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Making Higher Education Work: A Comparison of Discourses in the United Kingdom's Conservative and Labour Parties' General Election Manifestos between 1979 and 2010

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This article elaborates a model of social democratic and conservative discourses in relation to access, financing, management, and results of higher education. The model is contrasted with the position of the Conservative Party and the Labour Party in the United Kingdom from the late 1970s to 2010 as expressed in their electoral manifestos. The findings show how the ideological differences between parties diminished over time, although not uniformly across themes. Explanations for this trend are provided through examination of the role of electoral institutions and “median voter” and “political partisanship” arguments.

Introduction

Much of the contemporary literature on education policy distinguishes between the policies of different governments by reference to political ideology. However, there are significant contradictions in the results reported in this literature. The United Kingdom's experience is paradigmatic in this respect, as reflected in the many accounts of the ideological values behind the “Third Way” (Giddens 1998) once espoused by “New Labour.” Differing accounts of the nature of contemporary education policies stem partly from the absence of a shared definition of social democratic aims and conservative aims in education as well as from continuous changes in political vocabulary (Dale 1989) and conceptual stretching (Sartori 1970). Given these difficulties, much education policy analysis is grounded in a form of abstract empiricism that conforms neither to classic political ideology models nor to more recent theorizations of party policy change.

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In order to address the problem of abstract empiricism, this article draws on work in political science and education to sketch a model of both social democratic and conservative arguments in relation to four themes in higher education (HE) policy: access, financing, management, and results. This model is proposed as a lens through which to conduct analysis and to avoid a purely inductive construct of the categories used to review social democratic and conservative discourses (Budge and Pennings 2007). The focus is on HE, an area that has been less studied than has compulsory education regarding partisan differences, although it has received more political attention in the past 3 decades, often linked to discussions on its role in economic growth.¹

While general ideological features can be identified for both parties, these ideologies are neither consistent nor static. Rather, they present a field for political struggle, for continuous shaping and reshaping. The conflict between the decentralizing logic of markets in education and the centralizing logic of governmental prescription and controlling standards has long troubled the Conservative Party (Pierson 1998). Labour has also struggled between alternative conceptions of education, including those of the “New Right,” developmentalism, and the “new social democracy” (Paterson 2003; Whitty 2009).

This article addresses two questions: (1) What are the differences and similarities between the Labour and the Conservative discourses regarding HE in their UK general election manifestos, and how have their discourses evolved over time? (2) Can we explain these discursive positions and trajectories by looking at electoral politics? The analysis presented here is based on an examination of UK general election manifestos from 1979 to 2010. The manifestos reviewed are for UK elections. The discussion thus applies mainly to England. HE has been subject to a process of devolution of political competences since the late 1990s that has accentuated differences between UK countries in this area.

The next section presents an outline of possible social democratic and conservative positions on HE. This is followed, in section 3, by a description of the methodology employed in the study. Section 4 presents an analysis of electoral manifestos to explore how parties conform to their expected positions and discusses possible causes for deviations from these. Section 5 concludes.

Social Democracy, Conservatism, and Higher Education

In this section, I engage with literature in the fields of education and political science. The education literature has focused on ways in which education policy has moved toward neoliberal positions. The political science

¹ See, e.g., Power and Whitty (1999) and Whitty (2009).

literature, in contrast, has emphasized differences between parties on the left and on the right in their views of educational issues.

The “golden age of the welfare state” (mid-1940s to the mid-1970s) was a period of unprecedented economic growth that funded the expansion of social programs from conservative and, in particular, social democratic parties in advanced industrialized countries, although to varying degrees depending on the country (Esping-Andersen and van Kersbergen 1992). In the United Kingdom, a second defining characteristic of the period was the marked ideological differences between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party on a wide range of social issues (Kuypers et al. 2003; Dumbrell 2004). In the battle between the two parties during this time, the Conservatives were, on the whole, winning: they achieved around twice as many parliamentary majority wins as Labour did between 1900 and 1997.

The Conservative discourse regarding the economy became increasingly radical as the century progressed. Whereas the party had previously expanded social programs, from the late 1970s onward the welfare state came under pressure from Thatcher’s New Right. A consensus arose that only neoliberal policies could work under the new circumstances prompted by the oil crisis, the increased volatility of financial markets, and globalization (Boix 1998). Thatcher, like Reagan in the United States, worked to create new institutional opportunities for intellectual and political advocates of free-market economics to influence policy-making agendas and to transform formerly marginalized economic perspectives into a set of legitimate policy goals, of which one hallmark was “small government” and welfare state retrenchment (Pierson 1994). According to the Conservatives, welfare states were in conflict with economic efficiency; they were “eating the hand that fed them” (Esping-Andersen 2006).² This view led to the abandonment of Keynesian demand-side policies based on a mixed economy, with high government intervention in the economy and vigorous public spending to stimulate economic activity and reduce unemployment, especially in times of crisis. Feedback mechanisms and path-dependent developments derived from the establishment of social policies that created their own constituencies—large groups of beneficiaries, which included the working class and the middle class—prevented strong cutbacks in welfare spending, at least initially (Pierson 1994, 1996). However, expansion of such spending would not continue.

