destiny of Quebec during the 43 years depicted here. All those governments were the product of a majority party in the National Assembly. Graph 4 displays the detailed positions taken by those governments.

Graph 4 about here

It is remarkable that there is almost as much change within a government than between governments of different parties. Look at the sixth government, the PQ government of 1976-1981, which, on average, scored 0.08 on the ideological scale. The variation within the term in office extended from a minimum of –0.01 to a maximum of 0.30 for a full distance of 0.31 between those extreme points. Such a variation between governments is registered only once for the whole period 1960-2003 and it is at the very end of the period when the liberal government of Jean Charest (2003-2006) replaced the PQ government of Bernard Landry. The distance between the average value of the eleventh government (1998-2003) and the twelfth (2003-2006) is indeed 0.43. Those numbers should, for sure, be interpreted with prudence since they are the product of an «human» assessment. Nevertheless, it seems obvious that as important as variations are within a government, those variations do not lead to a confusion. Using the label of the party a voter would be able to predict if the government of such a party would be on the left or the right. In the 1960's, two main parties faced each other, the UN party on the right and the PLQ on the left. The policies of the UN were on average on the right at –0.09 and the policies of the liberal on the left at 0.10. During the next 36 years, the PLQ faced the PQ, and the average score for the policies of the PLQ was –0.10 and for the PQ 0.06.

The policies of the governments of different ideologies are different. We have shown using the party label that the policies of the governments of one party or another are different on average. The image a party label may have in the population may not

correlate tightly to what the party is actually standing for. To know what the party stands for, one has to analyze its platform. It is what we do next.

The electoral platform of the winning party has been analysed using the same categories already used for the government speeches. Party platforms from 1976 to 2003 had already been categorized by Pétry and his team and we thank them for providing the data for this part of the series[2]. For the earlier years, 1960 to 1973, we did it yourselves. For the speeches we used the average score of a government. To bring everything on a same scale we standardised the scores.

Graph 5 presents a scattergram where the party platform is on the horizontal axis while the speeches are on the vertical axis. In the upper left corner one finds the cases where the party platform at the time of the election is characterized has being on the left and the government speeches are also on the left. The liberal party platform of 1962 almost entirely devoted to the nationalisation of the production and distribution of electricity is by far the most left wing platform. The 1960 platform of the Liberal party is the second most left wing. Those years were also the core years of the "Quiet Revolution" (Pelletier 1989: 237) and it is reflected in the public policies. Four other governments had left wing policies; they were all governments of the Parti Québécois. In two of those cases, 1981 and 1994, the party platform announced policies more on the right than what actually happened. The policies of the Liberal governments of 1970, 1985, 1989, 2003 are quite consistent with the programs of the Liberal Party (lower right quadrant). Two

---

[2] We thank Benoît Collette, Department of Political Science at Laval University, for providing the data on party platforms.

governments, one Union Nationale and the other Liberal, had policies slightly on the right when the party platform would have located them on left.

Graph 5 about here

Conclusion

In this chapter we have described the policy positions of the Quebec governments from 1960 to 2003 on a left-right continuum. The data do not support the idea that policies converge over time. The ideological divide was as important at the end of the period than at the beginning. Our data show that political parties matter. In Quebec, the PQ describes itself as a social democratic party while the Liberal Party stresses the «liberal values» and positions itself to the right of the PQ. The policies of the governments formed by one or the other party reflects these positions. However the content analysis of the party platforms does not predict the policies of the governments as well as the simple party label. For example, the content analysis of the program of the PQ for the election of 1981 indicates that the PQ was right of the centre. The policies of the PQ government of 1981-1985 were left of the centre. The same can be said for the PQ government of 1994-1998. A similar situation was already identified for the Union Nationale government of 1966-1970 and the Liberal government of 1973-1976. The party label was here an indicator of the relative position of the parties on a left-right continuum. The content analysis of the platforms gave an absolute measure of the party position on the same axis. Those absolute positions of the platforms and the policies do

no always coincide for many reasons one of which is the fact that governments have to deal with issues not covered by their party platforms.

We have also shown that the party affiliation of the decision makers does not explain all variations in the left-right positioning of the policy's statements. There are some very significant differences from year to year in the policies originating from the same government.

