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Focus: The State of the Parties: Party Democracy in the 21st Century

Introduction

INGRID VAN BIEZEN

Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK. E-mail: i.c.vanbiezen@bham.ac.uk

As any reading of the current scholarly and popular debates will easily attest, political parties are not without their critics. In an era in which liberal democracy appears to have triumphed over alternative forms of political organization, and in which parties seem to have acquired a relatively universal acceptance as necessary vehicles for political participation and representation as well as the organization of the democratic polity, the parties themselves could scarcely be less liked or respected. Political parties in modern democracies are being criticized for having become so indistinguishable from one another that electoral choices seem increasingly meaningless, they are seen to be out of touch with their core constituents, they are haemorrhaging members, and they are perceived as incompetent and dishonest, and as the most untrustworthy, corrupt and self-serving of all public and private institutions.[1,2] Parties may therefore well constitute the key link to democratic government, but they are not necessarily believed to serve the broader public interest. This has resulted in a growing disengagement of ordinary citizens from conventional party politics and in mounting challenges to their democratic legitimacy. Indeed, the paradox of modern democracy is that parties are clearly not what they once were,[3] but that it is difficult to see how representative government could work without them.

To be sure, this anti-party critique is a long-established motif in writings on parties and democracy, and in fact dates back to the very era in which parties first appeared on the political stage. In recent years, however, it has been renewed and revived in a more contemporary fashion. Much of the current wave of anti-party sentiment can be associated with what many regard as the personal and political failures of party leaderships, and of the political class more generally.

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These attitudes may be a product of socio-economic, demographic, cultural and educational changes, which have generated more critical citizens who are generally better informed and less deferential, and who have more differentiated political preferences, which are less easy to satisfy. They may also be related to the passing of the 'golden age' of the mass party – a type of party that has always been seen to epitomize the norm in terms of both representation and legitimacy, and with the emergence of new forms of party organization and modes of representation – which are characterized by the interpenetration of political parties and state, as well as by patterns of inter-party collusion. The modern era, as Katz and Mair have argued, is that of the cartel party, in which the main parties work together and take advantage of the resources of the state – such as public subsidies, state-regulated media access, and party patronage – to ensure their collective survival.[4] Contemporary anti-party sentiments may furthermore be associated with domestic and global sources of depoliticization:[5] Ongoing processes of European integration and globalization have effectively consigned a great deal of political decision-making to arenas largely beyond the control of domestic parties and politicians. Moreover, within the confines of the nationstate and beyond, both academics and political actors are increasingly embracing a discourse that actively defends a more prominent involvement for non-majoritarian institutions in political decisions in order to safeguard democratic goals against the alleged malevolence, incompetence and inefficiency of the political elite.

Some of these challenges to party democracy were noted by the contributions in a special issue of this journal published ten years ago.[6] At the turn of the new millennium, many remain the same, some have progressively become more critical, while new challenges have appeared that may not have seemed so acute a decade ago. The contributions to this special issue assess the state of the parties and challenges to European party democracy in the 21st century from several different empirical and theoretical perspectives, analyzing parties in their various roles as agencies of society, government and the state. Traversing the key issues and questions emanating from recent scholarly debates, they offer critical and stimulating new perspectives on the position of political parties in modern democracy.

Michael Saward in his contribution critically evaluates the different modes and strategies of party representation, arguing that the common understanding that the representative capacities of political parties have declined is one that generalizes on the basis of only one particular, and historically contingent, mode of representation. He contends that political parties may in fact claim to represent in a variety of forms, and distinguishes between three ideal types: the 'popular' mode, which perhaps resonates most deeply with dominant conceptions of democracy, is characterized by parties claiming to speak as delegates of certain politicized interests on the basis of a relatively fixed ideology. This form of representation is most clearly associated with the classic mass party, which

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positioned itself as rooted firmly in pre-existing social cleavages and acted as the agents of social interests. The 'statal' mode of representation, on the other hand, is characterized by parties claiming to speak as trustees of depoliticized issue-based positions on the basis of relatively flexible ideologies. This mode is more top-down and accentuates the performance of state functions such as the staffing, operation and organization of government, and is most clearly associated with the cartel party. Parties in this mode tend to emphasize 'governance' over 'government', and are agencies of the state rather than society, more a vehicle for representing the state to society than vice versa. Thirdly, Saward identifies a 'reflexive' mode of claiming representation. This is characterized by parties speaking as sympathizers of local and issue-based positions and presenting themselves as speaking for a plurality of temporary societal interests in a variety of different (electoral and non-electoral) contexts, and with the potential to transcend national boundaries. He suggests that a number of developments, such as the growing interdependence of local, national and global arenas, may signal an increased relevance of this more post-modern form of representation.