Labour’s electoral base, the working class, was at the same time in decline in the United Kingdom. Profound social changes were taking place due to new forms of employment and the expansion of the service sector, which gave birth to novel electoral dynamics and questioned previous political alliances (Mann 1973, 1985). Trade unions, another Labour stronghold, were noticeably weakened under Thatcher (Towers 1989). In this context (the

² The supposed trade-off between social spending and economic efficiency has been questioned by Atkinson and Mogensen (1993) and Iversen and Stephens (2008), among others.

1990s), the Labour Party adopted a “new social democracy,” which differed from old-style social democracy and neoliberalism, to appeal to a wider constituency. It accepted the market, but not all of its outcomes, and made commitments to full employment in “good jobs” and a “social investment State” (Green-Pedersen et al. 2001). Alongside other measures—such as a robust macroeconomic policy, responsive wage bargaining, and “employment-friendly tax policies”—education and training formed the core of this model, labeled the Third Way under New Labour (see Blair and Schröder 1999).³ Labour followed Third Way politics until its defeat in the 2010 elections (Giddens 2007; Ball et al. 2011).

The view endorsed by much of the education literature is that conservative, particularly New Right, policies came to dominate HE globally (see Torres and Schugurensky 2002). Two distinct conservative perspectives can be differentiated regarding HE. According to the first, HE should not be concerned with the employability of students or with producing a qualified labor force for the economy (Oakeshott 1989); HE is seen as a good in itself, an opportunity for development. The second perspective emphasizes links between HE, employability, future income streams, and economic development (Hayek 1960; Becker 1964). The New Right that appeared in the 1970s was much more influenced by the Austrian school of economics and Friedrich Hayek than by the conservatism of Michael Oakeshott. The post-1940s central social democratic values—concerning equity, accessibility, and autonomy, or the contribution of HE to social transformation—were overshadowed in the 1980s by the values espoused in the “conservative turn” (Apple 1996; Levy 2006)—self-responsibility, individualization, excellence and efficiency, increased “choice for consumers,” changes in the public-private provision mix, decentralization, and financial cutbacks (Olssen 2004). In this way, education became a tool for socialization into capitalist values (Giroux 2003) or global competitiveness (Brown et al. 2001; Souto-Otero 2007). Significant elements in Labour’s policy on education in England have been a continuation of Conservatives’ policies. Some authors have seen this continuation as the result of Labour’s need to respond to global challenges (Ball 2001); other authors have seen this continuation simply as a product of inertia provoked by the Conservatives’ previous actions and inactions (Lunt 2008).

Political science analyses have focused first on how political parties’ education policy choices satisfy their “core constituencies” (assumed for the Conservative Party to be the most well-off and for Labor to be the least well-off) and “swing voters,” as well as how national political institutions and the distribution of power between Left and Right parties mediate global trends within countries. Second, this literature has tended to rely on quantitative cross-national analysis and does not sufficiently take into account either na-

³ Some authors, though, are skeptical about whether the Third Way differs much from old European social democracy or even Christian democracy (see Navarro 2002).

tional variations in the nature of social democratic and conservative party ideologies across Western democracies (Anderson 2005) or the national structuring of skills formation systems. The analyses presented in this article thus are modeled on some important simplifications.

In response to the argument that social democrats moved ideologically to the right, one school of political scientists argues that differences with conservatives are still significant: heavy investment in education and public physical infrastructures (the supply side of the economy) has become the distinctive social democratic strategy in the absence of demand-side Keynesian policies. Carles Boix (1998) argues that social democratic governments invest heavily in human capital formation to enhance national competitiveness. This can be combined with high taxation to enable greater levels of social protection for the least well-off. Conservative parties prioritize containing taxes and public expenditure, including expenditure in supply-side measures, to enable greater private productive investment and growth (Boix 1998; Iversen and Stephens 2008).

In contrast, a second school of political scientists argues that investment in HE is regressive: it benefits the better-off in society and is thus more conducive to conservative ideology (Wilensky 2002). Conservatives appeal to the upper and middle classes by emphasizing the role of HE in promoting “equality of opportunity” and saving in social protection investment that favors the least well-off through equality of outcomes. Ben Ansell (2008) reports that when enrollment levels are low, right-wing parties invest in and expand HE to attract middle classes, whereas left-wing parties oppose this expansion. However, partisan preferences reverse once the HE system has expanded, because it then captures people from wider social strata and starts to also benefit the working class.

A third set of authors (Apple 1997; Mellizo-Soto 2005) argues that not only the degree but also the aims and design of educational investments are relevant. They postulate that conservative and social democratic policies in postcompulsory education are guided by different principles (e.g., conservative meritocratic versus social democratic compensatory principles).

