Why We Still Need Parties:

The Resilience of Europe's Political Parties Explained

Edited by Thibault Muzergues, Romain Le Quiniou and András Braun

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party, dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

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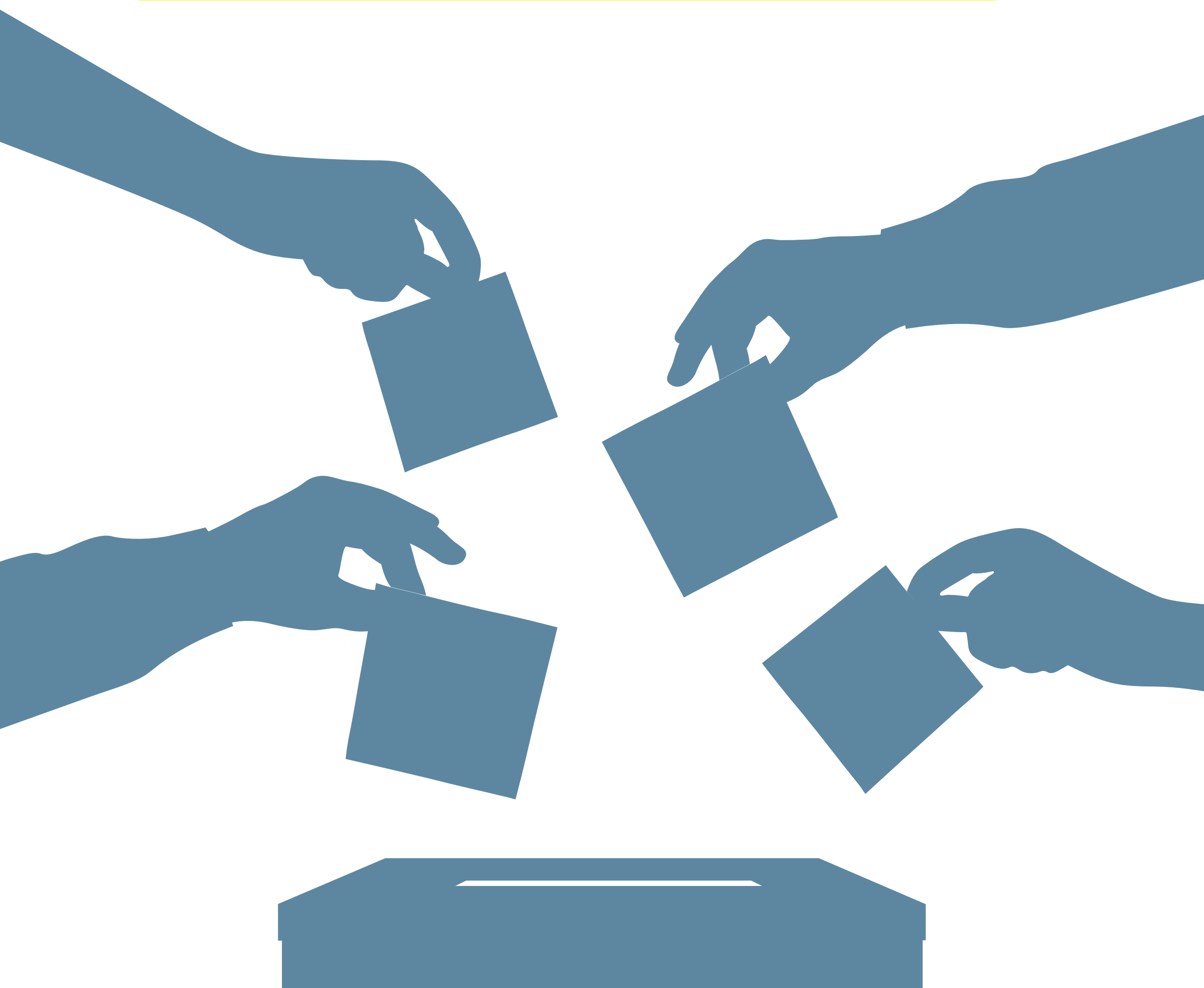

Foreword

Everyone takes certain 'truths' in daily political discussions and media for granted: the story of the decline and even disappearance of political parties in Europe is a famous example. Outdated communication, undemocratic decision-making processes, lack of compelling ideologies, susceptibility to corruption: there is hardly any criticism of modern Western democracies not related to political party pundits.

Surprisingly, political parties have not disappeared. They have remained as the core political actors in all Western-style democracies. Much acclaimed alternatives such as 'movements' or other forms of 'direct democracy' have not been able to replace those old-fashioned institutions from the nineteenth century.

Therefore, the astonishing fact of 'party resilience' deserves a closer and comparative view across Europe's political and constitutional landscape. Political parties' evolution and future perspectives are shaped on one hand by the irreplaceable contributions of political parties to the functioning of liberal democracies, such as developing coherent ideologies and recruiting political elites. But on the other hand, the ground-breaking transformation of Western societies, driven by demographic and cultural changes, and a revolutionary changing media environment, demand a quantum leap for all political organisations, most importantly political parties, to adapt.

How have political parties across Europe reacted to this rapidly changing environment? Are there lessons from different European countries worth being adopted by others? How can the legitimacy of Western democratic systems be strengthened, and what is the specific contribution of political parties? And last but not least, what is the particular role of European political parties as a relatively new type of political actors?

To find answers to those and many other aspects of political parties, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has set up an ambitious project for a comparative analysis of selected national party systems across Europe, which the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is pleased to publish. Leading experts from political science,

think tanks and parties were invited to provide a comprehensive insight into the diverse landscape of political parties on the continent.

The results clearly show the enormous pressure on the established party systems. Reasons and strategies for successful adaptation but also failures are analysed. Each chapter concludes with recommendations for regaining ground for political parties and increasing the overall performance of democratic systems in Europe.

I would like to thank IRI—and in particular, co-editors Thibault Muzergues and Romain Le Quiniou—for a very fruitful cooperation. The preparation for the research process, the final workshop and the editing process was outstanding. I also thank all our European experts for their valuable contributions.

Ahead of the European elections in June 2024 and massive domestic challenges in all European democracies, the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, the think tank of the largest European political party, sees this volume as a timely contribution to the debate of the renewal of European democracies. And political parties will play a key role in this transformation.

Brussels, 1 September 2023

Dr Peter Hefele
Policy Director
Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

The authors

Tim Bale—Professor of Politics, Queen Mary University of London, UK

Tim Bale is a graduate of Cambridge, Northwestern and Sheffield universities and is currently Professor of Politics at Queen Mary University of London.

He is the author of several books on British and European party politics, the most recent of which is *The Conservative Party after Brexit: Turmoil and Transformation*, published by Polity in March 2023. Tim is also a frequent contributor to broadcast and print media in the UK and abroad. His Twitter (now X) handle is *proftimbale*, which doubles as the name of his blog.

András Braun—Program Officer, International Republican Institute, Hungary

András joined IRI's Transatlantic Strategy Division in June 2021 and works as Program Officer in the Institute's Bratislava Office. At IRI, he is working on the Transatlantic Security Initiative (TSI) which is an annual program giving young professionals from Poland, Romania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary first-hand experience and expertise needed to be champions of a transatlantic- centred national security policy.

Previously he was working for a Hungarian think tank's representation office in Brussels, and also got experience in the EU's enlargement policy while he was a Blue Book Trainee at the European Commission. He earned his Ph.D. degree in political sciences in 2020 from the Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest, Hungary. He also had the opportunity to study the democratic transition of the Western Balkans while he was in Sarajevo and Belgrade between 2016 and 2017.

Peter Hefele—Policy Director, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

Dr Peter Hefele graduated in Economics and Economic History from the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt in 1997. He worked as an economic researcher at the Institute for Economy and Society/Bonn and joined the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) in 2003 as Head of the Economic Policy/Political Education Department. In

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From December 2010 to February 2015, he worked as Head of the China Office of the Konrad- Adenauer-Stiftung in Shanghai. From March 2015 to April 2019, he was Head of the Regional Project Energy Security and Climate Change (RECAP), based in Hong Kong SAR/ PR China. Between May 2019 and December 2020, he was the Director Asia and Pacific of KAS in Berlin. Since January 2022, he has been Policy Director of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, the think tank of the European People's Party, in Brussels.

His work focuses on foreign and security policy, economic policy, international development cooperation and energy/climate policy. He is also an expert on political, economic and social developments in Asia and China. He is fluent in German, English and Hungarian, has good knowledge of French and Italian and basic knowledge of Chinese.

Miłosz Hodun – Member of the Board of Directors, European Liberal Forum.

Miłosz Hodun, PhD, is President of the Project: Polska Foundation in Warsaw and Member of the Board of Directors of the European Liberal Forum, think tank and foundation of the ALDE Party. Member of the Liberal International Climate Justice Committee.

Coordinator of various projects and author of various articles on populism and hate speech. Editor of publications such as "Beyond flat Earth. European Liberal vs. Conspiracy theories", "US/THEM. Hate speech at the service of politics", "Scary stories or the sum of all fears in political discourse in Poland and Hungary", "European Atlas of democratic deficit".

International officer at Nowoczesna (Modern), Polish liberal party, and advisor to the party leader Adam Szłapka. Visiting Adjunct Professor at Reykjavik University Law School, focused on Comparative law and Federalism. Until September 2015, an expert within the "Presidential Experts Program" at the Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland.

Wilhelm Hofmeister—Lecturer, Heinrich-Heine-University of Düsseldorf, Germany

Wilhelm Hofmeister has been, since January 2023, lecturer at Heinrich Heine University of Düsseldorf. Before this, he was for six years Director of the Office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) for Spain and Portugal in Madrid, Spain. Previously, between 2009 and 2015, he was Director of KAS regional project Political Dialogue with Asia, based in Singapore. This project involved the training of young political leaders and cooperation with Asian think tanks.

Wilhelm has been involved in many other activities within KAS, including the start of activities in Australia as well in Myanmar/Burma (1999–2009). He was also KAS representative in Brazil and Director of the KAS Study Centre in Rio de Janeiro (1993–9). He was also based for a while in the headquarters in Germany, being Deputy Director of International Cooperation and Director of the Department for Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America.

Finally, Wilhelm is the author and editor of numerous books and articles on political parties, political development and political system change in Latin America and Asia as well as on political system transformation, EU external relations and international policy issues.

Romain Le Quiniou—Program Officer, International Republican Institute

Romain Le Quiniou joined the International Republican Institute in June 2021 as Assistant Program Officer in the Bratislava office (Transatlantic Strategy Division). Romain has a double degree from Sciences Po Aix with a master's degree in Political Science (Military History, Geostrategy and Defence and Security) and a year later, he graduated from KU Leuven with a master's degree in European Studies.

In parallel, Romain is the co-Founder and Managing Director of Euro Créative, the first think tank in France focusing exclusively on Central and Eastern Europe and dealing with the strengthening of relations (political, economic, societal and cultural) between France and the CEE countries. Finally, Romain is also a Fellow at WiseEuropa, a Polish think tank where he worked as European Affairs' Analyst from 2018 to 2020.

Thibault Muzergues—Senior Advisor, International Republican Institute

Thibault Muzergues has been working at the International Republican Institute since 2011, and currently serves as Senior Advisor as he heads the Institute's activities in Rome, Italy. At IRI he specialises in political parties and the geopolitics of Europe and the Mediterranean. Prior to his work at IRI, Thibault was for five years a fundraiser and direct marketing consultant to France's then leading party, UMP, and Nicolas Sarkozy. He started his career in London, UK, where he served as advisor to the British Conservatives, both at regional and local levels.

A graduate of the London School of Economics and Sciences Po Paris, he regularly writes on generalist and specialised media in France, Spain, Italy and the US. He is the author of *The Great Class Shift: How Four Social Tribes Are Redefining Western Politics* (Routledge, 2019) and *War in Europe? From Impossible War to Improbable Peace* (Routledge, 2022). He is currently preparing his next book on post-populism, which will be published in 2024.

Heidi Nordby Lunde—Heidi Nordby Lunde, Norwegian Member of Parliament

Heidi Nordby Lunde is currently serving as an MP in the Norwegian Parliament for the Conservative Party. This is her third term. She is now serving in the Standing Committee on budget and finance, and has former served in the Standing Committee on Labour and Social Affairs.

She has a background from marketing, sales and PR from international companies like HP and PA Consulting. After a breakthrough as a political blogger, she worked as an editor and community manager at a Norwegian news site and appears as a columnist in several news outlets.

Nordby Lunde frequently appears on television and radio concerning a wide variety of political issues, including tax policies and the economy, EU-related issues, the welfare state, gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and the impact of new technology and social media. Since November 2017, she has been the President of the European Movement in Norway.

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Arjen Siegmann (1974) is a full professor at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam with the chair Valuable Work and Christian Social Thought and a research associate at the CDA Research Institute (CDA-WI). He has published in international journals such as *Operations Research, Journal of Banking and Finance, Journal of Empirical Finance* and *Journal of Urban Economics*. An edited volume on climate change was published with Springer in 2022. For CDA-WI he works on economic topics such as the labour market, climate, housing, fiscal policy and lifelong learning.

Arjen studied Econometrics and Operations Research, and received his Ph.D. in Finance in 2003. Previously, he worked as a post-doc researcher at the Netherlands Central Bank (DNB), advisor on strategic model development at Abn Amro Bank and associate professor of Finance.

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1 This chapter is the result of exchanges and discussions between all the authors who have written a chapter in this project. These exchanges were then put together and written down by Muzergues, Braun and Le Quiniou.

For more than ten years, political actors, pundits and scholars have commented on and lamented the sorry state of political parties in Europe. Most agree that they have been in decline, even terminal decline, for a long time and all over the place. Described in contemporary debate as old-fashioned, sometimes corrupted and even outdated in terms of their communication, ideology and structures, they seemed to have gone beyond their usefulness, and may be destined for obsolescence before disappearance. How many times have (exaggerated) news of the near-death of political parties been announced in the mass media?

That political parties are unpopular and distrusted by the wider public is beyond doubt. In the latest global survey of public attitudes towards democracy released by the Foundation for Political Innovation (Fondapol) together with the International Republican Institute (IRI) in 2021, political parties stood out as the globally least trusted institutions in the democratic world, with only 27% of overall trust versus 73% of distrust. Parties are far more distrusted that parliament (42% trust vs. 58% distrust), the government (43% trust versus 57% distrust), the media (44% trust versus 56% distrust) or the unions (48% trust versus 52% distrust), the other institutions that had more distrust than trust (interestingly enough, all of them are political).[2] Those are not the only worrying numbers for political parties: not only are they distrusted as institutions, but their memberships seem to have hit and to remain at an all-time low, following a more general pattern of lower, less intense political participation across the board, at least when compared to what is widely considered as the 'golden age of political parties' in Western European democracies during the 1960s and the 1970s. While the UK Conservative Party could boast around 1.5 million party members in the mid-1970s, it has not gone over the 200,000-member bar since the late 1990s.[3] Numbers from Germany and the Netherlands follow a rather similar pattern of decline, although numbers have tended to stabilise since the beginning of this millennium.

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2 See Dominique Reynié et al., Freedoms at Risk: The Challenge of the Century—a Global Survey on Democracy in 55 Countries, Paris: Fondapol, 2022, p. 72. Also available online: https://www.fondapol.org/app/uploads/2022/01/fondapol-iri-cod-kas-genron-fng-rda-survey-freedoms-at-risk-the-challenge-of-the-century-01-2022-2.pdf

3 See the chapter on the UK by Tim Bale, in Paul Webb & Tim Bale, *The Modern British Party System*, Second Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 240.

The decline of political parties is, in fact, part of a long-term societal trend related to more fundamental societal changes that have slowly but surely touched European societies, and which include the declining role of ideologies, the atomisation of societies—or, as French sociologist Jérôme Fourquet once described it, their "archipelisation",[4] and the declining role of the old social webs that constituted entire social ecosystems, of which political parties were only one aspect: associations, churches, trade unions and so forth. The triumph of individualism since the 1980s has made citizens less conscious of their belonging to a political family, or to a specific social class, and as a result these citizens have switched support more easily and more quickly between political parties, depending on the personality leading it. In the era of mass television, voters have learned to zap between parties as they have between TV channels, and the sense of proximity towards *any* political party has weakened tremendously in Western societies. With the rise of the Internet and social media in the 2000s and 2010s, it was feared that this process would not only continue but even accelerate. The risk was then that any long-term political party project, that is, building or consolidating a political party representing a specific section of society, articulating its interests in a global vision or ideology and fielding candidates to defend these interests and ideology in an election with the aim of exercising power in their name or that of the greater good, was becoming irrelevant for modern politics.

Indeed, during the past 15 years, the impending death of political parties has repeatedly been announced: various pundits have contested their usefulness in aggregating aspirations of society in an age of social media; scholars have preferred studying the rise of direct democracy and alternative modes of representation/decision rather than the decline of political parties; and even politicians have shied away from giving their political movement the seemingly infamous name of 'party', even though those movements performed the primary function of political parties, which is to field candidates for elections.

The disdain for political parties was perhaps best described by Italian populist firebrand Beppe Grillo, who during his time as leader of the Five-Star Movement

4 Jérôme Fourquet, *L'Archipel français: Naissance d'une nation multiple et divisée*, Paris: Seuil, 2019.

publicly stated that he 'hated' and 'wanted to destroy' political parties,[5] to replace them with a more direct form of democracy—in the case of the M5S, this took the shape of an online network dedicated to keeping a close link between the party elites and sympathisers through the Rousseau Platform.[6]

In the end, the endeavour proved quite problematic as the platform's rules and functioning remained notoriously opaque and its ownership (including that of data) by a private company became an issue in Italian politics. The project also quickly lost speed as the M5S had to adjust its revolutionary ambitions to the day-to-day constraints of exercising power, losing much popular enthusiasm (and participation) in the process. But the Rousseau Platform and its promotion were symptomatic of a wider problem that struck political parties in the 2010s, and which for a while seemed to destine them to the ash heap of history: with the rise of social networks, it seemed that any intermediation between the elites and the people, between the decision-making and the deliberation, between the *Kratos* and the *Demos*, had become obsolete, thereby questioning the primary raison d'être of political parties. In any case, in the years that followed the 2008 financial crisis, the elites that exercised decision-making in the name of the people were not exactly covering themselves with glory as they struggled with a number of crises that hit the European middle class hard without citizens seeing decisive solutions presented by their politicians. The post-crisis years came to be marked by an increasing level of distrust for political elites, seen as disconnected from the rest of society. Political parties came to be the prime recipient of this distrust, as for a while they seemed to perfectly exemplify that disconnect, hanging on to old totems and taboos (on immigration, free trade, state intervention in economics, etc.) that were less and less considered as such by large parts of the electorate.

The existential crisis of political parties in the past decade is therefore the direct result of the rise of social media and of the crisis of confidence in the political system following

5 Nicola Biondo and Marco Canestrari, *Il Sistema Casaleggio – Partito, soldi, relazioni: ecco il piano per manomettere la democrazia*, Milan: Ponte alle Grazie, 2019, p. 35.

6 Ibid.

the 2008–15 financial and economic crises. Combined, these two elements gave rise to the idea that perhaps political parties really were obsolete or that in any case they were not needed any more to perform their duties to stabilise our democracies. Even in the realm of democracy promotion and democracy support, people lost interest in parties, with investment in civil society and e-democracy taking most attention.

Indeed, it did seem for a while that the news of political parties' imminent death had not been grossly exaggerated. All over Europe, new movements challenged the supremacy of traditional, legacy parties, and some became quite successful. In Italy, the anti-party that was then the M5S succeeded in becoming the most popular political grouping in public opinion, and then in parliament after the general elections of 2018. A year earlier, Emmanuel Macron's party, En Marche!, had succeeded not only in breaking the duopoly of France's two legacy parties, but he had also completely destroyed the old party system. For a while the rise of his movement En Marche! Threatened to do the same to the EU's political party system. Meanwhile, in the Netherlands the atomisation of the political party system in parliament threatened (and continues to threaten) its coherence and the formation of any government: it took 299 days to form the last Dutch government, which at times consisted of four different parties in a lower house of Parliament that counts no fewer than 20 political parties or factions.

Yet what is remarkable about this all-out assault on political parties is that despite their weaknesses and their long-term decline, they have remained at the centre of the game in most countries' political systems. Perhaps even more importantly, they have proved indispensable for the functioning of democracy in Europe: in the Netherlands, no agreement on a coalition government could have been passed without negotiations between political parties. In Italy the M5S soon understood that it needed to convert into a much more classic political party to implement its political programme: it built more traditional structures and adopted a clear positioning on the very left–right divide that it had claimed to supersede a few years before.

In fact, it seems that after the excitement caused by their emergence, those movements and single-issue parties that competed successfully for elections in

the early and mid-2010s were faced with a dilemma: become real political parties with a long-term agenda or disappear. For different reasons, some movements like the M5S in Italy, the Progress Party in Norway or SYRIZA in Greece chose the latter and professionalised their structures, while many other parties simply disappeared or weakened so much as to become irrelevant, either because the single issue they had been campaigning for had been resolved (for example, the Brexit Party in the UK), because they proved unable to offer a vision beyond the charisma of their first leader (e.g. Team Stronach in Austria), or because their positioning beyond the left–right divide had become obsolete when new issues requiring a clear answer on the left–right divide took first place in voters' preoccupation (e.g., Ciudadanos in Spain). Only in France did the political party system get fully destroyed without a replacement in sight, for multiple reasons that have to do with France's historic reluctance to embrace political parties, the country's heavily centralised and now personalised presidential system, but also the personality of Emmanuel Macron, which over time became a fault line in and of itself. However, Macron's anticipated exit from the political scene after the 2027 presidential elections in which he cannot be a candidate augurs a possible return to a more rational, if not traditional, party system in France.

Political parties have therefore won their battle for existence, and it looks like a miracle, considering the contrary winds they were facing. What can explain their remarkable resilience? As the case studies in this publication have shown, there is a variety of causes to this resilience, which can be generally divided into three categories: institutional, historical/political and practical.

The institutional dimension is best documented by the comparison between countries such as Germany and the UK, where the political party system has been challenged but has roughly stayed the same, and other countries such as France or Hungary, where the institutional framework was much weaker. In Germany, Romania and the UK, the catch-all political parties have benefited from an institutional framework that has favoured them. This gave them time to adapt to a new political conundrum and withstand the assault of new parties: this is perhaps best exemplified in the UK, where

the first-past-the-post constituency system has greatly helped both the Conservatives and the Labour Party to withstand the challenges of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) of Nigel Farage from the right and the Liberal Democrat (Lib Dems) or the Greens from the centre and left. In the 2010 general elections, the Lib Dems garnered 23% of the votes but only 9.5% of the seats, while UKIP did not win a single seat in the following 2015 general elections despite taking 12.9% of the votes—and needless to say, both Lib Dems and UKIP would probably have got more of the popular vote had the election been on a proportional representation basis as in the European elections, where both parties tended to fare better than in general elections.

In the UK, the accusations of a 'cartel' of political parties being favoured by the institutional framework do not ring totally hollow, and they indeed allowed traditional parties to regroup after the initial surprise caused by the rise of new movements such as UKIP. But party cartelisation is not only the consequence of election methods, as organisation and funding can also play a role: in Germany, where the term 'cartel' is widely used, it refers to the fact that those parties in parliament decide together on the allocation of resources between them, and the 5% threshold to enter parliament in general elections ensures that representation as well as political party resources are kept within a relatively small number of parties. This does not necessarily preclude the entry of new parties in parliament, as the emergence of the Greens in the 1980s and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the 2010s attests, but it limits these risks and concentrates resources in an institutional setting that includes campaigns and political foundations. The Netherlands, which has a more open political system where resources are more widely shared and where no threshold for representation exists, provides the example of a much more atomised and unstable party system, at least in parliament—this makes the political party scene much livelier, but also somehow rockier.

Political parties have also endured because of more historical, or political reasons. This was perhaps best seen in Southern Europe in the 2010s, where traditional parties were (logically) blamed for the extreme social and economic consequences of the financial crisis and the social costs that large parts of the electorate had to pay for the consolidation of national budgets and the austerity policies that went with them.

In Greece, Spain and Italy, political movements that refused to be called parties and claimed to renew democracy by making political parties obsolete through the exercise of direct democracy challenged the status quo, and it looked for a time that they may well succeed in shaking up the system. However, it turned out with time that the roots of traditional political parties were much more profound than originally thought. For example, the traditional left–right divide that historically runs very deep within southern European countries could not be superseded for something new. Furthermore, those parties that could benefit from a solid on-the-ground organisation and structure managed to weather the storm thanks in large part to their local and societal networks. In the end, very few of the political parties that were dominating Southern European politics in the 2000s have disappeared, even though their dominance over the system has weakened, and some new parties emerged and consolidated by representing new publics that did not previously recognise themselves within the traditional party system.

In other parts of Europe, and notably in Central and Eastern Europe where the party system is generally less stable, the 2008 financial crisis also provided a major challenge. Here, the resilience of some (though not all) political parties during a period of crisis can be explained by the capacity of historical parties like Smer in Slovakia, Fidesz in Hungary and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in Serbia to adapt their discourse to become 'drivers' of the changes in the economic, fiscal and also political debates, notably in their cultural dimension. The fact that some succeeded in this endeavour (while others did not) led to an imbalance in the political party system, with one dominant party becoming capable of overshadowing the whole political system, generally to the detriment of democratic quality.[7]

The Central European example shows that the reaction of political parties themselves to the feeling of estrangement that large parts of the population felt towards their political elites and traditional parties also had a role to play in their own resilience. At

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7 Hanspeter Kriesi and Swen Hutter, *Crises and the Transformation of the National Political Space in Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 30–1.

the time of the financial crisis, political party elites often came to be viewed (rightly or wrongly) as completely disconnected from the aspirations of large sections of the population whose preoccupation had shifted to issues that had become taboo in society, such as immigration and the environment. When traditional parties reacted quickly by offering credible new platforms that integrated these issues into their ideological corpus and their messaging, they managed to better withstand the assault of new and one-issue parties. Scandinavia offers perhaps a mitigated example of this: political parties in Denmark and Norway, and to a lesser extent Sweden, were able to react rather quickly to changing moods in the public regarding immigration, integration and the environment. This was perhaps not enough to stop the emergence of new populist parties such as the Danish People's Party or the Norwegian Progress Party, but it somehow limited their appeal and by slowing down their rise, encouraged them to normalise and become political players (as opposed to disruptors), to the extent that they are now all full actors in the traditional parliamentary game, and have either taken part directly in the government (as in the case of the Progress Party in 2011) or granted the government confidence and support from the outside (as in the case of the Danish People's Party between 2001 and 2011, and again between 2016 and 2019, and currently of the Sweden Democrats).

Historical roots, but also political adaptation and the modernisation of messaging and programming, have also helped traditional political parties maintain their position as key players in the parliamentary game, and when those parties failed to adapt to new demands from the public, they left space for new parties to emerge and consolidate their electorate. Whether populist or not, when those parties decided to institutionalise and play the game of parliamentary (and even government) politics, they progressively became part of the system, and in the end contributed to its stabilisation: thus, despite originally offering a rather radical programme of direct democracy, both Podemos and the M5S ended up serving in coalition governments and became traditional political parties, with parts of their appeal disappearing as a result. It remains to be seen whether these parties will consolidate like the Greens did in Germany after the 1980s, retaining their own identity and stand-alone appeal in a

more diverse but stable party system, or whether they will disappear or be more or less digested by more traditional political parties—even if it is to find a new life inside a wider coalition led by a traditional party as has been the case of Nowoczesna in Poland. But in any case, the institutionalisation of originally rebel movements into the political party system seems to have been the norm rather than the exception in European politics in the latter part of the 2010s and the early part of the 2020s.

Finally, it should also be noted that political parties also proved more resilient than expected for very practical reasons, that is, that the attempts made to replace them have basically failed. As Richard Young of Carnegie Europe has noted in his most recent book *Rebuilding European Democracy*,[8] there has been a plethora of experiments to renew, strengthen and rebuild European democracy over the past decade, whether bottom-up through the rise of civic activism, or top-down through efforts by governments to involve more directly the citizenry, may that be through the use of referendums or more or less complex public consultations. While these many efforts have had various forms of successes (and sometimes failures), none of them has been able to replace the role played by political parties. Although new modes of consultation have been used most effectively as complements to traditional methods of democratic decision-making, they have not been able to replace institutions such as parliament, where political parties reign supreme.

Interestingly, the very movements that refused to call themselves 'parties' and sought to make them as 'superfluous' as parliaments, to use the terms taken by M5S theorist Davide Casaleggio,[9] were themselves forced to rethink their approaches after one or two terms in office. Following the dismissal of Beppe Grillo as leader of the party (and after some years in government), the M5S abandoned its Rousseau platform, the online tool that was supposed to replace traditional party structures

8 Richard Young, *Rebuilding European Democracy: Resistance and Renewal in an Illiberal Age*, London: IB Tauris, 2021.

9 See Nicola Biondo and Marco Canestrari, *Il Sistema Casaleggio – Partito, soldi, relazioni: ecco il piano per manomettere la democrazia*, Milan: Ponte alle Grazie, 2019, p. 8.

and provide a direct link between citizens and decision-making. The movement has since largely adopted a traditional functioning, at least in line with the Italian tradition, in recognition of the fact that, at least as long as democracy had to rely on a parliament to take decisions and control the government, political parties in their traditional sense remained indispensable.

It might be a somehow distressing thought, but one of the main reasons that parties ended up being so resilient is that despite numerous attempts to replace them by alternative forms of 'direct' democracy, there was simply no alternative to them—meaning that any political movement wanting to continue to exist beyond a single electoral cycle needed to institutionalise and therefore become a proper political party. Inevitably, those who refused to play this game, either individually (Yannis Varoufakis in Greece is a good example) or collectively (To Potami, still in Greece), condemned themselves to irrelevance. In many ways, political parties ended up very much like democracy itself according to Winston Churchill, that is, the 'worst form of government—except for all the others that have been tried'.

This permanence, almost by default, of political parties is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that although party membership numbers remain much lower than they were during the heydays of mass political parties, they have stopped dropping in most countries and have even increased in some cases, for better or for worse, as the example of the British Labour Party in the middle of the 2010s shows, or more generally in the Netherlands, where party membership figures have stabilised and even risen recently.

In the Dutch case, it is interesting to note that the traditional, catch-all parties have indeed continued to suffer a further slide in their membership numbers, but this has been compensated, and even more recently superseded, by growing membership in newer, emerging parties. While engagement in political parties is not as large as it used to be in the 1960s or 1970s, it therefore seems that citizens are still eager to participate not only in political life, but also in the life of political parties, even though the modes of engagement now vary, as does the level of concentration of membership into small groups of large parties.

One should therefore not be too harsh on political parties. It may well be that they have survived partly by default, but this very fact also illustrates the fact that political parties perform very specific functions that simply cannot be replaced by any other form of organisation, at least within the confines of the workings of a liberal democracy where parliament performs its legislative functions. If, in a time in which parties also organised themselves to confiscate power in dictatorships, Max Weber defined them as 'organized structures which promote candidates and contest elections for the aim of capturing political power,[10] political scientist Tim Bale, who wrote the chapter on the UK in this publication, defined political parties as performing the following functions in a fully functioning democracy:

- representing socially or culturally significant interests at the same time as 'aggregating' (lumping together and packaging) their sometimes contradictory preferences;
- recruiting, selecting, socialising and providing material and ideological support to candidates and elected politicians who will do the representing, often at both national and subnational levels;
- structuring an otherwise bewildering array of choices available to voters at parliamentary and local elections, which, by their very presence, they render competitive;
- facilitating the formation of governments that produce relatively coordinated and coherent policy responses to perceived and real problems; and
- effectively mediating between millions of citizens and a state that otherwise might act exclusively in the interest of those it employs and those whose economic clout could give them a disproportionate say in its direction.[11]

10 Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und gesellschaft, Tübingen*: Mohr Siebeck, 1922.

11 Tim Bale, *European Politics: A Comparative Introduction*, Fourth Edition, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017, p. 144.

As the experience of the 2010s has shown, those functions can hardly be performed without having to resort to a rather classic form of organisation able to field candidates, produce and disseminate propaganda material to compete in elections and convince voters to support them, or even represent those socially or culturally significant interests while aggregating them in a more or less coherent global vision for the future. The thing is, as long as there are parliaments and public positions that need to be filled by elections, political parties (whether formal or informal) will be required to perform these basics democratic functions. If they do not exist yet, then it is only a matter of time before interests will be aggregated into more or less formal parties (as happened historically in France despite the ban on political parties between 1791 and 1905). But if they cannot be allowed to form, or if one party comes to dominate all the others by a superior organisation which it uses to consolidate its power—as is presently the case in Serbia and Hungary—then the national democratic framework is bound to suffer.

It is a fact that political parties and a healthy, diverse political party system (meaning at least two, able to compete fairly) are indispensable to a meaningful democracy, but how can we explain the mistrust of citizens, even now that this utility has been proven? Some of the answer lies in the very nature of political parties, which mirror the divisions within our societies. As such, they cannot be loved or trusted because they reflect our disagreements, and indeed often seek to capitalise on them to gain and consolidate our votes or support, whether in elections or when they ask for our financial or time contribution. But it would be lazy to put all the blame solely on nature, for political parties have often done a particularly bad job at presenting their role to the public, perhaps because their leaders have been so busy at courting our votes without really considering that their existence might be put into question. How many times have political leaders claimed that they (and the party they incarnated) represented the national interest, rather than a specific vision for the future of the country that was in competition with others (and indeed, would probably need to compromise with those others for the exercise of power)?

Perhaps the crisis of political parties that we have just experienced (and that may well be continuing today) is a reminder for political parties and their leaders that even though they remain in general indispensable for the functioning of democracy, their particular existence and utility should not be taken for granted. They should therefore make a particular effort at communicating to citizens the functions that they perform—not to be loved, or even fully trusted, but perhaps to be respected. In order to do that, they need to better communicate to the public—something that they often do profusely, although for other reasons, but they cannot do so indiscriminately. While online communication has become a very useful tool to reach out to new publics, experience collected in the past 20 years has shown that it only complements, and in any case cannot replace the social role that political parties play to understand, represent and aggregate the interests of groups of people. If parties are disconnected from the realities of the lives of citizens they are supposed to represent, then they are no longer performing their function, and it is normal to see them lose support. Perhaps the sometimes extreme focus on online communication (which often turns out to be much more one-directional than one would have predicted, due to its mass dimension) has helped strengthen this disconnect between parties and people, and explains much of the crisis of traditional parties in the era of populism.

This question of representation is perhaps the key issue that parties must first answer to consolidate their support—in this sense, the rise of new political parties, while sometimes considerably complicating the work of forming a government, is not necessarily a bad thing, as it allows for a more accurate representation of the citizenry, allowing for those who may have previously felt they had been left behind by the old political system to be (and feel) represented by a specific party. A more diverse political party system certainly makes the daily life of governing politicians more difficult, as they have to constantly keep an eye on their parliamentary coalition, but in the end it only pushes the question of aggregating the interests of particular groups of society *after* the elections rather than *before* or *during* the electoral campaign.

Of course, if political parties want to reverse this dynamic in societies that have become much more diverse than at any time in the modern era, they will need to be able to aggregate more effectively the diverse and sometimes contradictory interests of our European societies. This is a real challenge for the old big-tent parties if they want to regain the levels of political support they used to enjoy when most political systems coalesced as mostly bipartisan. Recent examples such as that of New Democracy in Greece show that it is not completely impossible.

Another challenge for political parties is the deep personalisation of politics seen over the past decades, which has at times confused electorate and politicians alike about the ownership not only of parties, but also of politics. The rise of entrepreneurial parties since the 1990s, starting with Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, may have originally refreshed political systems that had too often ossified and were deemed out of touch with realities, but it has also accelerated—and indeed, pushed to the limits—the move towards a politics based only on personalities rather than policies or the representation of specific social groups.[12] While over-personalisation is nothing new—and indeed, it is a reproach that could equally have been made to Tony Blair's Labour Party in the 2000s, Václav Havel's Civic Forum in the 1990s, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party in the 1980s, Willy Brandt's Social Democratic Party in the 1970s or Konrad Adenauer's Christian Democratic Union in the 1960s, it needs to be thought out for a political party that aims to survive (if not thrive) once the leader is gone, not only for its own sake but also for that of the stability of the political party system.

While personalities tend to naturally centralise authority and make decisions (good or bad) based on their political flair, which also includes a balancing-power act inside their own coalition, the role of political parties is to ensure that these decisions remain grounded in the philosophy and interests of those they seek to represent. This is why a long-term party structure, which includes not only party members but also meetings and campaigns on the ground, is so important not only for the party's sake, but also for that of the political leaders, who can in this way retain a direct connection

12 See Vít Hloušek, Lubomír Kopeček and Petra Vodová, *The Rise of Entrepreneurial Parties in European Politics*, Cham: Palgrave, 2020.

to their social base. While personality matters in politics (and indeed always did so), political party infrastructures allow for a much deeper relationship with supporting sections of the electorate than polls or social media studies can allow in the long-term. Indeed, it is telling that the only country in Europe that currently does not have anything looking like a stable party system, France, is also the one that also has gone through the most violent civil unrest in Europe, from the Yellow Vests in 2018–19 to the contestations against the pension reforms of 2019 and the winter of 2023, and even more recently the riots in the banlieues in the summer of 2023.

