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LIBERAL PARTIES

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The Liberals figure among the oldest of the 'traditional' (European) party families. Liberalism and liberal parties have played a major role in the emergence of many modern Western states, in the building of the European Union, and also in democratisation processes and the promotion of liberal democracy across the globe. Nevertheless, the age and history of these parties only mask the great heterogeneity of this party family whose contours remain complicated to trace. This chapter aims to provide a snapshot of the main points of scholarly discussion about the characteristics and evolutions of liberal parties around the world.

Three general observations can be made about the state of the literature on liberal parties. First, the literature has been dominated by single case studies, except for a couple of comparative examinations. Second, it has focused on cases in advanced democracies – the Liberal Party in Canada for instance has attracted notable attention (Blais 2005; Carty 2015; Jeffrey 2021). Third, comparative endeavours have been usually limited to Europe (Kirchner 1988; De Winter 2000; Close and van Haute 2019a). In Africa, attention has mostly been drawn to the development (and replication) of a western model of *liberal democracy* (Brown and Kaiser 2007), rather than towards liberal parties *per se*. However, there is particular interest in the impact of liberalism on the structuring of the South African party system (van Staden 2019), and on the development of the Democratic Alliance as the major opposition party to the dominant African National Congress (Southern and Southall 2011). In Asia, especially in South-east Asia, the literature points to a limited influence of liberalism (Rodan and Hughes 2014, 6), except in the Philippines (Claudio 2017) and to a certain extent in Thailand (Larsson 2017). The review of the literature provided later is hence inevitably rooted in advanced democracies.

The chapter first assesses the way Mair and Mudde's (1998) four approaches to the concept of party family (name, transnational federation, origins and ideology) have been mobilised to delineate the contours of the liberal party family highlighting the difficulty of defining precisely the boundaries of this family using those criteria. Second, the chapter discusses the reasons for the electoral success (or failure) of liberal parties, among which we discuss their capacity to adapt strategically to party system change. Third, the chapter presents existing knowledge on the sociology of liberal voters, pointing to the sociodemographic diversity of this electorate. Fourth, it discusses liberal parties' unusual ability to gain power, partly explained by their pragmatism and positioning, which is often close to the 'median' legislator. Fifth, the chapter digs

into the typical organisational model of liberal parties. Finally, the main challenges of the party family are discussed, before we draw general conclusions.

How has the liberal party family been conceptualised?

Party name

Identifying liberal parties on the basis of their label can be quite misleading. On the one hand, some parties may mobilise the term 'liberal' while, according to other criteria, they can hardly be qualified as such. In advanced democracies, the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (Crespo 1995) should rather be considered as a conservative force despite its label. The Liberal Party of Australia is another case in point, although the party 'has not been philosophically uniform throughout its history' (Rickard 2007, 29). On the other hand, parties that allegedly develop a liberal ideology and/or adhere to transnational liberal federations do not uniformly refer to 'liberalism' in their labels. Only a minority of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) members in the European Parliament makes explicit reference to liberalism in their label (Close and van Haute 2019a). When examining the membership of the Liberal International, a direct reference to liberalism is virtually absent in the labels for parties in Africa, Asia and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries. In these contexts, references to 'democracy', 'democrat', 'democratic', 'freedom', 'renewal' or 'change' are more common. Avoiding referring to 'liberalism' may be strategic, as it may carry negative connotations.[1] By contrast, a 'liberal' label may be used strategically to gain international recognition, as occurred in several post-communist countries as they embraced European integration (Cholova and De Waele 2019, 226).

Transnational affiliation

Because of the ambiguity and value-laden connotations associated with liberalism, affiliation to transnational organisations has been used as a point of departure by comparative studies on liberal parties (Close and van Haute 2019a; Szmolka 2020). These studies have looked both at the parties' membership of the Liberal International (LI) and at their affiliation to regionally based transnational organisations, such as the ALDE or the Arab Liberal Federation (ALF).

However, this approach involves several limitations. First, like labelling, international affiliation has been shown to reflect political strategies rather than identification to common values (Smith 2014; Hloušek and Kopeček 2020). Moreover, transnational organisations can bring together parties with very different political projects and philosophies (Bardi et al. 2014). In that regard, McElroy and Benoit (2012, 163) suggested that the ALDE had 'the widest range of positions among its member parties'. Finally, some parties that allegedly conformed to a 'liberal' ideology may not formally adhere to any transnational federation. For instance, in France, The Republic on the Move! – LaREM, created in 2016 appears neither as a member of LI nor as a member of the ALDE, yet its MEPs sit with the liberal group in the European Parliament (Renew Europe) and it displays a 'liberal' ideological profile. The US Democratic Party, while standing as the 'liberal' opponent to the 'conservative' Republican Party, is not affiliated to any transnational federation.