The arguments presented above are, thus, not conclusive in relation to what could be expected from Labour Party and Conservative Party positions on HE. In the content analysis presented below, I examine differences between parties, often downplayed in the education literature, and assess the degree to which the rhetoric of the Labour and the Conservative parties conforms to Boix’s or Wilensky’s propositions regarding access and financing (aspects that Wilensky predicts will be emphasized by conservative parties and that Boix suggests will be stressed by social democrats). I also explore management (hypothesizing that UK Conservatives will emphasize efficiency gains, choice, and privatization given their emphasis on a small government and individual sovereignty; see Tullock and Buchanan 1965) and results

(hypothesizing that UK Conservative manifestos will emphasize the needs of the economy and that UK Labour manifestos will emphasize social results, linked to the compensatory principle). I then review whether observed differences between parties coexist with a general movement toward conservative positions and the recentering of the debate on HE, a dynamic aspect that has been attended to in the education literature but has been largely ignored in the political science literature.

Methodology

My article is based on a content analysis of the Labour and Conservative parties' electoral manifestos produced in the period 1979–2010. Content analysis studies examine human communications by systematically identifying specified characteristics of the channels through which they operate, communications messages themselves (e.g., the frequency of key words and the structure of communication), and the recipients of the communications (Holsti 1969). Given that the channels for the message analyzed (i.e., printed and online electoral manifestos) and the recipients of the communication analyzed (i.e., the electorate) are similar for both parties, I focus on the content of their respective manifestos' messages. My aim is to categorize the manifest and latent content of a body of communicated material to ascertain its meaning and probable effects (i.e., what the analyzed material enables and what it prevents; Krippendorff 2004). While there is enormous diversity in approach to content analysis (Merten 1983)—from word counts to analyses of document sections, spread, and meaning—what these approaches have in common is that they offer something often missing in other forms of social critique, namely, close analysis of texts and interactions through an empirically grounded method (Titscher et al. 2000).

Content analysis is particularly relevant in the UK context. As Norman Fairclough (2000) argues, if language is important in politics, it is crucial for the politics of New Labour precisely because of the ambiguities in its rhetoric. Sociological analyses of education policy that ignore discourse risk overlooking its important role in shaping and legitimizing policy (Ball 1990). This article focuses specifically on parties' manifestos. In doing so, it thus necessarily omits what happens between elections and the differences between electoral pledges and actual policy. Those aspects are more deeply explored in the literature than political discourses are (for excellent reviews of UK HE policy, see Barnett [1990, 1994]; Halsey [1995]; and Barr and Crawford [2005]).

Educational policies are formulated, reformulated, delivered, and interpreted by politicians and policy makers, civil servants, teachers, parents, and a wide range of stakeholders in an array of documents, practices, and behaviors. Political parties' electoral manifestos are only a part of this, but a focus on such manifestos is warranted by several factors. Electoral manifestos are relevant as a salient forum for expressing the official dicta of political parties to their

electorates. These manifestos therefore have a strong symbolic value (Laver et al. 2003; Franzmann and Kaiser 2006; Souto-Otero and Whitworth 2006) and directly measure what parties publicly state as their position (Budge and Penning 2007). There are no institutional arrangements that force parties to keep their electoral promises. The threat of electoral punishment for dishonoring electoral pledges may encourage politicians to follow their stated policies. However, voting is a rough mechanism for accountability because the public is often unaware of the changes made in relation to electoral promises, because policies may not have their desired effects, and because past performance is only one of the bases that determines voting behavior (see Maravall 2003). Moreover, unexpected contingencies and crises can force parties to move away from their original promises “legitimately” in the eyes of the electorate. In spite of these factors, and other notable inconsistencies between a party’s manifestos and that party’s actions once elected, the empirical literature has found that, for the most part, manifestos are good predictors of government policy (Klingemann et al. 1994). At the very least, they are an important resource for the understanding of proposed education policy.

I employed the Labour Party and Conservative Party electoral manifestos directly. This allowed me to go deeper in the analysis than widely used manifestos’ content databases (e.g., the Electoral Manifestos Project of the Berlin Social Science Research Center [Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung]) because such databases provide scant information on education issues (see Jakobi 2009). To initially assess the importance of HE for each party and over time, the number of references made to “education” and “higher education/university/college/polytechnic” (coded together) were annotated for each manifesto. To obtain a more nuanced view of the importance of HE, the inclusion or absence of a subsection on HE was recorded. The length of the main discussion on HE, proportional to the manifesto’s length, was also calculated. Finally, the spread of the referencing to HE in other sections of the manifesto was documented, to assess the extent to which HE was a transversal theme. This mapping was complemented by an in-depth review of HE-related content within each manifesto. The four main topics for this analysis (access, financing, management, and results) were selected a priori, as being key in current policy debates. The list, of course, is selective and for reasons of space excludes other topics that have also been subject to political debate. Likewise, the analysis cannot always cover all topics in the utmost nuance; thus, further analyses would complement the arguments proposed here.