While political parties perform a role in the social communities that they are rooted in, they have not necessarily done it properly over the past few decades. Old, catch-all parties have been slow to respond to major sociological and ideological shifts that challenged their individual relevance as large aggregating political forces. In the meantime, the over-personalisation of politics has often led to short-term political calculation to supersede long-term, structural choices. Perhaps even more worryingly, the political party structures have often lost touch with their local communities or local electorates, because of the general trend of professionalisation in politics. This trend has given middle-class politics graduates an over-representation in party structures and even in some national parliaments, and this has in turn accentuated the over-investment in unidirectional communication rather than strategies of back-and-forth exchanges with voters and communities. Sometimes investing in strengthening direct contact with members, supporters, voters and communities that are represented by the party is of higher long-term value than a short-term communication strategy whose chances of winning actual votes is more of a gamble than an actual probability. This, of course, does not mean that political parties should not communicate or should not invest in databases, messaging and presence on social media, but they should remain mindful that beyond their short-term objective of winning the next election, they must also think about the long-term loyalty of their voters, which has become structurally more difficult to consolidate. Instituting and strengthening a long-term trust relationship with their public remains the key for parties' long-term survival, and this can only be done via a strengthened long-term dialogue, made even more crucial by the professionalisation of political party structures at the top.

Conclusion and recommendations

While political parties have lived through a difficult time and been challenged like never before in contemporary democratic politics, the fact that they are still standing today in most countries is a testament to their resilience. However, this small victory after a long period of decay and a decade of contestation should not lead party staff and leaders to complacency: while it is true that they survived the challenge of disintermediation and of the politics of rage, much of the explanation for their resilience is to be found in the indispensable nature of functional political parties to a healthy democracy. In a sense, it is not too exaggerated to say that political parties partly won the day by default, simply because no other viable solution was found to replace them as an intermediary between civil society and brute political power—or indeed, in modern societies, the machinery of the bureaucracy.

Although not particularly glorious, this victory by default should not be seen as dishonourable for political parties. But it should lead to internal questioning as to what went wrong beyond the inevitable evolution of society, which makes a return to the golden age of powerful mass political parties impossible, at least in the 1960s format. Indeed, part of the reason for the contestation of political parties is that they had lost touch with their voters, and their purpose in political life was no longer obvious. As political parties represent our divisions, they tend to be more distrusted by citizens than other institutions, but that does not mean that they should not strive to regain *some* trust, or at least some respect from citizens.

Among the things that parties can do to achieve this is to slightly shift their focus to content rather than only communication. In the post-ideological age that was the 1990s and 2000s, the move away from all-encompassing visions of society to the world of marketing and communication was obvious for political parties, and it contributed to further personalise politics. The mood, however, is now towards some

sort of return to content (i.e. policies and programmatic ideas, even when these are the personal visions of the party leaders), and with it come philosophical divisions and the risks of political polarisation. Political parties are in a unique place to be the indispensable link between, on the one hand, a society that has become more diverse and where interests are increasingly diverging, and on the other, the reality of political democratic decision-making which will always remain a balancing act between these competing interests. By aggregating sectoral interests into a coherent political programme, parties allow for a more predictable decision-making, and one that is closer to the will of the citizenry. The fact is that many resources have recently been spent in communicating *to* the people with a rather top-down approach, that is, sending a message in the hope to convince, while too few resources and too little time have been spent on linking more tightly the aspirations of voters with the identity of the party.

As a corollary to this issue, the social dimension of political parties has somehow become lost, and parties should strive not only to get their social role recognised, but also to focus on this social dimension and become social arenas again. This is not to say that political parties should provide social services in the way they (or at least some of them) did in the 1960s, but they should provide a platform for different people with a similar social or ideological background to come together and socialise. The recent hikes in civic activism and the now relatively stable political party membership numbers across Europe show that people do not want to disengage from politics, even though their engagement changes in terms of activity, being more focused on single issues rather than all-encompassing political engagement. Political parties can strengthen themselves by trying to aggregate these different forms of social engagements and providing platforms for these to express themselves, while remaining mindful that aggregation is not surrender: over the past few years, activism has also tended to radicalise positions. This is somewhat normal, as activists seek to draw attention to a problem rather than to gain votes—and this is why political parties need to be present in the political debate, as they aggregate different interests into a global philosophy that can win support and votes for their candidates. This does not preclude polarisation (as examples in some European countries show), but at least

it gives coherence to the political debate and opens the way to manage divisions, in parliament if not anywhere else. Delegating policymaking to civil-society groups is a very risky position that has done more harm than good to political parties, who need to remain fully in control of their platforms and manifestos.

In the past, some political parties have been hijacked by specific sectoral interest groups, which have often ended up narrowing (rather than widening) their electorates. Part of the reason for this is that political parties have not always been transparent about their own function, perhaps because they had themselves lost the fundamentals of their utility. Understanding what a party can do and what a party cannot do is not easy for the average citizen (or indeed for a non-political, non-governmental organisation) if parties themselves do not communicate about their role in society. It becomes even trickier if party leaders do not properly understand what their role really is, beyond winning elections. In many countries, an effort at transparency about what parties do and what they should do in general, and what an individual party is set to do or represent, would help improve their respectability in the view of the larger public—also because it would allow them to manage public expectations. Luckily for politicians, the citizens have actually set the bar quite low, which is the relative advantage of being distrusted: as the public does not expect much from political parties in general, being realistic about what the party can accomplish and the necessity of negotiating with other parties and platforms, far from disappointing citizens, will probably be considered more as an act of truthfulness (a ‘campaign promise’ in some way) than anything else.

Transparency begins there, but it can also be made more convincing if parties regularly publish measurable items about their own life and structures, such as the number of party members/supporters on their database, as well as regular updates on the financial situation of the party. These obviously pose the risk of exposing a rather worrying mismatch between the available party funds and the number of members, but it may also lead parties to seek to bridge that gap and attract more members. This strategy may not immediately translate into measurable recognition by the wider public but will help in improving long-term trust for political parties.

Parties also have work to do in terms of reconnecting with the citizens they claim to represent. Politics has become more professionalised over the past decades (including because of the increasing complexity of problems that the legislators have to face), and this trend is not reversable. This is not necessarily a bad thing in itself, but the resulting estrangement from the citizens has been one of the key factors in the populist outburst and the more general rejection of party politics in the past. There is, of course, no easy fix to this problem, but political parties should ensure that their activists and staffers and (importantly) candidates remain rooted in the communities that they represent. This can be done in different ways: for example, by getting elected officials to dedicate a large amount of time to work in or with their core constituency (being mindful that constituency surgeries and touring necessitate dedicating a lot of time, and therefore longer parliamentary recesses), or by opening up candidate selection to a larger pool of candidates that would be more representative of the diversity of civil society, a theme that IRI explored in a previous publication.[13]

Political parties, however, cannot improve their lot on their own. The diversity of cases in this publication shows that institutional set-ups matter in strengthening (or weakening) the resilience of political parties. Experience in the UK shows that election rules and districting have an influence not only on the outcome of the election itself but more largely on the nature of the party system itself; otherwise there would not have been such a large difference in results (including in actual percentage) between single-constituency elections such as local or parliamentary elections and elections using more proportional voting systems, such as the now irrelevant European elections, or some regional elections. While elections matter, the general rules of the game also condition the setting and evolution of a party system, and they can favour the development of responsive multi-party democracies as much as they can result (by design or by default) in gross imbalances that can perpetuate single-party rule or exclude some parties and categories of the population from power. Being mindful of

13 See Thibault Muzergues, Daniel Scaduto, et al., *Standing Out From the Crowd: Political Parties Candidate (S)election in the Transatlantic World*, Washington DC: International Republican Institute, 2022. Also available online: https://www.iri.org/resources/standing-out-from-the-crowd/

the historical development of each country, which will inevitably have an incidence of the selection of a particular voting system, specific attention needs to be taken at institutional level to keep a balance between openness and stability, between the need to keep a certain base of political actors in the longer term for the sake of political consistency and the need to keep the door open for new actors to come in, should the legacy parties prove to be out of touch with the ever-changing fabric of our societies. In party politics as much as in business, institutions need to trust competition, and at the same time provide a fair framework for competition to thrive.

Finally, a word also has to be said about the focus on political parties in the realm of democracy-promoting organisations, which has been rather weak over the past decade. This is, of course, not to say that the weakening of political parties is a direct consequence of a lesser interest from the profession in these actors of democracy—whether in historical (or indeed strong) democracies or more recent ones, political parties and multi-party democracy have been equally and universally challenged. But shifting most attention and resources away from political parties and their development has further destabilised party systems that were already being seriously challenged, in particular when focus shifted for the benefit for civil society organisations that found themselves in competition with political parties for attention and support. In some way, this shift away from parties to 'civil society' and civic activism is understandable: in societies that are now much more atomised than before and in which political activism is being played in many different ways, often at micro-level, civil society organisations (CSOs) do play an important role in making democracies a more vibrant, responsive agora where citizens can express their differences and make decisions for the good of the community. However, CSOs and political parties are doing a completely different job, as the many failed attempts by CSO leaders to enter the realm of politics has shown. If the past decade has shown anything, it is precisely that political parties are not easily replaceable, at least if one wants to preserve or strengthen democracy. And even though party politics is fundamentally less likeable than the work of CSOs (partly because party politicians need to compromise where CSO leaders don't have to), it remains a fundamental

part of democracy. As we came to learn over the past few years, and to paraphrase Barrington Moore's famous quote: No party—no democracy.

Whether we like them or not, political parties are here to stay as a fundamental component of our political systems. The question is whether they can contribute to the consolidation of democracy, or whether their strengths and their weaknesses will result in weakening democracy, for example, by blurring the border between state and party or by not performing their function of linking civil society with the exercise of political power. Each actor has a role to play in making sure that political parties play the role of stabiliser of democracy, and organisations like IRI and the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies surely wish to contribute to this, whether by studies like this or actions to support political parties in Europe, and more largely across the world.

The UK:

Familiarity May Breed Contempt, but What Alternative Is There?

Tim Bale

The UK as a whole has long been dominated by just two parties—at least on the surface. Before the country became fully democratic in 1928, it had been governed either by the Whigs or the Tories, who over the course of the nineteenth century morphed into the Liberal and Conservative parties, respectively. Soon after the First World War (1914–18), the Liberals found themselves displaced, in the emerging era of class politics, by the newly founded Labour Party—a largely social democratic outfit funded by the country's largest trade unions. Within 10 years, Labour became the main opposition to a Conservative Party, which, although funded largely by business interests keen to defend the interests of property by keeping taxation and government spending as low as possible, managed (mainly by dint of its intense appeals to both nationalism and individual aspiration) to win the votes of around one-third of working-class voters. As a result, it continued to govern the country for much of the time, only occasionally forced from office by Labour. The Liberals, meanwhile, did not disappear but eventually (in the late 1980s) merged with a centrist splinter from the Labour Party (the SDP) to form the Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems)—the UK's third party, capable at its peak in the early 2000s of winning nearly 10% of the seats in the lower House of Commons. This fragmentation (or at least fraying) of the country's essentially two-party system was driven, too, by the growth of nationalism in Wales and Scotland, with Plaid Cymru and the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) making significant inroads into the vote share of the UK's two main parties—so much so that, in Scotland in particular, Labour and the Conservatives (who are still commonly referred to as the Tories) have long since lost whatever grip they used to enjoy there. Across the Irish Sea, Northern Ireland hosts a party system of its own, founded on the age-old nationalist/republican vs. unionist/loyalist divide.[14]

Longevity, however, does not mean popularity. If anything, familiarity, as the saying goes, seems to have bred contempt. In a recent comparative survey carried out for the OECD, the UK's political parties earned the trust of just one in five respondents. While this may not be that far below the OECD average of one in four, the fact that

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14 For more detail on all this, see Paul Webb and Tim Bale, *The Modern British Party System*, Second Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021—especially Chapter 1.

some 60% of the UK's citizens told researchers that they don't trust the parties that every so often compete for their vote hardly represents a ringing endorsement.[15] Nor, incidentally, does the fact that, in Ipsos's annual *Veracity Index*, a mere 12% of Brits said they trusted politicians to tell the truth—down from 19% in 2021 and 15% in 2020, and even lower than the 13% recorded back in 2009 in the aftermath of the parliamentary expenses scandal.[16] Just as depressingly, only one-quarter of the UK population thought that a high-level politician would likely refuse a well-paid job in the private sector in exchange for granting a political favour, lower than the OECD average of just under a third.[17]

The electoral dimension

And yet, and yet. Although turnout at general elections has dropped over time (gone are the days when at least 75% of UK voters routinely cast their ballot at general elections), the 67.3% recorded in 2019 put the country comfortably mid-table when compared to the 27 EU member states, 12 of which recorded higher turnouts, 15 of which recorded lower. And, although it represented a slight decline on 2017, 2019 wasn't really that bad a year historically speaking. In 2001—an election whose result was essentially a foregone conclusion—turnout fell to a mere 59.4% (its lowest level since 1918) after which, note, it had been steadily rising.[18]

Moreover, while it is true that the UK's system has been experiencing considerable fragmentation since the early 1970s, with the appearance of several minor (and, in the case of the SNP, maybe not so minor) parties, the Conservative and Labour parties

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15 Note that the remaining 20% of Brits expressed neutrality. Data taken from Figure 2.5, OECD, *Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy*, 13 July 2022. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/b407f99c-en/1/3/2/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/b407f99c-en&_csp_=c12e05718c887e57d9519eb8c-987718b&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book#figure-d1e2356

16 Ipsos, *Veracity Index 2022*, 23 November 2022. https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-veracity-index-2022

17 Office for National Statistics, *Trust in Government, UK: 2022*, 13 July 2022. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/trustingovernmentuk/2022

18 All figures taken from Elise Uberoi, *Turnout at Elections*, House of Commons Library, 26 August 2021. https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8060/CBP-8060.pdf

still continue to harvest the lion's share of the vote. Admittedly, one can make too much of the fact that together they attracted 82.3% of the vote in 2019 (up markedly on the 67.3% they won in 2017) to suggest that the UK's 'classic' two-party system is 'back'. After all, party identification is far lower these days than it was in the so-called golden era when the Lib Dems (in those days the Liberals) were little more than a slight irritant, while nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales were essentially an irrelevance. And volatility (voters taking the opportunity to switch allegiances from one election to another) is far higher. But, in spite of Labour in 2019 crashing to its worst defeat since 1935, the 'big two' still accounted for over three-quarters of all votes cast in the country as a whole. Meanwhile, north of the border in Scotland, Labour's historic dominance seemed to have passed (many assumed—possibly a little complacently—for good) to the SNP.

The much-remarked-upon 'end of class voting' that accounts for some of the increased fluidity noted above can be somewhat overblown. Indeed, given the fact that the Conservative Party picked up more working-class voters than Labour in 2019, it is even possible to argue that, where once all the talk among political sociologists was of 'dealignment', we are now witnessing 'realignment', driven in part by the 'affective polarisation' of the electorate in the wake of Brexit, which has seen many working-class voters (who are significantly less likely than their middle-class counterparts to hold university degrees and the liberal/postmaterialist attitudes which go along with them) switch to the Tories. There is also an intersection with age, with older people (especially retirees) now far more likely to vote Conservative than Labour, while the opposite is true for younger people—especially if they are women (giving rise to a widening gender gap between the two main parties). In 2019, for instance, at a general election where some 43% of working-class voters voted Conservative while 36% voted Labour, well over 50% of voters aged 18–34 voted Labour compared to only just over 20% of those aged 65 and over. Meanwhile, Labour picked up the votes of just over 30% of voters with no educational qualifications while 55% of them voted Conservative.

There has been a degree of sectoral 'sorting', too, in the sense that, over the years, those working in the public and charitable sectors have become significantly more likely to vote Labour than their private sector and self-employed counterparts. Ethnicity also matters: although it may be true that the Conservatives have recently made inroads into the UK's Indian (largely Hindu) diaspora, it remains the case that people of colour are far more likely to vote Labour. True, the British Election Study found that in 59% of ethnic minority voters supported Labour in 2019, down from 66% in 2017; but Labour won 3 in 5 votes in the 75 most ethnically diverse constituencies and managed to win every single seat with a Black African/Caribbean population over 14%.[19]

Other parties have, of course, emerged in the wake of (and have doubtless also contributed to) these underlying social and demographic changes—most obviously the Greens and various iterations of the populist radical right (UKIP, the Brexit Party and Reform UK), all led at one time or another by arch-Brexiteer Nigel Farage. But while they have clearly made an impact—and, in the case of the latter, frightened the life out of Conservative MPs on one or two occasions—they have generally flattered to deceive at general elections.

This is especially the case when it comes to winning parliamentary seats, owing mainly (it seems fair to assume) to the UK's highly regressive single-member plurality (SMP)/first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system. Its high thresholds not only make things incredibly difficult for minor parties without geographically concentrated support, it also discourages potential supporters from 'wasting their vote' on candidates who therefore stand no chance of being elected—what Duverger famously referred to as the 'mechanical' and 'psychological' effects, respectively.[20] It should come as no surprise, then, that notwithstanding the occasional wobble on Labour's part when it has been out of office for a long stretch, neither of the two main parties has shown

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19 Will Jennings and Isla Glaister, 'The "ethnic data gap" on voters—and why it matters to parties and pollsters', *SkyNews*, 6 August 2021. https://news.sky.com/story/the-ethnic-data-gap-on-voters-and-why-it-matters-to-parties-and-pollsters-12365500

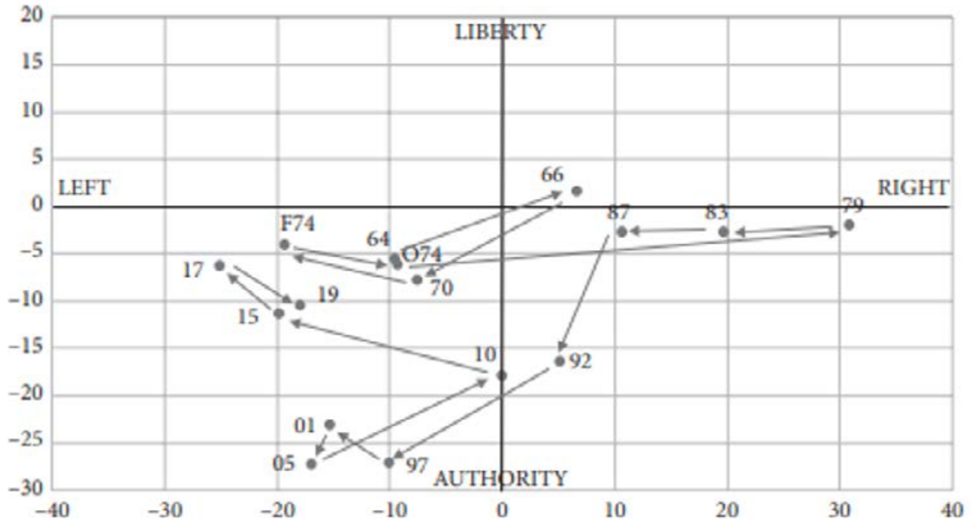
20 Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organisation and Activity in the Modern State*, Methuen: John Wiley & Sons, 1954.

much genuine enthusiasm for proportional representation (PR) since its introduction was seriously discussed in the first two decades of the twentieth century. By the same token, it hardly comes as a shock to learn that it is the minor parties with sometimes significant but often thinly spread support (the Lib Dems, the Greens, and UKIP/Brexit/Reform) that have looked upon the idea most favourably.

Scepticism bordering on resistance to PR on the part of Labour and the Conservatives, however, should not give rise to the impression that those parties are incapable of change. That would be to ignore not only their adoption (albeit sometimes haltingly and rarely in lockstep) of new campaign techniques and technologies but—perhaps even more importantly—their ideological flexibility.

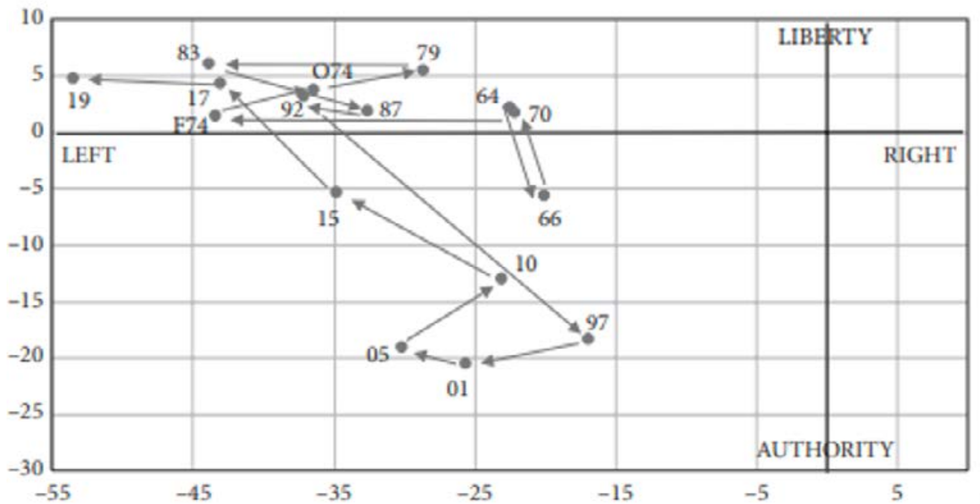
Admittedly, the latter has its limits: Labour remains an essentially social democratic party and, as such, is far more likely to be amenable to state-based solutions and economic management, while the Conservatives remain much more sceptical, even hostile, to such approaches, as well as being more prone to nationalism and to striking hard-line poses on crime, immigration and so-called wokeness. However, as Figures 1 and 2 (which use manifesto data to plot the parties' positions in general election years to illustrate how their platforms often change markedly from one contest to another) show that these limits, while evident, can hardly be said to have led to total stasis. This, and the fact that more detailed analysis of manifestos makes plain the two main parties' capacity to pick up on issues and co-opt stances that might otherwise allow new entrants to make more of the running, suggests that the resilience of the UK's Labour and Conservative parties may well be due not just to their determination to preserve an electoral system that has traditionally afforded them a tremendous advantage over their competitors but also to their willingness to constantly calibrate their respective offers to an increasingly sceptical and capricious electorate.

Figure 1 Conservative Party movements in two-dimensional space, 1964–2019



Source: Webb and Bale, *The Modern British Party System*, 156.

Figure 2 Labour Party movements in two-dimensional space, 1964–2019



Source: Webb and Bale, *The Modern British Party System*, 156.

The membership dimension

At first glance, grass-roots membership does not look like an obvious source of resilience for the UK's political parties—as Figure 3 shows, there has been a big drop in the number of people belonging to political parties even over the last half century, and if we were to go further back (to the early 1950s, for instance, when membership was at its absolute highest), things would look even worse. Yet there is some comfort in the fact that the decline seems to have levelled off and may have even reached a floor below which it is unlikely to drop that much further. Contrary to the cynical view that they no longer care about such things, parties these days put a fair amount of effort into ensuring it doesn't happen, and when it occasionally does (numbers actually fluctuate considerably), they do their best not to admit it for as long as they possibly can.[21] The Conservative Party, for instance, does not routinely publish its membership totals, although thanks to the frequency with which they have held leadership contests recently, we have supposedly accurate figures.[22] Moreover, parties have learned to live with fewer members, in part because electioneering these days is considerably more capital-intensive than it used to be when 'boots on the ground' were the be-all and end-all, which in some ways is fortunate, since only around 15% of UK party members really deserve to be called 'activists'—the sort of people who will attend branch meetings and go out canvassing at evenings and weekends.

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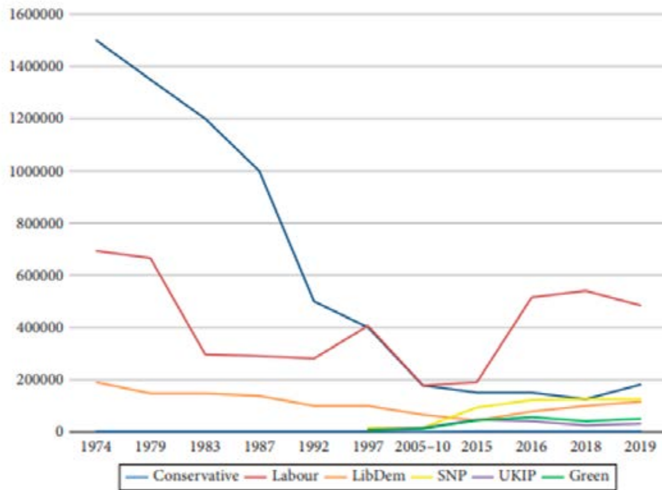
21 For a more detailed exploration of all this, see Tim Bale, Paul Webb and Monica Poletti, *Footsoldiers: Political Party Membership in the 21st Century*, London: Routledge, 2019.

22 There were just over 172,000 Conservative members registered to vote in the summer of 2022, compared to just over 159,000 who were eligible to vote in the leadership contest held in the summer of 2019. Other parties routinely declare their membership in the annual accounts they submit to the Electoral Commission. As of 31 December 2021, Labour had just over 432,000 (significantly down from just over 523,000 the year before), the SNP had just under 104,000 (marginally down from just over 105,000 the year before), the Lib Dems had a little under 74,000 (considerably down on the 98,000 they declared the year before), and the Greens had just over 54,000 (up from just over 47,000 the year before). See http://search.electoralcommission.org.uk/Search/Accounts?currentPage=1&rows=10&sort=TotalIncome&order=-desc&open=filter&et=pp&year=2021®ister=gb®ister=ni®ister=none®Status=registered®-Status=deregistered&rptBy=centralparty&optCols=BandName The SNP, note, was forced to revise its figures downwards in the run-up to its leadership contest in 2023, in which, in the end, just over 72,000 members were eligible to vote.

Figure 3 Political parties' individual memberships, 1974–2019



Source: Webb and Bale, *The Modern British Party System*, 240.

Nevertheless, three caveats are in order. First, it is worth noting that some parties do much better than others. Labour, for instance, appears to have held on to at least some of those members who joined under the left-wing veteran Jeremy Corbyn, in spite of the fact that, under his successor, Keir Starmer, the party has moved a considerable way towards the centre of the political spectrum—a fact that supports survey research that suggests even grass-roots radicals like to win elections![23] Meanwhile, even if is fewer than the 100,000 or so that it used routinely (but perhaps not altogether accurately) to boast, the fact that the SNP has just under 75,000 members in a nation of only 4.3 million voters is little short of phenomenal if one compares that total to, say, the Conservatives' 170,000 in the whole of the UK, which contains easily ten times as many voters.

Second, as Figure 4 shows, it is by no means a given that the parties' voters, members and MPs will sing from exactly the same hymn sheet ideologically, which

23 See Bale et al, 2019, op cit.

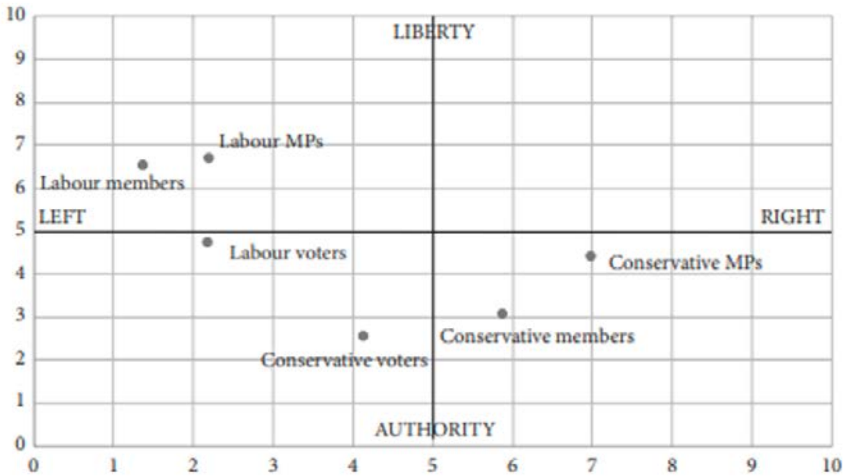
can lead to tensions that badly undermine party unity and may (partly as a result) cause considerable electoral damage. Labour, for example, suffered in precisely this way between 2015 and 2019, and, given the (arguably even greater) differences between the Conservatives' voters, members and MPs, they won't find it that easy to avoid trouble either, especially now that some prominent (and very wealthy) members, clearly aggrieved at the defenestration of their hero, Boris Johnson, are agitating for what they see as 'true Conservatives' to be given more of a say in the party.[24]

Third, nearly all British parties—with the exception of the radical right-wing populist Reform UK (which, unbeknown to many, is actually a company rather than a membership organisation)—now give their grass-roots members the final say in leadership contests. Although research has shown again and again that John May's so-called law of curvilinear disparity (which asserts that a party's members and especially its activists are more ideological than its voters and its elected representatives) is anything but, this approach to electing leaders does run the risk—as the Conservative Party found to its considerable organisational and electoral cost in the late summer/early autumn of 2022—that the grass roots might choose someone who lacks the support of MPs and bombs badly with voters.[25] Unlike the Labour Party, however, the Tories took far less time to remedy the situation—one reason, among many perhaps, why they have more of a right than their rivals to be called the UK's 'natural party of government'.

24 See Peter Cruddas and David Campbell Bannerman, 'Now Conservative Party members must take back control', *ConservativeHome*, 2 January 2022. https://conservativehome.com/2023/01/02/peter-cruddas-and-david-campbell-bannerman-now-party-members-must-take-back-control/

25 Alan Wager, Tim Bale, Philip Cowley and Anand Menon, 'The death of May's law: Intra-and inter-party value differences in Britain's Labour and Conservative parties', *Political Studies*, 70 (4), 2022, pp. 939-61. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321721995632

Figure 4 Ideological locations of voters, members and MPs in two-dimensional space, 2019

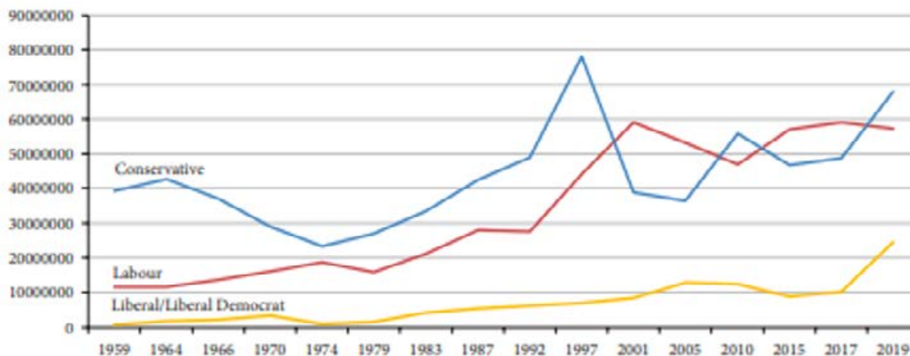


Source: Webb and Bale, *The Modern British Party System*, 261.

The financial dimension

The UK is unusual in that only a very small proportion of national party incomes derive from direct public subsidies—around 5%, compared to well over 50% in Germany and 70% in Spain, to take just two examples. Yet the country's main two political parties, while not necessarily drowning in cash, are not that badly off, even relatively speaking. Indeed, as Figure 5 shows, however low they seem to have fallen in public esteem, they are, if anything, slighter better off (in terms of revenue if not outgoings) than they used to be.

Figure 5 Party income, 1959–2019 (at 2019 prices)



Source: Webb and Bale, *The Modern British Party System*, 285.

Where their money comes from, incidentally, differs considerably. The Conservative Party relies heavily on donations from businesses and 'high net worth individuals' (in the election year of 2019, for example, donations made up some 82% of the Tories' centrally received income of nearly £68 million, while membership accounted for just 3%). Labour, on the other hand, got 29% from membership fees in that year, with donations making up 32% with the bulk of the remainder coming from trade union affiliation fees and public funding for its policymaking in opposition. Obviously, all these sources are subject to change—membership numbers fluctuate and, while some donors are deeply ideological (or in it because they hope to be appointed to the House of Lords), many are more interested in how policies will impact their bottom line and in who they think will win the next election, which may not bode well for the Conservative Party right now.[26] Still, there seems little prospect of either party falling into complete penury in the medium to long term.

26 Iain McMenamin, 'Party identification, the policy space and business donations to political parties', *Political Studies,* 68 (2), 2020, pp. 293–310. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719841243. See also Simon Radford, Andrew Mell and Seth Alexander Thevoz, '"Lordy me!" Can donations buy you a British peerage? A study in the link between party political funding and peerage nominations, 2005–2014', *British Politics* 15 (2), 2020, pp. 135–59. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-019-00109-4

Conclusion

In the wake of the British surrender to American revolutionary forces at Saratoga in October 1777, Sir John Sinclair wrote to the economist Adam Smith to express his concern that, 'If we go on at this rate, the nation must be ruined.' Smith famously assured him that 'there is a great deal of ruin in a nation', meaning (as far as posterity is concerned anyway) that—for good or ill—it would likely be a very long time before he really needed to worry there would be nothing left. The same almost certainly goes for the UK's two main parties—not only when it comes to their finances but also to their memberships and their ability to win over the majority of British voters.

The UK's parties may be distrusted, even, at times, despised. But money continues, for the moment at least, to flow through to them. They may be down to a hard core of members nowadays, but that probably means that the bulk of those members are less likely to bolt when times get tough than were their less committed predecessors. As for voters, in England, anyway (which after all contains nearly 85% of the UK population), most of them seem to see little realistic alternative—partly because of the country's electoral system and partly because (to be fair to both Labour and the Conservatives) Britain's big two do not stand rooted to the spot. Instead they tend (eventually, anyway) not only to embrace new ways of marketing themselves but also to adjust their policy platforms to catch their target voters as well as the zeitgeist.

Indeed, when one considers the sheer scale and pace of social, economic, technological, demographic and cultural changes most polities have experienced even in just the two decades after the turn of the century, it is parties' resilience, rather than their obsolescence (or indeed their senescence) that is most striking. That resilience could, of course, be illusory—parties may, like the hapless Wile E Coyote in the Road Runner cartoons, be sprinting off the edge of a cliff, momentarily unaware that there is nothing beneath their fast-moving feet before, suddenly, realisation dawns, and they drop like a stone to their demise. But, even though the once seemingly impregnable SNP appears to have run into unexpected trouble recently following revelations about its finances, I suspect not. After all, we have been reading their obituaries for what seems like forever, and yet they're still around—regardless.

A Stronghold in Stormy Times?

Germany's System of Political Parties Between Tradition and Reform

Peter Hefele

Alarm bells have been ringing among party leaders and political scientists alike for more than a decade regarding the worrying health of political parties in Europe: years of continuous decline in party membership, marginalisation of once influential people's parties, or fragmentation of party systems, to name a few developments, seem to have considerably weakened political parties as institutions in Western societies, and political party systems more generally.[27] As a result, there has been a heated debate about whether the traditional, post–Second World War (Western) European party systems are in their final throes, and whether or not they should be replaced by other forms of political organisation, such as *movements* or methods of direct participation of citizens.

In contrast, a look at the German political party system reveals an astonishing degree of stability. German parties have weathered quite successfully the country's reunification and massive changes in society and economy since the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, they remain almost unchallenged in their dominant role in the political arena at all levels.

This article will explain the surprisingly high resilience of the German political party system. But even in Germany, their status is not a given forever. Therefore, recommendations will be given to re-strengthen political parties in their indispensable role as stabilisers of democracy.

The analysis looks into the main functions of political parties in modern democratic/parliamentary systems and focuses on developments since German reunification. At specific points, this paper will have to go back to post-war, West German history, as the specifics of the country's party system are rooted in those formative years of the Second German Republic.[28]

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27 For the German case, see Michael Weigl and Jule Klink, *Politische Parteien: Unverzichtbar – Überholt*, Stuttgart: UTB, 202. See also Michael Koß, *Demokratie ohne Mehrheit: Die Volksparteien von gestern und der Parliamentarismus von morgen*, Munich: dtv, 2021, and Uwe Andersen, *Parteien in Deutschland: Krise oder Wande*l, Schwalbach/Ts: Wochenschau Verlag, 2014.
An overview of the European party landscape is given in Peter Egge Langsther, *Party Families in Western Europe* (Routledge Studies on Political Parties and Party Systems), Routledge: London, 2023. For conservative parties, see Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

28 The following article refers only to Western Germany and to the national level; the situation in the *Bundesländer* (federal states) is only mentioned if necessary. The formally multiparty systems of the GDR under the leadership of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) did not influence the decision-making of the communist regime. They can hardly be considered as part of the German party history.

Developments in the German political parties system since the German reunification

The reunification and integration of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) into the political and economic system of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in 1990 have led to unforeseen challenges for the country's political party system, which had evolved in West Germany since 1945.[29] This party system was based on two major parties taking most of the votes and the representation in parliament: the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)/Christian Social Union (CSU) on the right and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) on the left, with the Liberals and other smaller parties adding more complexity to the system. Against all fears—and hopes[30]—only a few constitutional amendments had to be made to the *Grundgesetz* (the German Basic Law), and the existing (Western) German party system remained surprisingly stable, as West German parties quickly built up their organisation on the territory of the former GDR (also known as *Neue Länder*). Despite a rather large potential electorate, all political projects to create specifically Eastern German parties following reunification failed. The transformation of the formerly ruling Communist party, or *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland* (SED) into a leftist party and its 'integration' into the traditional German party system proved the capacity of the Western German party system to absorb and contribute to the peaceful and largely successful integration of a fifth of the German population within a few years.

