

PARTIES AND POLITICAL SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

5. Party systems¹

Estimated studying time: 30 minutes

Defining party systems

During the first half of the 20th century, numerous party system typologies were developed by political scientist. Classically, they focused on the number of parties but we know from system theory that to examine the parties as a system, we need to do more than to simply measure their numerosness. As Giovanni Sartori writes

“The concept of system is meaningless – for purposes of scientific inquiry – unless (i) the system displays properties that do not belong to a separate consideration of its component elements and (ii) the system results from, and consists of, the patterned interactions of its component parts, thereby implying that such interactions provide the boundaries, or at least the boundedness, of the system. . . . Parties make for a ‘system’, then, only when they are parts (in the plural); and a party system is precisely the system of interactions resulting from inter-party competition. ”

Remember, that a system is a set of interconnected elements and their pattern of interaction produces features that do not necessarily belong to the individual units.

One possible typology

There are numerous classification, but the most authoritative one is probably Sartori's. In his typology, he lists numerous one-party systems (totalitarian, authoritarian and pragmatic) and also the hegemonic and predominant systems. These are considered as somewhat special cases not generally applicable to democracies.

¹ This teaching material has been made at the University of Szeged, and supported by the European Union by the project nr. EFOP-3.6.2-16-2017-00007, titled Aspects on the development of intelligent, sustainable and inclusive society: social, technological, innovation networks in employment and digital economy. The project has been supported by the European Union, co-financed by the European Social Fund and the budget of Hungary.

The part of his classification that concerns us here is two-party and multiparty system types. The two-party system is characterized by two-party pluralism, obviously there is not much space for variation. In the case of multiparty systems, he tried to incorporate how fragmented they are:

- Limited pluralism is characterized by the presence of 3 to 5 parties.
- Extreme multiparty refers to systems with more than 6 parties.

Another aspect is polarization – as you will see later, system can be characterized by the presence of political poles: they can have either two, or more poles.

Features of party systems

As mentioned above, party systems were originally classified by the number of constituting parties. However, if we are examining a pattern of interaction, then this is obviously not enough and there are other features of these systems that we must take into consideration. One way to improve our understanding is to look at the weight of the parties in the system.

We can measure the fragmentation of the parties by factoring in their vote shares or seat shares. For this purpose, we use the effective number of parties index. To calculate this, we take the square of each party's vote share, sum it up, and divide one by the result.

$$EVP = \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^n v_i^2}$$

Where v is the vote share and i is the number of parties.

Let's look at a very simple example! Imagine a two-party system where both get 50% of the vote. We take 0.5 for the vote shares, and square it to get 0.25. Now we sum it up, $(0.25 + 0.25 = 0.5)$, and divide one by the result $(1 / 0.5 = 2)$. So the effective number of parties is 2, meaning that political support concentrates on two parties.

Let's take another example, where the result is not that obvious! Again we have two parties, but one of them gains 90% and the other gets only 10%. 0.9 squared is 0.81, 0.1 squared is 0.01, their sum is 0.82. $1 / 0.82 = 1.22$. The number of parties participating in the elections is the same as before but the level of fragmentation is much lower. Votes concentrate mainly on one party, although not exclusively, this is why the effective number of parties is 1.22.

Another feature of party systems is the relationship among the individual parties. One possible way to look at it is polarization: although there are numerous parties, their mutual relationships structure them into poles. Parties that often have a similar ideological profile and may also form alliances can belong to the same pole. A system can be bipolar or multipolar and this feature greatly influences the structure of political competition.

Polarity and competition

Polarity of systems is theorized to have a very important effect on the structure of competition. In bipolar systems, there is a free center in the ideological space and the two poles are competing for this moderate voters. This cause the competition to have centripetal properties: parties are not radicalizing but cater to the political center. On the other hand, in multiparty systems, it is possible that there is a strong central pole so others on the left and right are forced outward, toward more and more extreme voters. This is akin to a centrifugal force in party competition that increases radicalization.

There is a difference between two-party and bipolar systems. In two-party systems there are two significant parties (see for example the United States). In a bipolar system, there may be more than two significant parties but they are organized into two poles. For example, there is a right-wing pole involving conservatives, Christian democrats and liberals, and a right-wing pole involving social democrats and green parties. The structure of the competition may even resemble that of a two-party system in this case even though we have 5 parties.

Two-party vs. multiparty systems

Previously, scholars considered two-party systems to be the most stable, and consequently the most appealing. Their reasoning is similar to what we have covered regarding the majoritarian model of democracy: a two-party system presents a clear choice to voters during the elections, there is probably no need for a coalition so voting has no unexpected effect on government formation. Two-party systems are more likely to lead to frequent turnover of the government, which was considered an advantage (remember the two-turnover test of Huntington?)

Literature

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

Questions

1. What is the definition of a party system? How does it relate to system theory?
2. Explain the classification devised by Giovanni Sartori!
3. What characteristics of a party system can we examine?
4. How do we measure fragmentation?
5. What would be the value of the effective number of parties index if there four parties ran and each received 25% of the vote?
6. What is the difference between a two-party system and a bipolar system?
7. Explain the mechanism behind centrifugal competition!
8. Explain the mechanism behind centripetal competition!



EFOP-3.6.2-16-2017-00007

9. What are the advantages of two-party systems?
10. Give an example for a two-party system and a multipolar system!

