PARTIES AND POLITICAL SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

4. Evolution of political parties[1]

Estimated studying time: 30 minutes

Definition of a political party

The political party is an organization that nominates candidates for public and legislative positions. They are distinct from the state because they do not have any authority on their own and can only gain power through the elections. They are also distinct from civil associations because

- their objective is to gain political power,
- unlike civil associations, they do not represent their members against state institutions,
- and instead, they seek public support to control the state institutions.

Not all political parties seek government positions though. There are frivolous joke parties that run for office, but their main objective is to caricature the political system. Other parties may refuse to take certain positions to demonstrate that they consider the current system illegitimate.

Functions of political parties

- Representation

They provide an opportunity for political participation, they represent the interest of citizens in political decision-making – they connect citizens with the state.

- Articulation of interests

By striving to represent a wide variety of different groups they form a compromise of opposing interests. They aggregate political and policy preferences.

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- Mobilization and integration

By mobilizing their voters they facilitate political participation (hopefully) increasing the integritiy of the political system. An institutionalized form of participation that consolidates democratic power.

- Recruitment and selection of leaders

They select the candidates, and eventually the state leadership. Their influence depends on the electoral system again.

- Governance

Besides actually forming governments, in parliamentary systems organized political parties contribute to the stability of governments.

- Politics

They do politics, meaning they formulate the themes and set the goals of politics.

- Legitimacy

They provide an institutionalized channel for criticizing the government and for changing the government.

You can see that the functions of political parties largely overlap with the functions of elections and the functions of the political system (see previous topics). That is not an accident. Political parties, although they are not an especially popular institution, are vital to the functioning of democracies. They have a key role in most political processes and democratic political systems, as we know them, could not function without them.

Let's look at mobilization for example. It is a nice thought that voters participate in elections because they consider public affairs important and wish to influence decisions relevant to their lives – of course this is true to a certain extent. But the scale of mass participation necessary for maintaining a democracy could hardly be achieved without political parties. These organizations are incentivized to take their supporters to the polling booth by any means necessary. They campaign to engage people in public affairs, inform their supporters of important issues and provide them with explanations for current events. This is why researchers say, a healthy democracy requires healthy political parties.

The emergence of political parties

The development of political parties began with parliamentarization – that is with the increasing responsibilities and political influence of legislatures. At first, political parties were loose alliances formed in the parliaments, representatives agreed to work

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together to enhance their influence over decisions. These *proto-parties* only involved members of the political elite (ordinary voters could not join) and were led by a charismatic and respected public figure.

The influence of these parties gradually increased, contributing to their stability. However, real change began with the enfranchisement of new groups of society. The labor movement played a key role in this process – they were extra-parliamentary organizations that sought the support of workers. As their supporter base gained voting rights, traditional parties were forced to cater to the public as well. To do so, they had to be present outside the parliament and it was necessary to develop structured organizations. This was the time of mass parties – political parties that were ideologically rigid and relied on high membership – fees paid by their members was an important source of funding.

The competition among mass parties continuously intensified and finally led to the appearance of the so-called electoralist or catch-all parties. The main objective of these organizations is to maximize their number of votes and to do so they try to appeal to a wide range of different groups. For this reason, they became ideologically flexible, they professionalized their operations and lost their movement-like features. This led to the decline of party-membership and their income from fees diminished.

To maintain their operations, parties increasingly began to rely on state subsidies. The necessity of public funding is theorized to be a main driving force behind the appearance of the cartel-party. These organizations collude to keep out new competitors from the political sphere because their survival depends on access to public office and state funding. They still compete with each other, but they have a common goal: to prevent the success of newly emerged contenders. During this process, these parties become part of the state and move away from society.

The final stage of party evolution, the cartel-party, remains a theoretical construct. However, the idea, that parties collude to close out new challengers can explain many recent developments. Political parties do rely more and more on state subsidies and with the emergence of anti-establishment populist groups, it is becoming apparent that the distance between the political elite and the voters is increasing. This process differs greatly in each country and empirically proving it is quite challenging.

Party families

There are three well-know party families:

- The left-wing parties include labor parties, socialists, social democrats, greens and feminists.
- The right-wing parties include conservatives and Christian democrats.

- The center parties are mainly the liberal and the agrarian parties.

There are radical and extremist political groups both on the left and the right, although they are often not part of the formal associations of the three traditional families.

Sometimes politicians and citizens criticize the tradition distinction of left-wing and right-wing and claim to transcend these labels – this attempt is rarely successful. These traditional labels have the advantage that they orient voters by representing well-known and widely understood value systems.

Literature

Katz, R. S., Crotty, W. J., & SAGE. (2014). Handbook of party politics. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Questions

1. How would you define what a political party is?
2. How can we distinguish political parties from other civil associations?
3. What are the main functions of political parties?
4. What are the key functions of political systems that parties play a role in?
5. What functions of elections and political parties overlap?
6. Explain the role of political parties in mobilization!
7. What is the process of parliamentarization?
8. Why did political parties evolved from the stage of proto-parties? What was the main driving force behind this change?
9. How do mass parties and catch-all parties differ from each other?
10. What is the cartel-party theory?

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