Two other parties have shaken but not overturned the German party system: Die Grünen (the Greens) in the late 1970s and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in 2013.[31]

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29 For an introduction to the political system of the Federal Republic of Germany, see Wolfgang Rudzio, *Das Politische System der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Wiesbaden: Springer, 2019.

30 See Christopher Banditt, *Das 'Kuratorium für einen demokratisch verfassten Bund deutscher Länder' in der Verfassungsdiskussion der Wiedervereinigung*, in Deutschland Archiv, 16 October 2014. http://www.bpb.de/193078. Accessed 18 April 2023. On the discussion about a new German constitution, which should have replaced the 'provisional' *Grundgesetz,* the idea failed due to a lack of support from the established parties and the German population and the need for quickly integrating the GDR.

31 For the history of the Greens (since 1993 Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), see Ansgar Graw, *Die Grünen an der Macht: eine kritische Bilanz*, Munich: FinanzBuch Verlag, 2020. For the Alternative für Deutschland (Afd), see Melanie Amann, *Angst für Deutschland*, Munich: Droemer, 2017.

Their creation was a reaction to the fact that the established three-party system had widely neglected burning issues such as environmental and climate protection, concerns about the future of European integration or unsolved problems of mass immigration. Both parties, at least in some parts of their programme and electorate, have portrayed themselves as 'anti-system parties', but their internal structure is actually largely modelled after the traditional parties.[32] Even though it has complicated at times the emergence of stable and coherent governing coalitions, the emergence of the Greens, the Left and the AfD rather shows that the established system has managed to incorporate single-issue movements and protest parties as part of the core party system.

The last decade also saw several attempts to create new forms of parties, such as Die Piratenpartei (the Pirates). Those new parties aimed to close the gap between party organisation, party representatives and the electorate by using modern communication tools such as ad hoc online voting to achieve a 'direct democracy'. But those parties had been short lived and could not establish themselves as real innovative alternatives.

Stabilising factors of the German party system

The (West) German parties after 1945 are undoubtedly a key factor in the success story of the Second German Republic. However, this development was far from a given. Why, one has to ask, has the post-war German party system been so successful in fulfilling almost all core functions of political parties? What was different this time compared to the failed experience of the party system of the First Republic of Weimar (1919–33)? There are, of course, many reasons, but this paper will focus on the four main ones.

Firstly, the very experience of going through a failing multi-party democracy in the past had a long-lasting and structural impact on political personnel, the party system

32 This results from a strict German party law, which clearly defines the requirements for political parties, such as 'intra-party democracy' See Federal Ministry of Justice (2023). *Gesetz über die politischen Parteien*. Accessed 22 April 2023.

and the political culture of West Germany between 1945 and 1955.[33] Instead of reducing the importance of political parties, the fathers and (few) mothers of the new *Grundgesetz* (GG, or Basic Law) of 1949 gave them a fundamental role within Germany's political and parliamentary system. Article 21 (1) of the GG clearly states that 'Political parties shall participate in the formation of the political will of the people. They may be freely established. Their internal organisation must conform to democratic principles. They must publicly account for their assets and for the sources and use of their funds'.[34] These provisions have massively contributed to the dominating and almost monopolistic role of German political parties (*Parteienprivileg*, or party privilege), even beyond the core political processes.[35]

Second, as a direct consequence of these constitutionally anchored privileges, the funding of party organisations and operations (not only during elections) is exceptional in terms of budget and appropriation from a global comparative perspective. It is de facto the party groups in the parliament themselves that decide on the allocation mechanism and the budget size for political parties—which has led critics to consistently denounce them as a political cartel. This mechanism also extends de facto to the party-affiliated political foundations, which have a unique position, too.[36] In 2021, Germany's political parties received 200 million euros per annum, and political foundations even ore, 590 million euros.[37] Membership fees, donations and other sources count for

33 It was only in the middle of the 1950s when the 'landscape' and the constitutional framework for the political parties were consolidated.

34 Federal Ministry of Justice (2023). *Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany*. https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_gg/englisch_gg.html#p0118. Accessed 18 March 2023.

35 Party representatives largely dominate the boards of public broadcasting companies (ARD, ZDF).

36 See the most recent decisions of the *Bundesverfassungsgericht* (Federal Constitutional Court), which declared the current party and political foundations unconstitutional and demanded a more transparent mechanism and legal basis for future funding. Federal Constitutional Court, *State funding of political foundations must be based on a separate act of Parliament,* Judgement 2 BvE 3/19, 2 February 2023. https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/EN/2023/bvg23-022.html. Accessed 23 April 2023, and Federal Constitutional Court, *Increase of the 'absolute limit' applicable to state funding of political parties is unconstitutional*, Judgement of 24 January 2023, 2 BvF 2/18. Accessed 23 April 2023.

37 Oskar Niedermeyer, *Staatliche Parteienfinanierung*. https://www.bpb.de/themen/parteien/parteien-in-deutschland/zahlen-und-fakten/42240/staatliche-parteienfinanzierung/. Accessed 23 April 2023. See also 'Üppiger Geldregen' *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022, https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/bund-der-steuerzahler-parteinahe-stiftungen-1.5590564. Accessed 24 April 2023.

only 20%–40% of their budget.[38] Despite being linked to the share of votes, German political parties could constantly rely on a stable, even increasing budget, mostly shared among five to eight parties in the *Bundestag*. This allowed them to establish and maintain professional organisation structures on all political levels—while no other political organisations have enjoyed this privilege.

Third, one of the most important regulations used to avoid repeating the *Weimarer Verhältnisse* (Weimar conditions) was the introduction of a 5% threshold for national and federal elections.[39] This threshold has largely kept single-issue and fringe parties out of the parliament(s). By this, the German electoral system effectively avoids fragmentation of political parties on all political levels, even if we take the elements of 'personalisation' into account. As the distribution of parliamentary seats is based on a proportional list election system,[40] independent candidates beyond the municipal levels have never made it to the federal state and national parliaments—giving political parties a decisive role as gatekeepers to the core political institutions.

Fourth and last, German political parties are known for their comparatively strict internal party discipline at all levels. The same goes for the parliamentary groups. Split-voting is almost unknown, and top-down control is effectively exercised, mainly by the *Fraktionsvorsitzender and Fraktionsgeschäftsführer* (the head and manager of the parliamentary group). Conversely, the dominating parties are forced to follow a complex system of balancing different internal forces, such as regional proportionality, gender representation and interest groups. This is sometimes a rather time-consuming process, but it has contributed to the internal stability of parties as these mechanisms ensure the representation of diverse interests.

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38 'Parteienfinanzierung', Lobbypedia, 2023. https://lobbypedia.de/wiki/Parteienfinanzierung. Accessed 18 March 2023.

39 The other constitutional safeguard is the so-called *konstruktives Misstrauensvotum* ('constructive vote of no confidence') of Article 67 (1) GG, which sets a very high threshold for toppling a government and makes it impossible for marginal parties to cause a constitutional crisis.

40 To be listed as a candidate on electoral lists requires some preconditions, which can only fulfilled by a party(-like) organisation. Parties, e.g. with one member, as in the case of the Netherlands, are simply not allowed.

And they will live happily forever? Mid-term challenges for German political parties

The established German political parties have benefited from a favourable and globally unique constitutional and financial framework. Does that mean that they will live happily forever? Not necessarily. As with many other European party systems, the resilience of the (established) party system has been massively tested during the last quarter of a century. This chapter examines internal and external changes to analyse the main important 'stress factors' that regularly rock the boat of the German party system. They affect almost all political parties, particularly the 'backbone' of the party system, the so-called *Volksparteien* (people's parties)[41] that sit on the centre-left and the centre–right of the political spectrum. Some observers have already announced the 'death of the *Volksparteien'*,[42] which could have consequences for the survival of a liberal, representative and democratic order *per se.*[43] Some topics can also be observed among Western political parties; others reflect the specific circumstances of Germany's history and political system and deserve a more detailed explanation.

Societal factors

The concept of *Volkspartei* aimed at overcoming the traditional fragmentation of the German parties along the lines of classes, religious beliefs, regions and socio-

41 On the history and concept of the *Volksparteien*, see Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2012, *Volks- und Großparteien in Deutschland und Europa. Stand und Perspektiven*. https://www.kas.de/de/einzeltitel/-/content/volks-und-grosspateien-in-deutschland-und-europa. Accessed 24 April 2023.

42 The literature on the future of party democracy and the stability of the political system in Germany is huge. For an overview and reference to Lösch, see Jesse Eckhard, *Krise (und Ende?) der Volksparteien*, in APuZ, 2021, https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/zustand-der-demokratie-2021/335443/krise-und-ende-der-volksparteien/ (accessed 18 March 2023), and Landeszentrale für Politische Bildung Baden-Württemberg (2022). 'Demokratie in Krisenzeiten – Herausforderungen und Chancen', in *Deutschland und Europa* (84/2022).

43 Koß correctly points to the complex relations between parties and the parliamentary system. This topic cannot be discussed in the framework of this article. See Michael Koß, *Demokratie ohne Mehrheit: Die Volksparteien von gestern und der Parliamentarismus von morgen.* München: dtv, 2021.

economic strata. As innovative as this approach had been, both *Volksparteien*, the Social Democrats (SPD) and Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), have still been anchored in and linked to traditional social networks, for example, trade unions or churches. Since the 1960s we have observed a constant erosion of those 'milieus' and related organisations. This process is mostly described as a process of individualisation and has not come to an end or is even being reversed.[44] Surprisingly, this development doesn't mean an overall decline in the social engagement of German citizens.[45] Instead, what has changed are their modes of engagement in politics. Long-term, often (quasi-)inherited and institutionalised affiliations had been replaced by single-issue, fluid and project-based activities.

Party-internal factors

German governments and the multi-party coalitions supporting them are stable and usually stay in power over several election terms. It may sound like a cliché, but it is true that stability is highly appreciated by German society. However, staying in power for a long time has often come at a high price for the ruling parties. Clinging on to power and remaining in coalitions 'at almost any price'[46] has led to a lack of programmatic renewal and a loosening of ties with the electorate. This is a particular challenge for 'catch-all' people's parties, which naturally have to integrate diverse opinions and cannot afford to be too picky in their programmes. In this respect, single-issue and populist parties have a clear advantage in campaigning—at least in the short-term. This development could be observed during the last 16 years of the era of Chancellor Angela Merkel, when necessary programmatic discussions on fundamentals, such as the future of the social security systems due to ageing, the energy transformation, or migration and integration, ended up being silenced within the coalition government

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44 Andreas Reckwitz, *Gesellschaft der Singularitäten*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017.

45 In 2022, around 16 million Germans had been actively engaged in social activities on a voluntary work basis. Roughly 620,000 associations are registered in Germany.

46 *Große Koalitionen* (grand coalitions) of two *Volksparteien* are of particular danger, as they try to cover a large chunk of the moderate field made of centrist voters but leave opposition to the small, more radical parties on the left and the right.

parties for the sake of governability and coherence. Great coalitions don't tend to spark too many debates, leaving little space for renewal—and there is indeed some truth in the saying that only opposition parties can renew themselves.

Today, the need for thoroughly rethinking and renewing the ideological basis of German political parties and their translation into concrete policy concepts is more urgent than ever. The massive social transformation that modern Western and industrialised societies are currently undergoing calls for similarly grand new narratives, as was the case in the second half of the nineteenth or the mid-twentieth century. While the great programmatic efforts and 'stories' represented by the centre–left and centre–right parties contributed to the stability and coherence of the political systems in Western Europe, these narratives seem to be missing today. German parties are often no longer at the centre of the debate on the future of society, which should be one of their tasks in terms of aggregating different political opinions and transforming them into actionable political programmes.

Related to this progressive estrangement from programmatic representation, a constant decline of party membership has hit (predominantly) the two largest *Volksparteien* since the 1990s.[47] Of course, the sheer number of party members is not a sufficient indicator of the vitality of a party system *per se*, nor is voting behaviour. But adverse effects of weak membership are also clear and empirically based. Below a certain threshold, parties cannot sufficiently cover their constituencies; they can no longer fill political functions in parliament or claim to represent 'the people'. They lose almost by default several of their main functions in a democratic system. In Germany, this fatal mechanism could be observed in rural areas and large parts of East Germany, where even the large parties are in the process of disappearing as organisations.

Finally, a word has to be said about East Germany, whose case is unique, as it

47 The membership of the CDU/CSU has declined by 50% since 1990, while the Social Democrats lost 60% of their members over the same period. Smaller parties have been doing better in maintaining numbers. See Oskar Niedermeyer, *Mitgliederentwicklung der Parteien*, https://www.bpb.de/themen/parteien/parteien-in-deutschland/zahlen-und-fakten/138672/mitgliederentwicklung-der-parteien/. Accessed 24 April 2023.

comes with a set of specific challenges for political parties. The ruling Communist Party had systematically destroyed independent social organisations such as trade unions, churches or entrepreneurial associations, leaving a no man's land for traditional and new political parties to operate in. As a result, the number of those civil society organisations and the degree of membership affiliation is significantly lower than in West Germany, making party membership way lower than in the rest of the country, while trust in the political and economic system is also much weaker in the East, which represents an additional challenge for democratic stability in this region.[48]

Conclusions and recommendations

The following recommendations draw on the weaknesses of political parties analysed in this chapter. Some of these weaknesses are quite comparable to those of many other European countries, while others reflect on the specific conditions of Germany, mainly for the people's parties. In recent years, German parties have already been quite active in overcoming some of their shortcomings but have not turned the tide yet.

- The constitutional framework for political parties will remain constant, and so will political parties remain a dominant political factor in Germany. Minor changes are expected only in the electoral law and the funding system.49 Thus, changes must mainly come from within the parties if they want to save and restore their legitimacy as major political actors. But it has also become clear that institutions other than parties must contribute to creating a more favourable and supportive environment. The population must regain higher trust in parties and be convinced that political parties are indispensable for a functioning democratic system.

48 Renate Köcher, 'Ostdeutsche haben wenig Vertrauen in Staat und Demokratie', in: *FAZ*, 23 January 2019. https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/allensbach-ostdeutsche-mit-wenig-vertrauen-in-den-staat-16002605.html. Accessed 24 April 2023.

49 See Federal Constitutional Court, *State funding of political foundations must be based on a separate act of Parliament*, Judgement 2 BvE 3/19, 2 February 2023. https://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/EN/2023/bvg23-022.html. Accessed 23 April 2023.

- Despite declining membership, German parties must resist the temptation of substituting digital communication for physical presence and in-person meetings with their electorate.50 Starting from the local level, parties have to remain part of a broader social network to be successful in the future. This requires innovative approaches, that is, new forms of engagement with civil society actors. Whilst traditional partners and networks have largely disappeared, new partners (even sometimes on a single issue) must become part of modern party work. Improved forms of linking up with the electorate will also help reduce the high voter abstention rate.51
- Openness to society is closely linked to intra-party democracy, which is clearly demanded by the German constitution. Moreover, the attractiveness of party membership is related to the degree of participation and co-decision, which the younger generation demands (and not only in Germany). Neither has a rapidly diversifying society been adequately represented within parties—people with a migrant background are only one example among many. Party leaders must acknowledge this and drive the necessary organisational and procedural changes.
- All the challenges for political parties described in this chapter are 'multiplied' in eastern Germany. To prevent the total collapse of political parties, the voices and identity of the former East Germany must be better acknowledged at the national level and within the concert of the sister parties in the federal states.
- The party organisation's programmatic and ideological development and training are not 'nice-to-have' add-ons for parties, particularly among youth organisations—

50 Uwe Jun, Oskar Niedermayer and Elmar Wiesendahl, (eds.), *Die Zukunft der Mitgliederpartei*, Opladen & Farmington Hill: Barbara Budrich, 2009.

51 In comparison to many other countries, the participation rate in Germany for national elections has always remained high, even though it is now around 75%. The lowest rate can be found in the European elections, with 60% (2019). In some municipal elections, the rate is as low as 40%. Surprisingly, non-voters' acceptance of the democratic constitution per se is as high as 80%. *Statistica*, 2023. *Anteil der Nicht-wähler bei den Bundestagswahlen in Deutschland von 1949 bis 2021*. https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1312907/umfrage/nichtwaehler-bei-den-bundestagswahlen/. Accessed 24 April 2023.

they are an essential part of their life. Against a common belief, the electorate is still interested in a value-based policy approach and a vision of a future society. German political parties must again become a key source and platform of new concepts for a future society, for example, in green transformation. They should not leave the public debate to more radical, fringe parties. Being again at the centre of a public discussion would also increase the legitimacy of parties per se.

- The ongoing revolution in communication has changed the internal party structures and the space for public discourse. For socially and regionally heterogeneous parties, such as the German *Volksparteien*, the efforts to cope with a constantly changing 'communication' environment are tremendous. While central party organisations have amassed remarkable resources and competences, regional and local party branches still struggle to professionalise their media work.
- The exchange of knowledge between national and European parties is still low.[52] German parties must encourage and support the exchange of mainly young and female members with their European sister parties. This would increase the sense of common belonging to the same party family and contribute to European integration—which should not be left only to the governments. This is particularly important given the role of Germany as the largest member state and 'engine' of European integration.

52 Jürgen Mittag and Janosch Steuwer, *Politische Parteien in der EU*, Köln-Weimar-Wien: Böhlau, 2010.

Can a Democracy Be Governed Without Political Parties?

The Case of France

Thibault Muzergues and Romain Le Quiniou

To look at France's political party system today is like walking the battlefields of Verdun in 1918: everything is desolation, and nothing remains. Just like in Verdun, there was an earlier battle, and just like in Verdun, there was no real winner among the belligerents. But unlike Verdun, which found some new order after the war, no sort of political party system has emerged since 2017: the vacuum has not been filled (yet), and the situation remains chaotic up to this day. The consequences of that chaos could be seen plainly during the episode of the Yellow Vests, a jacquerie like the ones France used to know during the *Ancien Régime*. This was a violent revolt led by anger and desperation, and a sudden but temporary explosion that would not find any political representation in parliament (for better and for worse) because it would not accept a head or a way to organise in the longer term. Four years after, the presidential elections of 2022 have confirmed that no stable political system has really emerged. Extremely weak parties were used as vehicles for individuals to compete only for presidential and legislative elections, while mayors and local officials got elected on their personal reputation rather than their party affiliation. Five years after its implosion, France's party system remains a tabula rasa.

This chaos is unique in the Western world: in all other countries, the political party system has threatened to collapse, and in some cases it has indeed collapsed over one electoral cycle. In Italy, this actually happened two times: in 1993–4 after the *Tangentopoli* scandals, and in 2018 with two populist movements heading the polls and forming the government.[53] But collapse was immediately followed by the emergence of a new normal, and by the next cycle by something that could be considered a more or less coherent party system, with a right and a left. France has experienced nothing of the sort, and the legislative elections of June 2022, where the party of Emmanuel Macron did not manage to reach an absolute majority, brought even more complexity to an already confusing situation. The French political system can now be best described by a numerous but heterogenous far left (although its parliamentary faction also includes members of the centre–left), a rather strong far right in which the former National Rally is the closest thing to a traditional party but is

53 See the chapter on southern Europe in this publication.

no longer used as such by Its de facto leader, an independent but weak centre–right with Les Républicains, and finally a wide 'centre' that has little ideological coherence, no organisation beyond its parliamentary faction, and importantly, very little local representation, as Emmanuel Macron's movement En Marche (now Renaissance, which can hardly be called a party) scored disastrous results during the local and regional elections of 2020 and 2021. Even worse, the very existence of Macron's party seems to depend exclusively on whether its champion is explicitly on the ballot, and the constitution does not allow him to run again in the next presidential elections of 2024.

France's unique mix of chaos and uncertainty shows what can happen when a political party system cannot hold, and this is why it is worth being treated as a separate case study. In this chapter, we will try to understand why and how the previous party system, which had always been weak and had taken time to take form, collapsed in 2017, before trying to understand why only France has gone through such a long period of turbulence in its party system. Finally, we will conclude by looking at prospects for a new political order to emerge in the next few years, with or without political parties.

No party for a democracy? France's ambivalent relationship with political parties

France's contemporary political scene cannot be properly understood without some historical background going back at least to the French Revolution of 1789—for the French do not like political parties, or anything that seems to divide the nation into camps. This is due to the history of the country: France has had no other glue to bring together a rather large (by European standards) geographical area other than a common language, and even more importantly a powerful central state. This was already the case during the *Ancien Régime*: strong royal power was associated with rather prosperous times, while the association of weak central power and deep societal divisions signalled trouble and civil wars. This was reflected in the philosophy

of royal power, as expressed by Jacques Bossuet in the time of Louis XIV,[54] but it found continuity in the enlightenment via Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his idea of a general will that would supersede, rather than be the sum of, particular interests.[55]

Despite breaking up many of the institutions and ideas of the *Ancien Régime*, the French Revolution actually kept some of its features, including centralisation and a holy horror of political parties. The *Le Chapelier* law of 1791 went much further than the absolute monarchs by outlawing outright any guild, corporation and grouping of particular interests, including political parties. As a result, the French had to wait one hundred and ten years, until the 1901 law on civil association, before they could legally form political parties.

During more than a century, the French therefore had to build their democracy *without* political parties, and despite the vicissitudes of French political life in the nineteenth century and its many regime changes, they managed to do without them—meaning that parties would always remain weak, and by nature disliked by French elites and public opinion alike. But even though parties, that is, organised civil society organisations with a political goal, were outlawed, the very 'factions' or 'currents' that French kings and *révolutionnaires* alike wanted to outlaw naturally formed in the French debate, first and foremost over the political regime that France needed. The very notion of left and right was actually born at the very beginning of the Revolution, when the president of the constituent assembly called for a vote to define the nature of the king's veto in the new constitution. At the moment of counting, those in favour of an absolute veto, mostly nobles, were naturally invited by the president to gather on his right (reserved for the most honourable guests, as in the British Parliament, where the governing party always sits to the right of the speaker), while those favourable to only a suspensive veto were invited to his left.[56]

54 Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Politique tirée des propres paroles de l'écriture sainte à Mgr. Le Dauphin* (original edition 1709), Paris: Hachette/BNF, 2012.

55 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, London: Penguin Books, 2004.

56 See Thibault Muzergues, *The Great Class Shift: How New Social Class Structures Are Redefining Western Politics,* London: Routledge, 2019, pp.13-14.

The divide then stuck, and even though parties were outlawed, the debate between left and right raged on about the nature of the regime during the course of the nineteenth century: those on the left favoured a republican government, while those on the right advocated for monarchy or empire. But this divide was also hiding further fault lines within each family. The left was divided between liberals (who then joined the centre and the right once the regime debate was closed), anarchists, radicals and socialists, who themselves were divided between revolutionary and parliamentary, and between different chapels linked to individuals, past or present (Proudhon, Blanqui, Baboeuf, etc.). On its side, as described by René Rémond, the right was divided between the partisans of the different pretenders to the throne: one could be a Bonapartist, or one of two types of royalists—the legitimists, *Ancien Régime* nostalgic of the Bourbon dynasty, and those who wanted to install the more liberal Orléans branch of the family, represented by Louis-Philippe, to the throne.[57]

The fact that none of these factions could officially organise as a political party is perhaps one of the keys to understanding the tumultuous institutional history of nineteenth century France, but also the ultimate triumph of the republican form of the government, which managed in its early years to withstand the assaults from both the left(s) and the right(s).[58] Once the regime consolidated, it felt strong enough to authorise, and even encourage the formation of, associations, including political parties. But as the regime had already survived 30 years old without them, the obvious usefulness of political parties did not emerge immediately for politicians who had built whole careers without them, and so their development took a rather long time. Factionalism and, above all, fluidity resulted from this situation: this is why the first French political party, the Radical party, emerged on the far left of the political spectrum in the 1870s, before they were even officially organised, before progressively becoming the most centrist (and even at times conservative) party in the country in the 1930s.

57 René Rémond, *Les Droites en France*, Paris: Aubier, 1985.

58 René Rémond, *La République Souveraine*, Paris: Fayard, 2002.

As the political divide moved away from the nature of the regime after the 1880s to be defined by other, sometimes temporary topics (the Dreyfus affair, the relationship between church and state, colonial policy, etc.), the role of parties in France's political life until 1914 was rather minor. Only after 1918, with the emergence of mass politics and a stable fault line between left and right on the state's role in the economy, did political parties really emerge as a force in French politics, with Communists, socialists and radicals (from the most extreme to the most centrist) building a real party ecosystem on the left. In the meantime, the right remained divided into myriad organisations (not all of them parliamentarian) linked to ideologies or personalities. The first 'proper' party France had on the right was the 1930s French Social Party of Colonel François de la Rocque, who mostly copied the statuses of the Socialist party of the time for his own right-wing politics, and provided a mix of all the ideologies in vogue at the time in Europe, from agrarianism to Christian Democracy, and some elements of Fascism (even though la Rocque, a conservative Christian republican, never embraced Fascism[59]).

The Second World War and the near-death experience of German occupation represented a major break in French political life, but soon after the liberation, political party life resumed roughly among the same lines as before the war. The time was for mass political participation, and in that game, parties thrived. Even though Charles De Gaulle did not like political parties, he nevertheless understood that they were a useful tool not only to accede to power, but also to keep it, which is why he relied on his own party, the Rally of the French people (RPF), which then became in 1958 the Union for a New Republic (UNR) when De Gaulle came back to power, and the Union of Democrats for the Fifth Republic in 1968 (UDR). In many ways, De Gaulle took the mantle of la Rocque and created a large party of the right fully inserted into the institutions of the republic, partly because De Gaulle himself had shaped the regime. French political life in the 1960s, 1970s and even the 1980s came to be defined around four poles, each standing on one side of the left–right political divide: on the left, socialists and Communists fought for supremacy, while on the right the

59 Gilles Richard, *Histoire des Droites en France*, Paris: Perrin, 2017, pp. 213–21.

Gaullist parties clearly dominated the debates until the mid-1970s, before being challenged by the 'centrists' (in fact centre–right liberals) who had been defeated several times under De Gaulle and for the first time became victorious in 1974 with Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.

The divide made sense. There was a clear left–right divide, and each party corresponded to a tradition in French politics: the Communists and the socialists represented, respectively, the revolutionary and the republican tradition of the left, while the centrists were in the continuation of the Orleanist tradition of the French right, leaving the Gaullists as the upholders of Bonapartist republicanism. Each of these poles also relied on political parties that regularly changed name through time; but they remained in line with their political tradition and provided organisational direction from the grass roots to the top, with candidate and volunteer training programmes, opaque but rather efficient candidate selection processes,[60] and generally a social life for party members that organised not only the existence of the community, but also sometimes that of the individual from cradle to grave.

This model did not survive the 1980s. In the nineties, with political affiliations now much more fluid and almost every citizen at least aspiring to belong to the middle class, a political life organised around the affiliation to a political party made much less sense. Furthermore, the beginning of the Europeanisation of French politics also meant that the political system started to normalise, with left and right now coalescing to win elections. François Mitterrand's Socialist Party (PS) satellited a diminished Communist Party and the rising Greens in a coalition later dubbed 'the plural left', in which each party maintained its autonomy, but governed together under socialist leadership. Electoral (and coalition) agreements were made to maximise results and govern with a majority. On the right, the process was more painful, as union was slowed down by the ideological and personal rivalries within and between the parties,

60 See Thibault Muzergues, 'Candidate (S)election in France: The Long Way Towards (and Away From) Open Primaries', in Thibault Muzergues and Dan Scaduto (eds.), *Standing Out from The Crowd: Political Parties Candidates (S)election in the Transatlantic World*, Washington DC: International Republican Institute, 2021, p.33.

but with Jacques Chirac the last leader standing in the early 2000s, the three main parties of the right decided to go one step further and fusion into one single party, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP, which became in 2014 Les Républicains). Thus, the normalisation of French politics in the period 2002–14, with a roughly bipartisan system at times disrupted by the rise of a right-wing populist movement defining France's political party system for more than a decade. Bizarrely, it took a quarter century to build this model, but just a few years to destroy it in the mid-2010s.

The slow and painful agony of France's bipartite system

The paradox of France's bipartisan politics is that it got seriously contested almost as soon as it emerged. In fact, 2002 was the first presidential election since 1970 in which a candidate that was not part of the mainstream qualified for the second round, with Jean-Marie Le Pen disturbing a seemingly predictable system to run in the second round. Even though Le Pen's far-right National Front had been rising for the previous decade, the result came as a shock to the establishment and to most of French society, who then proceeded to re-elect Jacques Chirac with a record 82.21% share of the votes. If Le Pen's qualifying two weeks earlier could have been attributed to record abstention and the atomisation of the left vote, the second round showed that a disruptive candidate had no chance to win a two-round election in France, at least at the time.

The event turned out to be far reaching whichn the long term. Le Pen had opened a breach in the system at the very time in which it was consolidating. His performance had shown that a substantial portion of the French electorate was dissatisfied with the rather consensual politics of the time, and this showed once again in 2005, when a clear majority (54.67%) rejected in a referendum the EU's constitutional Treaty. Most of the establishment on the left and right had campaigned for the 'yes' side. And so the 'no' vote, which wasn't even close, represented a clear rejection of mainstream politics, and a proof that at least on a single issue referendum, the mainstream could be beaten. This led to serious questioning inside the traditional elites, particularly on the left.[61]

61 Eric Perraudeau, Les Français dans le miroir européen. Le référendum du 29 mai 2005, *Pouvoir*, 2006/1 (n116), 2005, pp. 149-61.

The 2005 referendum disaster had shown that the half-victory of the far right had not been an accident. The bipartisan system was perceived to be corrupt because it was co-opting: in the end, mainstream politicians were all supposedly sticking to each other, and even though they each in turn tried to show how different they were (with a turn to the right engineered by Nicolas Sarkozy's UMP in 2007, and another turn to the left by François Hollande's Socialist Party in 2012), the politics pursued by both presidents in turn were seen as too comparable, too similar for the traditional left–right divide to be trusted. As a result, presidential approval ratings continued to drop substantially in the 2000s and the 2010s, as compared with previous presidents.

The establishment tried to react by embracing the left–right cleavage more radically and by personalising their politics. However, this did not stick in the French electorate, and as people came to feel the effects of the 2008 financial crisis and the 2009–14 Eurocrisis, the message pushed by the marginal parties on the far right and the far left began to stick in public opinion: national politics came to be defined less as a traditional left–right divide incarnated by the rivalry between the UMP and the PS, but as a fight against the 'UMPS', a term used to show the collusion between the two parties, which were accused by the far left and the far right of governing essentially in the same way.[62]

To respond to these accusations, each party tried to reach out to the margins by strengthening their discourse on the left or on the right to prove their bona fides to their electorate. As previously mentioned, Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 and François Hollande in 2012 ran on platforms that were seen as rather radical for the time, but they were caught up in the realities of governance in a sociologically deeply conservative society. The result was that, while abstention constantly progressed, party politics were often pushed further to the right and left in order to limit electoral losses to the far left, who found an incarnation in the 2010s with populist firebrand Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and the far right, now led by Le Pen's daughter Marine.

62 Invented by Jean-Marie Le Pen, this slogan became popular in the 2010s with Marine Le Pen. See Denis Tugdual and Elise Karlin, 'Cette France qui tombe dans les bras du FN', *L'Express*, 28 November 2014.

Paradoxically, while this increased polarisation (imperfectly) slowed down the losses of the traditional parties to the disruptors on the left and right, it also opened a wider space in the centre, where the mass of the French electorate actually remains. In fact, despite the regular revolutionary outbursts of French history, the French electorate is traditionally defined by a rentier mentality, which has been made even more salient now that vast portions of its stable core is made of pensioners.[63] When the going gets tough, this rentier mentality pushes voters to an economic conservatism and adversity to risk, a reflection of their primary interest, which is to preserve the rent on which they live. This means that when faced with a choice between radicalism and centrist conservatism in an election, they will likely choose the centrist option—and indeed this is what they did in 2017.

Gradually, then suddenly: the end of the traditional party system

The traditional party system was showing obvious signs of weakness prior to 2017, with voting abstention reaching record highs during the early years of the decade, but the presidential election held that year served as a catalyst for change. Originally, it had been thought that the traditional parties could regenerate by a change of personnel and the use of more democratic candidate selection methods: in 2016–17, both parties used open primaries as a way to select their candidates for the presidential elections. Both internal elections were extremely popular, gathering 1.6 million voters for the Socialists and 4.4 million for Les Républicains (LR), the new name of a rebranded UMP.[64] Both primaries made the headlines and retained the attention of the media and the wider public during the fall and winter.

63 See, for example, Eugen Weber, *France Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986, pp. 51-82; and Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s*, New York: Norton, 1994, pp. 26-87.

64 Thibault Muzergues, 'Candidate (S)election in France: The Long Way Towards (and Away From) Open Primaries', in Thibault Muzergues and Dan Scaduto (eds.), *Standing Out From The Crowd: Political Parties Candidates* (S)election in the Transatlantic World, Washington DC: International Republican Institute, 2022.

The result of the primaries confirmed the polarisation of the political parties, which was not completely mirrored by the electorate as a whole. Socialist voters chose Benoît Hamon; this candidate, who during his whole career had been clearly positioning himself on the left, won the contest against former Prime Minister Manuel Valls, the moderate option. On the right, the primary took on the airs of an elephant graveyard, as former president Nicolas Sarkozy was eliminated in the first round, while centrist former prime minister (and longtime favourite) Alain Juppé lost to another former prime minister, François Fillon, who had chosen to ride on the internal wave of discontent by proposing the vision of a radical, social conservative reshaping of French society. In each case, the mainstream parties had chosen to corner themselves into a niche electorate, leaving the candidates of the margins of mainstream public opinion. This left wide open an avenue for a centrist candidate to take the spoils.

On the fringes, both the National Front and the Left structured themselves around a charismatic leader and defended anti-system positions using populist narratives. After the Austrian presidential election, the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump in 2016, 2017 was a time of peak disruption, and it was expected that candidates from both margins of the political spectrum would do well. Their model of organising was typical of populist movements at the time: highly charismatic, with a rather loose structure, and even though Marine Le Pen had definitely a more structured party than any other, her National Front was nowhere near as organised as during her father's years. In both cases, the far right and the far left were able to crystallise their support by betting on a platform tailor-made to fit the concerns of the marginalised white working class (for Le Pen) and disgruntled millennials (for Mélenchon) before expanding towards the traditional parties.[65]

On his side, Emmanuel Macron also offered another type of challenge to the system: his candidacy was certainly disruptive, and his model of leadership was just as charismatic as the other disruptors. However, Macron's disruption was not

65 See Thibault Muzergues, *The Great Class Shift: How New Social Structures Are Redefining Western Politics*, London: Routledge, 2019.

revolutionary; it rather claimed to change gradually but profoundly the political system in order to save it—a French version of Italy's *Gattopardismo,* named after Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel in which the main character, Tancredi, tells his aristocratic family that 'everything needs to change for everything to remain the same'. The message itself was extremely attractive to the disgruntled middle class, whose rents would be saved, and to the threatened creative class elite, who would not see their status threatened.

However, Macron's proposition promised a real revolution in France's political system, as his proposition to do away with left and right—and embody both at the same time—promised to weaken the centre–right and centre–left to the point at which they would become irrelevant when faced with the disruptive right and the disruptive left. And indeed, Macron recruited the liberal wings of both the Socialists and Les Républicains, depleting their ranks and weakening their appeal. Macron's plan to do away with the left and right effectively killed the two traditional parties. Neither of their candidates reached the second round of the presidential election; they had historically bad results in the subsequent legislative elections in June 2017, and both scored less than 10% in the European elections two years later, in 2019.

The 'old world' of the traditional bipolar French political party system was dead, but the problem was that nothing emerged to replace it.

The revolution that wasn't: why and how a vacuum replaced the old system

As soon as he was elected, Emmanuel Macron was confronted with a double challenge: that of accompanying the rebuilding of a political party system after the complete destruction of the political system, while at the same time engaging in what was seen at the time as an ambitious project of modernising France. For a while, the French President could boast a cleavage that indeed seemed to structure the political debate in much of the Western world, between progressives (led by him) and nationalists (who would be led in France by Le Pen and in Europe by the likes

of Viktor Orbán). The fault line had the double advantage of corresponding to the reality of the French political landscape, with Macron and Le Pen qualifying for the second round of the presidential elections, and of leaving the former with at least a theoretical advantage over his rival, as he had won convincingly the second round and was expected to win another contest in this configuration in 2022 (which he eventually did). In some way this meant redefining the divide between left and right in a way that would give his camp a structural advantage over the opponent, much as De Gaulle had done in 1958 when he reshaped the institutions of the French Republic.

