

## Manifesto Watch: Content analysis of Conservative and Labour Manifestos, 1945-2019

There has been a great deal of interest in recent years in the direction of travel of the main political parties in the UK. The Conservative and Labour Parties have both been accused of harking back to the past, relying on old solutions to new problems. Both parties have also been accused of abandoning the values of their parties, their members or both.

General election manifestos help us to judge whether these accusations have legitimate grounding. They provide a glimpse into the values, attitudes, thinking and aspirations of political parties at that time. They also act as political signalling devices, aimed at candidates, party members and potential voters. In this sense, they are useful records that tell us something about ideology, leadership and intended political directions.

There are limitations of course. Manifestos are, by definition, aspirational. They do not tell us very much about policy making. They may reflect more closely the views of party leaders and well-placed individuals than a party or political movement. And in some cases they may present aspirations that the party knows will never actually see the light of day.

This report is based on a comparative, quantitative analysis of the manifestos of the two main (at least by national vote-share) UK political parties.

This brief report looks at all manifestos from 1945 until 2019. It is a preliminary, first-look, analysis of 2019 compared with previous manifestos, comparing across both parties and within the parties. The analysis makes use of *WordStat*, quantitative analysis software.<sup>1</sup>

### Findings

The following figures plot either keywords or categories (see below) on a map. Wordstat identifies keywords within each manifesto and, on the basis of their relative frequencies, assesses the similarity of manifestos with each other.

Figure 1 plots all major words (extracting common words), from all manifestos over the entire period. What is striking in this map is that, based on an examination of keywords and frequencies only, there is a clear progressive path that shifts incrementally over time, and in the same direction, for the two parties. This illustrates how common themes and threads are covered by both parties over time. More useful on 'whole population' samples such as this is the ability within Wordstat to categorise keywords according to subject and, where applicable, sentiment. For instance, the category 'Regulations+' includes keywords that defend and/or promote higher regulations, eg: regulate, re-regulate and increased accountability. Conversely, 'deregulate', 'liberalisation' and 'red tape' are keywords that suggest a party's negative stance towards regulations. The categories utilised here are adapted and expanded categories developed by Laver and Garry (2000). Their categories are designed to estimate the policy positions of political actors.

---

<sup>1</sup> See <https://provalisresearch.com/products/content-analysis-software/>



Figure 3: 1979-2017

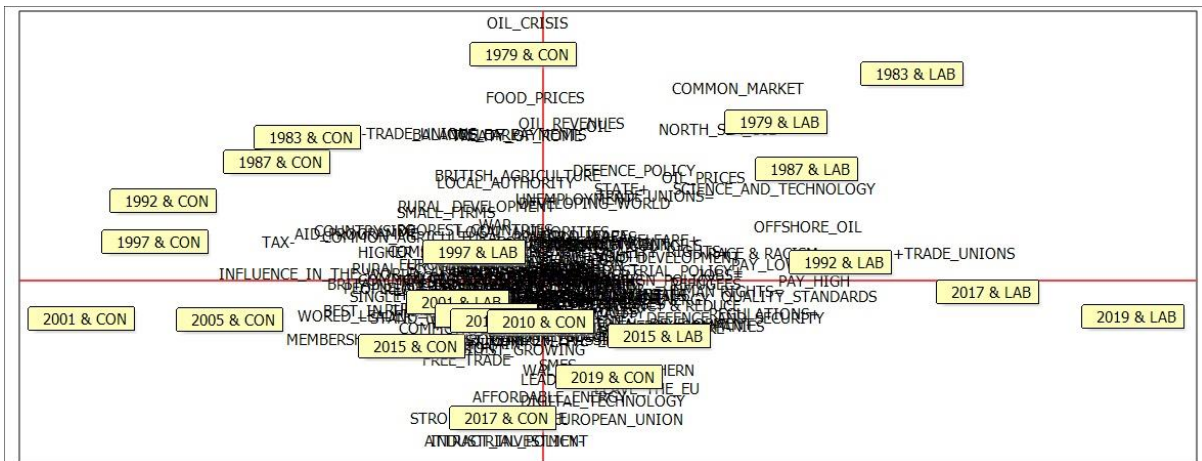
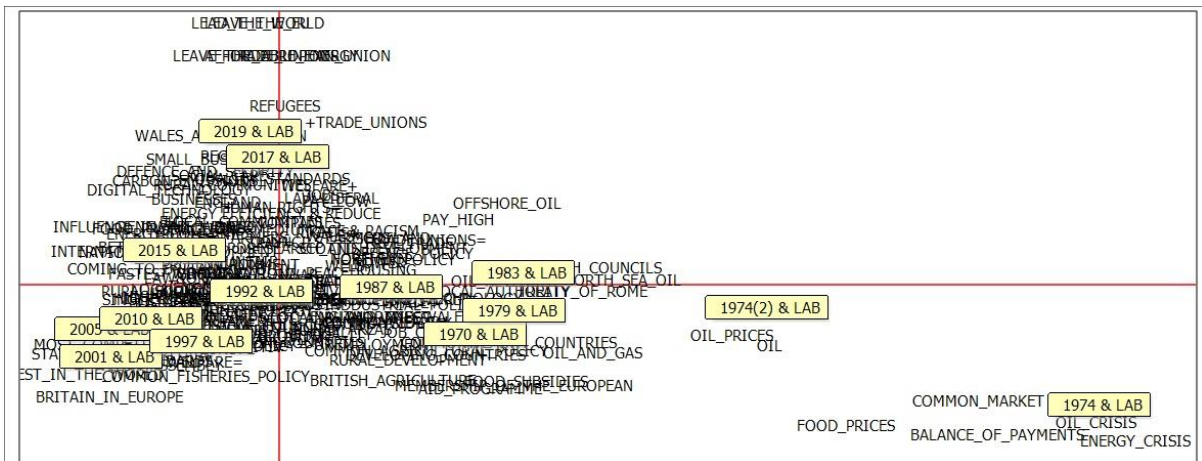


