

85. Parties and party systems

At first glance, it may seem easy to define what a political party is. However, the concept covers diverse realities. We find parties of all ages, adopting a more or less flexible organizational form and a more or less clear ideology. It is therefore not always easy to identify what differentiates parties from other organizations such as social movements or interest groups. The task is all the more difficult when political parties themselves refuse the label of “party” (e.g., Five Star Movement in Italy) or when movements claim to be parties (e.g., Tea Party in the USA). Defining what a political party is and is not matters from a political sociology perspective, as actors use labels to convey how they want to be perceived and construct their image toward the public.

Duverger defined parties as having “their primary goal the conquest of power or a share in its exercise” and drawing “their support from a broad base”, in contrast to interest groups, for instance (1972, pp. 1–2). Some authors emphasize electoral goals or the exercise of power: Sartori defines a party as “any political group identified by an official label that presents at election, and is capable of placing through elections (free or non-free), candidates for public office” (1976, p. 63), while for Neumann,

the term “political party” can be defined as the articulate organization of society’s active political agents, those who are concerned with the control of governmental power and who compete for popular support with another group or groups holding different views. (1956, p. 396)

Adopting a more organizational perspective, LaPalombara and Weiner (1966) identify four essential criteria for distinguishing parties from other organizations: (1) durability (continuity in the organization and depersonalization), (2) complete organization (visible and permanent organization at the local level in connection with the national level), (3) power (willingness to conquer and maintain power), (4) popular support (concern to gain supporters, adaptation of the party in order to obtain maximum popular support). Just as there are a multitude of definitions of political parties, there are numerous classifications of parties,

articulated around distinct criteria: origins, ideology, objectives, life cycle, organization, or functions.

A first approach stresses the genetic roots of parties. If representative democracy today is seen as inseparable from political parties, the structuring of political life around parties has not always been obvious. Why have democracies generated political parties? The literature emphasizes the role of institutions, social forces, and political actors. The parliamentarization of democracies went hand in hand with a structuring of parliamentary life around political parties (Scarrow, 2006). For instance, if the American Congress was initially composed of representatives with no political affiliation, debates led to the emergence of groups according to positions on the central issues of the time, systematically opposing two points of view. The parties of parliamentary origin are then machines at the service of elected representatives and their re-election. However, other parties derive their emergence from being rooted in a social movement around a salient issue, such as the extension of suffrage or the defense of the rights of workers in democracies with property-based suffrage facing strong industrialization. Furthermore, some also argue that political actors will embark on the partisan adventure if and only if it allows them to maximize their chance of achieving their objective (winning elections) (Aldrich, 1995).

A second approach investigates why some political parties have emerged in specific national contexts. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) consider parties as mediators of structural divisions in society, called cleavages. This approach considers the emergence of parties in Western Europe from two revolutions (national and industrial), giving rise to four cleavages (church-state and center-periphery for the national revolution; workers-employers and rural-urban for the industrial revolution). An active cleavage in a country gives birth to a party on each side of the cleavage, each party mediating the interests of the population on this side of the societal division. This classification therefore identifies eight families of parties. The structure of the cleavages at work in a country determines the political parties present in the national party system.

Illustrating a disciplinary turn in political science, the rational choice approach proposes a classification based on the objectives pursued by the parties (Müller and Strom, 1999): vote-, office-, or policy-seeking. This

approach argues that, according to the institutional contexts and parties' organizational form, parties will pursue specific objectives, and that the objectives pursued by a party play on its chances of survival and institutionalization. Following the emergence of new parties in Western Europe (Bolleyer, 2013), new classifications were put forward, which distinguish parties according to their life cycle and thresholds in their development (Pedersen, 1982): declaration (creation of the party and intention to participate in elections), authorization (meeting the legal prerequisites for participating in elections), representation (obtaining seats in parliament), and relevance (becoming an actor that other parties in the system must consider).

The organizational approach constitutes perhaps the most classic perspective of party typologies, embodied by pioneers such as Michels (1915), Ostrogorski (1964), and Duverger (1972). To the classic opposition between mass and cadre parties (Duverger, 1972) were added the catch-all party (Kirchheimer, 1966) and variants of the market metaphor such as the franchise party (Carty, 2004), the business firm or the entrepreneurial party (Krouwel, 2006), and the cartel party (Katz and Mair, 1995). These different models focus on the way in which parties ensure the link between citizens and the state. They distinguish parties based on characteristics in terms of resources, size, and composition of the party base, the type of leadership, the level of professionalization, bureaucratization and efficiency, the level of centralization, and the balance of power between the three "faces" of party organizations: the party in central office, the party in public office, and the party on the ground.