However, this fault line turned out not to be the only one in French politics, as issue after issue provided an overlap of allegiances, and Macron's party, En Marche, failed to take root in the local political system. The movement had been created as an electoral machine for 2017, and suffered from the traditional lack of interest of the elected leader after an election victory, with most of the cadres leaving the party to run the government. As a result, En Marche never really structured itself as a traditional party, and it suffered in intermediate elections whenever Emmanuel Macron was not on the ballot: the 2019 European election campaign was saved by the president's direct involvement in the last days before the vote, on an issue that had come to be considered his signature; the 2020 local elections and the 2021 local and regional elections turned out to be major routs for En Marche, with voters voting for well-known, traditional local figures affiliated to an old party rather than according to candidates' party allegiances.

The failure of En Marche to take root in the local political landscape had direct consequences at national level: the upper house, the French Senate, is elected by local elected officials, and Macron never enjoyed a majority in the upper house, even though he could boast a strong majority in the lower chamber in his first mandate. The latter was made for the most part of a motley crew of experienced politicians from the former left and right, and civil society representatives who had been recruited through an open selection process with a jury, not dissimilar to the popular reality show *The Voice*. This had the advantage of largely renewing the pool of members of parliament, but at the same time went against the cohesion of the parliamentary

group, which quickly fractured during the first term of the president. The result of this fragmentation was to reinforce a presidential tendency to centralise decision-making in a small circle of advisors in the Elysée—thereby making Macron as much of a disruptor as a continuator in French policymaking.[66]

The destructuring of French politics became more visible in late 2018, when the Yellow Vests crisis exploded into the face of the French elites and initiated a movement of social unrest that really ended only with the COVID-19 pandemic. This revolt was violent, and very much reminiscent of the jacqueries of old, which had marked French history prior to industrialisation. Without a clear leader or an organisation to control or at least manage the movement, this revolt of peripheral France ended up being a powerful outbreak of violence, which profoundly destabilised the French political situation and destroyed the divide that Macron thought would emerge between progressives and nationalists. In addition, it also showed the extent to which the disintermediation between civil society and government had gone, and the price to pay for it: without a trade union or a political party to channel the anger, the debate was transformed into a direct and violent confrontation between disgruntled citizens and the government.

Unsurprisingly, nobody ended up strengthened in this process: the Yellow Vests achieved very little and the government remained in place. However, the latter's agenda was much changed after the revolts, with Emmanuel Macron, who had shown populist tendencies during the 2017 campaign, doubling down on these to become a disruptor within the system, bypassing parliament in civic consultations whose contours and methodology remained debatable, and at times sidelining the civil service by resorting to further centralisation in the domestic and foreign policy decision making.[67]

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66 On continuity and change in Macron's governance, see Isabelle Lasserre, *Macron le disrupteur: La politique étrangère d'un president anti-système*, Paris: Éditions de l'Observatoire, 2022.

67 See Ibid.

The result of this instability was a relative unpredictability in the political landscape, with three political families emerging: a revolutionary one in the far left, a disruptive one on the far right, and a catch-all centre existing only by and through President Macron. Besides that, French political life enjoyed very little structuration, and the political debate has been centred more on personalities that policies or parties.

The 2022 electoral cycle of presidential and legislative elections took place in this context of extreme fluidity and instability, and so it was remarkable that the two candidates who qualified in the second round in 2017 also confronted each other in 2022. But what is even more remarkable is how fluid the positions of the candidates were: for sure, both Marine Le Pen and Emmanuel Macron were the favourites to get into the second round, and at no point did a poll predict a defeat for Macron, but the number of attempts to unseat Le Pen from the second spot to force a different confrontation with the incumbent was staggering: in October–November, it looked like far-right and paleo-conservative intellectual Eric Zemmour would take that role, before he fell out of favour due to his reaction under pressure in public events and the war in Ukraine; in December–January, voters then turned to centre–right Valérie Pécresse as a possible alternative before her dismal performance on stage in her opening campaign rally killed her campaign. Finally, on the left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon benefited from a late last-minute rally around him to have the left represented in the second round: in the end, he missed qualification into the second round by 400,000 votes out of the 36 million cast, that is, just a bit more than 1% of total votes.

The fluidity in the electorate showed again a month later in the legislative elections: usually a formality for the party supporting the president, it held disappointing results for the would-be majority. En Marche ended up losing its absolute majority in a parliament more atomised than ever, even more so if one understands that the far-left La France Insoumise parliamentary group is a motley crew of socialists (including members of the once powerful and now near-defunct Socialist Party), Communists, Greens and Social Democrats whose sole reason to co-exist is the allegiance they gave in May–June 2022 to failed presidential candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon to get elected to the lower house in single-mandate districts. The same could actually be

said of Emmanuel Macron's majority party, now renamed Renaissance, which remains a fractured group united only by their allegiance to Emmanuel Macron, and even to a certain extent of Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National, which at least until now has at times looked more like a family business rather than a political party. As for Les Républicains, their level organisation and territorial presence at local level seems to help them little at the national level, as the party needs to compete with an increasing number of alternatives to its right and centre.

Conclusion : the vacuum remains … for how long?

To a certain extent, the chaotic French political landscape is a return to the old days: in terms of structure, it is as if France had come back to the early days of the French Republic, when political parties were only tolerated, if not outright outlawed. The politics have reverted to being a highly personalised business, and if each leader has endorsed a very specific nominal affiliation on the far right, far left or extreme centre, these do not necessarily make sense when confronted by the reality of their platform: for example, can Marine Le Pen systematically be affiliated with the far right when her economic manifesto has been more socialist over the past three electoral cycles than that of François Hollande, the last left-of-centre French president? Can we really call Emmanuel Macron a traditional centrist, considering how disruptive he has proven (or tried) to be in some areas like foreign policy?

This is the price to pay for the highly personalised politics of today. In France, a return to a traditional left–right divide, as is being witnessed in most other countries with the emergence of post-populism,[68] would therefore make sense, but it is unlikely to happen in the very near future. This is first because Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen have crystallised and ensured the loyalty of their millennial and working-class core electorates, which means in turn that they will shape the debate for the years to come with a strong base on which they can rely day in, day out, for national elections. On the other hand, Emmanuel Macron's dominance of a very large centre,

68 Thibault Muzergues, *Postpopulisme*, Paris: Editions de l'Observatoire, 2024.

while a remarkable political tour de force, is currently hampering any attempt at redeveloping a large, big-tent political party on either the right or the left. As the presidential party failed to structure itself either nationally or at local level, this leaves a dangerous vacuum between the far right and the far left that cannot be filled, at least until Emmanuel Macron himself leaves the stage in 2027—he cannot stand for election for a third term. In the meantime, the French political system at large will remain unstable and unpredictable, which is a problem for the resilience of France's democracy in a turbulent time for Europe.

United in Fragmentation:

Political Party Resilience in the Netherlands

Prof. dr. Arjen Siegmann

This chapter describes the development of membership and activities of political parties in the Netherlands. In decline of membership, political fragmentation and campaign strategies, the Netherlands offers an insight into the way in which what Peter Mair called the 'void' is ruled when centrist parties lose their electoral base.[69]

I describe first the trends of party membership and the formation of new political parties. This has occurred in the context of political fragmentation, which is discussed next. One of the confounding factors has been the use of micro-targeting of voters that has mostly benefited new and single-issue parties. Centrist parties have to find a way to marry modern means of communication to coherent political programmes aimed at the common interest.

The decline and fall of the traditional Dutch party

Membership of the traditional Dutch political parties has declined markedly in the past 20 years. Figure 1 below shows the number of registered party members. It is in marked decline compared to the 1950s, but at a quite stable level since the end of the Cold War (1990). However, the stability in numbers masks a decline in relative participation, since the population of the Netherlands has grown from 15 million in 1990 to 17.5 million in 2022, a growth of 17%. With stable membership numbers, the growth in population is in marked contrast with political party membership, which has declined by the same numbers (17%) relative to 1990. There is a small uptick visible since 2021, which we will get to later.

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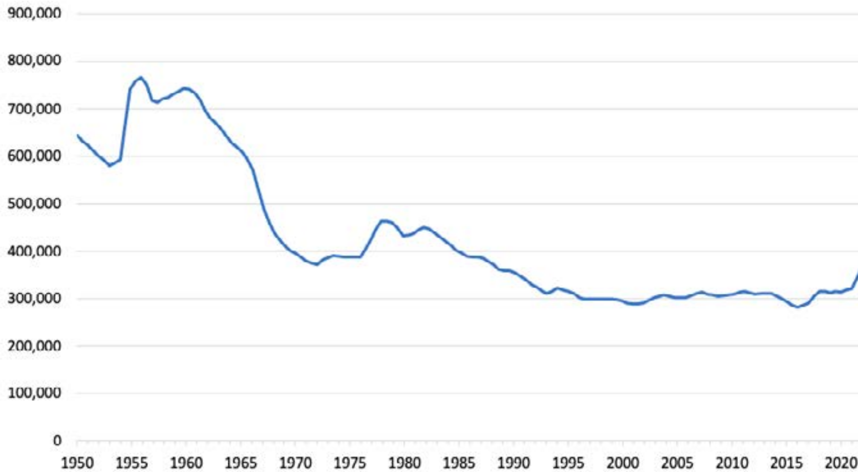
69 Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, London: Verso Books, 2013.

Figure 1 Membership of political parties, total, 1950–2022



Source: Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen (DNPP), University of Groningen.

A 2005 reform, voted by parliament to promote political participation, made extra financing available for political parties based on membership. In 2020, a total amount of €3.3 million was allocated over parties with at least one seat in parliament. The law put the spotlight on a sizeable group of non-paying members. Currently, members have to pay at least €12 per year to count as a subsidisable member. Parties have been active in rescinding membership if people do not pay, although some have been stricter than others. However, the extra subsidy does not seem to have had an effect on the total numbers of political party membership, although it can also be argued it might have mitigated the decline of party activities.

The decline in party membership is due to a number of reasons. First, fundamental disagreements over economic and social policy have become less salient. In the 1950s, it was still seen as a serious possibility that the socialist means of production would be better than the free market with government intervention. Strong voices from Christian Democratic thinkers upheld the view that entrepreneurship should be mostly free, with a strong role for the state, families and civil society.[70]

70 Röpke, Wilhelm, *A Humane Economy: The Social Framework of the Free Market*, Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1960.

In Europe, trade policy has become the responsibility of the EU. Monetary policy is the sole responsibility of the ECB. The decline in party membership reflects the decline in the number of major issues about which fundamental political disagreement exists. But at the same time, electoral democracy is not—and should not be—the only form of legitimacy. In that sense, decline in membership is a phenomenon of all Western democracies.[71]

Second, decreasing political affiliation reflects the decline in the rather rigid division of Dutch society into 'pillars'. Up to the 1960s, socialists, protestants and Catholics formed distinct parts of society, each with their own newspaper, union, broadcast association and political party. Party membership was a regular element, just as was having a subscription to the newspaper belonging to that sphere of society into which one was born. In the 1960s, the whole stratification started to crumble and the identity process became less rigid.[72] Because of the rigidity of the pillars, the societal changes were also more radical than in other countries. The decline in membership of political parties is an element of this dynamic.

Figure 1 shows a small uptick in membership that starts in 2020. This is due to the formation of new political parties, which attracted new membership and raised the global figure. Figure 2 shows membership numbers since 2016. The most prominent rise is that of the Forum for Democracy (FvD). It is a populist/nativist party with a strong anti-EU, anti-immigrant stance. However, there is also growth in membership of the Party for the Animals (PvdD), Volt (a pan-European, pro-European party) and the Farmer-Citizen movement (BBB).

The BBB was formed as a response to the widespread farmers' protest over the nitrogen-emission scandal. Permits for emissions had been handed out under the mistaken belief that EU rules would allow the offsetting of emissions across regions. This backfired when the High Court ruled that this procedure did not satisfy EU regulation to protect environmentally sensitive areas in a proven and effective manner.

71 Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, London: Verso Books, 2013.

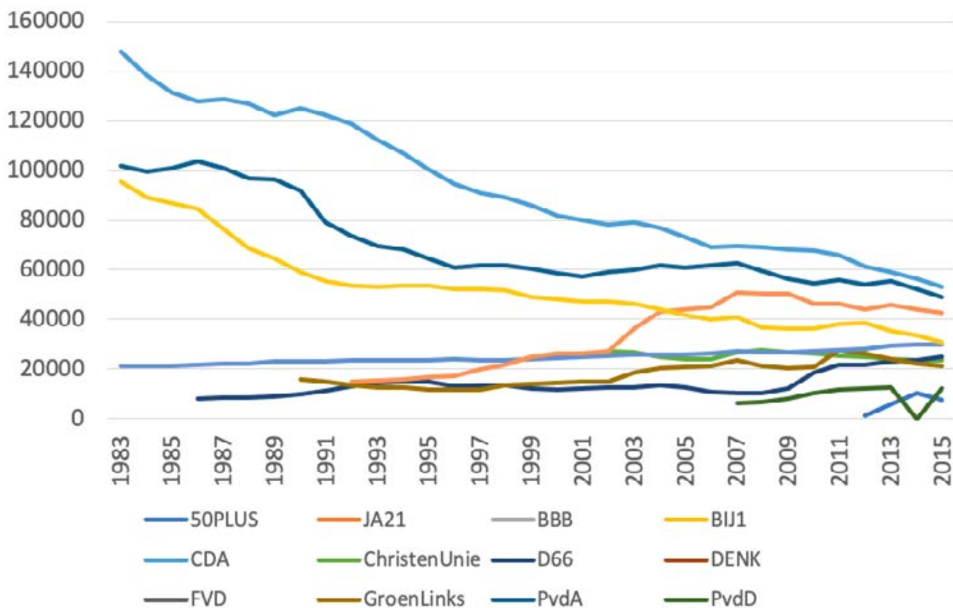
72 The tremendous speed and impact of the process of de-pillarisation in the 1960s is aptly described by James Kennedy, *Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw: Nederland in de jaren zestig*, Amsterdam: Boom, 1995.

Following the provincial elections of March 15, 2023, BBB became the largest party in the Upper House overnight. It received 18% of the total votes in those elections, while the party of the prime minister, the VVD, received only 11%.[73] BBB's success is an example of how specific political issues can lead to the mobilisation of voters. BBB had seen a strong increase in membership, formulated a political programme and attracted many former politicians of existing parties to stand for election. The ability to attract experienced politicians has paid off in terms of the number of provinces where BBB is now a part of the ruling coalition. In almost all provinces they are contributing to the coalition.[74]

Apparently, very few voters considered the existing mainstream parties to be of relevance for the large challenges that the Netherlands faces in terms of climate change, housing and the natural environment. This is a worrying trend.

Figure 2 Party membership of Dutch political parties

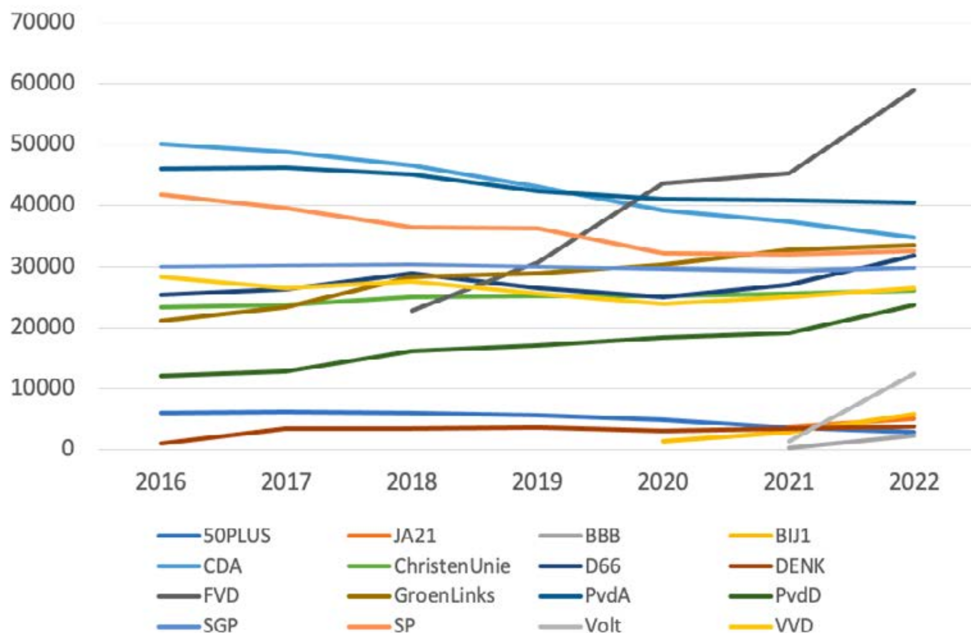
Panel A: Party membership 1983–2015 (by party)



73 https://allecijfers.nl/uitslag-provinciale-staten-verkiezingen-2023/.

74 https://nos.nl/artikel/2481406-bbb-ook-in-provinciebestuur-noord-holland-en-drenthe.

Panel B: Party membership since 2016



Source: Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen (DNPP), University of Groningen. (Note: only parties that participated in the 2021 elections are included.)

An increase in political fragmentation

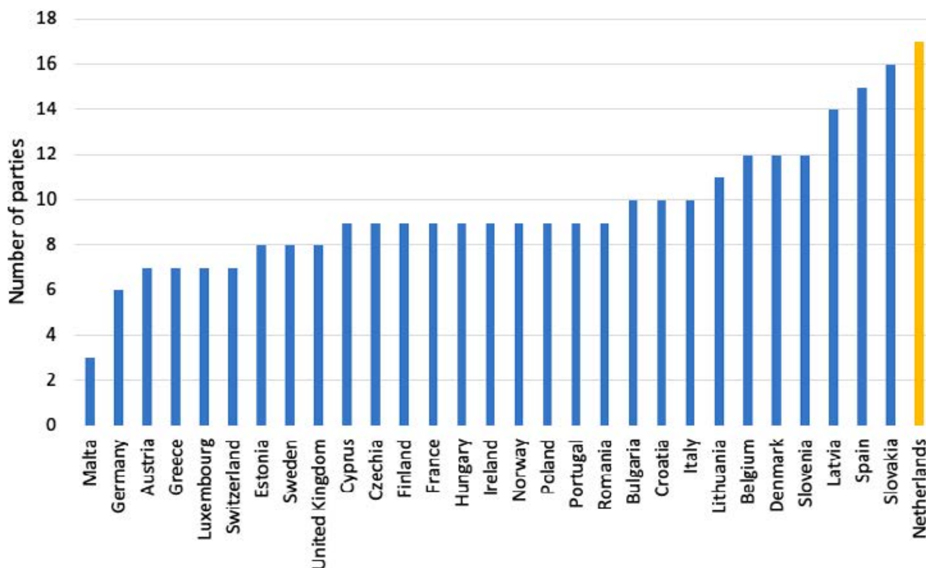
Among the European countries, the Netherlands stands out as having the most political parties (17) in parliament (see Figure 3). It would be foolish to attribute this to a single factor. And it is both a cause and a result of the changing role of political parties.

Because of the large number of parties, a coalition government will be composed of an increasing number of smaller parties. The current government consists of four parties. If current polls are an indication, as of January 2023, a future government will consist of at least five parties. It cannot be expected that the fragmentation will end soon.

Political parties will adapt, or have adapted already, to this new reality. Since a coalition government will need many parties, being able to cooperate constructively becomes more important than standing out at the general elections. One could think of this in terms of a Banzhaf power index: a marginal increase in the number of seats is only useful for the potential it has for being part of government.[75] The willingness to cooperate in a largely hostile environment, that is, with many small fringe parties, is sometimes more important than one extra seat.

Another consequence is that campaigning becomes more expensive. Standing out amongst 16 other parties is much more difficult than with just three or four parties. For example, CDA used to see only the other centrist parties (VVD and PvdA) as serious competitors. It must now compete with parties that have taken over some of the themes that in the past belonged to CDA, such as Europe, farmers' interests or conservative values.

Figure 3 Number of political parties per country (number of parties actively tracked by Politico in its Poll of Polls as of January 2023)



75 Adrian Van Deemen and Agnieszka Rusinowska, 'Paradoxes of voting power in Dutch politics', in *Public Choice* 115 (1–2), 2003, pp. 109-37.

Source: https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/ These represent political parties in or outside parliament that attract a large enough following (for example, through membership) to be tracked by pollsters.

The increase in the number of parties in parliament is not restricted to the Netherlands. In what has often been called 'Dutchification', many more countries have seen a rise in the number of active political parties.[76]

New parties are a response to concrete issues

In the Netherlands, the total number seats in parliament is fixed. Any loss for traditional, centrist parties means that the vacuum left by them will be mechanically filled by other parties. Smaller parties appeal to specific interests or grievances of voters. As mentioned above, a completely new party, BBB, was formed in the slipstream of widespread (and disruptive) farmers' protests that started in 2022 after the court ruling. The court ruling itself was disruptive: *all* construction sites in the Netherlands had to be shut down immediately and remained so for two months, until the government had formulated emergency laws.

Given the self-produced problem of the government in dealing with the nitrogen emissions and protection nature areas, the emergence of a new political party is exactly what one would expect from a healthy democracy. Existing political parties, most of them tied up with the government, are too entrenched to make a meaningful change in direction. Citizens who form a new party sense this and channel the energy into representation in parliament. In the Lower House, BBB gained one seat in the 2021 general election and are likely to win many more in the next elections due to be held in November 2023.

For other parties that gained seats—and membership—in the years since 2020, similar mechanisms apply. For some, it is discrimination of minorities and the historical role of the Dutch government in the slave trade that serve as a platform to mobilise

76 https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/12/dont-be-afraid-political-fragmentation.

against (that is the case for Bij1, for example). For others, it is Eurosceptic populism against which people mobilise (Volt). The Internet, online cooperation and social media provide ways to reach out to new and younger voters.

US-style campaigning does not benefit traditional parties

The US presidential election seems to have become the greatest show on earth, especially for the Netherlands. With the growth of Internet and social media, people worldwide can view and share the daily back-and-forth of candidates, debates, and gaffes. The English proficiency test places the Dutch in the first position among non-native English speakers regarding English language skills, which adds to the popularity of the election among the population.[77] American TV shows and political debates are watched live or with Dutch subtitles, and they reach Dutch homes almost unfiltered.

Taking inspiration from US electoral campaigns, however, cannot be done without taking into account the unique features of American democracy. In the US, party headquarters play a marginal and only procedural role. Any candidate can qualify as a Republican and participate in a primary election: there is no centralised party manifesto, no board that selects candidates and no large funding for the party itself. And for presidential elections, candidates need to obtain close to 50% of the popular vote to win the election.[78] Politics is personal and candidates pick the issues that are most likely to win them the majority of votes.

US electoral campaigns have inspired the established political parties in the Netherlands to mimic candidate selection with primaries, spend money on attention-

77 See https://www.ef.nl/epi/. It is run by a Dutch non-profit. Eurobarometer finds a similar result, though, see Jürgen Gerhards, 'Transnational linguistic capital: Explaining English proficiency in 27 European countries', *International Sociology* 29 (1), 2014, pp. 56–74.

78 In the US electoral system, one could theoretically win with 27% or even 23% of the popular vote. https://www.npr.org/2016/11/02/500112248/how-to-win-the-presidency-with-27-percent-of-the-popular-vote. In practice, candidates need to get close to 50% to have a chance of winning. Since 1900 the lowest vote shares by winning candidates were Woodrow Wilson (1912, 42%), Richard Nixon (1968, 43%), Bill Clinton (1992, 43%) and Donald Trump (2016, 46%).

grabbing activities and even indulge in a bit of negative campaigning. Twitter is extremely popular among politicians and journalists.[79] A breakout session at the CDA party congress in 2009 had the title 'learn how to campaign like Obama'. The authentic manner of personal campaigning with new channels of communication was dutifully copied by the political advisors of the politicians of established political parties.

The problem in a parliamentary system like that of the Netherlands is that voters' perception of a political party encompasses much more than just a person. The plurality of parties means that the margin of policies that parties can choose or campaign on is limited. Moreover, in the Netherlands, it is ultimately the central political party structure (and neither party members nor registered voters of a party) that decides on the electoral list and the political programme. And although the members have to approve the programme and electoral lists, it is the general board of the party who sets the agenda and selects candidates. Large deviations from what the board proposes are rare. The institutional setup of political parties gives them a large responsibility to come up with a sound programme and good candidates to represent that programme. In short, compared to the US, the political party make-up gives greater weight to principles than to people. As a consequence, candidates can only express their personal appeal to voter to the extent that it fits with the party programme.

The flipside is that elections are never won with a full majority. The VVD party has won all elections since 2010 with a vote share of 20% (2010), 27% (2012), 21% (2017) and 22% (2021). It is consistent with the ideological space that parties can inhabit and campaign on. Compared to the US, a much narrower group of voters is interested in a more principled and coherent programme that fits with their worldview.

With these observations, I dare to say that Dutch political parties have learned the wrong lessons from US presidential elections. The attention to creative campaigning came at a cost. There has been little or no investment in creating political programmes that make the 'trade-offs among policies in a complex world'.[80]

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79 Maurice Vergeer, 'Twitter and political campaigning', *Sociology Compass* 9 (9), 2015, pp. 745–60.

80 Christian Salas, Frances Rosenbluth and Ian Shapiro, 'Political parties and public policy', *NOMOS LXIII: Democratic Failure*, 2020.

Conclusion

The mainstream political parties in the Netherlands do not appear to be very resilient. They have been undergoing a long-term decline in membership numbers. Voters are much less loyal and switch party support regularly. Party finances are in shambles and headquarters are regularly scaled down.

About the same time, traditional parties have enthusiastically embraced campaigning techniques gleaned from US presidential elections. As insiders from different parties have told me, 'everything is now about perceptions, not political choices'. The analysis I have offered here is that, in mimicking US-style campaigning, Dutch parties have overlooked the structural difference in electoral systems between the US and the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, the political leader is expected to carry and develop the specific worldview of the party, not the other way round.

The political system itself, however, does seem to be resilient: new parties have obtained seats in the general election, and with some spin-offs from existing parties, the Lower House now consists of 20 different parties.[81] It is now up to a multitude of political parties to formulate their democratic vision and ways of being constructive in forming a government to the benefit of the Netherlands.

The fact that in many provinces some colleges included the upstart BBB party is a sign that the political system is capable of handling the disruption. The Netherlands is still the country of coalition-building.

The challenges for traditional parties are several. First, they need to find a way to handle all the research and policy advice that comes out of independent agencies and ministries. Parties should offer an integrated political programme that involves itself with the complexities of a modern society. A narrow focus on campaigning is clearly not the way to approach this.

81 Consisting of 17 political parties and 3 spin-offs that have not yet participated in a general election.

Second, parties should question whether all the money they spend on micro-targeting is well spent. To begin, collecting and storing information about potential voters is severely limited. Facebook now puts limits on what information can be used by political organisations. The EU privacy law (GDPR) puts legal limits on what data can be stored. If this is so, parties should examine more closely whether all the money put in marketing is worth is.

Third, parties should think about what it means to be a party of members. The focus on communication has left many members feeling that they are there ‘just to cheer on the leader’. Any serious recovery of traditional parties will involve a way to reconnect with party members. This provided an apt bridge to a fundamental law in US-style political campaigning that is too often missed: ‘don’t neglect your base’.

Political Parties in Southern Europe:

After Chaos, the Quest for a New Stability

Thibault Muzergues

The 2010s have been a tumultuous decade for southern Europe, with economic meltdown followed by political chaos, and populist politicians coming to lead governments in Greece (SYRIZA, 2015–19) and Italy (Five-Star Movement or M5S, and Lega, 2018–19, then M5S, 2019–2020), while in Spain the far-left Podemos were co-opted in the government led by the centre–left Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) from 2020 to July 2023. In a different vein, the far-left Left Bloc in Portugal supported (but did not participate in) the minority government of moderate Socialist Antonio Costa in Portugal between 2015 and 2019.

In many ways, it can be said that the extreme social and economic experience endured by the populations of southern Europe during the 2010s conditioned the rise of anti-political movements: faced with a spectacular reduction in their incomes (-33% in Greece, for example) and the explosion of unemployment, voters sanctioned what many of them considered the bankruptcy not only of an economic system, but also of a political class viewed as responsible for the economic hardship endured by the population. The loss of credibility endured by traditional parties as a result of the euro crisis in the early 2010s led to the rise of new parties and movements on the far left, far right and centre. Most of these groupings claimed to supersede traditional parties, often refusing in the process to be described themselves as political parties. Thus, many of them, particularly on the left, branded themselves as 'movements' (M5S) or 'coalitions' (SYRIZA, or the electoral alliance Unidas Podemos in the 2020 elections). This was not only a question of branding: their political leaders claimed that parties were actually obsolete and that their movement was truly different, with new organisation types offering solutions of direct democracy, very often via social networks, as an alternative to rigid party structures. The M5S went the furthest in these claims, with tight rules preventing re-election beyond two terms, and the online Rousseau platform, which was portrayed as allowing a direct democratic link between a loose leadership and the party members. On the other hand, more traditional populist parties relying on a charismatic leader claimed to a lesser extent to replace political parties through the direct relationship between the leader and members or voters.

Carried by these claims to do politics differently as well as by aspirations to replace what was seen as bankrupt traditional party systems, the 'movement parties'[82] on the left and the charismatic populist parties on the centre and right popped up and won significant shares of the votes in repeated elections. This led to spectacular victories in Greece for SYRIZA (2015), in Italy for the M5S and Lega (2018), and remarkably high results for Podemos, who consistently scored over 20% in the mid-2010s before entering the Socialist-led government in 2020. In the meantime, during this period many other political organisations who also claimed to revolutionise politics came and went, whether in Greece with the neo-fascist Golden Dawn or the centrist To Potami scoring remarkable results in the mid-2010s, or in Spain with centrist party Ciudadanos in the mid-2010s and right-wing Vox in the early 2020s. In Italy, new parties remained popular, with Fratelli d'Italia on the right winning the elections in 2022, while at the same time the centrist Terzo Polo coalition scored a reasonably high score of 7.7%. The enumeration of these many parties, whose success was sometimes ephemeral, shows how fluctuating the political scene has been during the 2010s in southern Europe.

Yet the most remarkable feature of this political period is not so much the proliferation of renegade movements, but the persistence of traditional parties. In fact, all of the traditional parties that had dominated the political scene prior to 2008 remained key components of the political system in the early 2020s, with the exception of the Greek centre–left PASOK (who almost disappeared before modestly coming back to the forefront of politics in the 2023 elections). What is more, the 'new' political parties that promised to reinvent politics by either superseding traditional political parties or by replacing political parties with something new ended up either disappearing or inserting themselves into the system, thereby becoming much more traditional political parties.

82 Donatella della Porta, Joseba Fernández, Hara Kouki and Lorenzo Mosca, *Movement Parties Against Austerity*, Cambridge: Polity, 2017.

The remarkable persistence of traditional political parties, despite a very serious challenge from charismatic populist groupings, centrist forces and left-wing movement parties is the subject of this chapter. We will first take a look at the strong roots of the pre-2008 southern European party system, before detailing how and why it was challenged by movements and parties from the left, right and centre. The study will then move on to the consequences of these challenges and the relative failure of rebel parties to revolutionise not only the political scene in southern Europe, but also its most important fundamental: the left–right divide. Finally, the conclusion will try to learn lessons from the remarkable resilience of political parties in southern Europe and suggest possible future developments: if political parties have proven that they remained irreplaceable tools for parliamentary democratic systems in southern Europe, the structuration of the political party systems in Greece, Italy, Spain, and to some extent, Portugal remains in flux. As a result, the quest for a more stable, predictable party system is one of the main challenges for the future.

Before the populist explosion: The southern European party systems

Looking at southern European politics prior to 2008, one remarkable feature of the political party system in Greece, Portugal, Spain, and Italy is its relative stability throughout the years. This is partly due to the history of these countries, which experienced comparable historical upheavals in the twentieth century. Those involved a strong left movement powered by an emerging working class, an equally strong reaction from conservative forces that partly led to elite support for right-wing dictatorships, and a resulting civil strife that led to regular outbursts of political violence and even civil war in Spain (1936–9), Italy (1943–5 and 1919–22) and Greece (1946–7). Indeed, with the notable exception of Italy, whose democracy emerged immediately after the Second World War and survived the political violence of the 'Years of Lead' in the 1970s, the democratisation of southern Europe dates from 1974–5 and is therefore a rather recent phenomenon. Although it is part of the second, and not the third wave

of democratic transition according to Samuel Huntington,[83] one needs to remember that the democratisation of Poland and Hungary, which started in 1989, is a process only 15 years younger than the transitions of Spain, Portugal or Greece. Indeed, one could say that Spain's or Greece's democratisation is actually closer in time to Poland's experience of transition than Italy's, which started in 1945.

The mix of strong extra-parliamentary left and right movements, polarisation and a common experience of civil war and right-wing dictatorships has meant that the politics of Italy, Greece, Portugal and Spain have shared some features in their democratic period. One of them has been the persistence, at least until 2010, of a stable party system based on a rather clear, almost cultural divide between left and right. In Greece, the opposition between the centre–right New Democracy (ND) and the centre–left Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) dates back to the very early days of the transition, with both parties founded in the wake of the demise of the military junta's downfall in 1974. From then on, these two parties competed for first and second place all the way from the second democratic elections of 1977 until 2012. The same can be said in Portugal, where the dichotomy between the centre–left Socialist Party (PS) and the centre–right Democratic People's Party (PPD, soon to be rebranded as Social Democratic Party or PSD) dates back to the first constituent assembly elections of 1975. In Spain, the party system took shape more slowly and was complexified by the emergence of strong regional parties in Catalonia and the Basque country, but opposition at national level also quickly crystallised between a left dominated by the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and a right first led first by Adolfo Suarez's Union of the Democratic Centre (UCD), and then after 1982 the People's Coalition (AP), which became in the late 1980s the People's Party (PP).

In this typology of political parties, Italy represents a special case, perhaps because its democratic experiment was somehow longer that those of its Mediterranean neighbours. Democratisation happened and consolidated in the immediate follow-up to

83 Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Twentieth Century*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

the Second World War under an equally strong divide between the left, then dominated by the Communist Party of Italy (PCI), and the right led by Christian Democracy (DC). Two events came to destroy this imperfect bipartisan system dominated by DC: the end of the Soviet Union marked the extinction of the PCI's raison d'être, and led to the party's actual disbanding in 1991. As to DC, its continued hold on power since the immediate post-war period led over time to practices of clientelism and ultimately endemic corruption, which came out in the open during the *Tangentopoli* scandals of 1992–3. This also led to the dissolution of the party in 1994, and the end of what Italians call the 'First Republic', referring to the DC-PCI party system. It was, however, quickly replaced by a new, more diffuse party system: the left was first dominated by the coalition of the Olive Tree (l'Ullivo, 1995–2007), which became The Union (l'Unione, 2004–7) before turning into the present-day Democratic Party (PD). On the other side of the spectrum, the post-*Tangentopoli* right was dominated by political entrepreneur Silvio Berlusconi and his Forza Italia party—Berlusconi, however, always had to compete for the leadership of the right with two other parties, the Northern League made of northern Italian separatists and then federalists, and then the National Alliance (AN), a normalised successor of the post-Fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI). Between 1994 and 2010, the dichotomy between left and right ossified under the personal enmity between Berlusconi and Romano Prodi, further entrenching the political system. In this system, fluidity was limited: while it was easy for an individual politician to move between parties of the 'centre–right' and the 'centre–left', there were very few cases of politicians actually moving from the centre–right to the centre–left, with the notable exception of the few Christian Democratic politicians who migrated to the left in opposition to Silvio Berlusconi amid the chaos of the mid-1990s and in 2008, when the centre–left alliance (or 'Union') turned into the Democratic Party.

The Italian term for designing the two blocs, 'centre–right' and 'centre–left', although it conveyed a certain sense of pragmatism and of consensus that governed the Italian elites in the post-war years, should not hide this very deep entrenchment on both sides. This polarisation has deep roots in the twentieth century history of

these countries and the opposition between Communists and right-wing groups, may those right-wing groups be Fascist or not. Indeed, history has been commonly used by both sides as a dog whistle to mobilise their troops against the other camp. Thus the centre–left has regularly accused their counterparts of being 'Fascist', 'neo-Fascist' or 'post-Fascist',[84] while Berlusconi never missed an occasion to call his opponents Communists, may those be judges[85] or politicians.[86] In a similar vein, the politics of memory are being regularly used by politicians in Spain to mobilise their electorates: thus, the exhumation of dictator Francisco Franco's body and its transfer from the Valley of the Fallen to a private cemetery in 2019, just a few weeks before parliamentary election, was a not-so-subtle way for politicians on the left to bring back the memories of Franco's dictatorship to the centre stage of the political debate and underline the right's ambiguity and unease in dealing with this past.

These incidents show that the memory of twentieth century history is still regularly used in southern Europe as a campaign tool by politicians on both the left and right. There are good reasons for that: around the middle of the twentieth century, all countries except Portugal and Malta experienced civil war pitting left and right against each other, and the memory of those events has continued to run deep in the collective imaginations of those whose families were involved, including in the fantasising over the identity of the enemy. The choice by post-dictatorship elites to bury the historical issues to preserve social peace and limit lustration also helped preserve dual-track memories in some key components of the electorate. This in turned preserved the dichotomies that still allow politicians today to portray their political opponents as 'Communists' or 'Fascists', even though these adversaries had individually nothing to do with either left-wing insurgency or with right-wing military repression.