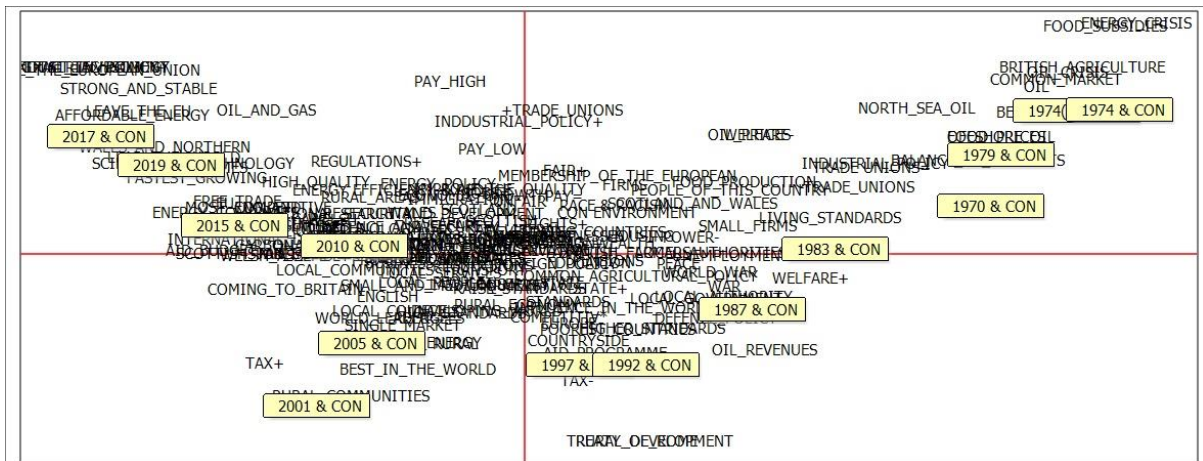
Figure 3 is more interesting still. This map zooms in on this narrower period from 1979. To reiterate, the plots are the outcome of complex algorithms, they are not manipulated in any way. This is important to point out because this map has the appearance of a designed flow-chart. The 1979 Conservative manifesto is plotted at the top, with subsequent Conservative and Labour manifestos following almost in year-order to the bottom in the case of the Conservatives, and to the bottom right quadrant in the case of the Labour. The New Labour period is captured in the middle-bottom space that also clusters around the greatest number of ‘shared-centre-ground’ categories. The radical outliers here are Conservative, 1979 and 2017, and for Labour 2019 and 1983 which is pretty-much what we’d expect to read in politics textbooks.

Figure 4: labour manifestos, 1970-2019



Zooming in still further to the individual parties post-1970 builds an clearer picture. This mapping again confirms the same outliers, but it does not suggest that the Corbyn period has harked back to the 1970s as is the charge in some quarters. In fact, Corbyn’s manifesto is no closer to the 1974 Wilson manifesto as is Kinnocks 1987 manifesto. The real break with the past, according to this mapping exercise, appears to come in 1992.

Figure 5: Conservatives, 1970-2019



The same exercise repeated for the Conservative Party shows a smoother, yearly-incremental shift over time. There's fewer signs of key breaks, even in 1979. Some years are slight outliers: 1974, 2001 and 2017. Based on this measure, the manifesto of 2017 appears to be more radical than 2019.