Policy change, that is the first difference of policy (policy$_1$ – policy $_{t-1}$ = $\triangle$Policy$_t$) is related to what the political parties claim they would do if elected. However, the variations within a term of a government are obviously not related as such to the program of the party forming the government. Erikson, Mackuen and Stimson (2002), in their effort to model what they called the macro polity, suggest that policy change should be explainable by three variables: the previous policy, the election outcome and the public opinion.

We have dealt here with the election outcome. As we have seen, when elections serve to replace one set of policy makers with another we observe a change in policy. Using the label of the party as an indicator of its position gives some leverage. It is mainly what voters used to make their decision. We can improve the quality of the data in studying the party platforms to locate the parties on the same ideological scale as the policies of the governments.

The second explanatory factor has to do with the weight of history. It can easily be argued that previous policies shape what would come later. Described with the concepts of incrementalism or path dependency this phenomenon is well documented. The positions of the governments in graph 4 reinforce this idea. Take the third government; its first policy declaration is quite close to the last declaration of the outgoing government. The same can be said of its successor. The most notable exception to this dependency path is the Charest government (2003-2006). So it seems that a new government does not immediately move the policies from the position the outgoing government had taken to the new position expected from the party platform or which will define the new government.

The third variable, public opinion, which we have not documented here, is presumably what allows the governments to implement the proposals found in their party platform or what constraints them not to implement their platform. Unfortunately, the information on the opinion of the public, as measured by opinion polls, is not available for our case, and cannot be recreated, for the first part of our period (see Beaud for an appraisal of the situation between 1960 and 1980 first period). We can however document occasions were the party platform was not clearly implemented because of the public opinion. Take the case of the Bourassa's government of the mid 1980's. Those were the good years of Ronald Reagan in the USA and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom; in Canada the Progressive Conservative Party had won a majority of seats in the House of Commons and the government of Brian Mulroney was also trying to implement its policy of reducing the size of the State. It is within this context that the liberal government of

Robert Bourassa (1985-1989) was first heading for clear right wing policies when it appointed a committee, chaired by the President of the Treasury Board (a cabinet minister), to review the functions and organization of the State. The committee suggested abolishing many regulatory or consultative agencies, the privatization of certain organizations like the public broadcaster, some hospitals, and some other commercial assets. In education, the committee suggested raising university fees, increasing the teaching load in public schools, implementing a system of voucher, which would have allowed parents to choose between publicly or privately owned schools. The Prime Minister Bourassa ignored most of those recommendations after he heard from the civil society. In this case, the government moved away from the radical ideology of his party. The claim that authorities govern by opinion polls is witness of this idea that public mood may influence the policies that a government may propose. If the public mood and the party ideology go in the same direction, the probability that the policy will be consistent with the party label would be high. If the public mood does not coincide with the platform of the party in government, one can expect a policy which is in between.

We started by asking, «Does it make a difference that the government is from the left or the right?» And the answer is «yes». Public authorities walk as they talk. The land however may already been surveyed and the paths firmly entrenched. Furthermore, the public mood may force the authorities to follow a path the decision makers may have preferred to avoid.

References:

Acemoglu, D. et J. A. Robinson (2006). *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Alesina, A. et E. Spolaore (2003). *The size of nations*. Cambridge (Mass), The MIT Press.

Beaud, J.-P. (1984). "Vingt ans de sondages d'opinion au Québec". In J. Crête, Ed *Comportement électoral au Québec.*. Chicoutimi, Gaëtan Morin**:** 25-118.

Bobbio, N. (1996). *Droite et gauche : essai sur une distinction politique*. Paris, Éditions du Seuil.

Castonguay, C. (2005). *Mémoire d'un révolutionnaire tranquille*. Montréal, Boréal.

Crête, J. (1995). "La vie des parties". *Québec 1996*. In D. Monière et R. Côté Eds. *L'annuaire politique du Québec* Montréal, Fides/Le Devoir**:** 183-198.

Dalton, R. J. (2004). *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices : The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Easton, D. (1965). *A Framework for Political Analysis*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall.

Erikson, R. S., M. B. MacKuen et J. A. Stimson (2002). *The Macro Polity*. New York, Cambridge University Press.

Finer, S. E. (1997). *The History of Government From the Earliest Times*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Imbeau, L. M. et G. Lachapelle (1994). "Les déterminants des politiques provinciales au Canada" Synthèse des études comparatives". In J. Crête, L. M. Imbeau et G.