Labour and Conservative HE Discourses (1979–2010)

General Overview

Table 1 presents results from the analysis of the frequency of key words in the two parties’ manifestos and the specific location of the key words in each manifesto. It shows that the difference in the number of references to

TABLE 1
LABOUR PARTY AND CONSERVATIVE PARTY DISCOURSES IN RELATION TO EDUCATION (1979–2010)

	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
Manifesto length:								
Conservative	9,100	12,350	18,300	30,700	21,800	12,500	7,300	28,700
Labour	9,600	23,600	9,400	12,800	18,300	20,900	22,500	30,200
Education:*,†								
Conservative	10.99	8.91	16.39	13.36	15.60	3.20	19.18	6.62
Labour	13.54	25.00	31.91	28.91	25.14	28.71	23.11	19.87
HE:*								
Conservative	1.10	5.67	9.29	5.54	2.75	7.20	8.22	5.92
Labour	3.13	2.97	5.33	3.13	3.83	12.44	5.78	9.27
Subsection:‡								
Conservative	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Labour	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Share:§								
Conservative	.7	1.5	1.6	.6	.5	1.5	.6	1.4
Labour	.7	.3	2.0	.9	.4	1.6	1.0	1.0
Spread:¶								
Conservative	1	3	1	4	2	4	2	4
Labour	1	3	1	2	3	9	6	8

NOTE.—My elaboration from parties' manifestos. HE = higher education; N = no; Y = yes.

* Mentions of word/expression per 10,000 words.

† Includes higher education/university/college/polytechnic institute. References to the University for Industry initiative, which mainly provides training on basic skills, are excluded. References to university technical colleges, which do not teach at the higher education level, are excluded for 2010.

‡ Existence of a subsection mainly on HE.

§ Word share (%) of the manifesto taken by main discussion on HE—regardless of whether this is a separate subsection or not.

¶ Number of subsections in which HE/university/college are mentioned—the number of subsections varies between manifestos but is generally large and fairly compact—between 50 and 80—except for the 2005 election, when Labour's manifesto had over 100 subsections and the Conservatives' manifesto fewer than 20. Excludes mentions in case study boxes about cities with a university or similar institution in which nothing is said about HE.

“education” as a general term in the Labour and Conservative manifestos was relatively narrow in 1979 and in 2005. In the rest of the period analyzed, however, Labour devoted much greater attention to education than did Conservatives, more than doubling Conservative mentions of “education” except in 1987 and 1997. The situation is very different with HE up until 1997, as HE occurred substantially less in Labour than in Conservative manifestos, particularly in the 1980s and up until 1997, coinciding with the arrival of New Labour. In the following four elections (1997–2010), Labour devoted more attention to HE than did the Conservatives, except for 2005. The context is one of resurgence in the importance of HE in the 2000s' manifestos after a dip in the 1990s and a reversal of the leading party: the Conservatives' mean number of mentions of HE for the two elections in the 1980s is 7.48; in the two elections in the 1990s, 4.14; and in the three elections in the 2000s, 7.11.⁴ For Labour, the averages were 4.15 in the 1980s (55.5 percent in relation to the Conservatives); 3.48 in the 1990s (84.1 percent); and 9.16 in the 2000s (128.8 percent).

⁴ The mean numbers were obtained by summing the number of mentions of HE per 10,000 words in each manifesto for a given decade and dividing the result by the number of elections in that decade—e.g., (9.29 + 5.67)/2 for the Conservative Party in the 1980s.

The next three indicators, on “subsection,” “share,” and “spread,” measure the location of the references to HE in the manifestos. As can be seen in the table, both parties had a subsection for HE in their manifestos more often than not (the Conservatives, five out of eight times; and Labour, six out of eight). The main difference has appeared recently: whereas the Conservatives had a subsection in only two of the last four elections (1997–2010), Labour had an HE subsection in all four manifestos since 1997, reversing the trend of 1987 and 1992. The table indicates a more mixed result in relation to the share of the manifesto devoted to the main discussions on HE. Although here Labour took the lead in four elections since 1979, against three for the Conservatives and one tie, each party led on two elections since 1997—even though the 2010 Conservative HE lead is somewhat disputable because the HE section in their 2010 manifesto (entitled “Improve Skills and Strengthen Higher Education”) contains substantial references to non-HE issues, whereas New Labour’s HE sections were more focused on HE throughout the period.

Finally, regarding the degree to which HE is embedded in other parts of the manifestos, Labour made references to HE in the same or in fewer sections of its manifestos than the Conservatives did in the period 1979–92. However, this trend was reversed in 1997, with notable differences in the three elections from 2001 on: the number of Labour references to HE in other sections tripled those of the Conservatives—although the 2005 figures provide a distorted vision, since it was the only election besides 1987 in which one party’s manifesto had more than twice as many sections as the other party’s had.

This suggests two fairly distinct Labour periods. Up to the arrival of New Labour’s Third Way, the Labour Party gave greater importance to education than the Conservative Party did, HE excluded. From 1997 to 2010, however, Labour concentrated more strongly on the supply side of the economy and education. Throughout the period of analysis, Conservatives’ measures have tended to remain more constant than Labour’s. However, the actual content of the proposed policies is more important than the frequency of references to HE in electoral manifestos. This is analyzed below.