Finally, several authors have made classifications of the functions exercised by parties (Lawson and Merkl, 1988; Key, 1964). In relation to the electorate, parties simplify and structure electoral choices, serve as channels of communication, educate citizens, participate in their socialization and their integration within the political system, generate symbols of identification and loyalty, and organize electoral campaigns. Parties are also channels of political participation. As organizations, parties recruit, train, and select leaders and candidates and develop political programs. In their relations with the government, parties organize the government and create majorities, ensure accountability

for government actions, control government administration, maintain government stability, structure parliamentary divisions, and organize representation. In this view, parties are considered essential to the functioning of political representation and democracy. Note that some authors add the subversive or tribune role of certain parties.

Parties tend to be relatively stable organizations, especially when they are highly institutionalized (Panebianco, 1988). Consequently, partisan change rarely occurs. A first view understands party change as a gradual process of slow adaptation and as the unintended consequence of natural evolutions in the life cycle of parties (Katz and Mair, 1995). Parties gradually transition from one organizational model to another by a dialectical process of adaptation to the context. For example, the extension of suffrage at the end of the nineteenth century would be concomitant with the development of the mass party model. A second view sees party change as an abrupt and discontinuous event, resulting from intentional and conscious choices by actors. Harmel and Janda (1994, p. 275) conceive party change as "any variation, alteration or modification in the way parties are organized, the human and material resources on which they can rely, what they stand for, and what they do". They identify two necessary conditions for party change: a good reason (external factor) and a coalition supporting change (internal factor). Among the external factors, the authors list in particular institutional reforms, major societal events, the appearance of new competitors, and public opinion. They argue that certain external shocks will affect certain parties more, depending on their primary objective: electoral defeats and mobilizations of public opinion will particularly affect vote-seeking parties, while external societal events will affect policy-seeking parties. From this perspective, external stimuli do not automatically generate organizational transformations. These stimuli must be perceived by the actors for a reform to take place (Gauja, 2017).

Finally, many other classifications of parties are based on the place they occupy in the national party system. Some oppose mainstream parties to small parties or minor parties, niche parties, or third parties (for instance, in the American context). Some labels explicitly refer to the strategic position occupied by a party: we then speak of a pivotal party or

a dominant party. This leads to a distinct literature on party systems that focuses not only on parties as autonomous units, but also on their interaction or competition. Parties are constitutive of a political “market”, opposing actors in search of a good that remains central to all of them, popular support. The first typologies of party systems, developed until the 1970s, mainly focused on the number of parties as a determining feature, with an internal debate as to how to count parties in a system. It opposed bipartyism (two parties structure the system) to multipartyism (more than two parties are structuring). This dichotomy was subsequently refined by considering the relative size of parties. On the one hand, the concept of a “two and a half” party system was introduced to describe systems in which a third party, smaller than the other two, manages to disrupt the political game. This model existed in countries with a pivotal liberal party in the system (traditionally in Germany with the FDP). This type of configuration is now rarer in Europe. On the other hand, the concept of a “dominant party” multiparty system was introduced, to describe a system where a party reaches at least 40 percent of votes, as illustrated then, for example, by Sweden. Typologies then added the number of criteria considered. For instance, polarization and volatility were introduced to describe party systems. The first criteria adds an estimate of the ideological dispersion of parties in the system; the second refers to the variation in support for different parties from one election to the next and reflects the structuring capacity of parties. More recently, typologies have proposed a theoretical refoundation to consider more directly the structure of interactions between parties. Mair (1996) takes into account three criteria: the existence of alternation in government; innovation or continuity in coalitions; the existence of parties systematically excluded from coalitions, whether it is a refusal on their part or a “cordon sanitaire” strategy on the part of the other players in the system. These criteria make it possible to distinguish between two large types of systems, those where the competition is “closed” (the UK or Japan until the 1990s) and those with an open structure (the Netherlands and Denmark).

Why is one type of party system present in one country and not another? A first approach points to the role of institutions. Duverger (1972) proposes three laws linking, for the

two most important ones, first-past-the-post voting methods and two-party systems on the one hand, and proportional voting methods and multi-party systems on the other. These laws have given rise to an extensive literature which concludes that there is a strong link between the “magnitude” of constituencies (i.e., the number of elected officials per constituency) and the number of parties. This is explained by mechanical effects of voting methods and how they transform votes into seats. But it stems above all from a psychological effect, that is, from anticipation by the actors of the mechanical effects of the voting methods. If voters can adopt a strategic vote, leaders will adapt to this constraint by regulating the number of candidates and, therefore, of parties. A second approach has insisted on the role of socio-economic divisions in the formation of partisan systems (see Lipset and Rokkan’s cleavage theory presented above). These two explanations are less antithetical than they might appear. Voting methods have been seen as institutions constraining the political expression of social divisions, but also as instruments of their institutionalization.