Origins

The generic approach, which categorises parties according to the structural cleavage(s) from which they originated, has been argued to be better than labels and transnational affiliation for identifying party families (Seiler 1980), yet the liberal party family appears less discernible than

other party families on this dimension (Seiler 2002). Indeed, liberal parties appeared 'scattered' over several categories (Steed and Humphreys 1988, 400), depending on national specificities.

In the Benelux countries, liberal parties originated on the secular side of the church versus state cleavage, although they also gradually asserted their liberal (or 'bourgeois') identity on the socio-economic cleavage (Delwit 2016; Voerman 2019). In Germany and Switzerland, liberal parties were primarily entrenched on the 'right' side of the socio-economic cleavage (Bukow 2019). In the UK, in the nineteenth century, the Liberals were committed to promote *reforms* against conservatism, especially favouring free trade (Steed and Humphreys 1988, 399), although the party was divided between different wings, traditions and interests – Whigs, Radicals, moderates, etc. (Cook 2010). In Northern Europe, liberal parties were closely associated with agrarian movements, being positioned on the rural side of the territorial cleavage (Arter 2019; Bolin 2019; Kosiara-Pedersen 2019).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the emergence of 'new' cleavages led to the birth of a second generation of liberal parties (Close and van Haute 2019b). In the Netherlands, Democraten 66 was created by former members of the VVD (Party of Freedom and Free-thinking) along 'postmaterialist' values (Voerman 2019). In the 1990s, the 'transnational cleavage' (Hooghe and Marks 2018), also described as demarcation-integration (Kriesi et al. 2006), caused internal tensions among established liberal parties. The Liberal Forum (later merged with NEOS) in Austria and the New Alliance (now Liberal Alliance) in Denmark were formed by dissident liberals in reaction against the ethnocentric and Eurosceptic direction of their parties (Ennser-Jedenastik and Bodlos 2019, 130–131; Kosiara-Pedersen 2019, 46). In Iceland, Bright Future and the Reform Party emerged in the 2010s in a context of polarisation around the European issue (Thorhallsson 2021). In Southern Europe, although marked by the absence of liberal parties (Nuñez 2019), liberal actors also developed, such as *Ciudadanos* (2006) and *Unión, Progreso y Democracia* (2007) in Spain; and liberals also emerged in France *En Marche* (2016). Overall, the liberal party family has gradually come to occupy the 'integration' side of the new cleavage (Kriesi et al. 2006).

In Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) after 1989, liberal actors emerged who positioned themselves as 'anti-communist' through opposing the 'heirs' of communist parties and committing to the transition process (Cholova and De Waele 2019, 226). With the prospect of EU accession, the socio-economic cleavage became blurred, resulting in left- and right-wing parties aligning to promote free-market and privatisation (Tavits and Letki 2009). From the 2010s, the transnational cleavage and the increasing salience of the EU issue reinforced the commitment of liberal parties to 'pro-EU' positions, in relation to both economic and cultural issues.

Elsewhere, the 'cleavage' approach has rarely been applied to examine liberal parties, given the lack of social grounding for political parties. The American continent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was marked by a general 'division' between conservatives and liberals (Dix 1989), in the absence of class-based mass parties. The birth of the Canadian Liberal Party was related to the reformist movement in the colonies. Liberals sought greater political autonomy for Canadians and promoted free trade, while the Conservatives emphasised Canada's close relationship to the UK and British Empire and promoted economic protectionism. The linguistic cleavage and regional differences also mattered: the liberals managed to conceal English and French speaking movements, while hostility prevailed between the French Canadians and the Conservatives (Jeffrey 2010; Clarkson 2014). In Latin America, the greater political instability, de-institutionalisation and increased personalisation of party systems (Sanchez 2008) resulted in the virtual disappearance of most traditional conservative and liberal parties (Dix 1989, 25) – except in Paraguay and Honduras, where they remained significant.