Conservative Party Discourses in Manifestos

The late 1970s and early 1980s were a time of significant economic recession in the United Kingdom. Thatcher’s New Right argued that all major stakeholders had a common interest in raising productivity and profits to improve real living standards for everyone in a high-productivity, high-wage, low-tax economy. The 1979 Conservative manifesto highlighted the weaknesses of the British economy, claimed those weaknesses had led to substantial industrial unrest and strikes, and outlined its strategy to improve the economy.

The Conservatives took advantage of this context to put forward an instrumental view of education, referring to its crucial role for the United Kingdom's recovery to prosperity. Education, Conservatives held, could not help in the economic recovery if it was doomed by low standards (Conservative Party 1979). However, raising standards should be done without increasing public expenditure, in line with Conservatives' argument that public investment should take place within the limits of "what the taxpayer can afford" (Conservative Party 1979, 7). Their discourse stressed that increased efficiency within existing budgetary allocations was possible (Conservative Party 1979, 1983) and that, as a result, budgetary control ought not jeopardize opportunities for access. They claimed that more people could access HE thanks to "generous support systems" (Conservative Party 1992, 24; and see 1997, 20) and that high standards in HE could be provided at constant costs to the taxpayer: "We are committed to widening opportunities without compromising academic standards" (Conservative Party 1992, 22), through better use of available resources.

References to the value of research and scholarship for their own sake were undermined by the need for economic relevance (Conservative Party 1987). In spite of a token reference to "research and scholarship for their own sake" (Conservative Party 1987, 10), the complexity of the conservative tradition in its view of HE was not reflected in their manifestos. Conservatives proposed increasing the budget only for fields that they viewed as directly affecting economic development and international competitiveness, such as technological, scientific, and engineering courses (Conservative Party 1983, 1987, 1992): "Our universities and polytechnics, too, must generate new ideas and train the skilled workforce of the next generation. . . . The very large sums of public money now going to higher education must be spent in the most effective way. Within that budget, we want to see a shift toward technological, scientific and engineering courses" (Conservative Party 1983, 14).

The necessity for HE to be economically relevant was thought to be the only way into international competitiveness and out of welfare dependence in the context of globalization: "Developing economies are able to provide highly-skilled labour at a fraction of the costs of British labour. The only way we can compete is by dramatically improving the skills of Britain's workforce. . . . A Conservative government will not accept another generation being consigned to an uncertain future of worklessness and dependency" (Conservative Party 2010, 16). Conservatives also stressed initially the role of education as a tool to create equality of opportunity, at the expense of measures that promoted equality outcomes through social spending, to appeal to a wider spectrum of voters. The meritocratic discourse was incorporated despite the poor performance of education alone as a single mechanism for social mobility in the United Kingdom (see Goldthorpe and Mills 2005; Souto-Otero 2010). Expanding HE access from the low level of the 1980s meant,

de facto, increasing access for the middle classes. By 1987 the Conservatives argued that there had been a substantial improvement in access to HE under their government, with one in four young people going into HE in the mid-1980s, compared to one in eight at the beginning of the 1980s (Conservative Party 1987) and a high rate of degree completion. The Conservatives nevertheless explicitly committed themselves in the late 1980s and early 1990s to a further expansion of the system and to widening participation by making new funds available to students through top-up loans instead of further grants: “We will continue to expand the number of students in HE. . . . We are abolishing the artificial ‘binary line’ between universities and polytechnics” in order to give HE access to a third of young people by the year 2000 (Conservative Party 1992, 24).⁵

According to the Conservatives, these measures would help reinforce the image of education as a level playing field. Yet the field was far from level. Selection of students by traditional universities continued to be highly stratified, and the individual student’s decision to continue study depended crucially on family background (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Breen 2005).

In the 1980s, the Conservatives had been committed to access and widening participation to help children from all backgrounds to achieve HE credentials. After the system had expanded to the middle classes, the Conservatives’ interest in access and widening participation dwindled in the early 1990s; it reappeared only in 2010 under a new “Compassionate Conservatism” (see my “Conclusions” section). During the 2001 and 2005 elections, the Conservatives advocated the abolition of student fees approved by Labour, in a new move to attract the middle classes, who benefit disproportionately from HE. In that period, core principles of the Conservatives that had been largely absent in their manifestos during the 1990s were recovered: competition, choice, and specialization. Furthermore, whereas government intervention to ensure standards was defended until 1997, from that date on—with the Conservatives in opposition—the route to “excellence” was linked to government withdrawal from HE, to free it of the “threat from interference by politicians” (Conservative Party 2001, 5; 2010, 17). Additionally, HE financial independence through individual endowments paid for by “future asset sales and the reform of student loans” (Conservative Party 2001, 4) would “free” universities from reliance on state funding (Conservative Party 2001, 8; 2005, 9). Universities would be encouraged to establish joint university-business research and development institutes, although the importance of fundamental research was also recognized (Conservative Party 2010). In other words, the Conservatives’ position was that universities should become more “private” and deregulated.

⁵ Loans are a favored Conservative option, on the assumption that making loans available for poorer students mitigates the negative effect on access produced by privatizing the costs of attending HE (see Friedman 1955).