The literature also converged to explain the stability of party systems. Lipset and Rokkan observed that the party systems of the 1960s were very similar to those of the 1920s in Europe. This stability was explained both by the stability of social divisions, the parties contributing to renewing these identities and these collective organizations over time, and by the stability of the institutional arrangements, voting methods in particular. This idea of the stability of party systems has been undermined since the 1970s. Many new parties have emerged, and the structuring capacity of parties has declined. At the same time, party systems have faced a dynamic of misalignment. These changes point to a growing fluidity of party systems.

Because parties are central actors in representative democracies, understanding how and why parties emerge and evolve, how they organize, what roles they play, and how they are structured in a party system are central themes in political sociology. Political parties face numerous challenges. Among other things, the processes of personalization, digitalization, and deterritorialization are important dimensions for future research.

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86. Partisanship

Partisanship – the relationship which links citizens to parties and that leads most voters to repeatedly cast a ballot for the same parties – is a continued matter of critical debate in comparative research (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009; Oscarsson and Holberg, 2020) but also one of the fundamental analytical constructs routinely employed in empirical research on voting in democracies. The main disagreement in this large literature concerns the nature and sources of partisan attachments.

Let's start by recapping the development of research on partisanship. Early accounts of voting behaviour relied on sociological explanations of party support, linking societal divisions to parties originated to represent them. Both the US-Columbia School (Lazarsfeld et al., 1949) and the European tradition (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) found in the alignment between social stratification – along class, religion and territorial lines – and political parties, the source of people's electoral choice. The representation of common group interests shaped parties' ideology, and membership in social groups forged relatively stable allegiances to political parties. In the US two-party system such allegiances were initially conceived as 'political predispositions' based on social group belonging: 'A person thinks, politically, as (s)he is, socially' (Lazarsfeld et al., 1949, p. 25). Social characteristics determined political predispositions, measured in the 1950s on the basis of just a few social features which best predicted voting choice (religion, socio-economic status, urban/rural residency).

In the ideologically more polarized multi-party European context, such political predispositions had stronger roots and were referred to as cleavage voting (Rokkan, 1970). Cleavages were the fundamental lines of conflict existing in Europe at the time of mass enfranchisement which had been reinforced and politicized by parties' organizational structures. Voters' encapsulation (Bartolini, 2000) within such cleavages – the people's sharing of social positions, values and interactions with party structures and secondary organizations such as unions or churches – created political subcultures and identities which sustained stable party support.

Such sociological models of partisanship were not without limitations: they were

unable to explain the entire vote among the European and US electorates and were biased towards electoral stability, therefore at odds with explaining electoral change. Researchers in what was later to be recognized as the Michigan School shifted their analytical focus to the psychological processes behind the calculus of individual behaviour. The focal point of their proposal was the mediating role of long-term political predispositions, located between voters' mainly ascriptive social characteristics and the final political choice, which they defined *party identification*. Relying on the 'reference group' social psychology theory, party identification was conceived as 'an affective attachment to an important group object in the environment' (Campbell et al., 1960, 121). Such people's enduring emotional attachment to the (US) parties originated from early socialization in the family, only loosely linked to social stratification but rather rooted in the party itself. The party becomes then an important component of an individual's self concept, forging a political identity which would shape how the political world is perceived by largely unsophisticated citizens.

The theoretical significance of party identification centred on the crucial distinction between party attachments and actual voting preferences, thought to be independent from each other. Occasionally, short-term factors – leaders' personality, policy issues, scandals and so on – could push voters to deviate from their long-term party identification without however losing it. Lacking short-term external shocks, partisans rely on their party identification in choosing at the ballot box. The observed general stability in voting choice at the aggregate level was then attributed to the influence of party identification at the individual level. This would also function as a perceptual screen – a heuristic – to orient voters in evaluating policy issues, leaders and events.

The notion of party identification has known great fortune among scholars who rapidly incorporated this construct into the toolkit of (survey-based) electoral studies, adapting the original US formulation – which includes a directional element (which party to identify with) and a strength element (how strong the identification is) – to other national contexts. However, the format of the European multi-party systems did not allow an easy replication of a construct more attuned to two-party systems (Budge et al., 1976). It was argued