Elsewhere, lines of conflict have been diverse. In the MENA countries, liberals have often been associated with the 'secular' or 'anti-Islamist' side of the religious cleavage (Szmolka 2020). South African liberal actors opposed apartheid; then, from the 1990s, they progressively aggregated opposition forces to the dominant African National Congress (van Staden 2019). In Russia, *Yabloko* (Russian United Democratic Party) developed in the 1990s as the principal opposition party (White 2012, 219). However, the party declined at the beginning of the twenty-first century as a result of internal divisions, organisational crisis and lack of financial resources, leading Hale (2004) to conclude that liberalism had failed to establish itself in the Russian party system (see Chapter 30).

Ideology and policy positions

The ideological criterion has been central in the scholarly discussion on the distinctiveness of the liberal party family (Steed and Humphreys 1988; Close 2019; Szmolka 2020). Empirical analyses point to the ambivalence of liberal thought, and highlight the ideological heterogeneity of the liberal party family (Smith 1988, 16; Ennser 2012, 167; Close 2019). First, their position in the left–right space has been described as 'ambivalent' (Smith 1988; De Winter and Marcet 2000), or 'between left and right' (Smith 1988). Indeed, liberals have been perceived to be more *rightist* than the left (socialists, greens, radical left) and more *leftist* than the right (conservatives, Christian democrats, radical right), due to their commitment to two 'types' of freedoms (Smith 1988): economic and cultural. This ambivalence is seen as one of the major distinctive features of the liberal party family (Close 2019): liberals combine a right-wing position on economic issues and a centre-left position on cultural matters. This ambivalent position is also found among non-European liberal parties. For instance, in Latin America, the liberals have advocated free trade and defended commercial interests, federalism and disestablishment of the church (Dix 1989, 24).

Second, liberalism constitutes a complex doctrine or a 'complex of doctrines' (Geuss 2002) that is not easily simplified. Economic liberal positions can range from the commitment to a minimal state to the demand for state intervention in the economy and the promotion of welfare policies. On cultural matters, liberals may defend more or less progressive positions, depending on their origins. Scholars have attempted to look beyond the heterogeneity of the liberal party family by identifying distinct liberal traditions (von Beyme 1985; Ennser 2012; Close 2019). For instance, 'classical liberals' would present a firm economic liberalism and a centre-left position on cultural issues (e.g. the German FDP). In comparison, 'social liberals' would emphasise cultural liberalism, while being more centrist on economic issues (e.g. D66 in the Netherlands, and *Radikale Venstre* in Denmark). Moreover, differences can be observed with 'conservative liberals', which resemble conservative parties given their centre-right placement on both economic and cultural matters (e.g. Centre Party in Finland; the Dutch VVD). Using manifesto data, Close (2019) has shown that the weight of these traditions within the liberal party family has changed over time; but also within each liberal party. Some parties have oscillated between different traditions, reflecting internal divides (e.g. UK Liberal Democrats, Belgian Liberals), while others have remained quite constant (e.g. FDP in Germany, D66 and the Finnish Centre Party). In other contexts, these classifications have proved their usefulness. For instance, in the MENA countries, Szmolka (2020, 77) describes liberal parties as corresponding to a 'liberal-secular' tradition, while Lebanese (Future Movement) and Egyptian (*Wafd* then *New Wafd*; *Free Egyptians Party*) liberal parties as pertaining to classic liberalism; and the Tunisian liberal party *Afek Tounes* adopting social liberalism.

Explanations of electoral success

Liberal parties have been quite 'unequal' regarding their electoral appeal and success. Close and Delwit (2019) provide an overview of the fate of liberal parties in Europe between 1945 and 2017. Their explanations pertain primarily to societal trends and the configuration of the political system. In the Benelux countries, in the absence of strong conservative parties, and given the secularisation process and weakening of Christian Democratic parties, liberal parties have progressively asserted their position as the main right-wing organisations. By contrast, where conservative parties have been strong (e.g. Germany, Switzerland), liberals have struggled to be relevant actors. In the Nordic countries, centrist parties (KESK – Centre Party in Finland and Sweden, *Venstre* in Denmark) have competed with conservative parties to secure the position of major right-wing party, in opposition to the social democrats (Close and Delwit 2019, 287). While KESK and *Venstre* have been relatively successful, in Sweden the Moderate Party (a conservative party) has become the major right-wing political force. Social liberal parties (*Radikale Venstre* in Denmark) or economic liberals (*Liberalna* in Sweden, *Liberal Alliance* in Denmark) are minor parties measured by electoral weight. In CEE, the fate of liberal parties has been marked by high instability and volatility, except in Estonia where the Reform Party and the Centre Party regularly attract 20–30 per cent of the vote.