The persistence of this divided memory over the twentieth century is actually one of the reasons why electorates often remained more faithful than in other places to

84 https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/qualifier-fratelli-d-italia-de-parti-post-fasciste-n-a-plus-aucun-sens-20220926.

85 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-berlusconi-idUSTRE59R1JX20091028.

86 https://www.smh.com.au/world/berlusconis-communist-claims-20060327-gdn8zj.html.

traditional parties—provided that these traditional parties gave them an occasional little push. However, these institutional parties had to deal with major upheaval in the 2010s as not only their position, but also their very existence was jeopardised as a consequence of the economic crisis.

The first challenge on the left

For such a stable and entrenched system to be challenged, southern Europe had to experience a cataclysm grave enough to turn its countries' social fabric on its head. The euro crisis of the early 2010s, itself a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis turned out to be such an event. The reasons for this economic meltdown in the south of Europe are complex, but can be grossly summarised, for what is of direct matter to us, in one word: debt. Public deficits have always been a problem in southern Europe, and indeed most of Greece's major economic crises have had at least some connection with public debt,[87] but this one was different in that the often-used instrument for restoring fiscal and financial stability—devaluation—was not available, as Spain, Portugal, Italy, Cyprus, Malta and Greece had joined the euro ten years earlier. Of course, the governments of the day and their predecessors had been culprits of overspending in the period prior to the crisis, but the real turning point that made the Greek, Portuguese and Spanish economies collapse was the 2008 financial crisis, which meant the repatriation of outside financing, and massive state intervention to save a collapsing national banking sector. The states eventually saved their most important banks, often at the price of a painful restructuring, but the result—dangerous levels of debts towards domestic and foreign creditors, led to a second meltdown known as the euro crisis, which threatened to take these countries away from the eurozone.[88]

Of course, for Spain, Portugal, Italy and (despite some hesitation) Greece, leaving the euro was out of the question, and someone had to pay the bill to put the books

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87 See Roderick Beaton, *Greece: Biography of a Modern Nation*, London: Allen Lane, 2019.

88 See Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crisis Changed the World*, London: Allen Lane, 2019.

back in order. International creditors did play a part in restructuring the debt, but their options were limited as, northern European economies were also under pressure (including from public opinion) following the financial meltdown. Ultimately, the local populations came to carry most of the burden of fiscal and financial restructuring, with hard austerity policies that came on top of the economic crisis itself. In the most extreme example, Greeks lost a third of their disposable income[89] as the country experienced a spectacular slump in its GDP, from 355 billion euros in 2008 to 242 billion in 2012.[90] As a result of the economic meltdown and the fiscal squeeze, unemployment exploded: it reached 27% of the overall active population in Greece in 2014, 26% in Spain, and as often in these cases, youth were the most vulnerable: youth unemployment reached 58% in Greece, 55% in Spain and 45% in Italy, even though the global unemployment rate in the *Bel Paese* was 'only' 12%.[91] The economic squeeze, made worse by the austerity policy adopted by the governments, had a profound impact on the whole population, with whole chunks of the middle class facing poverty overnight, and young graduates unable to find a job.

Unsurprisingly, voters turned against the politicians that they deemed responsible for their hardships, and if the first result of this was a landslide in favour of the opposition party at the very beginning of the crisis (Greece in 2009 and then 2010, Portugal and Spain in 2011, Italy in 2013), the continued pain and uncertainty experienced by voters incited them to break with tradition and look for more radical alternatives.

Those first came from the left: as the first and most visible victims of the crisis and of austerity policies, young people had mobilised heavily during the first days of the crisis to defend their interests. In Spain, this translated in the Indignados movement of 2011–15, in which young protesters joined massive anti-austerity, pro–direct democracy demonstrations in Madrid and elsewhere in the country. In Greece,

89 https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-greece-incomes-idUKBRE93I0HL20130419.

90 World Bank. Note that the GDP of Greece at the time of writing this article remained much lower than in 2012, standing at 216.2 billion euros.

91 See Thibault Muzergues, *The Great Class Shift: How New Social Class Structures Are Redefining Western Politics*, London: Routledge, 2020.

a similar movement rocked Syntagma square over the same period, with violent explosions that reflected the even more dire situation of Greek youth at the time. In both cases, the demonstration organisers (often well-known left-wing militants) not only targeted austerity policies, but called for a profound revamping of democratic politics, with political parties seen as part of the problem rather than the solution—hence the calls for direct democracy as an alternative to the parliamentary democracy that had, in the eyes of demonstrators, led the country to ruin. The name of the left-wing NGOs that organised the demonstrations, Real Democracy Now! In Madrid, and Direct Democracy Now! In Athens, said a lot about the agenda of the organisers, who targeted austerity policy as a channel to overhaul the whole system.

These social movements on the left were massive. They soon transitioned to become political movement competing for elections (as in the case of Podemos in Spain in 2014), or joined left-wing coalitions that had previously enjoyed only a limited appeal, such as SYRIZA in Greece or the Five Star Movement, which presented itself as a non-partisan alternative to party politics. In fact, the original M5S was not strictly far left, and its ideology mixed elements of right-wing and left-wing populism with environmentalist concerns and the ever-changing positions of then-leader Beppe Grillo. The case of M5S is remarkable in that it defined itself not only in opposition to political parties like the other movements—who *all* refused to be called parties, but it actually came to present itself as an *anti*-party, an attempt to supersede political parties and make them obsolete. A known proponent of direct democracy ever since the *Vaffanculo Day* of 2007, Grillo distrusted elected officials, and so made sure his movement would not produce the nomenklatura of elected officials that usually forms the backbone of any party. This is why no member of the movement could be a candidate for more than two elections, at least originally.

Grillo also rejected any type of party structure and at least on paper proposed an alternative model of 'horizontal' organisation and direct democracy powered by social media. At the centre of this organisation was the Internet platform Rousseau, designed by Gianroberto Casaleggio, Grillo's tech and communication guru. Casaleggio designed Rousseau as a direct democracy interface, in which users had access to

traditional activism tools (including fundraising), but also had the possibility to initiate referendums and react to other members' initiatives, with an algorithm allowing regional differentiation between members and their activities.[92]

On paper, the Rousseau platform offered a way to disintermediate between party members and party structures. At some point in the mid-2010s, Rousseau and the M5S came to be seen as one and the same, with a promise to effectively make political parties, the traditional intermediaries between the people and politicians in representative democracy, obsolete. In reality, as Giuliano da Empoli showed in his book on what he called the 'engineers of chaos',[93] the façade of direct democracy was hiding a more sinister reality, in which a small group of people were actually controlling the agenda and the votes behind the scenes. Worse, in some cases the platform served as a smokescreen behind which those who controlled Rousseau edited ex-post the texts that had been approved by an unquantifiable group of online voters—all this in order to fit the new agenda of the party leadership.[94] Nonetheless, the optics of the time certainly made it look like Casaleggio's project was challenging the very idea that political parties had a role to play in politics. For people like Beppe Grillo and Pablo Iglesias, the leader of Spain's Podemos, this was perhaps the best way to get rid of *La Casta*, those elites they wished to replace: if they became irrelevant, parties would simply have to disappear and leave way to new elites, and those new elites would in turn carry out their idea of a direct democracy.

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92 https://www.wired.it/attualita/politica/2016/04/15/rousseau-movimento-5-stelle/.

93 Giuliano Da Empoli, *Gli Ingenieri del Caos: Teoria e Tecnica dell'Internazionale Populista*, Venice: Marislio, 2019.

94 See Giulia Pompili and Valerio Valentini, *Al Cuore dell'Italia: Come Russia e Cina Stanno Cercando di Conquistare il Paese*, Milan: Mondadori, 2022, pp.160–4.

The centre and the right, too: the rise of rogue political parties outside of the anti-austerity movement

Grillo, Iglesias and others on the left were not the only ones to profess the end of political parties, at least as they were known to citizens. Other politicians on the right and centre took notice and started challenging the traditional party system. While their challenges never went as far as that of the M5S, which claimed to reinvent democracy as a whole, they nevertheless shook the foundations of the political system. In some cases, the political establishment had to battle challenges from left, right and centre at the same time, and in the case of Italy, it had to admit defeat once against a coalition of populists from both sides.

The centrist parties (Ciudadanos in Spain, To Potami in Greece) and personalities (Matteo Renzi in Italy) that emerged during the euro crisis were not challenging the need to have political parties. In fact, Ciudadanos actually replicated much of the party structures and the territorial anchoring used by traditional parties, while Matteo Renzi originally used the existing structure of the traditional Democratic Party to steer it in the direction he claimed would bring electoral success—only after being ousted did he break away to form Italia Viva. Furthermore, neither Ciudadanos nor To Potami seem to have trusted the claims that direct democracy could replace representative democracy: Ciudadanos firmly condemned the pseudo-referendum organised by Catalonian independentists in 2017,[95] while To Potami appealed to SYRIZA leader and Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to call off the 2015 referendum he was organising on the latest bailout deal offered by the EU[96] (and which he was to sign anyway a few days after, even though the 'no' won overwhelmingly).

The centrist parties, however, challenged one important feature of the system: bipartisanship. To them, the oligopoly enjoyed by the big parties was one of the

95 https://www.politico.eu/article/catalonia-referendum-independence-albert-rivera-anything-can-happen/.

96 https://greekreporter.com/2015/06/30/to-potami-leader-urges-greek-pm-to-call-off-referendum/.

plagues that had caused the larger woes of their country. Because they were in a so-far unchallenged dominant position, the traditional political parties were afflicted by clientelism, and the backroom deals that perpetuated their dominance were harming the common good—the emergence of a number of corruption scandals[97] during that time helped further this narrative. Ciudadanos, which was originally created in reaction to the radicalisation (and corruption cases) of Catalan mainstream movements in the 2000s and went national in the 2010s, is a remarkably consistent case. Its claims to destroy the oligopoly of the independentist movements at regional level in Catalonia were used very successfully to challenge that of PP and PSOE at national level.

The centrist parties were by no means revolutionary. But their ability to better use social media than the traditional parties and their attacks on bipartisanship, the very basis of the political party system, provided a remarkable challenge to the powers that be, even more so because it was coming from the inside. In fact, the centrists were all part of the elites—whether economic, media or political. They thrived because they represented the emergence of the creative class as a political force.[98] For them, even though political parties were a useful tool to win elections, their ideological and structural rigidity made them unable to challenge their own assumptions, leading to a dangerous stagnation in a time of crisis.

The centrists therefore favoured a much lighter structure for their parties, one that would allow more agility and action, with presence on traditional and social media seen as a priority. This media-first approach corresponded to the social background of the leadership: all parties were dominated by prominent members of the creative class, who brought with them the values that they had learned to cherish as professionals in the media, the intellectual world and the tech industries: flexibility, transparency, diversity. Because they were refreshing and not revolutionary, these parties and personalities originally gained much interest in traditional media: in many ways, they corresponded

97 https://www.elespanol.com/espana/20180522/casos-corrupcion-hundido-pp-valencia/309219868_0.html.

98 See Thibault Muzergues, *The Great Class Shift: How New Social Class Structures Are Redefining Western Politics*, London: Routledge, 2020.

to journalists', and more largely the creative class's aspirations of a brand-new political party system where technical problem solving would replace political decisions, and where politics would be done more transparently. In this sense, the centrist challenge was existential for traditional political parties, in the sense that it tried, by making the art of government a science, to replace party politics (defined by negotiations, and therefore to some extent behind-the-doors discussions) with automatic processes where those who know best, mostly technicians, would take the decisions.

This drive for epistocracy, although brought to radical conclusions by intellectuals like Jason Brennan,[99] was by no means a goal professed by the centrists, whose objective remained the rejuvenation of politics and political parties by the emergence of new forces and new personnel within the political system. When he was prime minister, Matteo Renzi did not hesitate to use a referendum to try and pass an important piece of legislation, tying his political future to it—his loss in this exercise of direct democracy led to his resignation as prime minister and estrangement within the Democratic Party. It was, however, never clear what the likes of To Potami, Ciudadanos or later Italia Viva and the Terzo Polo would replace traditional politics or political parties with. Indeed, there was always a hesitation between maintaining (and renovating) a system they were intrinsically part of, and the temptation of advocating for a more radical overturn, which would condemn parties to irrelevance via technology and expertise.

The challenge from the right of the political spectrum, which came last in the region, was even less directly challenging to the political system, in the sense that with the exception of the neo-Fascist Golden Dawn, which was structured more like a criminal organisation,[100] the political parties that emerged on the right did not claim to replace political parties with something new or better. Indeed, the individuals who build Vox in Spain, the Greek Solution in Greece or Chega in Portugal were all previously members of a political party, and all three parties have tried to build a regional and local network in essence similar to that of traditional parties. On the

99 Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

100 https://apnews.com/article/hip-hop-and-rap-trials-athens-financial-markets-greece-8193d867c12224dbc9ba3e2675b8d25c.

other hand, Matteo Salvini's takeover of the Northern League, a conservative and regionalist party based solely in the north of Italy to represent 'Padanian' interests against the south, and his efforts to transform it into a national party with branches all over the country, is telling of the philosophy of these right-wing populist parties: while they challenged the status quo and the traditional politics that they considered were responsible for the downfall of their countries, they did not consider political parties useless, nor did they challenge the bipartisan nature of party politics. Quite the contrary, as they claimed that the very reason for their parties' existence was that the traditional centre–right had abandoned all its conservative values to fit into an ideological mould imposed by the left—whether on immigration, marriage, sexuality or education. Their claim was therefore not to revolutionise democracy or the party system, but on the contrary to reaffirm bipartisanship in a clear binary basis: on the one hand a dusted-up right, clear on its values and close to the people, and on the other an amalgamation of the left and its technocratic allies.

Of course, these political parties did represent a challenge to politics as usual, and not only by the fact that they brought to the public square taboo themes such as immigration and culture. Their highly hierarchical structuration allowed them to propose a model based on charismatic leadership as opposed to collective decision-making, often (though not always) considered as inefficient. As a corollary to this charismatic leadership, right-wing parties have often favoured the use of referendums as tools of direct democracy to bypass parliamentary (and elite) obstructionism. Thus, in 2022 Vox's Santiago Abascal called for referendums on 'fundamental matters' such as immigration, taxes and energy[101] to solve once and for all these issues, while Matteo Salvini also proposed a policy referendum on the gasoline and diesel car sales ban voted by EU institutions a few months earlier.[102] Much like on the left, referendums are thought of by the populist right as a tool to bypass resistance by national elites or to resist common decisions taken at EU level. This is part of the 'populist' agenda

101 https://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-abascal-compromete-convocar-referendums-asuntos-trascendentales-si-llega-moncloa-20220907142317.html.

102 https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2022/09/21/elezioni-salvini-referendum-su-stop-benzina-e-diesel_ff451b0c-d1bb-4b19-aa4e-f5981e6e9d6b.html.

of the right, in the sense that it wishes to bypass those intermediary bodies like political parties that stand in the way of a direct joint decision-making involving the charismatic leader acting in the name of the masses. However, this does not constitute a fundamental challenge to the existence of political parties, or to the political party system, which the right-wing parties seem to be comfortable with, including (and even more particularly) in its bipartisan form.

Counter-revolution? The return to a new normalcy

As in France in the 2010s, the traditional political party system came under stress from three directions, with the left, the centre and then the right assaulting it successively (although with overlaps) and offering renewal in times of economic and social hardships. If the left, which came first in challenging the status quo, offered the most frontal challenge, both the centre and the right were actually offering alternatives not only to political parties, but more generally to the party system, or what the Italians have dubbed the 'partitocracy'.[103] But unlike in France, where the combined pressure of right-wing, left-wing and centrist challengers destroyed the party system, those in southern Europe either were left intact, as in Malta or to a lesser extent Cyprus and Portugal, or adapted while retaining most of their features.

In Greece, it seemed for a long time that SYRIZA, by outflanking a PASOK ruined by its management of the first years in the euro crisis, had simply replaced the centre–left by taking over most of the PASOK electorate and adding to it that of the millennials who had taken part in the anti-austerity protests of the early 2010s. Indeed, this was pretty much the coalition that destroyed the traditional PASOK and put Alexis Tsipras in charge in 2015, at a critical time for Greece. It took just six months for the new prime minister to renege on his anti-austerity platform and become an almost 'normal' prime minister of the European left, while his party, SYRIZA, had by then also

103 Or *Partitocrazia* in Italian. See 'The Italian Partitocracy: Beyond President and Parliament', *Political Science Quarterly* (conference issue: Presidential and Parliamentary Democracies: Which Work Best?), Special Issue, 1994. Available online: https://www.psqonline.org/article.cfm?IDArticle=13332.

renounced its claims to change the democratic game. Indeed, taking over PASOK's traditional electorate also brought the old practice of clientelism in the party, which as a result became the protector of the civil service—and therefore public servants—in the face of privatisations. By replacing PASOK and in the end refusing to fully embrace the revolutionary anti-austerity that was professed by his alter ego Yanis Varoufakis, Tsipras chose to fully insert SYRIZA into the old party system. In this sense, even though its ascent originally seemed to promise a very profound break with the past, SYRIZA only replaced PASOK as the party of the left, putting the cursor somehow more to the left but neither challenging the left–right political divide nor the political party system as a whole. SYRIZA's post-electoral difficulties after the 2023 double elections and the possible revival of a more centrist alternative under PASOK-KINAL (a fusion of PASOK with other centrist parties, originally including To Potami) may slightly complicate the political equation, but these emerging trends are not challenging the left–right divide, which remains a founding element of Greek politics.

In Italy, too, the multiple challenges of the 2010s have not fundamentally changed the equation of the party system, which in 2022–3 remained divided quite clearly between two camps, that of the centre–right and that of the centre–left, with a small centre (actually originally linked to the left[104]) trying to exist between these two poles. For a while, this dichotomy and even the whole Italian party system seemed under threat: in 2018, voters brought two populist parties to power as the two strongest in the parliament: the M5S and Matteo Salvini's Lega. At that time, the M5S did not consider or portray itself as left or far left, and indeed mixed some of its original green policies with left-wing populism and anti-immigration rhetoric. What mattered though is that, as both anti-systemic and populist movements at the time, both Lega and the M5S threatened to overhaul the party system along with the whole political system. Furthermore, announcements by the M5S that they would use the Rousseau platform

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104 Both leaders of the *Terzo Polo*, Matteo Renzi and Carlo Calenda, originally came from the centre–left's Democratic Party, and in many ways remain defined by it—they almost went into a coalition agreement with the PD during the 2022 elections. The other members of the centre, *Noi Moderati*, also had to define themselves as part of the centre–right coalition in the same elections. See https://www.micromega.net/calenda-renzi-centro/.

extensively to decide and promote government policies did indeed promise to make old party politics obsolete, and to a certain extent Matteo Salvini also shared this idea of surpassing the political parties, as it was also a way for him to apply pressure, and sometimes evade his own historical party base in the north of Italy.

The result, however, was very disappointing for those who thought that the era of 'partitocracy' was over. In fact, the Rousseau platform used by the M5S leadership for internal referendums proved particularly untransparent, with evidence of at least some votes/resolutions being either manipulated or edited ex-post. As the popularity of M5S crumbled, that of Matteo Salvini rose, but he was himself defeated by the fragmentation of the Italian parliament, which refused the early elections he had sought and ended the experiment of the Italian populist government. From then on, the country turned towards normalisation, first with an alliance between the M5S populists and the traditional PD, and then in the grand coalition led by Mario Draghi, of which both the M5S and Salvini's Lega were part, but under close supervision by the other parties and the Italian civil service. These times retrospectively seem to have been those of an anti-populist counter-revolution in which those parties that sought to overhaul the system failed to do it and were forced to normalisation by the civil service, the parties in parliament and the President of the Republic Sergio Matarella (who was, after all, only playing his role as the guarantor of the institutions). From then on, what followed was a process of normalisation in which the M5S did not always abandon radicality but clearly inserted itself into the political system rather than challenging it, as historical leader Beppe Grillo passed on the leadership to former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. As M5S normalised, it mostly took the place of the Communist Refoundation movement in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, meaning a party clearly on the left that would make sure that the centre–left would remain anchored where its roots were. Only the electorate had shifted: while Communist and post-Communist voters were to be found in the working-class suburbs and towns of industrial northern Italy, the electorate of the M5S came to be clearly defined as young and southern.

On the right, the situation was also similar to that of the late 1990s and early 2000s, although the order was different. The 2022 parliamentary elections saw the centre–right led by recently founded Fratelli d'Italia in the lead, with Matteo Salvini's Lega and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia as coalition partners. The configuration seemed new compared to the past, but in fact it was not, apart from the fact that Berlusconi was no longer the leader: Salvini's Lega was in the continuity of the northern autonomist party Lega Nord of Umberto Bossi, while Fratelli d'Italia was actually simply a re-emergence of the old National Alliance led by Gianfranco Fini in the 1990s and 2000s, after a failed attempt by Berlusconi to unite the right under his banner. As the saying goes, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

If in Italy the political party system went back to the pre-2010s almost unchanged, Spain is still searching for its balance, even though it seems that the traditional parties are now back in control. In many ways, the challenge to the political party system rested in Podemos, who like the M5S in Italy claimed to bring more direct democracy to the public debate, but the party always defined itself on the left, so it did not challenge the fundamentals of the Spanish political system. Its replacement by Sumar as leader of the far left in the run-up of the July 2023 elections is actually a proof of continuity rather than a rupture in the electorate as in left-wing party politics. Likewise, Vox is certainly claiming another type of charismatic leadership, but it is clearly leaning to the right ideologically.

The only odd party out was Ciudadanos, which enjoyed for a few years a spectacular rise and thought of itself as able to transcend the left–right divide. However, after a few years of quick growth, the party quickly had to position itself—notably on the Catalan question—in ways that clearly identified it with the centre–right. In any case, through its very well-organised networking and structuring, Ciudadanos did not seek to challenge political parties as such, but rather the imperfect bipartisanship (*bipartidismo* in Spanish), which they saw as the reason for all the country's woes. In the end, despite polling numbers that put them briefly in a leading position in 2018–19, Ciudadanos failed miserably twice: first, by having to position itself clearly on the centre–right because a substantial, even existential issue arose that needed

this clarification (i.e. Catalonia); and second, because the party quickly slipped into oblivion after a bad electoral result and the resignation of its leader Albert Rivera. But while Ciudadanos went down, so far Podemos (and now Sumar) and Vox have remained forces on both the far left and right (at least compared to the traditional parties). Their presence complicates the political equation in Spain, but does not change it fundamentally: the left–right divide is now even more pronounced due to the presence of these two new forces that try to pull the PSOE and PP further to the left and right. At the same time, it is clear that the formation of any government is now dependent on a coalition, or at least an agreement for a minority government. Further complicating the situation is the continued presence of regionalist parties in the Basque country and Catalonia, which have historically held the balance of power between the left and the right in Spain when the results were tight, thereby making the life of any government in Spain more uncertain. That being said, the recovery of both the PSOE and the PP (who at the time of writing this article were both polling above 25% or even 30%, after lows below 20% in the mid- and late-2010s) shows that both parties are patiently trying—and so far managing—to recover, if not their predominance then at least their competitive advantage over the rebel parties that emerged following the euro crisis, and which have all become real parties.

Conclusion: new normal or prelude to collapse?

This brief overview of the evolution of southern Europe's party system seems to point in one direction: that is, that despite a very serious challenge from all sides of the political spectrum (left, right and centre) and despite a huge loss of credibility following a euro crisis that spectacularly impoverished southern Europe, the political parties that were in charge back then are almost all still dominant. In fact, if one were to be transported directly from 2006 to 2023, one would see mostly continuity in the political party systems, with perhaps the exception of Spain (and still that

would need to be debated). Everywhere in southern Europe, including the island nations of Malta and Cyprus, the main political divide is still between left and right, with the main political parties clearly identified as belonging to either, and still in charge almost everywhere. The only exceptions here are SYRIZA in Greece, which has replaced PASOK on the left, and Fratelli d'Italia, which seems currently poised to take the place on the right of Forza Italia, a typical entrepreneurial party[105] whose very existence always relied solely on the will of its late leader Silvio Berlusconi. In both cases the new parties came to replace existing parties and took over from the fringe before recentring their message.

Other parties like Podemos and Vox in Spain or the M5S in Italy were more threatening to the party system, as their resilience has repeatedly threatened to change the balance of power over the years. For a time, both Podemos and the M5S also claimed to offer a counter-model by claiming that social media and direct democracy could make parties irrelevant in the political scene. However, these threats did not materialise, as all these parties undertook normalisation (very often as a way to overcome an existential crisis when confronted with the exercise of power) and found their place on the political spectrum, either on the right or on the left. In the end, all parties who refused to position themselves or to function like parties faced irrelevance after one or two electoral cycles, and became so insignificant that they had to run in coalition (To Potami with PASOK-KINAL), or face extinction (currently the case for Ciudadanos).

Today, notwithstanding the above-mentioned exceptions and qualifications, the same political parties that presided over the start of the crisis are still there, and even if their duopoly has weakened, they still reign—albeit sometimes over a more fragmented system. The main question is why political parties in general—and in particular the more traditional parties of the left and right—came to prove so resilient in the face of economic and social meltdown. There are several answers to that: the

105 See Vit Hloušek, Luobmir Kopeček and Petra Vodová, *The Rise of Entrepreneurial Parties in European Politics*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2020.

first has to do with the resilience of Mediterranean societies, which despite economic and social hardships did not fundamentally change in structure, in part because of the reliance on family ties and solidarity to withstand the shock of the crisis. One could add that, despite being very hard-hit by the euro crisis, the southern European economies did not face a complete meltdown of their economic and social structure as in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, thereby maintaining some rigidity in social statuses, which in turn translated in the perpetuation of old cleavages that went back to the early years of democratisation. Also, the nature of the challenge by the rebel parties on the left, right and centre did not always constitute a fundamental threat to political party rule, or even to political parties themselves (as many actually adopted the party structures of legacy parties). And when they did challenge the system as a whole, as was the case with the movement parties that emerged on the left in the early 2010s, their model of direct democracy (as an alternative to partitocracy) quickly showed their limits, forcing a rethinking of the party functioning almost as soon as they entered government. This was clearly the case with Podemos, SYRIZA and M5S, whose experience of exercising power actually led them to normalisation, if not ideologically, then at least structurally.

Finally, a word has to be said about the resilience of institutional parties, who managed to stay afloat in particularly difficult times, constantly juggling between the maintenance of their structure and power base and the need for internal reform. This mix of preservation of the status quo and reform (often in that order) is clearly the main reason for their resilience. Of course, the persistence of a strong left–right divide dating back decades helped perpetuate social and therefore political cleavages that could in turn be exploited by political parties for their survival. But the maintenance of the old social links also clearly played a role, as traditional families and social and regional groups stayed loyal to the old party networks and processes that have often been portrayed as outright clientelism in northern Europe or in newer parties. Nevertheless, the maintenance of these old links, sometimes via family networks, guaranteed an electoral base under which the legacy parties could not fall. This allowed parties like PP and New Democracy but also PD on the centre–left to withstand the storm when it was at its strongest.

The other element in the success of legacy parties, reform, was perhaps best embodied by the efforts of Kyriakos Mitsotakis to modernise New Democracy by rejuvenating the party base and reforming its candidate selection mode[106] along with the party's messaging. But such efforts were also successfully undertaken by Pedro Sánchez at the head of the PSOE, for example, and also to a certain extent by Pablo Casado in PP. In any case, the capacity of the parties to reinvent themselves, even if only partially, clearly played a part in their survival and, in some cases, victories. The only exceptions are PASOK, which was not able to withstand the shock of the Greek crisis of 2010 and did not get a chance to reform itself (although early signs saw that it is managing to partially come back from oblivion as a more centrist party), and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, whose future had always been tightly linked to that of its leader, who passed away in June 2023. S

Despite a very deep crisis and an all-out assault on all fronts, the institutional political parties of southern Europe survived and, at least for some of them, even managed to stage impressive comebacks. The question, however, is whether this resilience will be confirmed in the 2020s, at a time in which the whole of Europe is threatened by another socio-economic crisis in the aftermath of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. The fate of the party system matters to these countries' neighbours, to the EU and to the US, because, as has been seen on numerous occasions, the fringe challengers to legacy parties in the region often tend to be supported by foreign authoritarian powers, linking their fate with a shifting geopolitical system.[107] This matters in a Mediterranean region that may well be on the verge of becoming a new geostrategic issue in the latter part of the 2020s.[108]

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106 See Rebecca Pitsika, 'Candidate (S)election in Greece: A New, Professional Approach for New Democracy', in Thibault Muzergues, Dan Scaduto, et al., *Standing Out from The Crowd: Candidate Party (S) election in the Transatlantic World*, Washington: International Republican Institute, 2022, pp. 62–70.

107 See Giulia Pompili and Valerio Valentini, *Al Cuore dell'Italia: Come Russia e Cina Stanno Cercando di Conquistare il Paese*, Milan: Mondadori, 2022.

108 https://warontherocks.com/2022/10/the-next-mediterranean-front-line/.

Unpopular but Irreplaceable:

Resilience and Adaptability of the Party System in Poland

Miłosz Hodun

Fantasies about party-less democracy

Among public institutions, Poles trust political parties the least. According to the newest survey by CBOS, only 18% of Poles trust them (1% trust them completely) and 70% distrust them.[109] Such attitude is nothing new; it has persisted for years.

The vast majority of surveyed Poles (91%) believe that political parties cause quarrels and confusion in the country. Only slightly less explicitly, they support the statement that parties are in fact cliques of politicians whose only goal is to gain power (87%). Four-fifths of respondents (80%) believe that parties bring together people whose main motivation is to fulfil personal ambition; two-thirds (66%) say that the goals of most parties' activities are not clear.[110] A majority of respondents (64%) disagrees with the statement that parties try to solve the problems of ordinary people. Not only to Poles have a bad image of political parties, but things are getting worse with time. Compared with previous surveys (conducted since 2011), the proportion of Poles that sees a constructive role of parties as brokers and promoters of useful ideas has gone down.[111]

Dr Adam Gendźwiłł of Warsaw University wrote:

> When observing Polish politics, one might have an impression that many politicians would preferably distance themselves from the fact that they are members of political parties. 'Partisan' (*partyjny*) in vernacular Polish, as well as in the discourse

109 Seventy-six per cent of Poles trust the army; 63%, local and regional authorities; 51%, the Ombudsman; 43%, the president; 31%, courts; 32%, the government; 23%, the parliament; and 22%, the Constitutional Tribunal. CBOS, 2022. *Zaufanie społeczne. Komunikat z badań*. https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2022/K_037_22.PDF.

110 CBOS, 2022. Although, in fairness, Poles share also positive opinions about parties—they believe that political parties collect the demands of voters (55%) and that they propose solutions to the important problems of the country (54%).

111 The fifth edition of the European Social Survey (ESS) reports that the percentage of Poles identifying themselves with parties was 30.2%; only two countries in 26 examined reported a lower level. In four previous editions of ESS, Poland held the last position: in 2002, a relation towards any party was declared by 28% of respondents, in 2004, 22%; in 2006, 26%; and in 2008, 23%. European Social Survey Round 5 First Release, 2011. Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Norway—Data Archive and distributor of ESS data.

of the elites, is an adjective commonly evoking negative associations and very often it is a pure insult. Very frequent appeals to 'de-party' (*odpartyjnić*) many spheres of public life usually refer 'to curing' them.[112]

In such circumstances, it is not difficult to understand why Poland has one of the lowest party membership rates in Europe. Only 0.8% of Poles entitled to vote are party members. This is a very bad result not only compared with Western European countries but also in the context of Central and Eastern Europe. According to Statistics Poland (GUS), in 2016 around a quarter of a million Poles held a membership card in a political party (16% less than in 2014). Now it is whichs even less. Most of them are associated with the four biggest parties: Polish People's Party (PSL, 87,000 members); Law and Justice (PiS, 44,996 members); Civic Platform (PO, 23,727 members); and the New Left (20,604 members).[113] These are not very impressive numbers compared to, for example, some regional champions such as Romania (500,000 members for PSD and 250,000 for PNL) or Croatia (220,000 members for HDZ).

Some of the reasons for this situation are common to the whole democratic West.[114] But some important factors are specific to Poland, linked to the country's modern history. First of all, the way Polish people see parties is still inextricably connected with the Communist past. For over forty years the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) was the hegemonic party which brutally controlled the authoritarian regime dependent on the Soviet Union. PZPR is still the first association for many Polish people when they hear the word 'party', and in the 1990s the trade-union-turned-political-movement Solidarity did not take the necessary steps to rebuild the reputation

112 Adam Gendźwiłł, 'Why do Poles (still) dislike political parties? Some survey insights into anti-party attitudes in Poland, 1995–2011', *Polish Sociological Review*, 184 (4), 2022, pp. 467–86.

113 Other significant parties have smaller membership: *Lewica Razem,* 3,100; *Nowoczesna*, 1,246; Greens, 750; Poland 2050, 721; and Union of European Democrats, 500. See https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114884,29250249,zapytalismy-partie-o-to-ilu-maja-czlonkow-liderem-wciaz-psl.html.

114 Russel J. Dalton and Martin Wattenberg (eds.), *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen, 'Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980– 2000', in *Party Politics*, 7 (1), 2001, pp. 5–21; Richard Gunther, José Ramón Montero and Juan Linz (eds.), *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

of political parties when it came to power as a result of the peaceful revolution. Their early strategic decisions did not favour political parties and party democracy: in the 1990s, Solidarity decided not to institutionalise itself as a strong political party (or build a few strong parties), and its leaders fantasised about the idea of a partyless democracy.[115] A very open party system was built, full of small and fragile actors, and clear preference was given to regional and local politics, which was supposed to counterbalance parties in Warsaw ('party interests' vs. 'local interests'[116]).

This state of things leads to a strange paradox: if Poles distrust all parties and don't see them as a beneficial part of the democratic constitution, if the elites of the 1990s did not trust political parties themselves, then why has the party system in Poland become so stable, and why have parties and party candidates been able to mobilise new voters and increasing the turnout so effectively in elections?

The self-defence mechanism of the current system

To understand the durability of the party system in Poland we need to look at the legal environment first. The original anti-party philosophy of the post-Solidarity era quickly showed its weaknesses. The party system was volatile, and the consequence was a flood of new political groupings. As a result, in 1991, 29 parties gained entry into the Sejm (111 competed) and 22 into the Senate, with no party holding a decisive majority. Prime ministers came and went, unable to hold the majority.[117] For over a decade post-Solidarity politicians looked with jealousy at the stability of the united left-wing party, comparing it with endless rotations in their own circles. They were shocked when two post-Communist parties came back to power in 1993. This resulted in the establishment of a big right-wing block, Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS),

115 Gendźwiłł, 2022.

116 Tomek Grabowski, 'The Party that Never Was: The Rise and Fall of the Solidarity Citizens' Committees in Poland', in *East European Politics & Societies*, 10 (2), 1996, pp. 214–54.

117 See Miłosz Hodun, 'Behind Closed Doors: Candidate (S)election in Poland', in Thibault Muzergues and Dan Scaduto (eds.), *Standing Out from the Crowd: Political Parties' Candidate (S)election in the Transatlantic World*. Washington, D.C.: International Republican Institute, 2022.

that created a government with Freedom Union (UW) in 1997. On the ruins of this coalition two new parties, PO and PiS, were created. This started the *modern era* of Polish party politics.

In 2001, the rules of party financing were significantly changed. It is worth saying that in the first stage in the development of the pluralistic party system in Poland, in 1991–3, parties were allowed to undertake certain business activities (i.e. own cooperatives or be shareholders in companies), and the income obtained from such activities was not taxed. In 1993 state aid for parliamentary parties was introduced, but extensive private funding was also allowed (including certain economic activities and anonymous public collections). In 1997, when the constitution was adopted, the new Party Law containing a system of public subsidies came into effect. However, a lot of private sources of funding were still permitted, including donations from businesses and anonymous donations.[118] Finally in 2001, a predominately public regime of party financing was established and a proper system of financial control introduced.

According to the law, subsidies from the state budget are one of the major sources of funding for political parties. Political parties that obtain at least 3% of valid votes cast in elections to the Sejm (6% for coalitions) are eligible for an annual public subsidy proportional to the number of votes won. These subsidies are granted for one term, that is, four years, and are paid in quarterly instalments. Another important source of party financing is 'earmarked subsidy', which is disbursed to political parties that have managed to get at least one deputy or senator elected to the Sejm, the Senate and the European Parliament. The subsidy is considered a form of reimbursement for the party's election campaign expenses. Its amount is proportional to the number of acquired seats and may not exceed the amount of actual expenditures.

118 Fernando Casal Bértoa, 'Party funding regulation in Poland (1990–2015): an appraisal', in *Annales UMCS. Politologia,* 1 (1), 2016.