Labour Party Discourses in Manifestos

Labour's discourse in the 1970s and 1980s was different from that of the Conservatives in two main respects: it defended spreading opportunity through widening access to a university education, putting greater emphasis on the compensatory principle, and it supported an active state role in the management of the education system. Moreover, Labour made no reference to choice or competition among institutions during the period analyzed (1979–2010). Equality of opportunity was the guiding principle of Labour's education policy during the 1980s. The Labour Party (1979, 1987) thus argued for increasing and widening participation in HE for people from "working-class backgrounds" (Labour Party 1979, 1983) in contrast to more general Conservative commitments to "expand" and "widen participation" without signaling particular target groups. Furthermore, Labour aimed to widen participation of adult learners (Labour Party 1979, 8; 1983, 16, 24; 1987). To achieve this, the Open University and the grant system would be enhanced and Conservative proposals for student loans explicitly rejected (Labour Party 1983, 24). Access became an even more central aim in the mid-1980s. Labour's 1983 manifesto declared that its policy for education was based on reversing the "Tory's cuts to restore the right of all qualified young people seeking HE to secure a place" and on "substantially expand[ing] opportunities for adults in . . . higher education" (Labour Party 1983, 24) as a "second chance for personal development" (Labour Party 1987, 10).

Thus, in contrast to the Conservatives' rhetoric regarding increased efficiency as the key to maintaining quality and access to HE, Labour argued that increased resources were necessary. This increase was initially proposed to come from public sources and not from top-up tuition fees, which Labour promised not to introduce (Labour Party 2001). Investment in education could increase as a share of national income as the costs of unemployment fell (Labour Party 1997). In 2001, after a first term of relative financial austerity, the Labour Party (2001) claimed to have made a substantial commitment to increase education spending (at all levels) from 4.7 percent of national income in 1997 to 5.5 percent in 2005 (Labour Party 2005, 33). However, the discourse soon turned to diversifying funding sources to complement public investment in HE, following the introduction of top-up fees and greater calls for collaboration with the private sector.

Coming more in line with Conservative proposals, Labour argued that the cost of student maintenance should be increasingly borne by graduates, through loans (an instrument that Labour had explicitly rejected in its 1983 and 1992 manifestos) to be repaid on an income-related basis and under longer payback periods than advocated by the Conservatives (Labour Party 1997). Labour suggested that the continuing underrepresentation of "non-traditional" groups in HE might result from their lack of information and aspiration as much as from their financial concerns. Labour stressed the

importance of disseminating the economic benefits of HE and argued for outreach projects to attract more students from nontraditional backgrounds (Labour Party 2010). The implication was that individuals, not only the state, needed to address the existing shortcomings in access. In this period, Labour saw as the main role for government the solution of “market failures” in terms of lack information/credit, in stark contrast with Labour’s earlier position, in which the state was to actively promote access. The party nevertheless remained committed to “expanding” and “widening” access to achieve social mobility (Labour Party 2010) and covered these topics in greater depth than the Conservatives did.

Along with its evolution on the issue of financing, the Labour Party increasingly, starting in the late 1980s, saw HE as an ingredient of economic vitality as well as a foundation for fairness (Labour Party 1987), thus closing the gap between the two parties in their debates on the purpose of HE. Labour argued that “merit comes before privilege” and that “life-chances should be for all the people . . . whatever their background” (Labour Party 2001, 1, 3). However, the 1997 Labour manifesto also saw education as a tool to combat inflation, low growth, and unemployment. The 2001 Labour manifesto did argue for an expansion of HE and set out a 10-year target to increase participation to 50 percent for those under age 30. HE expansion would be achieved, Labour stated, primarily through the introduction of vocationally oriented 2-year Foundation Degree programs designed to offer a professionally relevant HE qualification as a way into skilled work or further study (Labour Party 2001, 2005, 2010). As the Conservatives had suggested in the 1980s, expansion should come also, Labour now proposed, from “science, technology, engineering and maths as well as applied areas of study in key economic growth sectors” (Labour Party 2010, 31). Targets in 2010 combined HE with advanced apprenticeships and technician training, with 75 percent of the population below age 30 going into any of these routes (Labour Party 2010).

Labour expressed the increasingly significant link between education and the labor market with progressive force from the early 1990s and, in particular, under the Third Way, which no longer included solidarity and equality as core values of the political Left. Values such as opportunity, responsibility, and fairness became central. The state’s job was to guarantee the provision of an “adequate education,” defined instrumentally as education that would enable individuals to have the opportunity to participate in the labor market. The rationale for expanding HE was clearly presented in economic terms: “Higher education brings on average 20 percent higher earning and a 50 percent lower chance of unemployment. It is time for a historic commitment to open higher education to half of all young people before they are 30, combined with increased investment to maintain academic standards” (Labour Party 2001, 29).

