

# Opinion Structures in Political Parties - The Law of Increasing Polarization?

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## Abstract

*In 1973 John D. May put forward the theory and empirical evidence behind the famous law of curvilinear disparity, which claims that opinion structures within political parties position voters as moderates; activists or sub-leaders as extremists; and politicians as trapped in the middle of the two groups, which exercise different but very important powers over the politicians: electoral success and nomination respectively. The analysis of three different attitudes: ideological self-placement, general fiscal attitudes and specific fiscal attitudes, provides no support for the law of curvilinear disparity. On the contrary there is a tendency towards increasing polarization. Differences of opinion among people who vote for different parties are much less than political disagreements between the local party chairmen of different parties or between politicians from different parties.*

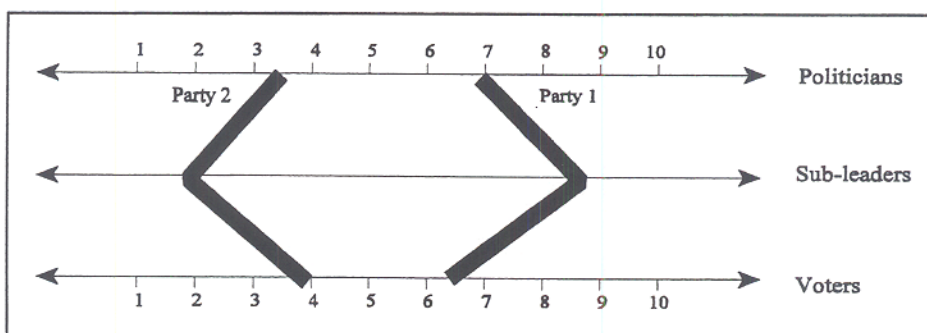
A classical element in the public as well as scientific debate about political parties is the question of parity or disparity in opinions between a party and the party's voters or members. The normative position underlying most of these debates is a claim saying that there ought to be a high degree of parity if democracy flourishes within the party or in society at large. But the most common empirical claim or observation is that there is a degree of disparity in opinions between the top and the bottom of parties no matter whether the bottom is defined as the rank-and-file members or as the voters.

One of the first to report this observation was Ostrogorski, who in the late 19th century wrote that »it is an almost general fact that the (local caucus) is more Radical than the mass of the party, more so even than the MP who has to submit to its demands.« (Ostrogorski, 1902/1964: 170).

Similar conclusions are found in Michels' study of the German Social Democratic party in the early 20th century. Party democracy is portrayed as a top-down system where the survival of the party and the interests of party leaders and the party bureaucracy becomes more important than the initial political goals of the party and its members, as well as party democracy. As an example Michels points to Engels foreword to Marx's »Die Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich 1848-49«, whose reformist political tone was later explained by Engels as the result of threats from anti-socialist legislation in Germany. In Michels' interpretation organizational survival became more important than the political ideals and goals set by the members (Michels, 1911/1962: 336).

Today the »old classics« in studies of opinion structures are often neglected because of a »modern classic«, John D. May's study from the early 1970s (May, 1973). May puts forward the theory of the so-called »special law of curvilinear disparity«, where the opinions of party leaders (politicians) are closer to the moderate opinions of voters rather than those of the sub-leaders -the party activists -who are more radical or pure in their opinions -which creates the curvilinear opinion structures as illustrated by Party 1 and Party 2 in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Illustration of May's special law of curvilinear disparity - example: ideological self-placement on a left-right scale where 1 is very left-wing and 10 is very right-wing.



This opinions structure is in May's words »...the normal configuration of major or semi-major parties operating where overt, organized, electoral competition for governmental office is institutionalized.« (May, 1973: 139). This chapter will first examine whether these curvilinear opinion-structures can be found in Danish local politics and, secondly, discuss why this is not the case!