In practice, state subsidies have become by far the most important source of finances of political actors. They are only available for parties, even if non-party actors can also participate in elections (and also win elections and form governments).[119] Yearly state subsidies for parties are currently as follows : PiS—PLN 23.5 million; Civic Platform—PLN 19.8 million; New Left—PLN 11.5 million; PSL—PLN 8.35 million; Confederation—PLN 6.87 million; Greens—PLN 0.3 million; Polish Initiative—PLN 0.1 million.[120] Other sources of income are insignificant compared to these sums. Rich subsidised parties don't even bother to create an effective system of membership fee collections: for example, PSL collected only PLN 51,139 in 2018, that is around PLN 0.5 per member.

The system of subsidies plays a great role in stabilising the political scene, as it hinders the development of newcomers. The 3% threshold is high for newly established parties, and the Polish feature of forming pre-election coalitions strengthens the biggest partners who can dictate how the overall sum will be divided. Therefore, PiS's allies get nothing from state subsidies, and PO's partners get symbolic sums or nothing. A good example of this is Nowoczesna, a new centrist party formed in 2015. The party was stripped of subsidies by the court for an accounting mistake in 2015. It joined the Civic Coalition in 2018 and ran as part of the coalition in 2019, but still did not receive state subsidies, as the senior partner in the coalition reserved for itself the bulk of the subsidies.[121]

Another factor that strengthens and perpetuates the position of parties is the Electoral Code. All 460 members of the Sejm are elected by open list proportional representation in 41 multi-member districts. Each district has between 7 and 19 seats. Seats are allocated using the d'Hondt method, with a 5% threshold (8% threshold for coalitions). Every committee seriously thinking about having any representation in

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119 Non-party affiliated groups can run in elections as an election committee of voters.

120 https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polityka/kodeks-wyborczy-co-nowego-w-kwestii-finansowania-partii-politycznych-6557625.

121 See also B. Mikołajewska, 4,5 mln zł długu i kary wisi nad Nowoczesną, OKO.press, 8 December 2018. https://oko.press/45-mln-zl-dlugu-nad-nowoczesna-i-mezem-gasiuk-pihowicz.

the Sejm must gather between 460 and 920 names on its lists (at least 35% women and at least 35% men), and collect hundreds of thousands of signatures to register them in the whole country.[122] Such a task can be successfully carried, in principle, by well-financed, nationwide organisations. Polish electoral law therefore de facto excludes independent candidates and regional groups (with the only exception being national minorities[123]). Those independents can be very popular in their voivodships and cities, but they stand practically no chance of winning a seat in the Sejm.

The only exception of a successful campaign for a non-party entity in recent years was Kukiz'15. After his resounding success in the 2015 presidential elections (20.8%), former rock start Paweł Kukiz ran in parliamentary elections with his association Kukiz'15. His list won 8.8% of the votes and 42 MPs. Kukiz'15 was not entitled to any subsidies and had to compete for four years with parties that received millions from the state budget. The situation had not changed in 2019 when Kukiz'15 ran together in a coalition with PSL. The coalition crossed the threshold and PSL received money, but Kukiz'15 did not. Together with identity problems and the extreme inconsistency of the association leaders, the lack of funding led to a collapse of Kukiz'15.

Interestingly, Paweł Kukiz's main political demand has always been the renewal of the political system and the fight against the 'partitocracy'. Kukiz has been advocating for a replacement of the proportional election for single-member constituencies, to be replaced by a 'winner-takes-all' model of voting. According to Kukiz, such a model would heal Polish politics by opening opportunities for newcomers and professionals who are not depended on parties. Since 2011, senators have been elected according to a one-round first-past-the-post voting method. It has resulted not only in a different majority in the higher chamber than in the lower chamber, but also in the election of four independent senators. However, the Senate is considered less relevant in Polish political puzzle, and party leaders were willing to experiment with its structure and election process. A similar de-partying of the Sejm would be impossible to imagine.

122 Hodun, 2022.

123 The lists of election committees created by electors associated with registered organisations of national minorities are exempt from the requirement of threshold.

Movements against party politics

Considering the low level of trust for political parties, it should not come as a surprise that there have been many attempts to crash the existing party system and destroy the current party duopoly. The anti-party sentiment was already visible in AWS in the 1990s, which is itself paradoxical, because AWS was itself a conglomerate of some 30 parties, created by many experienced politicians with years-long background in political parties. But one should also remember that in the end, it was the trade union Solidarity that ruled the roost. Union leaders didn't have much sympathy for political parties and their message dominated the public discourse.

No wonder that one of the two entities that were born upon AWS's grave also refuses to represent itself as a party, but rather as a movement. PO was created as an association in 2001; its original leaders criticised 'party politics, corruption and incompetence' (which were used as three synonyms). They suggested several improvements to limit the power of parties, in national and local politics, and also in public administration. PO built its original structures stressing that it was not a party, establishing its image of a broad citizens' platform. It was eventually registered as a party in 2002.

The trick of presenting a new political project as a non-party, or even an anti-party, became a new norm in Poland. In every election circle we can find at least one successful example of these: the populist Self-Defense (Samoobrona) portrayed itself as an anti-establishment agrarian trade union created to break the oligopoly of old parties (in reality it was a party founded already in 1992). In 2010 the time of *movements* started. They were progressive–liberal groupings that were calling themselves movements rather than parties. The first one was the Palikot's Movement, which later changed its name to Your Move. Next was Nowoczesna, created as a liberal association that for a long time considered itself a movement. Currently, there is Poland 2050, led by a former TV host Szymon Hołownia. All of these movements then understood that it was not possible to participate in a political race on an equal footing with key competitors, and—mostly for financial reasons—transformed into parties. In 2020, even Kukiz'15 was registered in the Political Party Register, despite

multiple promises of its leader that he would never do it. Finally, in 2022, the newest player on the political stage, anti-establishment and agrarian AgroUnia also registered as a party in the run-up to the general elections.

Many leaders have tried to build their electoral success on anti-party sentiment among Polish people. There is a rather solid group of voters, around 10%, who are willing to support something that is not a party and presents itself as an enemy of all parties. These leaders call their organisations movements, arrange them to be or to look like NGOs, and give them fancy names far from typical party names. But they all quickly realise that this is a road to nowhere, and that they can only fight for power with political parties.

Redefinition of roles and methods

If things are that bad, why don't Polish people rebel against their parties? Especially since the parties themselves seem vivid and mighty.[124] I believe that that there are two main answers to this: professionalisation and polarisation.

These two processes must be seen inseparable and arising from one another. They are a consequence of the intractable conflict between PiS and PO. When, in 2007, after a governmental deadlock caused by intra-coalition squabbling, PO won a parliamentary snap election and formed a government with PSL, PiS leaders were stunned. When Donald Tusk became the first Polish prime minister to win two elections in a row and extend his mandate, PiS party leader Jarosław Kaczyński knew that this might have been his last moment to reclaim power. PiS politicians didn't waste eight years in the opposition. They managed to professionalise and develop a new, broader idea of their party.

124 Turnout in presidential elections in 2020 (68..18%) was the highest since the symbolic 1995 election when Lech Wałęsa lost against post-Communist candidate Aleksander Kwaśniewski (68.2%); in 2010 and 2015 turnout was 55.3%, and in 2005, only 51%. In 2019 parliamentary elections Polish voters (61.7%) almost broke the record of the first democratic election in 1989 (62.7%), compared with 50.9% in 2015 and 48.9% in 2011. Local elections were never as popular among the electorate as in 2018 (54.9%), and European elections attracted double the number of voters in 2019 (457%) compared with 2014, 2009 and 2004 (20.9%).

While in the opposition, PiS leaders did their homework and understood what Poles expect from parties, and in particular from right-wing parties. They invested heavily to study their electorate and potential electorate, and transformed the party into a more data-driven campaign machine. After they got to know Poles' fears and needs, they were able to offer a comprehensive narrative, a story about the 'ruined Poland',[125] and proposals for different groups of their electorate.

PiS realised how important constant contact with potential voters is. It modernised party communication channels. But it also invested heavily in a network of support, for example, by creating new organisations and foundations for particular tasks. The most important part of this plan was the assistance given to right-wing media. For example, companies linked with PiS took control over niche right-wing outlets such as *Gazeta Polska*, *Gazeta Polska Codziennie*, or the news website niezalezna.pl. In addition, under the patronage of Jarosław Kaczyński new outlets were created, such as *W Sieci* (2012) and *Do Rzeczy* (2013). They all called themselves 'defiant media' and consequently magnified PiS's message. The year 2013 was also when *TV Republika* started. PiS was also backed by Tadeusz Rydzyk, a priest and owner of the Catholic media empire, with *Radio Maryja*, *TV Trwam* and *Nasz Dziennik*. This way PiS was better able to better reach out to older, religious people, partially in the countryside, the party's core electorate.

Of particular significance was the fact that some of these media outlets organised their audience/supporters in a form of agile associations. *Gazeta Polska* clubs or Circles of Friends of *Radio Maryja* became additional platforms for PiS to meet and mobilise their supporters. They offered a particular light membership to people all around Poland, including in small locations, who could be activated whenever it was necessary for the party.

When PiS won elections in 2015, it did not abandon these projects. On the contrary, it empowered them. 'Defiant journalists' took control over the state-owned broadcasters. PiS-friendly media have been promoted by the authorities and treated as if they were independent. State-Owned Companies have pumped millions into ads as pay back

125 'Poland is in ruins!' was one of the PiS slogans in 2015 campaign.

for standing by PiS.[126] The state budget has been also used to fill the pockets of their GONGOs, government-sponsored groups masquerading as civil society organizations. Special funds were created within the ministry of culture and ministry of justice to serve this goal.[127]

The democratic opposition understands that if they want to deprive PiS of power, they also have to rethink the way they operate. They must to be closer to the people, but of course they cannot abuse the state assets for their particular purposes. We can observe that opposition leaders learned from the right how important direct contact with voters is. Since his (re-)election as PO chairman, Donald Tusk—who is not an MP—has been traveling around the country mobilising the electorate and his own party. A side effect of his travels has been a similar effort by politicians from other parties. According to many observers, the summer of 2022 was unusual in that it was politically the busiest in Poland's modern history. Until now, summers were considered a dead season in politics with next-to-zero party events in regions, but last summer was extremely rich with rallies, debates and town hall meetings in big cities and small towns.

The opposition has also experimented with innovative forms of reaching and engaging with the electorate. The most outstanding concept of two recent years was the Future of Poland Campus, a week-long festival for over one thousand young people organised by the mayor of Warsaw together with a team of his co-workers from the Civic Coalition. It managed to attract thousands of applicants, mostly not affiliated with any political party, and created a deeper, long-term connection between the organisers (stemming from parties) and young adults.

Since 2015 the opposition has been also cooperating with NGOs in a different manner. A number of opposition-oriented organisations were created, such as the Committee for the Defense of the Democracy or Citizens of the Republic of Poland. Many of them have worked closely with parties, offering—similarly to clubs organised

126 https://ipi.media/in-poland-critical-press-hit-by-loss-of-state-advertising/.

127 https://www.politico.eu/article/pis-polish-ngos-fear-the-governments-embrace/.

on the right—lighter versions of affiliation. They became spaces for political engagement for those who didn't want to be members of parties. They proved to be successful, for example, by managing mass demonstrations or non-conventional participation activities, such as boycotts and occupation of public spaces. In addition, a number of single-issue organisations have been created, and they synced their agendas with opposition parties, for example, in the area of the rule of law, human rights and reproductive rights. These were especially popular with the youngest generation of voters, who are more attracted by single-issue political activism. At the same time, they also became a reservoir of candidates in elections—some of them ran and were elected in the last general elections and it will again most probably be the case in the 2023 elections.

Finally, what can be beneficial for the opposition is its pluralism. The Polish democratic political scene is very fragmented, but the electoral system in turn favours unity.[128] Parties, not willing to lose any votes in their fight against PiS, form durable coalitions. For example, the Civic Coalition is a grouping of four parties, the Left gathers two parties, and the Polish Coalition three parties. Such a system—while in general difficult and demanding—has the advantage of keeping small parties on the surface. Even with a very modest representation in the parliament they don't lose their raison d'être, and maintain existing structures. On the other side, from the voter's perspective, such arrangement promotes diversity, giving a chance to choose or promote a distinct candidate, not fully aligned with the views of the biggest party.

Centre of political life. No matter what

It is impossible to imagine Polish politics without political parties. All those who tried to offer extra-party solutions for political weaknesses of the system have failed. The system has actually been designed for parties: Poland's constitution reconfirms their role in the principle of proportionality in the Sejm elections. This provision ends all discussions about single-winner voting and loosening of the party control over the election process. Changing this state of things would only be possible by amending the constitution, which would require an unrealistic consensus. The strength of parties

128 In the current term, 22 parties have representation in the parliament; the PiS group is composed of three parties.

is also well-preserved by the Electoral Code and Party Law which reduce the access and growth of newcomers.

Polish political parties are not popular nor appreciated by the people. But they are the centre of political life, and big hopes are paradoxically still pinned on them. Their role in Polish society is also the result of the conflict they are driving: Poland is a country of extreme polarisation between the right-wing populist camp and the democratic opposition, embodied by the conflict between PiS and PO, and at personal level between Kaczyński and Tusk. This polarisation flows down from the parliament to Polish homes, dividing society and families. Such tribalism feeds on emotions, and needs clear guidance. People are turning to parties to provide arguments about why they should still fight the other side. This destructive mechanism is today one of the main strengths of main Polish parties.

But Polish parties also draw their strength from their adaptability and creativity. Because of different historical experiences, Polish parties will most probably never become mass movements. They will rather remain elite clubs for particular types of activists and career-driven functionaries. It seems that both the voters and the parties themselves accept it, just as they accept that investing in a radical increase of party membership is unjustified. In the past 15 years, Polish parties have adopted a different approach—namely, they build dense networks within civil society. They place themselves in the centre of a system composed of sympathisers—favourable social organisations, groups, media outlets—which can be activated in key moments, especially during the election campaign. It may look like a cynical approach, but in reality, it is a pragmatic and financially sound strategy.

Such a system of support will be helpful during any potential transformations of the political stage. One should not forget that the two largest Polish parties are only 22 years old, and they can be replaced by others. Poles are not too attached to party logos. Those came into being only in the 1990s, together with different brands of chocolate and potato chips. And with parties, just like with chocolates and chips, Poles care more about the content, the price and who stands behind the product. I am not sure if PiS, PO or the Left will exist in ten years, but I am sure they will have their successors who will cultivate Polish society's divisions.

Political Parties in Scandinavia:

Delivering on the Promise

Heidi Nordby Lunde

When weekly newspaper *The Economist* referred to the Scandinavian model as 'the next supermodel' in 2013,[129] its journalists were not thinking about high cheek bones and fair hair. Denmark, Sweden and Norway all figure in the top 10 global rankings for social equality, living standards, quality of democracy, ease of doing business and low corruption. Until Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, Scandinavia had also been in a peaceful corner of the world. The three countries are small, open economies with constitutional monarchies, have a multi-party structure and use proportional representation in their electoral systems. Trust in public institutions and a strong model for cooperation between the government, employer organisations and trade unions have been a cornerstone for necessary political and economic reforms in all three countries, underpinning their generous welfare states and big governments. Low levels of corruption are attributed to an efficient public administration, high quality services to citizens and enterprises and a long tradition of openness and transparency, along with a strong respect for the rule of law. This has led to a high acceptance of moderately high taxes and a widespread government. As long as it works.

This can explain why people in the Scandinavian countries have a high level of trust in political institutions and government compared to the rest of Europe. The OECD finds people's trust in government as an indicator of public administrations' performance and a measure of how well democracies are functioning.

Maybe that is why social scientists Michael Woolcock and Lant Pritchett coined the phrase 'getting to Denmark' in a paper in 2002, where Denmark was promoted as an example on how political institutions and good governance play an underpinning role to not only achieve but also maintain peace, stability, freedom, prosperity and social inclusiveness.[130]

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129 https://www.economist.com/leaders/2013/02/02/the-next-supermodel.

130 Pritchett and Woolcock introduced the metaphor of 'getting to Denmark' as a measure of 'development' with the immediate proviso: 'By 'Denmark' we do not, of course, mean Denmark. Rather, we mean the common core of the structure of the workings of the public sector in countries usually called 'developed'. See Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock, 'Solutions when the solution is the problem: Arraying the disarray in development', *World Development*, 32 (2), 2004.

This phrase was adopted by famed American political scientist Francis Fukuyama in his 2011 book *The Origins of Political Order.* According to him, Denmark is known for good political and economic institutions: it is stable, democratic, peaceful, prosperous and inclusive, and it has extremely low levels of political corruption. International development experts hold up Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries as models for what they are trying to achieve elsewhere.[131]

However, even though they have turned out to be quite resilient in times of crisis, Scandinavian countries are not immune to crises and developments also seen elsewhere. The impact of globalisation, immigration, increasing inequality, debates on identity politics and the rise of populism is also affecting the seemingly robust democracies in Scandinavia. The social contract presupposes the political ability and will not only to maintain social order but also to continue increasing the standards of living for everyone. How political parties are responding to these challenges and delivering on their promises will be pivotal for the survival of the traditional parties and the Scandinavian model. Trust in political parties and public institutions is essential for the legitimacy and viability of democracy and will erode if expectations are not met and promises not kept.

Even if a high level of trust in political institutions and political parties still defines Scandinavian societies, the support for mainstream, moderate centre–left and centre–right parties has shifted, as elsewhere in Europe. Although these parties are still dominant in the political spectrum, their support has declined. There are many drivers behind this. New issues that demand new answers or more focus have helped new parties to grow. Climate change has brought forward green parties, and immigration has been a driver for new, often populist parties on the nationalist right to emerge.

Although globalisation has served the global economy and most people well, it has also come with a cost. According to the World Bank, the opening of China lifted

131 Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, London: Profile Books, 2012.

more than 700 million people out of dire poverty.[132] But outsourcing and increased trade also moved jobs away from local communities where they were the cornerstone of the economy. Increased immigration, either through free movement within the EU, or through the arrival of refugees and asylum seekers, has changed formerly homogeneous societies and neighbourhoods. The integration of the global economy has left people feeling disintegrated in their own societies. What benefited the majority also left some behind.

Economic insecurity due to unemployment, income inequality, and declining living standards is one of the drivers behind populism. Populism can also arise when some people feel threatened by rapid cultural changes, such as immigration, globalisation or social liberalism. If the problems caused by economic insecurity or cultural changes are not acknowledged, addressed and solved by the mainstream political parties, they create a disconnect between the political establishment and ordinary citizens and give way to populist leaders who are willing to address them, often attacking the establishment.

This can create the perfect cocktail of fear, uncertainty and doubt to stir social unrest. No political system, no matter how perfect the model may seem to be at the best of times, can sustain itself without changing through the worst of times. This is where the Scandinavian model and a generous welfare state come into play. Few have a better base for providing credible solutions to alleviate the grievances many people now experience. However, problems not solved create populism, and populism is hard to restrain when it gains a foothold.

The Scandinavian model worked well through the initial period of globalisation, marked by China's accession to the WTO—back then, world trade only meant more opportunities for more people. But the world turned out to be not as flat as Thomas Friedman thought when he described how the playing fields between industrial and emerging markets were levelling after India and China became a part of the global supply chains.[133]

132 https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/04/01/lifting-800-million-people-out-of-poverty-new-report-looks-at-lessons-from-china-s-experience.

133 Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2005.

In retrospect, it is easy to point out that the people who benefited from the changes brushed aside the downsides of globalisation too easily, causing more anger and frustration in the ranks of those that felt like they were losing out. We see increased polarisation and social tensions all over Europe, and Scandinavia is no exception. Many have lost faith in traditional parties and have been looking for new solutions.

Our society's resilience to populism and extremism is dependent on the ability of political parties to recognise and understand the problems people experience in everyday life, and then deliver credible solutions. Is it crunch time for the Scandinavian model?

From a bird's-eye view

From a bird's-eye view, the Scandinavian countries can look deceivingly similar. A closer look might explain why they are intrinsically different. Their Viking past is well known, followed by a rather unstable personal union from 1397 to 1523, where the three kingdoms of Denmark, Sweden and Norway were joined under a single monarch. When the union broke down, Norway became a hereditary kingdom in a real union with Denmark. In the seventeenth century, Sweden expanded eastwards seizing territories from Russia and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. Denmark–Norway stretched to the Duchy of Schleswig and the Duchy of Holstein in the south, in today's Germany. Then Denmark–Norway fatally sided with France during the Napoleonic Wars. When the British seized control of the waterways between Denmark and Norway it crushed the union's economy, and Denmark–Norway went bankrupt in 1813. The union dissolved in 1814, and the Danish monarchy 'irrevocably and forever' renounced claims to the Kingdom of Norway in favour of the Swedish king. Norway, however, refused to subordinate itself to the Swedish king and declared its independence later the same year, but entered a personal union with Sweden that lasted until a peaceful separation in 1905, when Norway finally became a sovereign state.

This to give some background to the differences in approach in international politics and national identity thereafter. Being fully on the continent (and not separated by the Baltic Sea to the south and Russia to the east), Denmark joined the then-European

Community, which later became the EU, in 1973. Sweden followed in 1995, while Norway opted out, arguing for national sovereignty. However, Norway is integrated into the European Common Market through the European Economic Area (EEA) agreement between the EU and Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein. Both Denmark and Norway were founding members of NATO, while Sweden had remained neutral throughout the Second World War—although it is now applying for membership in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Despite different approaches to international affairs, the three countries have strong ties. Similarities in political systems allow for close political cooperation, country to country, and party to party. All three countries have a classic centre–right party (the Conservatives in Norway were established in 1884, and the Conservatives in Denmark in 1916 after its predecessor Højre's downfall, while the Moderate Party in Sweden was formed in 1904), and all three parties belong to the liberal–conservative European People's Party (EPP) coalition at European level. The Social Democratic parties were established a little bit earlier, but roughly around the same time: the Social Democrats of Denmark in 1871, the Social Democrats of Sweden in 1889 and the Labour Party in Norway in 1887.

The conservative parties were the dominant forces In Scandinavian politics up to the interwar period. Although the economy in Scandinavia prospered after the First World War, the stock market crash in 1929 led to the worst economic downturn in the history of the industrialised world. Without economic growth, social reforms stalled throughout the Scandinavian countries. After the Second World War the Social Democrats became the dominant power. With the recovery of the post-war economy, new industries and opportunities underpinned the introduction of timely social reforms that in time would become the welfare state as we know it.

The Scandinavian model and the welfare state

Ronald Reagan infamously asked his aides whether the Swedish Social Democratic Prime Minister Olof Palme was a Communist. 'No, Mr President, he's an anti-Communist,' they replied. Ronald Reagan then retorted, 'I don't care what kind of Communist he is.'

It is a misconception to think that the Scandinavian model is based on a social(ist) democracy of big government and a generous welfare state, as President Reagan may have thought. The Scandinavian model is rooted in its tripartite cooperation, which is a platform for centralised coordination of wage negotiation between employers and labour organisations to reduce conflict and promote stability, economic growth and distribution of wealth through political efforts.

After the Second World War came a long-running period of social democratic hegemony in the Scandinavian countries that lasted up to the end of the seventies. In the 1964 general election the Swedish Social Democratic Party received 47.3% of the votes,[134] in Denmark the same year they clocked in at 41.9%,[135] while the year after their Norwegian sister party received 43.1%[136] of the votes. In comparison, the Conservative parties received 13.7% in Sweden, 20.1% in Denmark and 20.3% in Norway in the same elections. In these post-war years, the Social Democrats presided over an era of economic growth, low unemployment and rising living standards, which laid the foundation for universal social reforms.

The Social Democrats' narrative is that Scandinavia rose from rags to riches solely through their political efforts. The Scandinavian centre–right, on the other hand, claims that it is their reforms of the stagnant leftist policies and overstretched public sector of the 1970s that pushed the Scandinavian countries to transform into today's modern, affluent societies. They are neither fully right nor fully wrong. Broad political support for the welfare systems has given it political legitimacy through shifting political regimes, albeit with discussions on the need to reform the system and different benefits.

Both the centre–left and the centre–right have played significant roles in the development of the Scandinavian model. Although the labour movement for the most part has embraced the tripartite cooperation, it has put the conservative idea

134 https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resultat_i_val_till_Sveriges_riksdag.

135 https://snl.no/Folketingsvalg_i_Danmark.

136 https://snl.no/Stortingsvalg_-_resultater_1882-2021.

of change to conserve into practice. To maintain social harmony and order, one must adapt to changing circumstances. Through economic downturns, and when faced with a need for reforms to maintain productivity and competitiveness to keep jobs, the tripartite cooperation provides a platform where representatives of employers, employees and the government can work in collaboration and through consultation and discussion, resolving issues of common concern. This has been the muscle of the Scandinavian model, giving it both the strength and the flexibility to change when needed. While most of Europe had to go through structural reforms in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the Scandinavian countries had already been through a series of necessary reforms three decades before.

When the economic crisis hit Western countries in the 1970s, Scandinavian countries had highly regulated economies, with state-owned monopolies in both media and infrastructure, like telecommunication, high taxes and an overstretched public sector. This could work in a period of economic growth, but the economic crisis only made the shortcomings of the policies more visible. Increasing taxes and an inefficient public sector made the economic crisis worse. Reforms were necessary, and Scandinavian countries went through major liberal and market-oriented reforms during the 1980s and 1990s, pushing forward deregulation and pro-business laws, and transforming state corporations into publicly listed companies.

A pragmatic approach has led the Scandinavian countries to a more sustainable division of labour between the public and private sectors. When *The Economist* described the Scandinavian model as 'the next supermodel' in 2013, it was partly because it was willing to inject market mechanisms into the welfare state to sharpen its performance by allowing private firms to run public services in competition with the government itself.[137] The famous magazine claimed that many could learn from the Scandinavian model and its ability to go through with structural reforms. They especially pointed to Sweden.

137 https://www.economist.com/special-report/2013/01/31/northern-lights.

Sweden

Sweden was officially neutral during the Second World War, which left the country with a strong industrial base ready to expand production to supply the rebuilding of Europe after the war. The Social Democrats started dominating Swedish politics in the 1930s and sat in government almost continuously from 1932 until 1976. Sweden saw unrivalled economic growth in the post-war era, but under the Social Democrats this also led to an ever-expanding public sector. This became a heavy burden during the economic crises of the 1970s when the government increased taxes. With already slowing growth, the increased tax burden added to the decline. In the 1980s, several key Swedish industries underwent significant restructuring, but there were no structural reforms until Carl Bildt led the centre–right Moderate Party to victory in 1991. Although his cabinet pushed through reforms by cutting taxes and public spending, introduced voucher schools and private health care, liberalised markets for telecommunications and energy, and privatised former publicly owned companies, it was too late to save the Swedish economy, and the country experienced a major crisis in 1992. According to *The Economist*'s 2013 special edition on the Scandinavian model, Sweden fell from being the fourth-richest country in the world in 1970 to the fourteenth in 1993, a year in which public spending reached 67% of GDP. The coalition lost their majority in the general election one year later, and the Social Democratic party gathered a record 45.3% of the votes, passing for the first time the 40% mark. They have been sliding back ever since, receiving 30.3% in the most recent election in 2022. The Social Democratic cabinet of Göran Persson was forced to carry out further deregulations and privatisation, cut spending and initiate reforms and austerity measures to improve Sweden's competitiveness. Reducing the deficits in the national budget and the foreign debt was also needed to meet the requirements to join the EU, which they did in 1995. Government spending in Sweden was recorded at 46.7% of GDP in 2019.

A new wave of reforms was necessary when the Moderates formed a new coalition government in 2006. At this time, the world was moving quickly towards a more

fundamental restructuring due to incidents with global impacts. China had joined the WTO, entering a period described as 'miraculous' in terms of economic growth. Globalisation was speeding up quickly. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York made a dent in the world economy, but also brought Islamic jihad to the top of the political agenda. In Europe, the EU went through its largest expansion in 2004, when 10 more countries joined the Union, seven from the former Eastern Bloc. Internet was coming up to speed, while outsourcing and offshoring were changing global value chains in such a way that author Thomas L. Friedman proclaimed that the world had become flat, a level playing field for fair competition with players aiming to become better versions of themselves.[138]

One of the disciples of this new world order was Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt. He was a true believer in the liberal world order, the virtues of free markets and how trade promotes democracy, freedom and peace. He was not alone. This was the sense of optimism many felt after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

Even though the likes of Friedman also described the pitfalls of a flattening world, where those who had a job suddenly saw it disappear as it moved to another part of the globe or evaporated because of automation. Even though globalisation does not have to be a zero-sum game, it became so for some. Together with a growing resentment towards immigration in general, and third world immigration in particular, this led to the development of a potent political problem, which would eventually come back to haunt the political debate in many countries in the 2010s. In Sweden as elsewhere, this led to the rise of the extreme right.

The positive idea of multiculturalism had long been a part of the political mainstream in Sweden. In the 1960s, there was a demand for labour within the production industry, and immigration to Sweden was more or less free. Even when demand declined and refugee immigration replaced the former labour immigration, a unanimous Swedish parliament led by the Social Democrats voted in favour of a new immigrant policy

138 Friedman, 2005.

in 1975. It explicitly rejected the previous policy of assimilation and ethno-cultural homogeneity in favour of state-sponsored multiculturalism. In comparison, Norway introduced a general ban on immigration the same year, only allowing refugees and asylum seekers. Although this was unheard of in Sweden, they had to accept a new Social Democratic government decision to limit refugee immigration to only include refugees by the definition of the UN by 1990.

Still, Sweden received a high number of refugees, and in the beginning of 2008, they started to see a larger share of migrants from non-European countries. The Moderate-led centre–right coalition government that had won the election in 2006 looked at migration as a positive, whatever the social impact on local communities. None of the established political parties acknowledged, addressed or solved the problems that people experienced with such a high influx of migrants. This created a void in the political landscape, which was quickly filled by the populist far right, anti-immigration Sweden Democrats. With a staunch anti-immigration agenda and an early history rooted in the neo-Nazi movement, the party became a pariah in Swedish politics. The fear of being associated with similar beliefs kept Sweden's main political parties from engaging in an honest debate about integration and its pros and cons. Being aware of challenges and willing to discuss how best to solve them is not the same as being anti-immigration or racist, but it was nonetheless treated as such. This may also serve as a note-to-self for globalists and supporters of free markets to engage in a fact-based, honest debate on not only the positives but also the negatives or potential challenges—and how to confront them.

In 2009, immigration reached its highest level since records began, and in the general election in 2010, the centre–right alliance lost its absolute majority in the parliament due to the rise of the Sweden Democrats. They continued to govern as a minority government, relying on ad hoc support from the opposition to pass legislation. The Sweden Democrats were isolated, but often voted with the government on key issues. Having to rely on this support was a heavy burden for the Moderates and did not go uncommented by the opposition.

What ensued next was a lesson in how a nation can turn into a pressure cooker. Issues like language training, housing and social integration were only on the table if they were treated along the lines of 'not working due to lack of funding'. The lack of debate in Sweden now has its own word, *åsiktskorridor*, which translates to 'a corridor of opinions'. This narrow corridor of politically correct opinions was the only path for the political establishment. It is easy to blame extremist parties for polarising the debate, but who plays concerned voters into the hands of populist or extremist parties?

Denmark and Norway have also had their populist right-wing parties critical of immigration, but in both countries some of the issues concerning migration have been discussed and new policies adopted. The problem in Sweden went two ways. One was the refusal to have grown-up debate on issues people experienced in their daily life, which also led to a lack of real political solutions. The other was the total isolation of a political party that gained so much public support that it became a democratic problem. The Sweden Democrats had only gained 5.7% of the votes in 2010, but by the 2014 election they had reached 12.9%.

The centre–right alliance lost the election, and the Social Democratic party formed a new minority coalition government. In order to keep the Sweden Democrats on the sideline, the centre–left and centre–right political blocks agreed that it no longer took a majority in parliament to pass a budget or secure the seat for a minority prime minister. The agreement guaranteed the indirect support of the non-governing parties, which were to abstain from voting if the minority government was at risk of falling before the next election.

After the migration crisis of 2015, the then Social Democratic government made a U-turn on immigration policy. That did not help much. The summer of 2018 saw several violent incidents occur, which may have caused 10% of Swedes to state that 'law and order' was the key issue in the upcoming election. The election resulted in a hung parliament, as neither blocs on the centre–left nor the centre–right had enough seats to form a government, and none of the parties were willing to talk to

the far-right anti-immigration Sweden Democrats, who now received 17.5% of the votes, making them the third largest party in the parliament. A brittle coalition held the Social Democrats in power.

While all this was going on in Sweden, Denmark was another story.

Denmark

The portrayal of the political landscape in Denmark in the political drama *Borgen* might seem unlikely. When you look closer at Danish politics, however, it is surprisingly to the point when it comes to political figures either switching parties or forming new political parties and quickly gaining power and positions. The electoral threshold of just 2% gives incentive to a more fragmented party system than in the two other Scandinavian countries.

When Danish Prime Minister Mette Fredriksen formed a bipartisan new government in a surprise move after the election in 2022, she included her own Social Democratic party, the centre–right Venstre (Liberals) and the newly formed Moderates. The Moderates were established only in June 2022, were led by Lars Løkke Rasmussen and came third in their first election. Rasmussen was the leader of Venstre from 2009 to 2019 and served as the prime minister of Denmark from 2009 to 2011 and again from 2015 to 2019. The drama of *Borgen* is real.

Denmark has had a history of coalitions throughout the last century, which might explain why prominent political figures can seem to seamlessly float between parties and governmental power. However, as in the other two Scandinavian countries, the Social Democrats dominated Danish politics in the post-war period, albeit not to the extent of Norway and Sweden. Denmark introduced social and labour market reforms with the Kanslergade Agreement of 1933, which laid the foundation for the Danish welfare state. The agreement was reached by the Social Democratic Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning and their coalition partner the Social Liberal Party, as well as the main opposition Liberal Party. So bipartisan cooperation is nothing new in Denmark.

Except for a brief period out of office in 1950–3, the Social Democrats were in government, alone or in some form of coalition from 1947 to 1968. After the initial post-war difficulties, they abolished most of the regulations that had restricted Denmark's foreign trade during the 1950s, and experienced rapid economic growth and improving living standards. But when new economic problems arrived, state intervention programmes did not help, and the majority shifted to the right in the 1968 election. Denmark then joined the European Economic Community (which later became the EU) in 1973, the same year as the general election that extended the number of parties in parliament. This created a political instability that coincided with the downturn of the economy after the oil crisis the same year.

The 1970s were characterised by many broad settlements because of the strongly fragmented parliament. The problem was that none of these settlements addressed the structural challenges in the economy, until a Conservative government got a grip of the economy in 1986. Since then, the Danish economy has been through many reforms, initiated by both sides of the political blocs, consisting of liberal reforms and tax cuts to ensure productivity increases and economic growth.

In a Scandinavian context, the first populist right-wing party, Fremskridtspartiet (the Progress Party), was established in Denmark in 1973 as a protest party advocating for radical tax and government spending cuts. They entered the Danish parliament the same year, becoming the second largest party in Denmark. From the 1980s, the party adopted anti-immigration as a key issue. It then gradually decreased in voter support, and when some of its leading members broke out and established the Danish People's Party in 1995, the Progress Party lost its representation in parliament.

Both the Danish People's Party and its forerunner have had a sizeable effect on Danish politics. The Danish People's Party provided the necessary votes for a centre–right coalition to govern in 2001, pushing for restrictive immigration policies in return. This won support in Denmark but was criticised by international observers—among them Sweden. But many of the policies maintained by the Social Democrats and Denmark continue to be perceived as those of an open, liberal country with a high standard of living.

In 2006, Denmark became the centre of attention when a Danish cartoon newspaper published caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. Initially published in late 2005, the publication led to a local uproar, as several Danish Muslim organisations objected to the depictions and demanded that the Danish government take action against the offence. When the latter dismissed the request, Danish imams went to the Middle East to gather support and presented the twelve cartoons from the *Jyllands-Posten*, together with other depictions of Muhammad alongside them, some real and some fake. This led to violent protests by Muslims worldwide and death threats against the cartoonists; the controversy also resulted in the recall of several Islamic ambassadors to Denmark and a sharp drop in Danish exports to Islamic countries. By 2010 more than 100 people had died in incidents related to the cartoons, including attacks on Danish embassies and riots in Pakistan, the Middle East and Africa. This was the first of several deadly incidents connected to caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad.

The cartoon controversy was seen in the context of an increased politicised media environment in Denmark, of an increasingly negative coverage of Islam and the Muslim minority and of the new government policies on immigration. Against this background, some Danish Muslims thought the cartoons reinforced the idea that Danes stigmatised all Muslims as terrorists and did not respect their religious beliefs.

Many years later, the Islamic Society in Denmark stated that they regretted their visit to the Middle East to show the caricatures because the consequences had been much more serious than they expected.

Nevertheless, the centre–right rule ended with the 2011 elections, when a centre–left coalition led by the Social Democrats took power. Helle Thorning-Schmidt, Denmark's first female prime minister, had promised increased public spending, higher taxes and a reversal of the restrictive immigration policies. Instead, with the support from the liberal–conservative opposition, she ended up pushing forward reforms aimed at increasing competitiveness and productivity, reducing growth in the public sector, and giving tax relief to the private sector to kickstart the economy. She also lowered taxes on wages and gradually lowered welfare payments to increase the number of

Danes in the workforce. The objective was to reform the welfare system and limit the public sector, while simultaneously holding on to the Danish 'flexicurity' system—a mix of flexibility and security meaning that the employers can easily hire and fire to adjust to the needs of the marketplace, while the welfare state provides moderate unemployment benefits, as well as assistance and training programmes for those who are jobless, to alleviate the occasionally adverse impacts of the market economy.