Lachapelle, Eds. *Politiques provinciales comparées*. Sainte-Foy, Les Presses de l'Université Laval**:** 1-28.

Imbeau, L. M., F. Pétry et M. Lamari (2001). "Left-right ideology and government policies: A meta-analysis." *European Journal of Political Research* **40**: 1-29.

Katznelson, I. et J. S. Lapinski (2006). "The substance of representation : Studying policy content and legislature behaviour". In E. S. Adler et J. S. Lapinski, Eds. T*he macropolitics of Congress*. Princeton, Princeton University Press**:** 95-126.

Laponce, J. A. (1981). *Left and right : the topography of political perceptions*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press.

Laver, M., dir. (2001). *Estimating the Policy Positions of Political Actors*. Routledge/ECPR studies in European political science. London/New York, Routledge.

Mayhew, D. R. (2006). "Lawmaking and history". In E. S. Adler et J. S. Lapinski, Eds. *The macropolitics of Congress*. Princeton, Princeton University Press**:** 241-250.

McDonald, M. D. et S. M. Mendes (2001). "The policy space of party manifestos". In M. Laver, Ed. *Estimating the Policy Position of Political Actors*.. London, Routledge**:** 90-114.

Norris, P., dir. (1999). *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Péladeau, N. (2006). QDA Miner. Montréal, Provalis Research.

Pelletier, R. (1989). *Partis politiques et société québécoise: de Duplessis à Bourassa, 1944-1970*. Montréal, Éditions Québec/Amérique.

Pétry, F. et B. Collette (2006). "Le gouvernement Charest a-t-il respecté ses promesses?" In F. Pétry, É. Bélanger et L. M. Imbeau, Eds *Le Parti libéral:*

enquête sur les réalisations du gouvernement . Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval**:** 83-101.

Pétry, F. et R. Landry (2001). "Estimating interparty policy distances from election programmes in Quebec, 1970-89". M. Laver, Ed. *Estimating the Policy Position of Political Actors*. London, Routledge**:** 133-145.

Volkens, A. et D. Hearl (1990). *Content Analysis of Party Programmes in Comparative Perspectives: Handbook and Coding Instructions*. Berlin: Science Center Berlin.
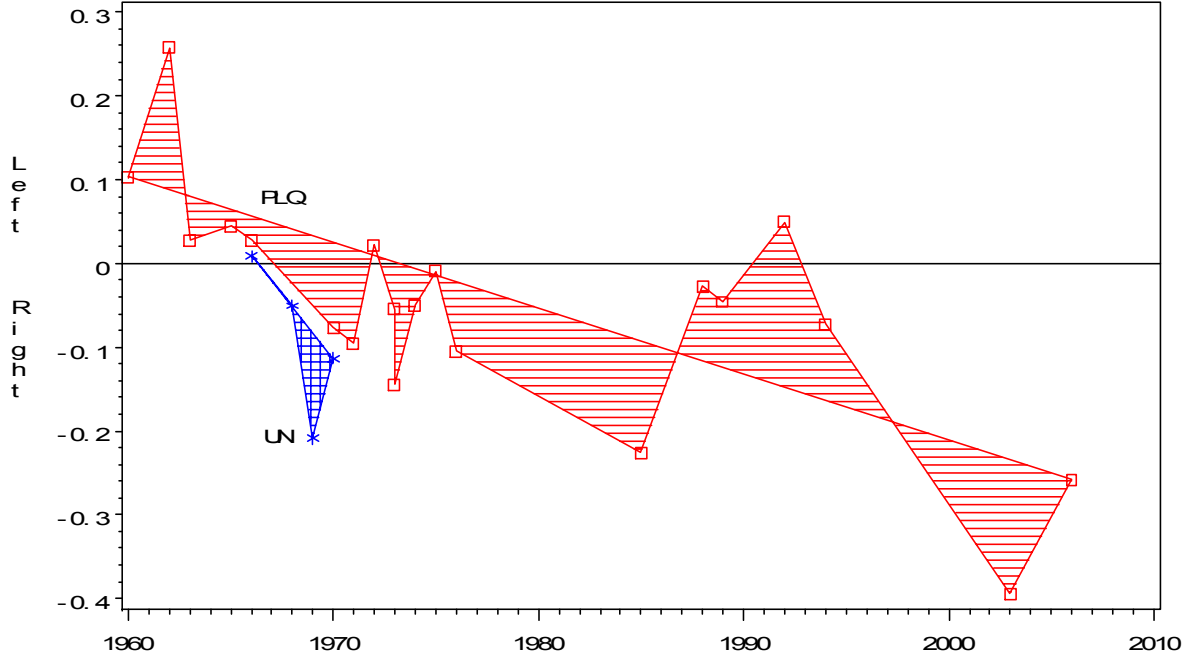
Graph 1