## Opinion-structures in Danish local politics

In the early 1990s Danish local politics was studied intensively in the research project »Leadership in Local Politics« (Mouritzen, 1993). Three of the many data-sets generated by the project will be used to test the special law of curvilinear disparity. First, a postal survey with a sample of every fifth local politician in the 72 municipalities, which were selected so that they were representative of all the 275 Danish municipalities. 1,238 questionnaires were mailed and 912 (74 per cent) were returned. Second, a postal survey with the party chairmen of all local party organisations in the 72 selected municipalities. In all, 926 local organizations were included in the survey and 610 (66 percent) returned the questionnaire. Third, a survey involving 1,002 voters, carried out by the Gallup Institute in the form of personal interviews. These three surveys contained many questions about beliefs, values and attitudes to different aspects of democracy and local politics. The analysis below focuses on three aspects:

- Ideological self-placement on a right-left scale
- General fiscal attitudes
- Specific fiscal attitudes

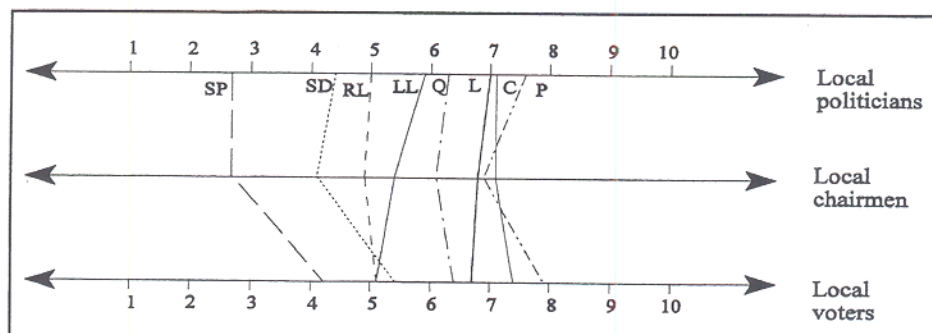
### Ideological self-placement on a right-left scale

In political science ideological self-placement serves as a rough gauge of individuals' political identity and almost all respondents were willing to answer the question about self-placement. May's special law of curvilinear disparity finds very little support in this respect, only the Social Democratic Party showed the expected pattern, with the local party chairmen as extremists. Conservative Party and Progress Party voters turned out to have the most extreme attitudes, while it is the politicians in the Liberal Party who are most extreme. The clearest tendency is that there are no tendencies! In some parties all three strata have a high degree of parity, while in other parties disparities are considerable; in some parties politicians are extremists, in others the party chairmen are most extreme, while others have voters as the most extreme stratum. It is impossible to talk of any kind of law of the structures of opinion, and this fact calls for a re-evaluation of the data with the focus not on each party, but instead on the party system as such.

A second look at figure 2 shows a tendency to increasing polarization the

higher the strata evaluated. Politicians had a range of 4.9 scale-points – from the politicians in the Socialist People's Party (2.7) to the Progress Party (7.6). The local party chairmen had a range of 4.3 scale-points – from party chairmen in the Socialist People's Party (2.8) to the Conservative Party (7.1), while the voters only had a range of 3.6 scale-points – from the Socialist People's Party voters (4.3) to the Progress Party (7.9). Whether this tendency towards increasing polarization is valid or not can only be concluded by reviewing other ways of gauging political attitudes.

Figure 2. Ideological self-placement of politicians, sub-leaders and voters in Danish parties, on a left-right scale where 1 is very left-wing and 10 is very right-wing.



\* C 'The Conservative Party, L 'The Liberal Party, LL 'Local Lists, P 'The Progress Party, Q 'The Christian People's Party, RL 'The Radical Liberals, SD 'The Social Democratic Party, SP 'The Socialist People's Party.

### General fiscal attitudes

The attitudes to the level of taxation and public expenditure in Danish local politics have been examined both at a general level and in various more specific fields of public service such as schools, roads etc. The general question on the extent of the Danish welfare state was phrased as a question – »If you could decide what ought to happen with the local taxation and the way the municipality spends the money, would you prefer« – 1) less tax and less service; 2) same tax and same service, and 3) higher tax and more service. The answers were coded respectively -1, 0 and 1. An average was calculated for each party and each stratum, and this varied from -1 (if all respondents in a stratum want less tax and service) to 1 (if all respondents in a stratum want higher tax and more service). The results for each stratum and party are given in Figure 3.

