

Commissioned Book Review

Party System Closure: Party Alliances, Government Alternatives, and Democracy in Europe by **Fernando Casal Bértoa and Zsolt Enyedi**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 320 pp., £75.00 (hardback). ISBN 9780198823605.

The new joint effort by Fernando Casal Bértoa and Zsolt Enyedi aims to explore the factors that enhance the stability of European party systems. The authors argue that changes in the patterns of competition for government (i.e. *closure*) constitute the best proxy to assess the degree of party system institutionalization. Through the closure indicator, the authors show the extent of change in party competition across an impressive time frame (over 171 years) and covering an extraordinary number of countries and party systems. This grand design, including all democratic countries from ‘the Atlantic to the Urals’ (p. 28), increases the generalizability of the analysis, which is not confined to a bunch of proximate cases – in time and space – but may also be applied to more distant political experiences.

The concept of closure consists of three components mapping the transformations in the process of government formation: (1) alternation, indicating change in the partisan affiliation of ministries; (2) the formula, signalling whether a coalition is new compared to past experiences; and finally (3) access, measuring whether new parties are entering into government for the very first time. The important causal claim of the volume is that the degree of party system institutionalization – measured through closure – can be expressed as a function of four crucial predictors: (1) the length of the country’s democratic exposure, (2) the level of parties’ institutionalization, (3) the fragmentation and (4) polarization of the party system. The authors dedicate a chapter to each of these predictors, which are treated as independent

variables both in a bivariate (from chapter 6 to chapter 9) and in a multivariate (chapter 10) fashion. The final chapter employs the theoretical and the methodological toolboxes of closure in order to explore whether democratic breakdown is more likely to occur in open party systems, discussing also whether the degree of closure influences the overall democratic quality of a political system.

In terms of theoretical embedding, the volume follows a reflection started with the works of Gordon Smith (1989) and Peter Mair (1997) that, since the late 1980s, has suggested shifting the focus to the competition for government in order to assess the patterns of evolution of contemporary party systems. Furthermore, the authors convincingly link the concept of closure with the literature on party system institutionalization, suggesting that the predictability of a party system can be explained by the stability of the inter-party relationships used to obtain cabinet control.

The inclusion of historical party systems allows the authors to offer important advancements to the literature on party system institutionalization. Casal Bértoa and Enyedi show that the length of democratic exposure, party institutionalization, and the degree of party system fragmentation and polarization are clearly related to party system closure; however, these constitute distinct concepts that cannot be employed alone as proxies for party system institutionalization. None of these four predictors represents a sufficient or necessary condition for reaching high degrees of closure. However, the bundle of strong party institutionalization, long democratic exposure and low fragmentation stimulates the predictability of a party system. In contrast, highly fragmented and polarized party systems with weakly institutionalized political parties are deterministically linked to open patterns of competition for government. Finally, in referring to the consequences of closure, the authors

conclude that a high degree of party system closure represents a sufficient condition for the survival of democratic regimes. Still, the association between closure and the quality of democracy is more complex. Indeed, in a context characterized by low economic development, high degrees of closure – which might also indicate power concentration in the hands of a bunch of sclerotized elites – may be negatively associated with the quality of democracy.

In analysing such an immense dataset, the construction of the index of closure necessarily involves several discretionary choices. Almost all of them are convincingly defended by the authors. Still, some criticalities deserve to be discussed, not least because they can serve as the inception for further research.

First, the authors define polarization in terms of the anti-establishment stance of parties, and thus they employ the vote-share of anti-establishment parties as a proxy to measure the degree of polarization (p. 193). This choice indirectly assumes the pro- or anti-establishment divide to be the main dimension of political competition. If it is largely correct that contemporary polarization can be read as a function of anti-establishment electoral contestation, the same might not hold for other historical periods where extra-parliamentary movements pushed established parties towards the extremes of the left/right dimension.


Second, although the immense number of countries analysed should be praised as an anti-parochial move for the study of party competition and political institutions in Europe, readers might raise their eyebrows at a comparison that lumps together contemporary liberal democracies with democratic polities that became defunct prior to the advent of mass politics (e.g. the French 1st Republic, the Yugoslav Kingdom) and controversial (at their best) democracies (e.g. Kosovo). The doubt here is that in these contexts the crucial drivers of party system closure might assume a different meaning in distant contexts.

Third, when Peter Mair developed the concept of party system closure, he was proposing a novel way of framing the overall process of party system change. In this respect, the methodological and theoretical improvement brought

by Casal Bértoa and Enyedi might have been brought closer to the complex process of party system change by explicitly integrating into a typology the properties of party systems and their degree of closure.

Overall, these points jeopardize neither the empirical findings nor the elegance of the theoretical arguments. The bad news is that the ‘problem’ of party system change still remains an unsolved conundrum. The good news is that this volume provides new empirical tools and an appropriate theoretical framework through which to expand this important research path.

In conclusion, the volume is destined to become the main point of reference in the study of party system institutionalization. The concept of closure can convincingly serve as the main proxy to measure the degree of predictability of a given party system. In this respect, the authors conclude that closure is superior to electoral volatility to indicate the degree of party system institutionalization (pp. 264–265). The great contribution of Casal Bértoa and Enyedi lies precisely in crafting an index that, thanks to its cumulative construction, might also account for the previous experiences of a party system. Still, volatility should not be easily dismissed. Indeed, closure cannot be employed to measure abrupt changes at a precise point in time. In this respect, volatility will continue to serve to signal abrupt changes *hic et nunc*.

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