From a different angle, Zsolt Enyedi also offers a critical re-evaluation of the conventional wisdom that popular modes of representation have been completely eroded. Assessing the structural basis of contemporary party politics, he argues that the image that parties have become wholly detached from society is to some degree misplaced. Although the historical cleavages have lost a considerable part of their relevance, modern party politics continues to be embedded in social structures and attitudinal orientations, which provide the basis for group-specific appeals and political behaviour. Of the traditional social structural positions that inform political attitudes and party choice, religion and especially regional identity continue to shape political behaviour across large parts of Europe. In addition, Enyedi points out that there are other social factors that constitute important building blocs of political identities. Emphasizing the importance of factors such as education, gender and sectoral employment, his article paints a nuanced picture of the structural complexities underpinning contemporary mass politics. In addition to socio-structural factors, he argues that values, attitudes and preferences play an independent role in defining political identities and behaviour. Furthermore, his article emphasizes the relevance of the political parties themselves in shaping political preferences, thereby underlining the importance of agency in the formation of cleavage politics. As parties continue to identify with distinct clusters of values, and appeal to the collective identities of their core supporters, Enyedi concludes, the cleavage model of politics cannot be discarded as irrelevant for contemporary politics.

Mark Gray's contribution focuses on political parties as governing agencies and on the question of whether they are still able to deliver on their promises. Their ability to maintain the traditional linkage between citizens and government through prospective or retrospective accountability is being challenged by emerging

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social, political and economic forces. In particular, parties are at risk of being less able to offer meaningful electoral choices to citizens as they are under pressure of the forces of Europeanization, globalization, rising localism and the increasing independence of central banks. These factors constrain the parties' independent policy-making capacity and may therefore undermine the 'partyness' of government. Gray argues that these risks to parties are very real: as the political geography of democracy has shifted in the 21st century, national governments are increasingly constrained by the continued process of European integration, the converging pressures of globalization, as well as the continuing empowering of regional and local government institutions. These processes arguably threaten the identities of national parties, and inevitably reduce the range of available policy alternatives. The rising independence of central banks, moreover, limits the influence of parties over monetary politics. At the same time, however, Gray notes that partisan effects have remained visible in many respects. He therefore concludes his article on a relatively sanguine note, observing that predictions of the demise of party government are as yet premature. As long as national elections continue to be the focal point of 21st century democracy, none of these challenges are likely to contest the centrality of national parties and party government.

Issues related to the changing nature of state sovereignty, globalization and European integration, re-appear in the article by Andrej Zaslove, who analyzes them in relation to the recent surge of populism in Western, Central and Eastern Europe. Conceptually, his article advances an encompassing approach to populism through the construction of an ideal type. Programmatically, he notes, populism should not be seen as intrinsically linked to the radical right. Indeed, new forms of populism have manifested themselves on both the centre-right (e.g. *Forza Italia*), and the left (e.g. the German PDS). In addition, populist tendencies also increasingly influence the political style and rhetoric of the more conventional political parties, on both sides of the spectrum. As the core constituent element of populism, Zaslove underlines the notion of 'the people', which, in the populist discourse, is seen as non-plural, virtuous, and homogeneous. Situated within the larger polity, populism juxtaposes the people against corrupt and dishonest elites and against perceived outside threats. Populism also has a specific form of mobilization, combining centralized organizational structures with charismatic leaderships, which corresponds with its demands for an unmediated link between the people and the leader. Zaslove underlines the ambiguous relation between populism and democracy, which lies primarily in populism's naïve and one-dimensional conception of democracy. In fact, the populist conception of democracy as unmediated popular sovereignty effectively discredits the institutional and procedural dimensions of liberal democracy, such as political pluralism, competition, and public deliberation. The opportunity structures that have enabled the expansion of populist mobilization, however, including the

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retrenchment of the welfare states, the eroding legitimacy of conventional party politics and the changing nature of state sovereignty, are all likely to persist in the foreseeable future, thereby contributing to the likelihood that the populist phenomenon is here to stay for some time to come.

There is no doubt that the changing role of political parties has contributed significantly to opening up the space for the mobilization of populist parties. Populist parties present themselves as outsider challengers to the cosy arrangements of the cartel parties and, in this sense, are a logical response to the transformation of historically 'popular' modes of representation to increasingly 'statal' forms, to use Saward's terminology. On this view, populism reflects a particular form of popular representation – albeit very different from the type once embodied by the classic mass party or by more post-modern 'reflexive' modes of representation – and signals a growing demand for the need to 'bring society back in'.