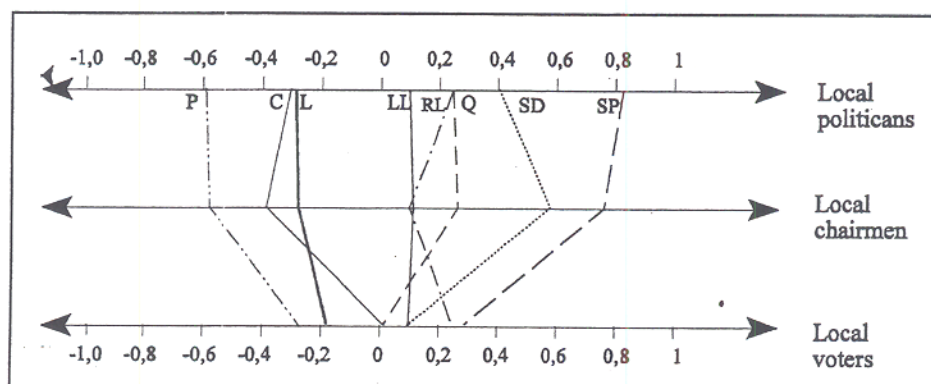
Again, the Social Democratic Party shows the curvilinear pattern, but is this time joined by the Conservative Party. The variation between the par-



ties, however, was extensive, both with regard to the level of parity and to the patterns found. So once again, the conclusion is that there is almost no support to the law of curvilinear disparity in Danish local politics.

This time the shift of focus from each party to the party system shows a variation of 1.41 scale-points among politicians, 1.37 scale-points among local party chairmen and 0.56 among local voters. Polarization clearly increases with the higher strata, but there is no significant difference between the local politicians and the local party chairmen. A more detailed analysis of the opinion structures of spending can be based on the attitudes to spending on numerous different kinds of public service.

Figure 3. Attitudes to tax and services. -1 'all support less service and less tax, and 1 'all support more service and more tax'



\* C 'The Conservative Party, L 'The Liberal Party, LL 'Local Lists, P 'The Progress Party, Q 'The Christian People's Party, RL 'The Radical Liberals, SD 'The Social Democratic Party, SP 'The Socialist People's Party.

### Specific fiscal attitudes

The last test of the law of curvilinear disparity is on specific attitudes to municipal spending on thirteen different areas of municipal service. The voters were asked whether their municipality was spending too little, sufficient, or too much money on:

- schools
- care for elderly people
- sports facilities
- roads and streets
- day-care and kindergartens
- social welfare
- libraries
- the environment

- road safety
- employment initiatives
- public transport
- culture
- administration

The answers were coded respectively 1, 0 and -1. The average was calculated for each stratum and each party.

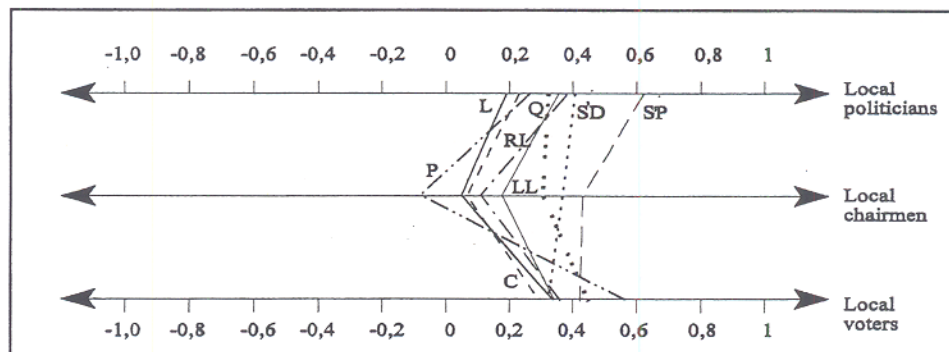
The overall result was that voters had a positive attitude to more spending on almost every kind of service. Only on social welfare, and particularly on administration, were averages negative and indicated a desire for less spending. The positive averages on the other services indicated a willingness to spend more money. This contrasts to the general fiscal attitude of most voters who want the same tax and service (71 per cent) or less tax and service (14 per cent) -although this is not shown clearly by Figure 3, and could be interpreted as a sign of fiscal illusion -a phenomenon also widespread among politicians and local party chairmen (Buch Jensen, 2000).