Although the Social Democrats lost the election in 2015, they came back with a revamped 'fair and realistic' immigration policy, which won them the election in 2018, and Mette Fredriksen applied firm control over Danish politics. This won her the newly Borgenesque drama of a majority, bipartisan government.

Norway

In the newest version of *Casino Royale*, James Bond's love interest Vesper Lynd is an agent of Her Majesty's Treasury's Financial Action Task Force assigned to make sure that Bond adequately manages the funds provided by MI6. When she introduces herself, she simply says: 'I'm the money.'

That's Norway in a nutshell. Thanks to oil, Norwegians are richer than everyone in Europe except the Luxembourgers. But the myth that Norway rose from rags to riches through a visionary post-war Social Democratic government, which then went on to find oil in the late 1960s, is just *wrong*, or at least not fully accurate.

Norway was among the richest countries in Europe around the year 1900, with the highest life expectancy of any nation in the world. The country was also far ahead when it came to technology. The first urban settlement in northern Europe to get electrical streetlights was the northernmost town in the world, Hammerfest, in 1891. The second cinema showing in the world after Paris was in Christiania (now Oslo) in 1896. Norway also had the world's highest literacy rate at this time and was one of the first to grant voting rights to women. The myth of a poor Norway standing idly in the periphery of Europe conveniently allows political movements or parties to take credit for bringing the country out of deep poverty, but it is not totally accurate. What

is true, however, is that by the turn of the century Norway had established the rule of law early on and developed a sound public bureaucracy and a well-functioning state government. This, combined with a strong civil society, laid the foundation for later developments.

Although social policy measures had been introduced during the nineteenth century, the development of the welfare state only gained momentum through the economic upturn that followed the Second World War. During their uninterrupted rule between 1945 and 1965, the Labour Party introduced child benefits, unemployment benefits and sickness benefits with broad political support from the opposition. Likewise, when the first centre–right government introduced the national insurance system and pensions in 1967, the Labour Party embraced it. This was financed through a significant increase in the tax levels in the 1960s and 1970s.

As did its Scandinavian siblings, Norway went through an economic crisis in the 1970s and reacted by a series of liberalisations and market-oriented reforms after the Conservative party came to power in 1981. Unlike in Sweden and Denmark, however, the social democrats of the Norwegian Labour party did not adjust their policies to the changing economic circumstances—they would be forced to do so while in opposition during the 1980s. Conservative Prime Minister Kare Willoch deregulated the housing market, opened for enterprises and ended the state-governed broadcast monopoly and restrictions on the banks' ability to lend money. The political shift implied by these reforms also led to transforming state corporations into publicly listed companies. By the time the 1980s were over and the Labour party came back to power, the reforms remained standing, and the Labour Party had reformed as well. It is said that Margaret Thatcher once remarked that Tony Blair was her greatest political achievement, to underline that the British Labour Party never reversed any of the reforms they had loudly criticised in the 1980s. The same can be said of Norway's first female prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland of the Labour Party, who continued the reforms and publicly listed the former state-owned telecommunications company, despite having fought privatisations throughout the 1980s.

Modern Norway partly shares the same history of a rising populist right, also named the Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*). They went from being a liberal, small-government, right-wing party, to an anti-immigration party in the late 1980s. Although stigmatised, and on occasion rightly so, the Progress Party in Norway served as a correction to the establishment, challenging multiculturalism and pushing for a restrictive immigration agenda. They have been a milder version of their Swedish and Danish counterparts, but still highly controversial. However, the general ban on immigration in 1975 by the Labour government, combined with the fact that the populist right-wing party always remained available for negotiations, has probably served as an antidote against a more extreme far-right party. Their take on big government, a bloated welfare state and high-taxes addresses, albeit sometimes expressed in a crude manner, allowed mainstream parties to stay in touch with some key issues in Norway.

Of the three Scandinavian countries, Norway has the highest state ownership. State ownership in commercial entities is extensive. Without blinking, the current government will boast ownership in about 70 companies, consisting of everything from leading listed companies to institutes, the defence industry, performing arts institutions, research companies, health organisations and companies that manage important natural resources such as forests, hydropower and petroleum resources. The state controls around 35% of the total values on the Oslo Stock Exchange, and five of the seven largest listed companies are partially owned by the state, ranging from 34% to 64%.

This list excludes the Government Pension Fund Global, one of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds. This fund was established after Norway discovered oil in the North Sea to shield the economy from ups and downs in oil revenue. It also serves as a financial reserve and as a long-term savings plan so that both current and future generations of Norwegians get to benefit from the oil wealth.

Among other investments, the fund owns almost 1.5% of all shares in the world's listed companies, generating a small share of their profits each year. The Norwegian government can spend only a small part of the fund, but this still amounts to almost

20% of the government budget. But the blessing of the revenues from a limited, unsustainable natural resource could soon become a curse in disguise.

Both Sweden and Denmark had to go through tough reforms and take austerity measures in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis—but Norway has not had to do the same. Although a Conservative-led centre–right government introduced several programmes to reform parts of the public sector between 2013 and 2021, these were not enough. Norway still has proportionally the largest public sector workforce among OECD countries: 30.7% of Norway's workforce is employed in general government, the highest share in the OECD. Norway performs exceptionally well on citizen satisfaction and confidence. Norwegian citizens reported the second highest confidence in national government among OECD members in 2020 and ranks first in the OECD for citizen satisfaction with both health care and education.

However, the new coalition government led by the Labour party stalled or reversed many of the reforms from the former government to solve this problem. Norway is now at the peak of its oil economy, profiting additionally on the switch from Russian to Norwegian gas exports to Europe after Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. Earlier in 2023, the German federal minister for economic affairs and climate action told a conference full of politicians and businesspeople that Germany would stop buying Norwegian gas as soon as they had sustainable alternatives. When your biggest customer tells you that they will drop your product as soon as they can, you had better listen.

The weaknesses in Norway's economic system have been obvious for some time, emphasised by the pandemic and its aftermath of weakened value chains, inflation and unstable energy prices, partly as a result of the war in Ukraine. Notwithstanding a few short-lived exceptions, Norway has not felt real austerity in almost 30 years. The public is used to having a generous welfare state and (during and after the pandemic) a government that has the means to keep the private sector going when the market fails. The demands of services and economic support are soaring at the very peak of the oil and gas revenues, which have greased the wheels of the economy so far. What will happen when they run out of grease, and the machinery stalls?

Public spending as a proportion of GDP is high, and the levels of taxation encourage investors to move out. There are no reforms in sight, and people are getting angry due to soaring prices and unfulfilled promises from the government. After getting used to a constant increase of living standards, people are now fearful of the future. Although the Conservative party now sees historic levels of support, with over 30% in opinion polls, nobody believes that these numbers will convert into a similar result in the next general election in 2025. But the Labour party is facing a historic low—with a disturbing 15% of declared vote intentions after nearly two years in government. This must be disturbing for a party that sees itself as a nation builder and the country's natural leader. Maybe their self-image is part of the problem. In that case, they are not alone. Traditionally strong parties on each side of the centre are in decline as the general public are looking to others options.

Is the party over?

As in the rest of Europe, the traditionally strong Scandinavian centre–left and centre–right parties have suffered a decline in membership the last three decades. A study from 2013 showed that the membership levels has plummeted by 50% to 60%. Sweden is a social democratic stronghold, which gave the Social Democrats a whopping membership of 1,198,000 members in 1979. Back then, their conservative counterpart, the Moderates, could boast 149,000 members. This has declined to 80,000 for the Social Democrats in 2022, and around 50,000 members for the Moderates.

Numbers from Denmark[139] show that the Social Democratic party has declined from nearly 95,000 members in 1960, to 33,000 members in 2021. The moderate liberal right party, Venstre, went from 193,000 in 1960 to 28,000 in 2021. The Danish Conservative Party had 109,000 members in 1960; its membership has declined to a mere 13,200 members in 2021.

139 https://www.ft.dk/-/media/sites/ft/pdf/partier/om-politiske-partier/tal-og-fakta-om-partier/partiernes-medlemstal-fra-1960.ashx.

The Norwegian Social Democratic party had 165,000 members in 1960, declining to 48,000 in 2022,[140] while the Conservative party shrank from 100,000 members in 1980 to 30,000 members in 2022.

Taking into account these numbers, it should come as no surprise that new parties will find it easier to go through periods of rapid growth, but this still doesn't make up for the general decline in party membership.

Now, there is no natural law that old parties necessarily deserve to have more support simply by virtue of their experience. The answers in the post-war era are that strong economic growth gave room for improved living standards and a generous welfare state, providing a satisfaction that led to legitimacy for traditional parties. For their part, the politicians and their parties identified what needed to be done at home, and understood the time they lived in. But new times needs new answers. Many failed to see how globalisation, new technologies and a more integrated world would affect local communities—as a result, they could not propose the necessary measures to both harness the opportunities of the new world and cushion the negative effects of the global trends at work.

Political parties will persist as long as they serve important functions in the political process, from developing policies, promoting political ideas, electing leadership and candidates, mobilising people and organising campaigns. But their main purpose is to fulfil their promise of improving people's lives.

With dwindling numbers, parties risk becoming less representative and reinforcing the feeling of disconnect between the political establishment and ordinary citizens. Many people now mobilise for single issues through social media and digital platforms. The challenge is to engage and include these people in real political processes—from identifying problems and finding broad solutions to accepting the results. As of yet, the political parties have the experience and resources to survive because they designed the political system that empowers them. That design might be changing faster than

140 https://www.arbeiderpartiet.no/om/medlemstall/.

we like, notably through the rise of populism—a phenomenon that focuses precisely on polarising and amplifying single issues on platforms that the mainstream political parties don't use (or don't use well).

In technology, a legacy system is defined as an outdated computing system, hardware or software that is still in use. Although not all legacy systems are obsolete technologies, it is often impossible (or at least more difficult) to upgrade them or make changes in the existing system than to create something new. The political system with a full-grown public sector and welfare state shares some of the challenges that the legacy systems face in computing and technology (systems that, on a side note, are often used in the public sector).

Extreme makeover?

In Sweden, the 2022 general election led to a change of government, with the centre–right Moderates forming a minority government supported by the Sweden Democrats. After the Russian aggression in Ukraine both Sweden and neighbouring Finland went on a fast track out of neutrality to join NATO. This is a radical shift that will be changing the Nordics forever.

Just as momentous is Denmark's lifting of their opt-out of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy in a referendum in June 2022. Denmark made yet another surprising turn, when the Social Democrat Mette Fredriksen formed a ruling coalition with her former political opponents, bridging the gap to the centre–right in order to stem the tide of radical left and radical right politics in Denmark.

As mentioned, the Scandinavian countries went through major liberal and market-oriented reforms throughout the 1980s and 1990s to get a better balance between the public and the private sectors. Now, Norway is the country in the most dire need of change, if it wants to conserve a well-functioning welfare state in the future.

The question is whether the Nordic model can deliver on the promises of a continuously increased standard of living that the Scandinavian countries have seen over the last

three decades. The idea of 'getting to Denmark' was after all not only something to achieve, but also something to maintain: peace, stability, freedom, prosperity and social inclusiveness. This might be the decisive moment for the Scandinavian model: the political parties must give credible answers to the challenges brought on by globalisation, urbanisation, technology, immigration and climate change. The answers must increase prosperity and quality of life through inclusive and sustainable economic growth. It has been done before; it can be done again.

However, traditional parties also need to think of these issues not only in the short term, to gain back the votes of populists or abstentionists, but also in the long term, which is the only way to build credibility, and a meaningful model. As Francis Fukuyama puts it, 'The problem is that Denmark did not get to be Denmark in a matter of months or years. Contemporary Denmark gradually evolved modern institutions over the course of centuries.'

Democracy has been on the decline for a decade, and we see the rise of populism unfold in Europe, with Great Britain as the seemingly most unlikely victim of them all, with Brexit. The liberal world order and fundamental values are under pressure across the world. Add to this the threat of climate change, an ageing population, digitalisation, automation and immigration, and now rising living cost and inflation, and the mix becomes explosive. *The Economist* underlined that the secret of the Scandinavian model's success was based on the ability to reform and adapt to economic changes.

The greatest challenge of modern politics is to deliver on the promise of a better future. Having their achievements dubbed *the next supermodel* by an internationally renowned newspaper a decade ago, Scandinavian politicians have not been holding back in promoting themselves and their values as superior to the rest of the world. However, this also increases expectations at home. The rapidly changing world and the challenges it brings reveals cracks on the surface. Even supermodels need a makeover now and then. Let's hope an extreme one will not be necessary.

Slovakia, Hungary, and Serbia:

Party Competition in Dominant Party Systems

András Braun

Introduction

Compared to Western Europe, the party systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) were organised after a relatively rapid democratic transition. In the 1990s, most of these countries successfully switched to competitive multiparty systems, and the new democracies achieved some level of consolidation. Just like in other parts of Europe, parties soon became the most important and powerful actors in politics. At the same time, it was clear that the relatively high level of electoral volatility would have a profound impact on the stability of party systems. This trend was somehow changed in the 2000s, as domestic and global crises brought new challenges to the region. These changes reorganised party systems and the dynamics of political competition. Some parties became dominant, even sometimes over-dominant, dramatically changing the electoral landscape in some Central European countries, not least of which Hungary. Bringing back traditional issues, such as identity, nationalism and Euroscepticism, just to mention a few elements of the populist agenda, dominant parties won significant shares of the vote in elections. This led to the victory of dominant parties in Slovakia, and Serbia, and to the four-times-in-a-row electoral successes of Fidesz in Hungary. At the same time, opposition parties who claimed to remain on the democratic spectrum were not able to succeed in any major elections in Hungary or Serbia, and even though they won the elections in 2010 and 2020 in Slovakia, they remained divided.

Dominant parties proved to be resilient in Serbia and Hungary, while fragmented opposition parties in the political centre were unsuccessful in changing the balance of power. The situation is somewhat different in Slovakia, where opposition parties preserved their competitiveness to challenge the dominant centre–left party, winning elections twice but facing internal issues after their elections.

This chapter will analyse the development of party systems in three CEE countries, from a very specific aspect, namely the competition between the dominant parties and their fragmented opposition. These countries started their democratic transition

and established multiparty systems around the same time, but for different reasons dominant parties came to power and reorganised party competition. This trend gave party competition a distinct nature in each of the three countries, which are analysed in this chapter. The next sessions will present the characteristics of the party systems, and the asymmetric competition between dominant parties and their opposition in Hungary, Slovakia and Serbia.

The characteristics of the CEE party systems: ideological divisions and the basis of party competition

The creation of a new, democratic, pluralistic political arena was a precondition for new parties to compete over free elections. However, the transition was not a smooth process in all countries. In Hungary, democratisation was a consensus-based process in which the Communist elite and the democratic opposition decided on a new political system at the negotiating table. Similarly, the Czechoslovak transition (the Velvet Revolution) was also peaceful and ended with the separation of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic in 1993 (the Velvet Separation). In the case of Hungary and (then still) Czechoslovakia, opposition movements and parties won the founding elections. Things changed much in Slovakia when in 1994 Vladimir Mečiar took power and instituted a regime with authoritarian tendencies that represented a serious challenge to Slovakia's democratic consolidation. This situation lasted until 1998, when Mikuláš Dzurinda's centre–right and Christian Democrat coalition won the elections, allowing Slovakia to advance on its Euro-Atlantic integration path.[141] Serbia, at that time a Yugoslav republic, faced a serious elite-driven challenge when post-Communist Slobodan Milošević remained in power—there was therefore a transition, but not towards democracy. Milošević's regime was not the only reason why democratic consolidation was blocked in Serbia. The years-long wars in Bosnia, Croatia

141 Elisabeth Bakke, *Central and East European Party Systems Since 1989*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 72–3.

and Kosovo undermined transition efforts, and only after the defeat of Milošević and the election of Vojislav Koštunica as President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia did a real democratisation process begin.

On party systems and cleavages

When comparing CEE party system developments to those in Western Europe, academic literature usually focuses on institutions, social cleavages, and civil society organisations. The left–right dimension, which dominated European countries, was established along four main cleavage lines, based on class conflicts, urban–rural, church–state, and centre–periphery. This was a result of an organic and long development, where these social factors eventually contributed to the consolidation of party systems. At the same time, democratic transition and multiparty construction were a rapid process in the CEE countries. The transition represented a significant challenge for new political parties in terms of professionalisation and institutionalisation. In many ways, the Communist successor parties and the pre-1990 elite benefited from their political and economic experience. On the other hand, newly established political parties needed to learn how to form new platforms and institutionalise their party organisations.[142] These organisations became more functional during the first free elections, and this was followed by a long, parallel process of institutionalisation and professionalisation. This means that the political party systems of Central Europe were indeed competitive and pluralist, just like those in Western European countries. However, there is a social factor that needs to be highlighted: political parties were created during the democratic transition period, mainly by political elite groups (former Communist elites or counter-elites) and educated individuals. Political parties were thus formed in a top-down process and lacked a stable voter base. All over the region, the past three decades have been characterised by similar voting behaviours—for instance, a large number of absentees and protest votes, and a certain lack of (ideological) integrity. As a result of the democratic consolidation, and the professionalisation of the parties, some level of stabilisation of the voter bases occurred, but only at the end of the decade.[143]

142 Ibid., pp. 70–1.

143 Bihari Mihály and Pokol Béla, *Politológia*, Budapest: Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, 2009, pp. 430–1.

Party competition from the 1990s to the early 2000s

One specific feature of Slovakia, Serbia and Hungary is the replacement of the initial anti-Communist versus old elite competition by a left versus right, or in some cases liberal versus conservative competition. This contributed to a relative stabilisation of the party systems. The process was also facilitated by Central European parties' integration into the EU's nascent political families (see the chapter on European parties). The simplification and concentration of the party system was more visible in Hungary, where the competition between the centre–left Socialist Party (MSZP) and centre–right Fidesz created a de facto two-party system.[144] Competition remained more divided and fragmented in Slovakia and Serbia.

In all three countries, the ideological spectrum both on the left and the right was multi-angle. Former regime parties reformed and redefined their ideological spectrum and they returned to power in Hungary and Serbia, but were less successful in Slovakia. In Serbia, Slobodan Milošević's Serbian Socialist Party combined left-wing socialism with nationalism. The party was eventually reformed after Milošević's fall and became a coalition partner first to the Democratic Party (DS) and then to the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). In Slovakia, Robert Fico successfully filled the vacuum that existed between Mečiar and Dzurinda in an empty centre–left space. In Hungary, the Hungarian Socialist Party was one important electoral party in what were then bipolar competitions.

Centre–right political parties, be they liberal or conservative, identified themselves as anti-Communist. These parties are mostly national conservative, with a strong emphasis on national and traditional values. This marks a strong difference from the Western European parties, which usually define themselves more through a market liberal–conservative ideology. In Slovakia, the KDH was built on its Christian roots, while in Hungary Fidesz became the main centre–right party after the collapse of

144 Theresa Gessler and Anna Kyriazy, 'Hungarian crisis or crisis in Hungary?', in Swen Hutter, Hanspeter Kriesi, et al., *European Party Politics in Times of Crisis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, p.171.

the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF). In Serbia, the centre–right was divided after the fall of Slobodan Milošević's regime. The two most prominent parties of this spectrum were the Serbian Democratic Party (DSS) and then the SNS was part of this spectrum, embracing a specific ideology made of a mix of national pride and defence of national traditions.

Liberal parties proved to be less stable. In Hungary, the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) was a parliamentary party until 2010 and its collapse, and liberalism only came back to national representation in 2022 when Momentum made it to the parliament. Short-lived and less successful creations also appeared in Slovakia (ANO), and more recently Progressive Slovakia (PS) failed to get into the parliament in 2020, but supported the successful candidacy of Zuzana Čaputová as president of Slovakia.

When it comes to the far-right parties, in Serbia SNS is formed by former members of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), and previously conservative parties such as DSS and Dveri are also closer to this ideological spectrum. A far right also emerged in Hungary, where the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIEP) was in parliament between 1998 and 2002. As a result of the financial crisis and due to the growing dissatisfaction with the MSZP-SZDSZ coalition, Jobbik was also a competitive radical right party, first entering the parliament in 2010. It became at some point the second most supported political party in the country. Besides the national, radical, anti-minority and anti-Western rhetoric, the party raised important social issues.[145] However, ahead of the 2018 elections, Jobbik aimed to switch closer to the centre–right. This trend continued in 2022 when the party decided to join the big-tent opposition coalition, emphasising its centre–right and conservative ideology. Very few of the Jobbik voters decided to follow this new party line. Thus, a new far-right party, the Our Homeland Movement, established by former Jobbik politicians, gained support and crossed the threshold to be represented in parliament at the 2022 elections.

145 Ibid., pp. 167–88.

The far right was perhaps the most influential in Slovakia. Parties like the Slovak National Party (SNS[146]), People's Party Our Slovakia (L'SNS), and later on Republik not only entered into parliament (the National Council) but some of them even became important partners inside the governing coalition. Although not all of them have been able to stabilise their base, their results have been high enough for a sufficient time to hint that far-right parties will remain important players, and potential coalition partners in the future. SNS in Slovakia was part of the governing coalitions in 1994, 1998, 2006 and 2016. Since 1990, the party has failed to enter the parliament only three times, in 2002, 2012 and 2020. L'SNS has been a parliamentary party since 2016 and is a heavily personalised organisation. The party's leader, Marian Kotleba, propagates xenophobic rhetoric and wants to establish closer ties with Russia, while advocating for leaving the EU and NATO.

Green, new left and single-issue parties have been much less successful. In Hungary, environmental issues were supported by Politics can be Different (LMP), and Dialogue in Hungary, but due to internal disputes and lack of integrity, among other problems, these parties have rarely retained their capacity to attract protest voters. Environmental protests in Serbia brought success to some green movements in parliamentary politics, like the party Moramo (We Must), an environmentalist protest movement turned political party which gained 13 seats in the National Assembly at the 2022 legislative elections.

Party systems were stabilised in Hungary along left–right lines in the mid-1990s, which gave a direction for party competition until 2010. In the other countries, a major restructuring phase went through in Slovakia and Serbia where different types of opposition alliances were formed to defeat the incumbent elites.[147] The party systems in these countries then showed signs and features of stabilisation, however, as will be described below.

146 Not to be confused with the SNS in Serbia.

147 Bakke, 2012, p. 74.

The 2010s: a new form of stability"

The events of the late 2000s and early 2010s brought multiple economic, political and social challenges to the Central European region. The 2008 financial crisis and subsequent crises within the EU were not the only factors that had an impact on the structuration of party competition. The financial crisis was combined with a set of domestic challenges,[148] such as a series of large corruption scandals in Slovakia, as well as a democratic and economic crisis in Hungary that had broken out earlier, in 2006. Meanwhile, in Serbia, Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence weighed heavily on the democratic consolidation process. Kriesi and Hutter argue that 'the impact of the economic crisis was linked to the pre-existing political crisis', and was a result of poor governance records and corruption. As a result, the electorate demanded political renewal and a larger scale of political stability. However, in the absence of new movements, mainstream political parties (Smer in Slovakia, Fidesz in Hungary, and SNS in Serbia) became the 'drivers' of the economic, fiscal and also political change.[149] In parallel with this process, identity and cultural dimensions became key issues in political and party competition.

In Slovakia, the financial crisis and other domestic political crises contributed to the rise of populist and far-right parties, while the centre–right remained divided. Smer, initially a social democratic party, followed a nationalist and populist path: after the 2006 elections, it entered into a coalition with far-right parties. The ruling coalition of Robert Fico was made of his own party, Smer, the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the People's Party Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (LS-HZDS). In government, Fico continued the macroeconomic policies of his predecessors, allowing Slovakia to become a member of the eurozone in 2009. When Fico's radical partners struggled at the 2010 elections, a new coalition of centre–right parties came to power. However, this coalition was divided, and the government fell after one coalition member voted

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148 Hanspeter Kriesi and Swen Hutter, 'Crises and the transformation of the national political space in Europe', in Swen Hutte, Hanspeter Kriesi, et al., *European Party Politics in Times of Crisis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 3–32.

149 Ibid., p. 31.

against joining the eurozone rescue package for Greece in late 2011. Fico then won the early elections in 2012 with an absolute majority, and the centre–right has remained fragmented ever since.[150] Despite Smer's relative dominance, there is a real party competition between the political parties; Fico was never able to fully control the democratic institutions, and the president of the republic was also able to provide a counterbalance to his ambitions and his politics when he was in power.

When it comes to Hungary, the country faced the 2008 financial crisis in a less stable economic position. The socialist–liberal coalition of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and SZDSZ implemented unpopular economic measures to save the country's economy, but in the period 2006–10 the government was divided on maintaining policy reforms. Eventually, economic stability could only be preserved by taking a loan from the International Monetary Fund. The combination of these unpopular decisions, the particularly painful effects of the crisis for everyday people (especially those who had taken a mortgage in Swiss francs, then a norm in the country) and internal fights within MSZP contributed to the landslide victory of Viktor Orbán in 2010. His party Fidesz, in coalition with the Christian Democrats, won a supermajority in the Hungarian National Assembly, while the far right also gained almost 17% of the votes.

Orbán's victory brought fundamental changes in politics, and besides bringing in populism and nationalism, Fidesz also played on Euroscepticism and started to show the first signs of developing some doctrinal critique against the idea of the West. In the context of the government's super-majority, this translated into a constitutional reform that allowed even more centralisation and control over democratic institutions. At the same time, the electoral law introduced in 2011 (which extended the majoritarian nature of the electoral system) gave a further advantage to the united right over the fragmented left.[151] In such a centralised environment, the government is not dependent on the parliament; the president of the republic (a largely ceremonial role) is also

150 László Flamm, 'The crisis and Euroscepticism in Central and Eastern Europe', *L'Europe en Formation*, 364 (2), 2012, pp. 305–21.

151 Gessler and Kyriazi, 2019, p. 171.

nominated and elected by the Fidesz majority, and the constitutional court and other judicial institutions are also politicised. Fidesz controls not only the legislation, and the executive branch but also the media—these actions gave the basis of a decade-long debate with the EU institutions over rule of law and democracy.[152]

In Serbia, SNS and SPS came to power 12 years after the political changes that had occurred in 2000. Much as in Hungary a few years earlier, party leader Aleksandar Vučić's major victory in 2014 (after a first victory in 2012) helped him consolidate his power, while electoral disasters led to the erosion of the opposition. These changes occurred for a number of reasons. In Serbia, the former opposition big-tent coalition that took power in 2000 (Democratic Opposition—DOS) started crumbling under the weight of growing problems and internal divisions. Topics such as the status of Kosovo and Serbia's path to the EU gave place to permanent debates about postings in the government coalitions. The Serbian party system was then divided between the old parties (Serbian Socialist Party–SPS, Serbian Radical Party–SRS), the liberal/left side (Democratic Party–DS, G17, Liberal Democrats, LSV and other parties) and more conservative parties (Serbian Democratic Party–DSS). The emergence of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) from SRS after the 2008 elections as a centre–right pro-EU organisation represented the biggest change in the party system in this period (2000–8). The further weakening of DSS and DS allowed SNS/SPS to form a government after the 2012 elections and gain further popularity in 2014. At the same time, far-right and opposition parties fell apart. The consolidation of SNS as a catch-all party and the 'atomisation' of the opposition gave SNS leader Aleksandar Vučić the opportunity to narrow down pluralism, leading to the emergence of a party system with one dominant party. In this system, SNS enjoys a large majority in parliament and public opinion, supported by the stable SPS and minority lists, while opposition parties remain fragmented. [153]

152 Flamm, 2012, pp. 305–21.

153 Dušan Spasojević, *Undermining Democracy: Processes and Institutions in Serbia 2010–2020*, Belgrade: Center for Research, Transparency, and Accountability, pp. 110–12.

To sum up this section, elections in the region can no longer be seen simply as a traditional left versus right or anti-Communist versus new elite competition. Internal and external events not only restructured party systems but also stabilised the position of some mainstream parties, bringing them into a dominant position. In addition to the fact that parties were less institutionalised in this part of Central Europe, the role of party leaders contributed to the presidentialisation and personalisation of politics, as leaders managed to concentrate political power in their hands by using different practices.

Dominant parties have been able to counterbalance the very high level of electoral volatility, especially in the cases of Serbia and Hungary. In these two countries, Fidesz and SNS control all levels of politics, while the opposition parties remain completely unstructured, disorganised and unable to offer a political alternative to the electorate. However, in the case of Slovakia, this fragmentation did not lead to the 'arch-domination' of Smer and democratic backsliding. This shows that the level of concentration differs in the three countries. The following sections will analyse the cases of Slovakia, Hungary and Serbia to better understand how dominant systems can be different from each other and what types of challenges the opposition parties are facing.

Party competition and elections

To better understand the circumstances that surround party competition, we will first present the profiles of the dominant parties (Smer, Fidesz, SNS) and then move on to discuss the fragility of the coalitions that are trying to compete with the dominant parties. Fragile coalitions in Slovakia are a contributing factor in the continued dominance of the centre–left in the political spectrum—even though not to the same extent as in the two other countries. On the other hand, due to heavy internal fights within the big-tent electoral coalitions in Hungary and Serbia, party competition has dramatically eroded in these two countries.

The profile of the dominant parties

Fidesz (since 2010), SNS (since 2012/14) and *Smer* (from 2006 until 2020) are parties that have clearly dominated their respective political landscapes over the past decade and beyond, not only because they are or were in government for a significant period, but also because these parties successfully proved ideologically flexible, and they are still able to adapt to the changing political environment and emerging domestic and global challenges. These parties not only occupy a large part of the ideological spectrum but also combine different practices and policies while remaining organised and personalised. Some analysts observed that in the case of Hungary, Viktor Orbán used a mixture of political practices to strengthen the party, and his position within the party, while maximising voter support. These practices include the concentration of political power, the emergence of charismatic leadership through presidentialisation and personalised party politics, meaning that the party organisation is in the hands of the party leader. Global control over the media scene allows Fidesz to retain and gain voters by spreading targeted messages. Such communication practices can also be detected in the case of Slovakia and Serbia. The sovereigntist rhetoric, or the protection of the national interest from a claimed internal/external enemy, and blame of the opposition is a common communication element of the three parties.

In Serbia, the 2008 elections marked the beginning of a somewhat new phase in the development of party relations. The emergence of the SNS (from SRS) under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić and Tomislav Nikolić created a new power balance on the centre–right. SNS quickly emerged as a dominant party: it has been receiving around half of the votes since 2014 and therefore easily wins elections against a fragmented opposition.[154]

Even though Fidesz and SNS describe themselves as centre–right (with different labels, such as progressive in the case of SNS or national conservative in the case

154 Ibid., pp. 110–12.

of Fidesz), and while Smer sees itself as centre–left, the ideological categorisation of the dominant parties is rather irrelevant. Fundamental identity issues are going beyond the ideological notions of left and right, and they make the core focus of the dominant parties. For example, in Serbia those fundamental issues have been the relationship with the EU, the status of Kosovo, and previously the cooperation with the Hague Tribunal. The dominant parties have also been toying with populist themes such as criticism of the Western media, the questioning of Western values and the vilification of enemies, whether external or internal.[155] Slovakia's Smer has historically been less critical towards international institutions than the other two parties; however, Robert Fico recently changed his communication and follows a more Kremlin-friendly line.[156] At the same time, Fidesz has showed multiple times that it is not only critical towards the EU institutions but also follows a very individual foreign policy line (vis-à-vis the politicisation of the migration crisis, or the peace rhetoric in the case of the war in Ukraine). These were important campaign topics of the 2022 national elections.

The political space in Serbia and Hungary is organised around the two dominant parties in the centre and a large number of fragmented smaller parties. The opposition parties are further divided by ideological and tactical fault lines. As a result, the dominant parties can define the agenda and create or anticipate the political cleavages that have replaced the classic left–right, or conservative–liberal competition. That main fault line is defined by dominant parties as one between what is portrayed as a stable, coherent and strong ruling majority against a fragmented and weak opposition. With some of the smaller parties happy to cooperate with the dominant parties (for instance, SRS in Serbia, and sometimes the parties of the radical right in Hungary and Slovakia, but also moderate ones such as Most-Híd in Slovakia after 2018), this

155 Ibid., pp. 113–17.

156 During his premiership, Fico was the one among the V4 leaders who supported a stronger integration into the EU in the region and wanted Slovakia to be part of the core EU. He was even open to dividing the V4 format if necessary (even on migration to some extent). But after losing power, and with the start of the pandemic, he started following a more Russia-friendly rhetoric and strengthened his populist rhetoric. Fico is more and more critical towards the West, and this can be also observed in his communication regarding the war in Ukraine.

division sometimes tends to be blurred, but this tendency for cooperation tends to further fragment the opposition rather than weaken the dominant parties.

In Serbia, the dominance of SNS took an extreme form when opposition parties decided to boycott the 2020 elections—a radical move that never occurred in Hungary or in Slovakia.[157] As a result, the party was able to get 63.02% of the vote and gain 188 out of the 250 seats in parliament.

The party systems in Hungary and Serbia are characterised by an ultra-dominant position of SNS and Fidesz, who both face a relatively stable opposition—stable also in the sense that it is fragmented and divided. There are relatively stable parties on the left in both countries (SPS and DK), while the rest of the opposition parties are generally atomised. A third category of parties belong to the radical right (Jobbik until 2018, Our Homeland from 2022 and SRS or Dveri in Serbia).[158]

In Slovakia, some key differences might suggest that Smer is less influential than SNS and Fidesz. After its establishment in 1999, the party was able to transform its popularity into electoral success in a relatively short period of time and it also quickly filled the void[159] in the Slovak centre–left. [160] Until the early 2020s, Smer was not facing any rivals on the left, while the centre–right parties remained divided. This ensured the party's relative dominance while it preserved its discipline, integrity and public support.[161] Smer follows the same top-down structure as Fidesz and SNS, and it is also centred around the charismatic leadership of party leader Robert Fico.[162] This stable and pyramidal structure, however, was shaken after the corruption scandals

157 Spasojević, pp. 120–2.

158 Ibid.

159 Smer emerged from the centre–left Party of the Democratic Left in 1999. In Slovakia, the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL) was not as influential as other post-Communist parties, for instance, MSZP in Hungary. It was a parliamentary party until 2002.

160 Peter Ondria, Branislav Kováčik and Igor Kosír, *The System of Political Parties of the Slovak Republic*, Banská Bystrica: Fakulta politických vied a medzinárodných vzťahov UMB, 2010, pp. 99–100.

161 Darina Malová, *Strengthening Social Democracy in the Visegrad Countries*, Prague: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2017, p. 12.

162 Ibid., p. 6.

of the late 2010s and the assassination of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak, which opened internal conflicts inside the party and led Fico's protégé, Peter Pellegrini to create a new party—Hlas (the Voice).

Centralisation allows parties to build up strong clientelist networks based on party patronage at all levels. This centralisation often leads to a decrease in local political engagement and often supports corruption.[163] The figure of charismatic leaders, the combination of ideologies, and simplified political messages contribute to the personalisation of politics. This somehow also helps voters to identify political parties with their leaders. Fidesz and SNS emerged as the main parties of their political landscapes, winning multiple elections in a row, and they were able to avoid internal conflicts. However, this has not been the case with Smer, as the establishment of Hlas by Peter Pellegrini somehow divided Fico's traditional electorate, and weakened his claim to uncontested leadership of the Slovak centre–left.

The fragmented opposition

With dominant parties so strong, does that leave any chance for a fragmented opposition to compete? The experience of Hungary, Serbia and Slovakia tell us three different stories, from which we can take general conclusions.

Slovakia: fragmented but competitive

In Slovakia, opposition coalitions won the elections in 2010 and in 2020, showing that they could (sometimes) be competitive despite their atomisation. However, the coalition of the centre–right parties has remained fragile, resulting in government instability.

After Fico formed a coalition with LS-HZDS and SNS in 2006, parties of the centre–right started to explore ways of joining their forces in the next elections. The opposition parties combined their forces in 2010, and even though Smer won a plurality of the votes, centre–right parties managed to form a four-party coalition

163 Ibid., pp. 7–8.

under the leadership of Iveta Radičová. Some of these parties already had government experience, having exercised power under the 1998–2006 coalition of Mikuláš Dzurinda, but not all. The 2010 governing coalition included the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union–Democratic Party (SDKU-DS, centre–right), Christian-Democratic Movement (KDH, Christian conservative), Liberty and Solidarity (SaS, conservative liberal) and Most-Hid (Hungarian minority party), so actually one party less than the previous 1998–2006 coalition. Yet Radičová's cabinet fell in 2011 over a no-confidence vote, and the coalition literally exploded during the early election campaign that followed. This put Smer in a much more favourable position, and Fico was able to form a one-party government after these 2012 elections. The sweeping victory of Smer-SD in the 2012 elections was the result of intra-coalition conflicts and a massive corruption scandal—also known as the Gorilla case.[164]

After the election, an ideologically heterogenous and fragmented opposition stood against Fico's government, giving Smer the momentum for political centralisation. Despite this weakness, the opposition remained a competent and somewhat credible force: despite remaining dominant throughout the period, Smer's support never reached the near-absolute majority levels of Hungary or Serbia, meaning that Fico could never win a majority by himself—and indeed, Smer was defeated twice in the country's two-round presidential election, the first time in 2014 with Fico on the ticket, the second time with an independent running with Smer's support.