Other European liberal parties have generally been weak electoral actors, yet some recently formed liberal parties have challenged the existing party systems, notably *Ciudadanos* in Spain and Emmanuel Macron's movement in France. The (ephemeral) success of these new actors seemed rooted in a disaffection and rejection of the traditional left-right two-party systems. Their success can also be attributed to the salience of and polarisation over specific cleavages, on which they came to occupy one pole: in Spain, the territorial cleavage and crisis, since the party was founded against Catalan nationalism (Teruel and Barrio 2016); in France, the cleavage over economic and cultural globalisation issues and more specifically over the EU (Schön-Quinlivan 2017).

Analysing liberals in Canada and in the UK contrasts two different fates in quite a similar, two-party, majoritarian system. The Liberal Party of Canada has been described as one of the 'most successful [liberal] parties in contemporary democracies' (Blais 2005, 821) or as 'the most successful political machine in the Western world' (Jeffrey 2010, 3). By contrast, the Liberals in the UK lost their position of major party when the Labour Party became the main opponent to the Conservative Party in the interwar period.

The dominance of the Canadian Liberal party has been explained by a combination of ideological, sociological, organisational and strategic factors. Ideologically, the party has been able 'to shape and define Liberal values as *Canadian* values, positioning itself as the party of national unity' (Jeffrey 2010, 3), while promoting the country's cultural and regional diversity, and providing 'a combination of nation-building social programs and commitment to strong government' (Jeffrey 2010, 3). The party has attracted the support of key social groups (Blais 2005, 834), mainly Catholics and Canadians of non-European origin. It has appeared less organisationally factionalised than its conservative opponent (Carty 2010; Jeffrey 2010, 3). Finally, the party has adapted to and taken advantage of changing circumstances (electoral defeats, periods of opposition and leadership changes) in order to renew its policies and organisation (Jeffrey 2021).

The electoral fate of the Liberal Democrats in the UK is regularly debated in the literature (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005; Johnson and Middleton 2016). Scholars highlight how the party suffers from the 'wasted vote syndrome' encouraged by a plurality electoral system and that it struggles to breach the 'credibility gap' (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005, 6). In the absence of a

stable social base and strong party identification, writers have highlighted the role of 'contest- and context-specific factors' (Cutts 2012, 96), which have helped the party to breach this gap: these include local election successes, incumbent candidates' personal popularity and support and (at times) a high-profile leadership effect.

The electorate

Regarding the profile of liberal voters, again, diversity prevails (van der Brug, Hobolt and Vreese 2009; Close and Delwit 2019). Comparative empirical studies suggest that only a few sociodemographic traits are consistent across Europe: education, socio-economic status and/or occupation (Kirchner 1988; Close and Delwit 2019). Liberal party voters are more educated than the average voter, and more likely to be highly skilled workers, self-employed or employers rather than manual workers or unemployed. Religion and residence come second: liberal party voting is less likely among religious voters, and more likely among urban voters – with some exceptions (e.g. parties closer to 'conservative liberalism' attract religious and rural voters). This profile is also found in non-European contexts. In Russia, in the late 1990s, Yabloko attracted votes from 'the not-so-well-off intelligentsia, those with a higher education and white-collar workers in large and medium cities' (White 2012, 212).

Ethnicity and language are key distinctive features of ethno-regionalist liberal parties, such as the Swedish People's Party of Finland, or the Estonian Centre Party (which appeals to the Russian-speaking minority) (Close and Delwit 2019). In South Africa, the issue of race has been crucially constitutive of party choice and identification. During apartheid, the liberals found support among white English-speaker voters, while the nationalists found support among the white Afrikaners. In the 2000s, the Democratic Alliance was becoming 'the home of the majority of whites, coloureds and Indians' (Southern 2011).

Looking beyond sociodemographic variables, the policy preferences of liberal party voters are also significant (Fieldhouse and Russell 2001). Liberal party voters' general self-placement leans to the centre-right (van der Brug, Hobolt and Vreese 2009; Close and Delwit 2019); and in a two-dimensional space, they would combine a rightist position on socio-economic issues and a centre-left one on cultural issues (De Winter and Marcet 2000; Close and Delwit 2019). However, voters' placement depends on, and reflects, the type of 'liberalism' promoted by the different liberal parties (i.e. classical, social and conservative). Interestingly, following the party system reconfiguration on the new cleavage dimension, support for EU integration stands out as an almost universal determinant of liberal voting in Europe (Close and Delwit 2019). However, liberal party voters seem divided over other issues, such as immigration or the environment.