The results of the analysis of the different public services were never exactly the same, but spending on traffic safety is shown as an example of the results (cf. Figure 4). Within many of the public services local party chairmen were moderate in their willingness to spend more money, while politicians and especially voters were more positive towards extra spending. With regard to the law of curvilinear disparity the findings are unclear. For some parties and some services the law finds support: the party chairmen are more extreme, the voters are the least extreme, and the politicians lie in between the two extremes. But for other parties or other services willingness to spend more increases with higher strata or decreases with higher strata or simply has no pattern at all. Once again, the very clear conclusion is that the law of curvilinear disparity finds no solid empirical support in the study of Danish local politics.

With the shift of the analysis to the party system as a whole, it once again becomes clear that voters are much less polarized than local politicians and local party chairmen. This holds true for nine of the thirteen types of services. Of the remaining four services three (sports facilities, roads and streets and employment initiatives) show the same polarization of the different strata, while the last service (schools) shows voters as the most polarized stratum. Much more variation is seen in the relationship between politicians and party chairmen, sometimes politicians are most polarized, sometimes local party chairmen are the most polarized stratum.



Figure 4. Attitudes to spending more on road safety. -1 'all support less service and lower tax, and 1 'all support more service and more tax'



\* C ' The Conservative Party, L ' The Liberal Party, LL ' Local Lists, P ' The Progress Party, Q ' The Christian People's Party, RL ' The Radical Liberals, SD ' The Social Democratic Party, SP ' The Socialist People's Party.

The analysis above provides two clear conclusions.

- 1) The law of curvilinear disparity found no support in this study of Danish local politics. Regardless of whether the focus was on ideological self-placement, general or specific fiscal attitudes, the curvi linear pattern was rarely seen and was never in evidence for all or most parties, not even for the »major or semi-major« parties mentioned by May in the quotation above. The major parties in Danish local politics are the Social Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, and there was only support for the Social Democratic Party on ideological self-placement and general fiscal attitudes, not on specific fiscal attitudes and never for the Liberal Party!
- 2) A shift in focus from the individual parties to the party system as a whole revealed support for – if not a law – at least a tendency towards an increase in polarization, when the level shifts from voters to sub-leaders or to politicians, and sometimes also with the shift from the level of sub-leaders to that of politicians.

The two conclusions raise two new questions: a) Why was there no support for the curvilinear disparity? and b) Why was there no tendency towards increasing polarization?

Why was there no support for the curvilinear disparity and why was there no tendency towards increasing polarization?

One simple answer to the questions is that May's law was developed with the focus on national party organizations and this is the explanation for the lack of empirical support in Danish local politics. However, this is not a very good answer as there is no reason to believe that the characteristics, dynamics and logic of internal control, bias in recruitment patterns and political socialization in parties and elected assemblies, etc., used by May, should only have an impact on national politics. The fundamental powerful position of activists as well as voters are no less important in local politics than in national politics, due to their different prerogatives and resources: on the one hand, nomination and campaign support and on the other, electoral support and success. Another characteristic feature of Danish local politics is that voters' personal knowledge about each candidate is crucial to the electoral outcome. This should give politicians more incentives and freedom to move closer to voters, but this is clearly not what is actually happening.