In the 1990s, and in line with previous Conservative Party proposals from the late 1970s, Labour identified university links with industry as an area to be strengthened (Labour Party 1992), and references to adult learners and self-development disappeared. The need to defend the world-class reputation of British university education and the importance of its links with economic prosperity (e.g., Conservative Party 1979, 1987, 1992) were themes that Labour incorporated into its discourse (Labour Party 1997, 2000, 2005, 2010). Entrepreneurship was to be fostered: “Every college and university should be twinned with a business champion” (Labour Party 2005, 23). This focus on the economic importance of knowledge and HE was largely at the expense of earlier Labour views of education as a tool for social and political emancipation, which traditionally have been linked to the Left (Peers 1958). In fact, going one step further than Conservative arguments, Labour argued that HE itself should be seen as a business and managed as such: “We must seize the opportunity to develop education, in particular higher education, as a great export business. Universities will be encouraged to develop international links. . . . We want the Open University . . . to reach the global market in distance learning” (Labour Party 2010, 13).

The education discourse advocated both by Labour and by the Conservatives became both technical and political—technical in its orientation toward producing the “individuals” allegedly required by the growing “knowledge economy,” and political to legitimize economic flexibility and the loss of social rights (Fairclough 2000). Some of Labour’s measures, such as the introduction of top-up fees, were intended to preserve the compensatory principle (Labour Party 2005, 40) but encountered strong opposition from students and from Conservatives for jeopardizing equality of opportunity and discouraging “good students” from college by the burden of loans that they would have to repay even when their incomes were low (Conservative Party 2001).

This recent Conservative interest in the less advantaged in society was embedded under the Compassionate Conservatism label (Olasky 2000), used in the United Kingdom by William Hague and Duncan Smith and proliferated later by David Cameron. This implied a change in concern, from lowering public spending to improving citizens’ lives—in particular, those of the poor—in an attempt to derail the social democrats’ greatest rhetorical advantage: their monopoly claim on caring about the worst-off (Magnet 1999; Dorey 2007). Following this view, government has a responsibility not to redistribute the wealth of citizens but to provide underprivileged individuals with skills and opportunities to create their own wealth—similar to New Labour’s Third Way postulates. Market mechanisms are seen as efficient tools to organize the economy and the community—in particular, faith-based organizations—to manage the delivery of social services (Evans 2008). Whereas the Third Way had moved Labour to the Right, Conservatives became ready

to give up on some of those aspects that in the past had detached them from middle England and to move to the center, squeezing the political spectrum. Compassionate Conservatism, in this way, became a rejoinder of the Third Way (Kuypers et al. 2003).

Conclusions

The initial treatment of education in the manifestos of both parties conformed to Wilensky's (2002) thesis that social democratic parties accord greater importance to education than do conservative parties, up to the HE level, at which point the emphasis is reversed. However, since the mid-1990s and up to 2010 the Labour Party—in the discourse of New Labour—gave increasing prominence to HE, and to education in general (see Boix 1998). Yet there was a marked narrowing in the rhetorical differences of both parties in this period, as a result of Labour's move toward positions previously defended by the Conservatives. This finding is consistent with the global trends presented in the education literature reviewed above. While an increasing emphasis on education became a defining characteristic of Labour, which communicated its messages more emphatically and clearly than did the Conservatives, Labour's message became nonetheless more an abridged version of the Conservatives' and less a reflection of Labour's own identity and singularity than in the past.

This narrowing of differences in Conservative and Labour positions was not uniform across topics. There was greater convergence in relation to arguments that support the need for diversification of HE institutions and, more fundamentally, in relation to discussions on HE's purpose and results. HE received a new univocal mandate to create the workforce required by the private sector, knowledge for industry, and more general economic development. Greater differences continued in relation to access, financing, and management. Regarding access, the Conservative Party was initially in favor of the expansion of the HE system, a move that would favor the middle classes. This could be achieved, the party contended, not through greater spending, which would have contradicted its aim to contain all public spending, but through increased efficiency in spending and in ending the binary divide, upgrading polytechnics to university status to lead to a massive expansion of the system (Conservative Party 1992).

Although this could be seen as a progressive movement akin to the ending of tracking at the primary levels (Trow 1998), in reality the move aimed to diversify the HE system and enhance the vocational character of much of its provision, while reducing costs per unit in the system. In effect, this expansion came from lower-tier providers, which led to accusations of class bias and "watering down the system." Yet it fit with instrumental views of HE at the time and satisfied the aspirations of many families to send their children to HE in a cost-effective way. The associated Conservative discourses deflected

government responsibility for individual well-being: as access to HE increased, so did the emphasis on individual responsibility to be economically independent. Conservatives defended the public subsidy of fees, which favored the upper and middle classes, given the social structure in the United Kingdom and the lack of a sufficiently developed grant system.

Labour, by contrast, defended a more targeted approach inspired by the compensatory principle, to which it would direct much of the additional revenue raised through the introduction of variable fees. It also adopted a wider view on the obstacles to HE access facing different socioeconomic groups and proposed a new set of policy measures particularly based on information campaigns on HE benefits.

In terms of the management of the system, Conservatives defended the need for greater efficiency of the HE system and have turned their discourse in recent times toward more neoliberal positions, focusing on institutional financial autonomy, provider competition, choice, and specialization. Labour has not fully followed rhetorically in this respect—at least not yet.