Government participation

As discussed, the Liberal Party of Canada has been incredibly successful in dominating politics and government (Jeffrey 2021), which has led scholars to talk about the 'natural governing party' (Jeffrey 2010; Clarkson 2014). In Europe too, liberal parties 'have been unusually successful at getting into government' (Hellström and Walther 2019, 310). Despite relatively modest vote and seat shares, liberal parties have been in the majority of governments in many European countries (Hellström and Walther 2019, 310–311) – around 70 per cent of the time or more in Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Finland, Switzerland, Ireland, Slovenia and the Netherlands. Liberal parties have also been quite successful in securing key roles in government (e.g. Prime Minister) despite rarely being the largest parliamentary party.

Explanations for this unusual success are manifold. From a socio-historical perspective, many liberal parties were born among parliamentary elites, and participated in the process of state-building and *liberal* democratisation. They are perceived as central, credible and competent actors, but also as pragmatic decision-makers (Clarkson 2014; Close and van Haute 2019b, 372). From a coalition-theory perspective, liberal parties' ability to join government would be rooted in their ideological closeness to the median legislator (Hellström and Walther 2019, 314–315). Their 'centrist' placement gives them more flexibility to form compromises with government partners, on either side of the spectrum.

Liberals mostly join coalition governments. Single-party liberal governments have, however, been formed in Denmark, Sweden, Ireland and Estonia (Hellström and Walther 2019, 370). In Canada, Liberals have always governed in single-party, majority or minority, administrations. The number and nature of coalition partners that liberal parties work with depends on party system dynamics (some being more or less fragmented), political culture (consensus/consociational) and the liberal 'tradition' of the party. Hence, where large coalitions are common (e.g. Belgium and Finland), liberals ally with partners from different sides of the political spectrum. In Germany, the liberals have more often allied with the conservatives (CDU/CSU) than with the social democrats (SPD) (Bukow 2019). Social-liberals have favoured centre-left partners, while conservative-liberals tended to form centre-right or right coalitions. Finally, the portfolio allocation in coalition governments sees liberals tending to occupy the justice, finance and foreign affairs ministries – in line with their commitment to defend the rule of law, individual rights, free-market and international cooperation – especially in the process of European integration. Overall, the way liberal parties access and exercise power constitutes a key distinctive dimension of the liberal party family, which reflects their pragmatism, adaptability and ideological fluidity (Close and van Haute 2019b, 369–370).

Party organisation

The organisational specificities of party families are rooted in their origins, but also reflect their core ideology and values (Poguntke et al. 2016, 662). On the one hand, the emphasis that liberal parties place on individual freedom is significant. Their aversion to excessive state or political authority can result in a certain reluctance to implement highly institutionalised structures, and a focus on *individuals*' rights and participation rather than that of collective bodies. In their empirical assessment of liberal parties' organisation in Europe, Beyens, van Haute and Verthé (2019) partly confirm this hypothesis. Liberal parties appear reluctant to provide guaranteed representation in the executive bodies to party subgroups. However, they generally allocate less decision-making power to individual members than other parties – although some liberal parties played a pioneering role in the implementation of more intra-party democracy in the 1990s (for instance, in Belgium, see Legein 2021).

On the other hand, the origin of many liberal parties as 'internally created parties' (i.e. parties created by political elites within the parliament) should make their organisation look like the typical 'cadre party' (Panebianco 1988, 51). Beyens, van Haute and Verthé (2019) indeed show that liberal parties in Europe are characterised by a lower (but more stable) membership than other party families. Besides, they present less complex but more expensive membership procedures for members, suggesting a certain degree of 'elitism' in their recruitment. Their parliamentary origins are also reflected in the increasing role of the parliamentary party group that has paradoxically accompanied the shift towards internal membership voting rights. Finally, their origins have led them to experience complex and highly competitive internal power dynamics in the face of decentralised, autonomous leadership with little discipline towards the

organisation. Cook (2010, 2) illustrates this in his in-depth study of the UK Liberal Party history: 'It was less a party in the modern sense than a loose alliance of groups of many shades of political opinion and widely differing social background. From the beginning, the Liberal Party was an uneasy coalition'.