Another answer is a methodological answer pointing to local party chairmen as poor representatives of the sub-leaders – they can in fact be claimed to be leaders, or to have very close connections with politicians. Local party chairmen often have a position as brokers or negotiators between activists and politicians and can be much more easily socialized to accept the attitudes, values and beliefs of politicians than the other, »purer« activists. It is not possible to test this explanation with the available data, but it clearly has a weakness: even with the influence of politicians the local party chairmen need the support of activists to be re-elected, and we could therefore expect to find them on the opposite side to politicians relative to voters – creating a weak curvilinear pattern – which, as mentioned, is often not found at all.

It is difficult to give a good explanation for the lack of support for the law of curvilinear disparity, but how can the tendency towards increasing polarization be explained? A probable answer is that the tendency is the result of invalid measures, because politicians and party chairmen reflect much more about their own political attitudes than do voters and that they are in a political world where the manifestation of disagreement is important. The lack of clear patterns within each party can be seen as the result of the very different party systems in Danish municipalities (Elklit, 1997). In different municipalities different degrees of ideological conflict give different manifestations within the same party, while the general tendency towards



polarization can be explained by the general need for ideological or attitudinal manifestation. This interpretation moves the explanation away from the May's world of power and self-interest into a much more complex world of discursive processes, which are almost impossible to test with the quantitative methods used here. The analyses needed should examine the link between attitudes and real-world political decisions, and the expectation would be not to find clear links between outspoken attitudes and actual political decisions on the individual level. This expectation is supported by analysis on municipal level, where Mouritzen (1991) show that there is no correlation between which party who has the power in a municipality and the municipal policy. Socioeconomic and sociodemographic variables turn out to be more important. However it is not possible to compare decisions in municipalities, which vary in size, demographics and history, with the available data set in this study.

To move from May's world of power and self-interest to a world of meaning and discourse would seem to render the question of opinion structures trivial for local and party democracy, but this is not the case – it will only move the debate into the complicated and interesting debate of »standing for« as opposed to »acting for« within the theories of representation (Pitkin, 1979)

In support of the interpretation, which cuts the link between the attitudes analysed here and the real political decisions, is the fact that Danish local politics is dominated by a consensus culture. Asked whether a politician should a) fight for his views even though it could lead to defeat or b) should always be willing to make a compromise, 88 per cent of the politicians in the survey chose the latter statement (Anderson, Berg & Mouritzen, 1996: 41). Most decisions in local councils and their committees are made either unanimously or with very broad support – as is the case in Danish national politics. All in all the consensus model (Goldsmith, 1992) not only of Denmark but the whole of Scandinavia could be the crucial factor in explaining the analysis reported here, but this would only be a provisional explanation – because what are the causes that create a consensual political climate? The discussion will stop here, without giving the final answers to why increasing polarization, and not curvilinear disparity is found in Danish local politics, but with strong indications of a fundamental weakness in May's theory, namely the neglect of the interparty discursive processes and political games between the competing parties which might be the real explanation for the many disparities in opinions structure in political parties. Much more empirical research is needed and it would probably be more fruitful to search for a tendency towards increasing polarization, rather than to search for patterns of curvilinear disparity -at least this seems to be the case in



Denmark, but probably also in many other countries – in particular when local politics is studied, but probably also in studies of national politics!

## Conclusion

In 1973, May formulated the law of curvilinear disparity, which claims that opinion structures within political parties places voters as moderates; activists or sub-leaders as extremists; and politicians trapped in the middle of the two groups, which exercise different but very important powers over the politicians: electoral success and nomination respectively. The analysis of three different attitudes: ideological self-placement, general fiscal attitudes and specific fiscal attitudes, provides no support for the law of curvilinear disparity. On the contrary support is found for a tendency towards increasing polarization. Differences of opinion among people who vote for different parties means much less than political disagreement between the local party chairmen of different parties and between politicians from different parties. This conclusion is a conclusion not on the analytical level of individual parties, but on the contrary on the level of the party system, which on the one hand make predictions on individual parties less precise compared to May's law, but on the other hand is much closer to the empirical facts in Danish local politics.

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