Ideological Trend of Inaugural Speeches
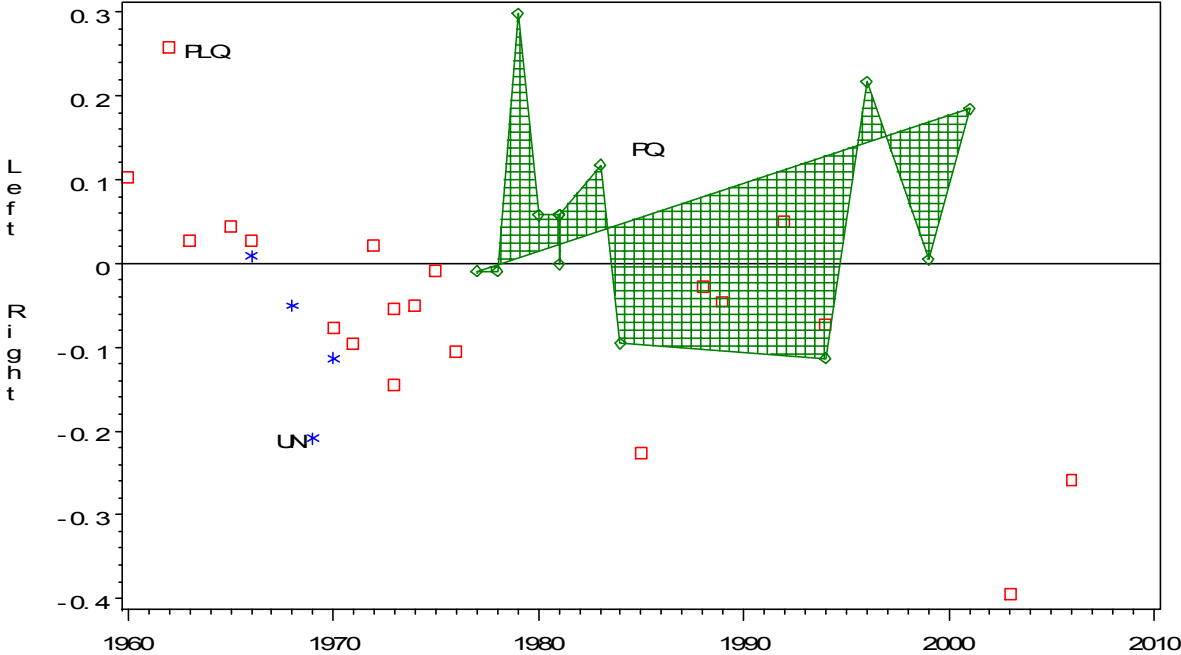*Cubic Regression Model with 95 percent confidence limits*
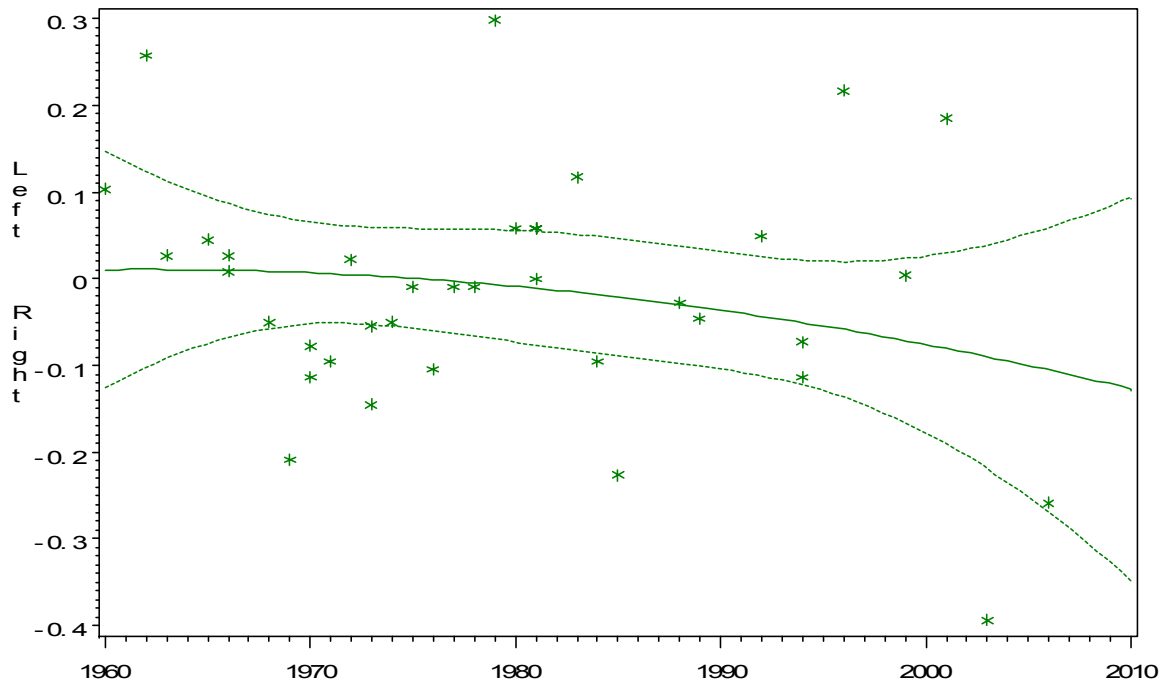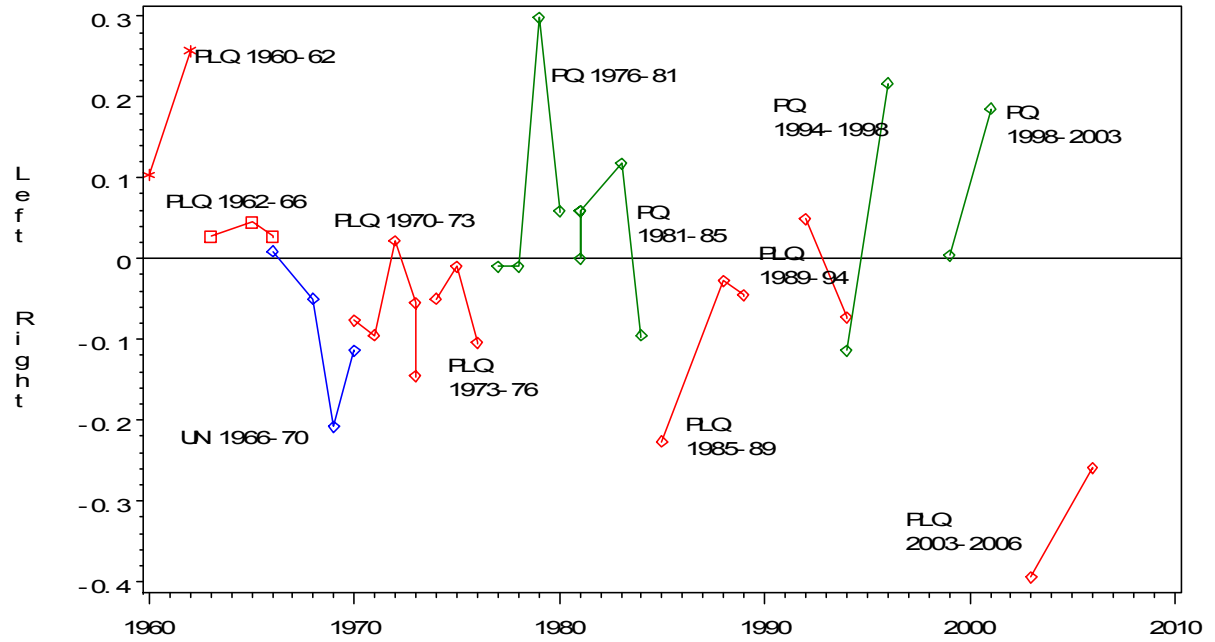
Graph 2

Ideological Position of the UN and PLQ

Graph 3

Ideological Position of the PQ

Graph 4

Ideological Position by Government

Graph 5

Program and Discourse