



## Book Review

Party Politics  
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*The Deinstitutionalization of Western European Party Systems.* By Alessandro Chiaramonte and Vincenzo Emanuele, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022; vi + 224 pp. ISBN: 978-3-030-97978-2, €95.39 (hbk); €74.89 (ebook).

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The recent electoral history of Western Europe has been marked by an astonishing number of critical elections. Yet the question is: to what extent do surprising electoral results represent just a temporary departure from stability or rather signal the approach of a new phase of systemic instability and unpredictability of Western party systems? This volume by Alessandro Chiaramonte and Vincenzo Emanuele represents a timely answer to such a pressing question by providing an original interpretation through the lenses of party system *deinstitutionalization*.

Reconstructing the debate on the concept of party system institutionalization, the authors argue that the concept is associated with the *stability* of the patterns of political competition, the *predictability* of these patterns and their *consistency* over time. If previous studies tended to focus only on one single party system's arena (either electoral or governmental), here the authors argue that a novel operationalisation of party system institutionalisation needs to incorporate information on the patterns of competition in the electoral, parliamentary, and governmental arenas.

Following their previous seminal research on the field of electoral volatility, the authors propose to distinguish between the volatility caused by the shifts of votes that occurred among established parties (i.e. volatility by *alteration*) and those provoked by the entrance of new parties (i.e. volatility by *regeneration*) (Chapter 3). In this respect, the total index of volatility represents a measure of the party system *instability*, while the volatility by *regeneration* allows disentangling the impact of new parties' emergence, measuring the unpredictability of the patterns of competition.

Looking at post-World War II electoral and parliamentary data, the *bias towards stability* thesis seems to stand out. However, when introducing time into the equation, it emerges clearly how West European party systems witnessed “a general shift towards instability” (p. 48) over the

last few decades. Combining the concepts of instability and unpredictability, the authors craft an illuminating descriptive typology. After 2010, most of the elections (40.4%) and legislatures (35.1%) are characterised by both instability and unpredictability. Additionally, 70% of these elections (and 67% of the legislatures) characterised by both high instability and unpredictability are also clustered, confirming that de-institutionalization trends are in place in the parliamentary and electoral arenas of several European countries.

In order to measure the *newness* registered in any election (or legislature), the authors introduce the index of party system innovation defined as the percentage of votes (and seats) collected by new parties in each election (and legislature) (Chapter 4). After 2010, the innovation index is rocketing, and such a trend is consistent across European countries. Yet, the emergence of a new party can be episodic and characterised by a meteoric fate. For this reason, the authors provide a telling index of cumulative innovation by measuring the support in the last election of those parties that were not present in the first two post-World War II elections (e.g. *non-founder* parties). In this respect, the last decade witnessed a sharp increase in support for *non-founder* parties.

The concepts of party system innovation and the index of cumulative innovation are then combined into a two-by-two typology of party systems, enlightening four distinct paths that have been followed by the West European party systems. In this respect, if the relative majority of European party systems are still *frozen* (i.e. resembling quite close to the same equilibria of 75 years ago), other systems have witnessed processes of both *layering* (e.g. small changes that have been cumulated across time) and *absorption* (large changes that have been re-absorbed). Finally, in a few countries (e.g. Netherlands, Italy, and France) the party system has been radically *transformed*.

Chapter 5 shifts attention towards the governmental arena by applying Peter Mair's (1996) concepts of *closure* and *openness*. If, in the parliamentary and electoral arenas, the authors registered increasing unpredictability and instability, in the governmental arena closed patterns of competition dominate even in the most recent decade. How to read such a misfit? According to the authors, the governmental arena might be a “latecomer” (p. 124). The

earthquakes that occurred in the parliamentary and electoral arenas in the 2010s have not yet been translated into the patterns of government competition. The recent innovative coalition formulae implemented in Austria, Belgium, Finland, Iceland, Italy, and Spain could represent the beginning of an increase in the *openness* of the governmental arena. In this respect, the following years will provide fresh data to eventually confirm or disprove this interpretation.

Combining the insights from the electoral, parliamentary, and governmental arenas, the authors provide a synthetic index of party system institutionalization (PSI) (Chapter 6). The index also implements a time-weighted moving average accounting for temporal trends in the overall process of deinstitutionalization (Chapter 6). In this respect, the index confirms “a consistent and sustained process of party system deinstitutionalization” (p.148).

In exploring the causes of deinstitutionalisation (Chapter 7), the authors found that PSI is mainly explained by long-term and structural factors related to the strength of the existing cleavages and the fragmentation of the party systems. The multiple crises hitting European countries in the 2010s undoubtedly boosted the process of deinstitutionalisation by influencing total volatility (p.171). However, the factors explaining deinstitutionalisation are not episodic and are intertwined with the weakening of the strength of the political cleavages. In short, deinstitutionalisation is here to stay (and maybe become more acute over time). The last empirical chapter of the book tests the impact of deinstitutionalisation on both democratic performances and the citizen’s perception of the democratic process. In this respect, the decline of the PSI index is linked to both a decline in the objective quality of liberal democracy and the citizens’ satisfaction with democracy.

By combining a theoretical re-definition of the concept of party system institutionalisation with a rigorous empirical analysis that clarifies the structural and long-term roots of the party system deinstitutionalisation process, the authors have provided an important contribution, also shedding a light on its bitter consequences for the future of European democracies. Through its elegant and parsimonious systemic analysis, the volume left un-touched the black box of party agency in driving such a deinstitutionalisation process. Are all new parties equal in challenging the existing

equilibria or some have some parties (and party families) been more successful than others in making contemporary party systems more unpredictable and unstable? In parallel, are there any necessary conditions (e.g. the ideological profile of the new challenger parties, existing patterns of interactions within the party system) that critical elections need to display to escalate in other arenas and to trigger the broader process of deinstitutionalisation?

In a nutshell, the volume represents a must-read for scholars interested in party system equilibria and changes not only because it represents the most updated and comprehensive analysis of the deinstitutionalisation trends in Western Europe, but also because of its ability to stimulate and open new paths for further research.

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Leonardo Puleo is a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of European Studies/CEVIPOL - Université Libre de Bruxelles. He received his PhD from the Sant’Anna School of Advanced Studies and the University of Florence in June 2021. His main research interests concern party competition, with a focus on the impact of challenger parties and the spreading of illiberal ideas.