The observed narrowing of political discourses can be explained with reference to “median voter” arguments, which assume that parties are motivated by winning elections more than by an enduring commitment to particular policies or constituencies (Jackman 1975). Jonas Pontusson and David Rueda (2010) report that in the past few decades the median voter has become more conservative in advanced industrialized countries. Against reformist arguments that increased social rights would increase freedom for workers, it would appear that since the 1950–60s there has been a decrease in the power, or an increase in the risk aversion, of the middle classes that makes it more difficult for them to make claims to protect the social benefits they had achieved in the previous decades. In any case, the move of the median voter to the right at least partly explains the developments outlined above: as the median voter moved to the right, Labour followed in an attempt to win elections. Ideologically, this has been difficult, as it could be perceived as a betrayal of former principles, policies, and values. In this respect, the recourse to rhetorical arguments has exploited the potential of external circumstances such as globalization, competitiveness, and their association with instrumentally conceived notions of lifelong learning—rather than election-winning motives—to justify this change (Pierson 1996). In the United Kingdom, as in other nations, social democracy lost part of its distinct identity to enable New Labour to become electorally successful (Callaghan and Tunney 2001).

New Labour and later Compassionate Conservatism argue that what matters is what works rather than ideology. Ideology is thus presented as outdated, rigid, dogmatic. However, disavowing ideology is not the same as overcoming it, since the pragmatic face of “what works” begs important questions about how one determines whether something is “working” and for whom (Reyes

2007). Therefore, the disavowal is, in itself, an ideological discourse. What we have seen is a move to the right by social democrats, creating a near consensus at the center, from which neither party seemed to deviate. Rather, the aim is to conquer the center through symbolic measures and palatable discourses for the median voter, at least on HE matters.

As a result, we have witnessed a transformation of the role of education in electoral campaigns during the period reviewed. Labour made this area less subject to “horizontal” debates (on the Right-Left continuum) by approximating its position to that of the Conservatives. Conservatives responded with a Compassionate Conservatism that further squeezes differences—at least for the time being. However, this has not meant that education became an electorally irrelevant topic. The fact that an issue is “vertical”—that there is a broad agreement on its objectives—does not mean that parties cannot “make it work” electorally, as the electorate still prioritizes vertical goals (Cailaud and Tirole 2002) and parties still need to be credible in their likely delivery (Green 2007). In a world in which politicians cannot seriously pursue all possible objectives during their term in office, they have to select which vertical issue to emphasize, identifying the most relevant concerns of the public. New Labour gave greater rhetorical importance to education from 1997, making it a core Labour area; Conservatives played catch-up.

How the Conservatives can take this further in future elections is a question upon which the British education literature has remained rather evasive. There is no turn toward less instrumental strands of conservative thinking on education in sight. David Cameron argued that the difficulties his Conservative Party has experienced since the late 1990s were the product of success rather than failure; that is, his party enjoyed victory in the “battle of ideas” with the Labour Party (Evans 2008). If the Conservatives fight for the center convincingly, they may well reap electoral benefits. In majoritarian systems faced with two major parties—as is the case in the United Kingdom—that both appeal to the center but cannot fully commit to the median voter, middle-class voters will be concerned that the center-left party may succumb to radicals within it and reduce benefits to the middle class while increasing taxes. They may also be concerned that center-right governments could abandon their electoral platform and cut middle-class benefits, but there will be an expectation of offsetting cuts in taxes to avoid an openly regressive outcome.

Whether for reasons of ethics or political stability, the scope for state redistribution from the poor and middle classes to the rich seems to be limited in advanced democracies. This produces a disadvantage for the Left in majoritarian systems, which is precisely the opposite of the bias in proportional representation systems (Iversen and Soskice 2006). The reconstruction of the Conservatives to the center, however, may face both internal resistance (Dorey 2007) and external confusion by its traditional constituencies (Evans 2008).

To implement the “compassionate” promises of the party, the Conservatives would likely require increased revenues, which would make it difficult to promise significant tax cuts. An alternative would be to wait for a swing in public views about the importance of new issues that Conservatives could make their own, as Labour did with education, or to provide the electorate with a more credible “managerial alternative” than Labour’s. A third alternative would be a long-term alliance with the Liberal Party, but this is unlikely. In fact, the Conservative-Liberal coalition government created after the 2010 elections (the first such coalition after the Second World War) faced important difficulties from its inception, derived at least in part from the fundamental contradictions in the two parties’ electoral promises on HE and, more specifically, in relation to HE tuition fees. The Liberals, who had advocated the elimination of student fees in their electoral manifesto, modified their position as part of their Coalition deal. This caused splintering within the Liberal Party and student demonstrations. The consequences for the public image of the party were significant, with plummeting support in the electorate; the issue has even been labeled “toxic” for the Liberals (Harris 2011).

Finally, the analysis has revealed two important points for the educational literature. First, there is a need to establish a more systematic dialogue with political science and related disciplines. Second, there may be benefit from focusing more strongly on a meso-level of analysis in order to avoid, on the one hand, functionalist and globalization approaches, which overemphasize commonalities and convergences between parties’ discourses across all education areas and aspects and, on the other hand, detailed narratives that overemphasize party positions’ uniqueness and divergence.

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