Liberal parties outside of Europe do not always fit into this typical organisational model. Their organisations can be shaped by electoral systems which can be highly territorial-based (i.e. single-member district systems), in opposition to the national (proportional) electoral systems of continental European countries (Carty 2010, 8). In Canada, for instance, the Liberal Party has been associated with the *franchise* party model, developed by Carty (2004). This model emphasises the *stratarchical* relations between national and local organisations that characterise political parties in Canada, and which have consequences for other organisational aspects, such as party finance (Coletto, Jansen and Young 2011) and intraparty democracy (Carty and Cross 2006).

Impact on mainstream politics and challenges

A minima, political liberalism involves the defence of individual rights and freedom against any form of tyranny, the promotion of constitutionalism and of the rule of law. Accordingly, 'all modern democratic parties [are] inheritors of nineteenth-century liberalism' (Steed and Humphreys 1988, 399). Liberal parties participated in the building of modern democracies, in consolidating political institutions, in promoting individual freedoms and liberal democracy. Besides, democratisation processes have usually been accompanied by the liberalisation and opening of national economies.

At the end of the twentieth century, most democratic actors accepted and promoted liberal principles at both the political and economic levels, which made it difficult for the liberal party family to assert its distinctiveness. In the meantime, the increasing salience of the demarcation versus integration cleavage resulted in tensions between and within the members of the family (Kriesi et al. 2006). Liberals tending to occupy the right-wing space of the spectrum have asserted themselves as conservative actors (Belgian Liberals, Dutch VVD), emphasising market liberalisation but adopting tougher positions on cultural values. Liberals which were 'squeezed' between strong social democrats and conservatives (UK Liberal Democrats, German FDP) have searched for a third way but ran the risk of 'the empty centre phenomenon' (Zur 2021). In post-communist contexts, the 'illiberal' turn of the 2010s has accentuated the perception that liberalism is essentially 'western': European, neoliberal and elitist. Some liberal parties have tended to assert their placement on the 'winning' side of globalisation, hence re-affirming the very essence of liberalism: economic freedom, a globalised economy, open borders, cultural freedom and a cosmopolitan society. In France, this strategy was adopted by Macron against Le Pen in 2017; and to a certain extent by the Liberal Democrats in a post-Brexit context (Sloman 2020).

This 'winning side' strategy comes with costs. Liberals become increasingly associated with a dominant, educated and privileged class. They might appear as unable – or unwilling – to respond to the social consequences of economic, welfare or environmental crises. On the last point, they are challenged by green parties, whose support comes from similar sections of the electorate – educated, urban and cosmopolitan voters (see also Chapter 16). While some Scandinavian liberal parties have sought to position themselves as *green*, most liberals struggle to combine their economic neoliberalism with strong ecologist endeavours. On their right flank, liberals face conservative opponents willing to protect national identity and values. Finally, while they have appeared as credible and competent actors in government, their pragmatism and longevity in power make them an easy target for the anti-establishment arguments of populist parties.

Conclusions and avenues for further research

The literature on liberal parties suffers from an uneven development across different regions of the world. Overall, scholarly appraisal of liberal parties has focused on advanced democracies, notably in Europe. Case studies and comparative examinations have attempted to assess the existence of a liberal party family along Mair and Mudde's (1998) criteria. The Liberals in Canada have also attracted considerable attention, with a focus on its longevity in power, electoral successes (and occasional failures) and its specific organisational structure. In other regions, the study of liberal parties has been closely related to the study of transition and democratisation such as in South Africa, Russia and the MENA countries. Yet, given the scarcity of comparative studies on liberal party organisations in these contexts, it is hard to assess the existence and specificities of their liberal parties.

In advanced democracies, despite extensive analysis, one puzzle remains unresolved: Can we really speak about a single liberal party family? Indeed, this family has been depicted as one of the most heterogeneous, especially in socio-historical perspective. Even when scholars point to ideological commonalities between liberal parties, they recognise the existence of different traditions within the party family, hence questioning its uniformity. Interestingly, the literature points to distinctive elements of the liberals that relate more to what they *do* than to what they *are* (Close and van Haute 2019b): liberal parties are primarily pragmatic actors, using their ambivalent and fluid identity and their flexible organisation to exercise governmental responsibilities, despite modest electoral support. Yet it remains to be seen whether this disproportionate success will accentuate the perception that liberal parties only speak to and for '(liberal) elites', and in the long run, risk eroding their support and credibility

Note

1 In 2011, the former Network of Arab Liberals (NAL) was renamed the Arab Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (AAFD) because of the negative interpretation of the word 'liberal' by the Arab population (see Meinardus 2014).

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