The final two contributions examine the dimensions of the progressively stronger linkages between political parties and the state in more detail. Ingrid van Biezen concentrates on the growing state intervention in contemporary party politics, focusing in particular on the increased availability and relevance of state subsidies to political parties, and the growing amount of state regulation of that lays down the rules for party activity, behaviour and organization. While the parties' increasing dependence on public subsidies was given a pre-eminent position as a key indicator of cartelization, the normative and empirical dimensions of the regulation of party activity have scarcely been the subject of systematic scholarly consideration. Van Biezen examines the increased availability of public funding to political parties from a comparative perspective and explores the motivations for its introduction in light of particular understandings of party democracy. She furthermore analyzes the empirical practice of party regulation and discusses the possible underlying normative paradigms – such as the managerial, the libertarian, the political market and the critical – which each reflect different preferences about the primary functions that political parties serve in the democratic system and different conceptions of the state interest in the party system. Both dimensions of state intervention, through public subsidies and public legislation, constitute part of the way in which parties have strengthened their linkages with the state in recent years. Van Biezen furthermore argues that the increased involvement of the state in the parties' internal affairs and external behaviour has contributed to their transformation into public service agencies, or public utilities.

The analysis by Petr Kopecký and Gerardo Scherlis largely echoes these conclusions. Their article examines another dimension of the party-state linkage, i.e. the degree to which political parties are themselves in control of the state and use public resources for their own organizational advantage through party patronage. The authors contend that party patronage – the power of parties to appoint people to positions in public and semi-public life – should be regarded as

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a key phenomenon in contemporary European party politics. Although patronage is usually associated with social, economic and political underdevelopment, in its more modern manifestations, patronage has reappeared on the stage as a critical tool that serves the organizational and governmental ends of parties. More specifically, modern political parties increasingly use their access to the resources of the state as a means to shore up their organizational networks. Their ability to appoint into positions of the state thus has become a crucial means by which they compensate for the loss of organizational strength on the ground and for the growing vulnerability that results from the increasingly volatile and uncertain electoral contexts. By entrenching their networks in the public sphere, parties ensure their continued control over the policy-making process. The ability to appoint networks of professionals that combine loyalty to the party with specialized expertise thus becomes a major asset of any modern party organization. In fact, as Kopecký and Scherlis argue, patronage has turned into a key device by which parties persist as semistate managerial agencies. They anticipate that the trend by which patronage serves as a means to consolidate parties as quasi-state networks of public officials is likely to become the empirical norm in contemporary Europe.

Each of the contributions in this special issue underlines that the relationships between parties, society and the state in their various manifestations have gone through profound transformations in recent years. The consequences of these processes are intimately related to normative questions about democratic accountability and legitimacy, and the prospects for the future of party democracy. As Mair has recently pointed out, the weakening of the linkages between parties and society has implied that the popular component of party democracy has been subject to a gradual and seemingly irreversible process of erosion. This is the part of democracy that accentuates the role and involvement of the ordinary citizen in government and which emphasizes government *by* the people. What remains is constitutional democracy, i.e. the part that emphasizes the need for checks and balances across institutions and which entails government *for* the people.[7] Structural links between parties and society may of course continue to persist, albeit in more differentiated and ephemeral forms, and new forms of societal representation – be they populist, reflexive, or yet something else – may ultimately successfully challenge the currently predominant statal modes of representation. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that the current state of the parties has made a significant contribution to their relatively broadly shared perception as agencies of the state rather than society, which resonates uncomfortably with understandings of democracy that underscore the importance of popular participation. Party democracy worked reasonably well when parties provided the synthesis between popular democracy and constitutional democracy. In the absence of the popular component of democracy, however, parties constitute little more than a procedural link to democratic government. If alternatives to

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democratic party government and party democracy are, as yet, difficult to conceive, this may only be so from a conception of democracy that is essentially stripped away from its popular component.

Hence, the key challenge to contemporary political parties is that of legitimizing their governance in the perceived absence of their representative capacity. This is perhaps easier in Western Europe with its longer tradition of democratic party government and party democracy, and more difficult in the newer democracies of Southern and Eastern Europe, where 40 years of authoritarian and communist rule have already served to undermine the legitimacy of party-related activities. However, it is becoming increasingly problematic in both regions. Because of social change, on the one hand, and the depoliticization of decision-making, on the other, parties find it increasingly difficult to function as representatives of societal interests. Nevertheless, the more parties are seen just to govern rather than to represent, the more difficulty they will have in legitimizing their procedural role and the less easily they will find themselves trusted as governors or as guardians of the public good.

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About the Author

Ingrid van Biezen is a Reader in Comparative Politics at the University of Birmingham, UK. She has taught at the University of Leiden and the Johns Hopkins University, and has held Visiting Fellowships at Yale University and the University of California, Irvine. She has published journal articles on party organization, party finance, and democratic theory, and is the author of *Political Parties in New Democracies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and *Financing Political Parties and Election Campaigns* (Council of Europe, 2003). Her current research focuses on the constitutionalization and legal regulation of political parties.

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