The two most important reasons for Slovakia's higher level of competitiveness are the proportional electoral system and the checks and balances within the political system, which proved efficient despite the country's serious challenges in terms of rule of law, clientelism and corruption. Fico's attempt to concentrate political power in the 2010s led to institutional confrontation with various political actors (including the president of the republic, the government, the National Council and the constitutional court). At the same time, the Slovak electoral system remained proportional, ensuring the adequate representation of society, and making a single party's dominance more difficult. Furthermore, even if there were serious attempt to

164 Ibid.

take control of the media, some parts of it were able to resist these attempts, thus safeguarding the media space as 'an arena of competition'.[165]

The assassination of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée provoked shockwaves and large protests all across the country. These brought at least three important results. First, growing dissatisfaction eventually led to the resignation of Robert Fico as prime minister in 2018. Second, the presidential elections brought momentum for the opposition as independent candidate Zuzana Čaputová won ahead of Smer candidate Maroš Šefčovič. [166] Third, in the 2020 elections, Smer lost a significant number of votes, leaving room for the anti-corruption electoral platform OL'aNO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities), led by Igor Matovič, to take at least parts of the protest vote and win the elections.

This was the first time since 2006 that Smer had lost an election, that is, it was not the largest party in the country. However, the anti-Fico campaign was perhaps the only element that was able to bring together the centrist parties, and it turned out to be barely enough to hold the coalition together, as Matovič's personal leadership quickly became contested. The anti-corruption campaign was somewhat overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic and questioned the government's ability to handle the crisis. The coalition crisis peaked in 2022 when Eduard Heger's government lost a vote of no confidence, leading after a protracted conflict to early elections in September 2023. The no-confidence vote once again highlighted the divisions between parties that were supposed to rule together, in particular, over personalities.[167] Indeed, the motion of no confidence was submitted by SaS, a former coalition partner.

The fragmentation of the centre–right in Slovakia is therefore a feature of national politics, and it is not likely to disappear, whatever the results of the September 2023 elections. The electoral and post-electoral coalitions can compete with the dominant

165 https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_fnf_v4illiberalism_pressure-points_20180605.pdf .

166 https://items.ssrc.org/democracy-papers/how-to-defeat-populism-three-lessons-from-slovakia/.

167 In autumn 2022, SaS announced its withdrawal from the government coalition, after O'LANO refused SaS's ultimatum to remove Igor Matovič, as the minister of finance. The conflict between Matovic, O'LA-NO's president, and SaS's Richard Sulík has been personal since the COVID-19 pandemic.

party; however, they remain fragmented and barely last a full election cycle, which in turn means they regularly pay a high political cost for their divisions.

Hungary: representing the one third

Since 2010, the Hungarian opposition parties have consistently gained only one-third of the parliamentary seats in elections, regardless of whether they ran on their own or formed coalitions. As the dominant party has been defining the rules of the competition for the past ten years, the opposition needs to compete along these lines. As a result of the majoritarian one-round system in Hungary, strategic cooperation between parties is necessary, as the electoral system was designed for a two-party system, thereby forcing centre–left, liberal, green and far-right parties to give up their ideological backgrounds in order to beat the dominant party. The other alternative is to run alone, which will never give single parties the opportunity to beat Fidesz.[168]

In 2014, the left parties (MSZP, DK, Together, Dialogue and the Liberals) formed an electoral coalition called Unity. This short-lived coalition gained more votes in 2014 compared to the previous elections. However, it did not even come close to defeating Orbán's party. The alliance was dissolved after the elections and party cooperation remained occasional. One of the main reasons for failure was that the left's joint candidate divided the opposition voters and there was a shortage of credible candidates on the party list. In 2018, the opposition ran separately and, due to the fragmentation of the left, far-right Jobbik became the second party of the country. Jobbik's leader Gábor Vona then aimed at rebranding the party and transforming it into a pro-European conservative party to challenge Fidesz. The 2018 elections showed precisely that the atomised left and the liberals would not be able to challenge the Fidesz rule on their own. Building on the experience of the 2019 local elections, opposition parties formed an umbrella coalition and, after organising the country's first-ever national primaries, they decided to run together under one opposition list, with a common prime ministerial candidate. The coalition not only included political

168 Pál Susánszky, Anna Unger and Ákos Kopper, 'Hungary's over-powerful government party and the desperate opposition', *European Review*, 28 (4), 2020.

parties of the left (MSZP, DK), greens (LMP, Dialogue), liberals (Momentum) and the right (Jobbik), but it also presented a non-partisan Prime Ministerial candidate, Péter Márki-Zay, the mayor of Hódmezővásárhely.

This attempt failed abysmally: even though some pollsters predicted a neck-and-neck race at the beginning of the year, the April 2022 elections gave Fidesz its biggest victory ever, and the coalition was dissolved on election eve—a clear sign of failure. Since the 2022 elections, an internal competition has started within the opposition, which is suggesting that opposition parties will rather compete with each other over the European Parliamentary and the local elections in 2024 rather than try to confront Fidesz. While Jobbik lost the vast majority of its voters to Our Homeland and other parties, the centre–left Democratic Coalition (DK) emerged as the strongest party, and it seems the party aims to become the 'centre of gravity' inside the opposition parties. At this stage, DK is not looking to deepen the cooperation with other actors, but to cement its role within the opposition; Momentum seems to be the only relevant party that could contest this plan. DK's and Momentum's rivalry may create an additional fault line within the party system, as DK's leader and ex-prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány belongs to the old elite, while Momentum is one of the youngest political organisations in the country. This is telling of the dynamics within Hungary: the very behaviour of the opposition leaders in the end helps legitimise the political system designed by Fidesz: the party in power can present itself as the only viable, stable option to steer the country in times of crisis. Iiascos of the opposition in 2014, 2018 and 2022 showed that there is no real competition between Fidesz and the rest of the parties at the national or at local levels. The Hungarian party system, therefore, has dominant (with Fidesz) and polarised pluralist (with the opposition) features at the same time.

Serbia: from electoral coalition to the boycott of the elections

Serbia's party system is not so different from Hungary's. Since 2014, SNS is in an arch-dominant position, having won between 120 and 188 seats (out of 250) in parliament in all the elections that have taken place between 2014 and 2022. At the

same time, the opposition parties are even more fragmented and divided than in either Slovakia or Hungary.

Without going too much into the historical details, one should remember that Serbian democracy experienced multiple challenges in the consolidation period.[169] After the break-up of the big-tent opposition coalition (DOS), DS, DSS and SRS (until 2008) were the main competing parties in the period between 2003 and 2012. Due to the lack of a single dominant party, power balance and competition were much more balanced between these actors. The democratic transition allowed the consolidation of Serbia's position in the international scene, the establishment of democratic institutions and work on the resolution of post-war bilateral issues with neighbours. However, the governments of the 2000s failed to constitutionalise these reforms.[170] Frustration with the new political elite grew constantly, and the events culminated in SNS's election victory in 2012. The following period has represented a serious challenge for opposition parties and narrowed both pluralism and political competition. While Aleksandar Vučić successfully consolidated his position as uncontested leader of his party, opposition parties faced a serious leadership crisis along with a lack of party organisation and professionalisation, much like in Hungary. Perhaps the most visible phenomenon of this was the complete meltdown of DS[171] and DSS support, while SRS also became much more marginal.

The past decade has shown that the Serbian party system lacks stability and remains extremely fluid. SNS and some remaining support for SRS have been the only signs

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169 These include the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran *Đinđić*, the declaration of independence of Kosovo, the relatively high support of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), and the cleavage between the coalition partners on the future of the country (European integration versus neutrality, or isolation), the cooperation with the Hague Tribunal, and neighbourly relations (mainly with Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina).

170 Slaviša Orlović, 'Constitutional-institutional design of the Republic of Serbia', in Zoran Stojiljković, Dušan Spasojević and Jelena Lončar, *How to Make Intra–Party Democracy Possible? Institutional Factors and Internal Dynamics of Intra-Party Relations*, pp. 9–27. Belgrade: Balkan Comparative Electoral Study, 2015, p. 20.
Ördögh Tibor: Szerbia, *Horvátország és Szlovénia politikai rendszereinek összehasonlítása 1990 és 2016 között*. Budapest: Dialóg Campus Kiadó, 2018, pp. 55–6.

171 in 2012 the DS got 23% at the elections (and SNS, 25%); two years later they went down to 6.2% (SNS, 49.9%).

of some sort of stability. Heavily personalised parties represent an additional burden for the opposition. Politicians and party leaders who started their careers in the DOS coalition have lost their credibility, and in the current environment it remains difficult to build up new personal brands and leaders. The 2020 elections further narrowed pluralism in parliament as the main opposition parties boycotted the elections.[172] In addition, the lowering of the electoral threshold further atomised the party system. [173]

Opposition parties did try to organise themselves and unite to compete against SNS. However, these efforts quickly dissolved prior to the 2020 elections, as most of the opposition decided to boycott the elections. This has introduced a new cleavage within the already fragmented opposition, as the parties that boycotted the elections did not recognise the 'opposition status' of those who competed in the elections.

The 2022 early elections represented a new possibility for the opposition to rebuild itself, as they decided to compete together. The coalition of the centrist parties United for Victory of Serbia was led by liberal–conservative NS (led by previous DS politician Vuk Jeremić), social democratic SSP (led by Dragan Đilas, who was also part of DS previously), social liberal DS and PSG, a movement started by the former ombudsman and presidential candidate Saša Janković. Social protests related to environmental issues and the constitutional referendum on bringing the judiciary into line with the EU legislation looked encouraging for the opposition.[174] To improve the electoral conditions and avoid another boycott, the ruling and the main opposition parties started inter-party dialogues, with the mediation of members of the European Parliament. Without going into details, these dialogues proved to be insufficient, and the ruling parties lacked the will to substantially improve electoral conditions,

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172 The 2020 elections were boycotted by the opposition, which claimed unfair campaign conditions and a biased media environment. Shortly after the 2020 parliamentary elections, Vucic announced that early parliamentary elections would be held in 2022.

173 Spasojević, p. 112.

174 The environmental protests, sparked by Rio Tinto's project resulted in the formation of the coalition Moramo, composed of environmental activists. It also made the government withdraw the Law on Expropriation. When it came to the referendum, the government and ruling parties called on citizens to vote for the changes; the opposition expressed the view that citizens should either vote 'no' or boycott the vote altogether.

including a balanced media coverage.[175] As the political landscape was dominated by SNS, and due to some internal divisions, the coalition suffered another defeat in the elections and got only 38 seats in the Serbian National Assembly. At the same time, the coalition's presidential candidate also lost to Vučić (with a wide margin: 19% vs. 60%).

While the Serbian opposition's electoral results look similar to those of the Hungarian opposition, the post-electoral situation strengthens the comparison, with atomisation and strong personal divisions between leaders defining the political field. There is, however, a major difference between the two countries: while SNS won a plurality of the votes, it did not get a parliamentary majority, and the party was not able to form a government alone.

Conclusions

The party systems of Hungary, Serbia and Slovakia showed relative stability prior to the early 2010s, but then party competition was replaced by what could best be described as an opposition between dominant parties and a fragmented opposition.

These dominant parties control all levels of politics in Hungary and in Serbia. In addition, ongoing debates and the lack of common political visions among the opposition parties cemented the dominant status of both Fidesz and SNS. The left-right competition was replaced by an asymmetric competition between the dominant party and its opponents. This took an extreme form in Hungary, where the opposition became extremely fragmented at the same time as the quasi-two-party system was replaced by one of Fidesz hegemony.[176] In this system, the opposition has only been able to get one-third of parliamentary seats. While Slovakia and Serbia have also each experienced the emergence of a dominant party, their electoral system is more

175 https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/19422.pdf.

176 Gessler and Kyriazy, 2019, pp. 186–8.

proportional, and this has ensured more competition, and even electoral victory for opposition parties in 2010 and 2020.

Interestingly, dominant parties offer remarkable examples of party resilience, as they have shown to be able to maintain and preserve their popularity in the long-term. This is especially remarkable because these parties were in a decision-making position during difficult crisis periods in 2008–10, 2015 and 2020. This resilience is mostly due to their well-organised internal structures, their capacity to manage their popularity and a well-identified electoral base. This obviously contrasts with the relative disorganisation and fragmentation of the opposition parties, all of which have lost their agenda-setting function and cannot integrate social demands. One extreme case is Fidesz, which has shown that Viktor Orbán's government was capable of preserving its high popularity in crisis periods, as politics were built up on identity-related issues, going beyond ideological or value-based issues. Conversely, opposition parties have proven unable to build a credible alternative to disillusioned voters. On the other side of the spectrum, Smer's defeats in 2010 and 2020 has shown that growing social discontent and the mobilisation of civil society could have an impact and result in political changes.

Political competition in Hungary, Serbia and Slovakia is multidimensional, in the sense that competition exists as much, if not more, between the opposition parties than between the dominant parties and the opposition. Opposition parties are competing with each other to get parliamentary seats and state funds, even though these resources are limited. Often unable to compete with the dominant parties, they often contend themselves with competition at a lower level for the lower spoils of the system. And when they come together into electoral alliances, the high popularity of the dominant parties (sometimes coupled with the specificities of the electoral systems) lead to electoral defeat, leading in turn to dissolution of the opposition coalitions. These big-tent alliances were dissolved right after the 2014 and 2022 elections in Hungary and Serbia 2022. Even in Slovakia, where the opposition won twice against the dominant parties, the coalitions did not last for a full parliamentary mandate. While it would be easy to attribute opposition parties' failures to win elections to the nature of the political

system, one must also admit that they also regularly commit strategic mistakes, often rooted in the very centralised, top-down structure of small parties that have failed to grow strong roots in local politics. Opposition alliances have often been supported in urban bubbles, and they remain unsuccessful in smaller settlements and villages.

As long as parties are following a more elitist and top-down approach, and as long they remain unable to mobilise their electorate along social issues, this situation will probably not change.

The Resilience of Mainstream Parties in Romania

András Braun

Compared to the other Central and Eastern European countries discussed in this publication, Romania's party system has different characteristics. One of the key differences is that despite high volatility, the main political parties show a considerable amount of resilience, both at individual level and as a system. The so-called mainstream parties that have been present since the end of Communist rule in 1989 have survived the 2008 economic crisis and the subsequent political crises that have followed until today.

Resilience in this case depends on multiple factors that are related to the institutional design of the country; the electoral system, which ultimately encourages the mainstream parties to collaborate; and also the capacity of these parties to exercise political power.

This chapter will focus more particularly on the resilience of Romania's two mainstream political parties, which have successfully preserved their position in the post-2008 crisis period: the National Liberal Party (PNL), and the Social Democratic Party (PSD). We will also take a look at the role of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians of Romania (UDMR, or RMDSZ in Hungarian), a smaller party, in stabilising the system.

Party competition in Romania: general features

Much like in Hungary, Serbia and Slovakia (described in another chapter of this publication), Romania's main post-Communist cleavages were centred around economic issues, along with the Communist versus anti-Communist (at least initially), and the modernisation–isolation, the national–regional and majority–minority divides. Another specific characteristic of the Romanian political system is the institutional set-up of the country, and this still has an impact on the competition between political parties and between political actors. During the democratic transition, Romania adopted a new constitutional structure, with a directly elected president, based on the French model. This system requires strong cooperation between the president, the prime minister and the parliament. It is therefore evident that partisan conflicts and interests become prominent in Romania's institutions during a *cohabitation* (when the president and the government come from different political parties), or during political crises (for example, during a vote of no confidence in the parliament).[177]

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177 Endre Borbáth, 'Romania: Polity contestation and the resilience of mainstream parties', in Swen Hutter & Hanspeter Kriesi (eds.), *European Party Politics in Times of Crisis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 214–35.

From an analytical perspective, the first decade of the new democratic system of Romania was characterised by the dominance of President Ion Iliescu, and his party the National Salvation Front (FSN) in 1990, which then became the Democratic National Salvation Front (1992), and finally the Social Democracy Party of Romania (PDSR) in 2000.[178] PDSR eventually was transformed into the Social Democratic Party (PSD) in 2001. However, the party's presidential candidate, Adrian Năstase, lost the elections in 2004 to Traian Băsescu, from the Democratic Party (PD)[179] and the Justice and Truth platform (DA). After the 2008 and 2015 electoral reforms[180] were introduced, Romania's party system showed signs of bipolar competition and stabilisation. PSD remained the strongest party on the centre–left, while after the decade-long presidency of Traian Băsescu, the Democratic Liberal Party (PLD) merged with the National Liberal Party (PNL) in 2014, leading to a united centre–right. Despite new parties entering into the legislation, the atomisation of the party system remained under control, allowing PSD and PNL to preserve their leading role. [181]

The mainstream parties

The mainstream centre–left and centre–right parties are the major players in the political arena since the first democratic elections of 1990. The social democratic, national liberal and Christian Democratic platforms control the political centre, and one of these parties was always part of the governing coalitions.[182] The political divide between them is generally organised around the approach towards the Communist past, PSD being perceived as the successor party of the post-Communist National

178 In 1996, a year of general elections, incumbent Ion Iliescu lost to Emil Constantinescu at the presidential elections, while the coalition of centre–right parties, the Romanian Democratic Convention, won the legislative elections. Nevertheless, Iliescu returned in power during the 2000 general elections.

179 In 2007, the party merged with the Liberal Democratic Party (PLD), forming the Democratic Liberal Party of Romania (PDL). PDL was associated with Traian Băsescu, President of Romania between 2004 and 2014. It officially merged into the National Liberal Party (PNL) in 2014, keeping the latter's name.

180 President Băsescu wanted a single-winner two-round electoral system, but a failed referendum on his proposal ditched the plan in 2007. A new electoral system was introduced based on a compromise. The previous party-list system of proportional representation changed to a mixed-member proportional representation system using sub-county constituencies. However, in 2015, the Electoral Code Commission decided to return to a proportional system based on party lists.

181 Alexandra Ionaşcu, 'Territorial dimensions of the Romanian parties: Elections, party rules and organisations', in *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 12 (2), 2012, 185–210, 188. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-445733.

182 Borbáth, 2019, p. 220.

Salvation Front (FSN) and therefore that of the Romanian Communist Party and the previous elite. Not unlike other Communist successor parties in the region, PSD combines ethnic nationalism with some elements of communist ideology, social democracy, and ethnic nationalism.[183] The party was successful in the general elections in the 1990s and 2000s, and after the 2008 electoral reform, it won a relative majority in the legislative elections of 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2020. However, the party's support base has progressively decreased over the past decade, from 45.5% in 2016 to 29.3% in 2020.[184]

When it comes to the centre–right, PNL alongside UDMR advocated for Western integration and overcoming the political and institutional status quo represented by the left side of the political spectrum. PNL is a mainstream centre–right party: initially a member of the European Liberals (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, or ALDE), it switched allegiance to the Christian Democratic European People's Party (EPP) in 2014. From 2008, the party's support increased (from 18.6% in 2008 to 20% in 2016 and then 25% in 2020). Romanian politics is built up around PNL and PSD, and the outcome of the elections often depends on how they interact or cooperate when in government or in opposition.

When it comes to UDMR, the ethnic Hungarian minority party has been represented in parliament since 1990. Even though the party's support never went beyond 6%–8%, since 1996 UDMR is often a coalition partner of the governing parties.[185] Indeed, a common joke inside the Bucharest political bubble states that elections in Romania are to decide who is going to rule the country with UDMR, for they are more often than not called into the government to stabilise the parliamentary majority.

183 Hanspeter Kriesi: 'Conclusion: A critical juncture for the structuration of party systems?' in Swen Hutter and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds.), *European Party Politics in Times of Crisis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 377.

184 Parties and Elections in Europe (parties-and-elections.eu).

185 Laurențiu Ștefan, 'Presidential politics and coalition bargaining', in Torbjörn Bergman, Gabriella Ilonszki and Wolfgang C. Müller (eds.), *Coalition Governance in Central Eastern Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, p.396.

When it comes to the other important parties, the mainstreams were challenged by anti-establishment parties, or movements, from both the far right and the liberal sides. Among the populist parties, the People's Party entered parliament in 2012 but was then kicked out in the following elections. More recently, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) got 22 seats in the Chambers of Deputies at the 2020 elections, to an extent as a side-effect of the protests organised against the COVID-19 pandemic measures, and it continues to enjoy a 10%–12% vote intention in the polls at the time of writing this chapter. From the liberal side, the Save Romania Union (USR) entered the parliament in 2016 as a fresh, anti-corruption and pro-expertise party. Originally a local movement called Save Bucharest Union (USB) set up for the 2016 local elections in the Romanian capital,[186] USR joined the Liberal family in 2019 and is generally considered to be on the centre–right.

In contrast to other Central and Southern European countries, Romania since the 2008 period has seen the structuration and crystallisation (as supposed to atomisation) of its party system. PNL and PSD not only survived the crises, they also cemented their position within the party system, by getting the vast majority of the votes over the elections, unlike many other catch-all parties in Europe who saw their share of the votes decrease over the past two decades. It is a rather remarkable (and unique) fact that the combined vote share of the two mainstream parties in Romania has not changed significantly and has remained high since the 2000s.[187] In 2004, the PSD, DA (DPL and PNL coalition) and UDMR altogether got 74% of voters at the Chamber of Deputies elections—while this number went up and down (90% in 2008, 71% in 2016 and 60% in 2020), the two mainstream parties combined form on their own a majority, which is not the case in most European countries today.

The success of Romania's mainstream parties can be linked to different factors. First of all, as they are the most experienced actors in politics, they know how to shift their position vis-à-vis specific political issues, and how to allocate state resources for

186 https://www.electionguide.org/elections/type/custom/?country_id=178&election_institution_type_id=&year=.

187 Borbáth, 2019, p. 220.

implementing policies.[188] The electoral system also ensures they receive a high share of votes, while the semi-presidential institutional design also favours big parties.[189] But what does it mean in practice? As the next section will show, PSD and PNL are competing with each other on the national political scene, but they also know how to cooperate: and in some cases, they also form coalitions to ensure governmental political stability and a safe parliamentary majority, as is the case today.

Mainstream competition versus mainstream coalitions

The Romanian constitution gives an active role to the president when it comes to the formation of the government. Due to electoral procedures, parties need to govern in coalition. The role of the president is to nominate a prime minister, whose responsibility is to start the discussions on forming the new government, before presenting the said government to the parliament in a vote of confidence. Only after being approved by parliament (by both a House and a Senate majority) can the prime minister take up his or her functions. In the period between 1990 and 2000, the presidential and the legislative elections were won by the same party (one party, or an electoral coalition), which made this exercise relatively easy. However, the situation has changed since 2004, as voters have repeatedly forced cohabitation between the president and the government—a practice that has since become ever more frequent.[190] This has in turn forced the mainstream parties to play a subtle game of competition and coalition between themselves, sometimes alternatively, but also sometimes at the same time.

For example, when PSD 'returned' to power in 2000, PNL and the Democratic Party established the Alliance Justice and Truth (DA) in 2003. The alliance's candidate, Traian Băsescu won the presidential elections in 2004 and the alliance formed a coalition with UDMR and other parties, which eventually fell apart in 2007 (as a result,

188 Ibid., p. 215.

189 Ibid., p. 214.

190 Ștefan, 2019, p. 403.

PNL formed a minority government with UDMR). Following the conflict between PNL and Băsescu's party, and as an answer to his re-election in 2009, PSD and PNL set up the left-of-centre Social Liberal Union in 2011. This grand coalition was in government until 2014 when PNL decided to break the coalition ahead of the European Parliamentary and Presidential elections.[191]

PSD then won the 2016 legislative elections and fell just a few seats short of an absolute majority—it then formed a coalition with a liberal party, ALDE, with PNL in opposition. However, a technocratic government (headed by Dacian Cioloș) was established after the resignation of Victor Ponta as prime minister in 2015.[192] After two consecutive governments (PSD-ALDE 2017–19, PSD minority government 2019), PNL replaced PSD and formed a minority government in 2019.

During this period, while cooperating and competing at the same time, both PNL and PSD tried to establish and collaborate with other parties: in the late 2010s, PNL and USR got closer and indeed led two governments together with UDMR in 2019–21 (under Prime Ministers Ludovic Orbán and then Florin Cîțu, both from PNL). However, this coalition was dissolved in 2021 when USR decided to leave the government, and after a rather long political crisis, President Klaus Iohannis ended up giving a mandate to govern to a PSD-PNL grand coalition, also involving UDMR.

In many ways, the present coalition continues the pattern of competition/coalition that has defined the relationship between the two parties for the past two decades: even though both PSD and PNL tried to form alternative coalitions with other parties, these proved to be less stable than a PSD-PDL coalition—perhaps because the fact that both parties have large and stable positions within the party system makes them more prone to define and divide clear roles over time.

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191 Ibid.

192 The Cioloș government was a national union/technical government that saw PNL and PSD govern together, with Cioloș being the neutral technocratic political leader, with PNL mostly in the government and PSD mostly controlling much of the legislative process. Ponta had resigned following the anti-corruption mass protests that were linked to a fire in a night club that had left 32 people dead. Due to corruption, the club had not followed the security norms that were compulsory according to Romanian law.

This short historical overview shows that while the president's position and role is clear, achieving (and maintaining) a majority in parliament has proven to be a rather difficult task for political parties. Since 2008, Romania has had 15 governments, with 10 different prime ministers. But compared to Serbia and Hungary, which are ruled by one dominant party defined by charismatic leadership, the role of party leaders in the long-term political life of the party system is rather marginal. Since 2005, PSD has had 8 different party leaders, while PNL has had 10. The personalisation of politics, therefore, happens mainly at presidential level, leaving some breathing space for political parties to develop their own brand, detached from the personalities of the leaders. The latter come and go without this putting the existence of the party in jeopardy.

This, of course, does not mean that personalisation is absent from Romanian politics—it is even a feature of the role of the president, which is central in Romania's political system. In this game, the centre–right has been able to win all presidential elections since 2004 (Traian Băsescu in 2004 and 2008, and Klaus Iohannis in 2014 and 2020) despite some difficult internal struggles during the election period; meanwhile, the centre–left has been historically the most successful in legislative elections, despite suffering numerous leadership problems over the past decade. The constitutional balance of powers between the president and the prime minister, and the necessity of forming multi-party coalitions, has also had an important impact on the political system, often forcing personalities to take a back seat compared to political parties.

Looking ahead: present and future challenges

It is clear that PNL and PSD have so far been able to preserve their power, and they have successfully adapted to the changing political landscapes in Romania throughout the years, especially since the start of the economic crisis in 2008. But even though they continue to rule alternatively or in coalition, PSD and PNL have to face growing social discontent and political criticism—which is in turn feeding the rise of new parties. Despite the dominance of the mainstream parties, the political landscape in Romania remains fluid, and parties are competing in a system that is

characterised by a high level of ideological inconsistency.[193] Political newcomers are constantly accusing the established and mainstream parties of being unable to fight against corruption, of being dishonest towards their voters and of serving their own interests rather than those of the citizens.[194]

Among those new parties, the liberal and progressive USR is part of the political centre and is committed to democracy. The party mainly follows an anti-corruption platform, and its identity is based on an anti-establishment narrative. On the other hand, the other new party that seems to have consolidated an electorate, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), is part of the nationalist-populist spectrum, and its rise is akin to that of other far-right parties in the region—although the emergence of AUR has come much later than that of the far right in Slovakia or Hungary, for example. AUR heavily criticised the government's policies during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it also opposes Romania's support for Ukraine. The party has a strong Eurosceptic and anti-Western stance, while spreading Russian propaganda.[195] Similarly to other far-right parties, they target their voters with identity-related topics (nationalism, traditionalism, protectionism).[196]

Citizens' scepticism towards political parties has also been widely evidenced in public opinion surveys. According to an IRI survey from 2018, the four least trusted institutions in Romania are the government, the prime minister's office, the parliament and political parties,[197] a score rather consistent with global and regional numbers.[198]

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193 Kriesi, 2019, pp. 361–75.

194 Sorina Soare, 'Romanian populism and transnational political mobilization', in Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina (eds.), *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*, Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 8 March 2023, p. 252.

195 Ibid., p. 253.

196 Mihnea Stoica, André Krouwel and Vladimir Cristea, *Stealth Populism: Explaining the Rise of the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians*. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2021/02/26/stealth-populism-explaining-the-rise-of-the-alliance-for-the-unity-of-romanians/.

197 Public Opinion in Romania. Conducted by the International Republican Institute, 2018. https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/final_romania_poll_presentation.pdf .

198 See Dominique Reynié (ed.), *Freedoms at Risk: The Challenge of the Century,* Paris: Fondapol-International Republican Institute, 2022. https://www.fondapol.org/en/study/freedoms-at-risk-the-challenge-of-the-century/

Interestingly, the president of the republic earned more trust in the national survey. Lower trust for the Romanian parliament and political parties is also evidenced by lower participation in the legislative elections as compared to presidential elections. Legislative election turnout was only around 40% (39.2% in 2008, 41.2% in 2012, 30.5% in 2016, and decreased to 32% in 2020) in the last parliamentary elections. Turnout was consistently higher during presidential elections: 53% and 64% in 2009 (first and second rounds), and 51% and 55% in 2019.

Conclusions

The party system of Romania has shown remarkable signs of stability in an otherwise quite unstable region (at least in terms of political party systems), and this should be credited to its mainstream parties' remarkable resilience. The PSD and the PNL are currently in key political positions at all levels and seem to be locked in a strange, but so far successful game of cooperation and confrontation, which is sometimes played alternatively, sometimes played simultaneously depending on the circumstances of the day and the composition of parliament. This has so far allowed the two parties to consolidate an imperfect duopoly over Romanian politics: for many years and decades, these parties successfully took up the primary political issues, while other parties were not able to offer relevant alternatives.

However, recent social, political and economic challenges have stirred some doubts about the continued relevance of this duopoly. Political newcomers in the centre and in the far right are challenging the hegemony of PSD and PNL by criticising the policy measures implemented by the government, on the one hand, and offering a substantially different alternative, based on liberalism, on the one hand, and populism on the other. Both offers seem to have attracted a substantial part of the electorate, which may mean that the imperfect PSD–PNL duopoly that had become the basis of Romanian politics may be coming to an end.

This in turn may provide another set of challenges for the institutional architecture of Romania. The semi-presidential and the electoral systems were in many ways ideally adapted to an imperfect bipartisan system, allowing both parties this game of cooperation and competition, depending on the electoral and institutional circumstances of the moment. However, the present set-up with new movements contesting the hegemony between mainstream political parties may contribute to antagonising conflicts that have so far been relatively effectively managed by the party system. As all parties get ready for a 'super-elections' year in 2024, where all elections (European, local, presidential and parliamentary) will take place, mainstream parties will certainly face a significant challenge to stay on top and maintain their dominance. Their ability to adapt to what will certainly be a new situation after 2025 may be the key to maintaining their resilience in the face of new competitors.

European Political Parties' Resilience Against the Threats to Democracy

Peter Hefele and Wilhelm Hofmeister

In recent years increasing restrictions and threats to democracy have been experienced not only by many countries outside Europe but also in some member states of the EU. These are warning signals to strengthen the Union's democratic character and to develop new forms of building and expanding democratic resilience. This means above all reforming those institutions and processes that embody and strengthen democracy. In this regard, the European political parties and the European Parliament (EP) are of increasing relevance. They should be enabled to exercise the two basic functions of democracy: the free election of the government, that is. the President of the EU Commission, and the parliamentary control of those in power. These would be important steps towards honouring the claim and mandate given by Article 10.1 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), according to which the 'functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy'.

The specific contributions of European political parties (EuPP) to the stability and vitality of European democracies are often unknown and underestimated among European voters. Even after 20 years of formal existence in the constitutional framework of the EU, European political parties in the complex, multi-layer system of Europe's current constitution still do not get enough public acknowledgement and remain difficult to describe, as they still lack several of the characteristics of their national counterparts, such as individual membership, for example.

Yet, one can hardly ignore that the EuPP have evolved into relevant political actors within the EU system—in parallel with the increasing importance of the EP. Representing the 'truly democratic' part of European institutions, they need further strengthening as bulwarks of resilience against internal and external threats. Furthermore, they play an often underestimated role in the enlargement of the EU. Against this background, the following article will approach this topic as follows: it will start with a brief description of the origins of European parties and their specific functions within the EU's political process. Against the ongoing discussion about the (perceived) deficit of democracy of the EU and reform proposals, ways of strengthening European parties and the political role of the EP as a central element to provide more democratic legitimacy to the EU will subsequently be discussed.

Political parties can only function efficiently within a wider political 'ecosystem' of party-affiliated organisations. Among them, political foundations play an important role by linking parties to the wider society, training future party leaders, contributing to the programmatic development of the respective parties or building up international networks. The antepenultimate part of this chapter will therefore analyse the contribution of European political foundations to the resilience of their 'mother parties' and the European and national party system.

The article closes with several recommendations to improve the role of political parties in preserving the stability and vitality of European democracies—and beyond.

The European political parties

European political parties have become an important structural element of European politics. In the Lisbon Treaty, their role is briefly mentioned: 'Political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union' (TEU Art. 10.4).

However, their function—in contrast to that of national parties—is less to mobilise, represent, recruit or promote interaction between citizens and the bodies of the EU. Their role in the formation of the awareness of the citizens of the Union is also limited, because they have practically no direct contact with the citizens. Their most important function is to promote communication, coordination and networking between the European level and the national parties. The European parties are not hierarchically superior umbrella organisations, but rather 'federal associations'[199] of national or regional parties from EU member states, but also from countries that are member of the Council of Europe but not members of the EU. European parties do not have steering powers over national parties. Their most visible political influence is exercised mainly through the political groups in the EP. On their side, European political foundations are attached to the European parties. They are linked to a party

199 Thomas Jansen, 'Zur Entwicklung eines europäischen Parteiensystems', *Integration*, 18, (3), 1995, p. 163.

and complement its activities, for example, by carrying out studies or organising educational events (see section 7).

The political importance of the European parties has grown steadily over the decades—even if perception of their role (and even existence) by a broader public is still clearly lagging behind their real influence as relevant European political forces. However, their progressive institutional anchoring has contributed to their consolidation, and even the building of some ideological coherence.[200]

The cross-border cooperation of national parties in Europe dates back to the nineteenth century when the social democratic and socialist parties first started transnational cooperation. From the 1920s onwards, Christian and liberal parties also began international cooperation, after first attempts at loose cooperation between liberal or centrist and radical parties before the First World War. Cooperation between 'party families'[201] has accompanied the European integration process since its beginnings after the Second World War. The European parties gained a first visibility to a larger public in the run-up to the first direct elections to the EP in 1979. The first European party groupings were the Federation of Social Democratic Parties of the European Community, founded in 1974 as the forerunner of the Party of European Socialists (PES); and the European Union of Christian Democrats (EUCD), founded in 1976 as the predecessor of the European People's Party (EPP). The federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties of the EC was also formed in 1976. In 1984, the green-alternative parties of the Benelux countries, Great Britain, France, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland founded the European Coordination of Green Parties.

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200 Thomas Jansen, 'Europäische Parteien', in Werner Weidenfeld (ed.), *Die Europäische Union: Politisches System und Politikbereiche*, Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2008, pp. 166–85. See also Karl Magnus Johansson, 'The emergence of political parties at European level: Integration unaccomplished', in Sverker Gustavsson, Lars Oxelheim and Lars Pehrson (eds.), *How Unified Is the European Union? European Integration Between Visions and Popular Legitimacy,* Heidelberg: Springer, 2009, pp. 157 –78; and Steven van Hecke, *Reconnecting European Political Parties with European Union Citizens*, International IDEA Discussion Paper 6, 2018. https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/reconnecting-european-political-parties-european-union-citizens; last access 14.01.2023.

201 The term 'party family' goes back to early approaches to 'cluster' political parties in order to compare them with each other. The term became popular after parties with an ideological affinity formed joint groups in the European Parliament and started to refer to themselves as 'party families'. See Peter Mair and Cas Mudde, 'The party family and its study', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, 1998, pp. 211–29.

Their political importance as a factor of integration was first laid down in Article 191 of the Maastricht Treaty (effective in 1993), which, on the EPP's initiative, confirmed them as a factor of integration contributing to 'the formation of a European awareness and the expression of the political will of the citizens of the Union'. However, it took another 10 years before the EP and the Council of Ministers agreed on the statute and financing of European political parties in November 2003.[202] This new framework was instrumental in promoting the establishment of new European party organisations. After another 10 years, European political parties were given a European legal personality with the regulation 'on the statute and financing of European political parties and European political foundations'.[203]

These regulations also contributed to promoting the coherence of the European parties, even if member parties of the individual party groupings have always shown a certain ideological diversity. Formally, at least there is a minimum of coherence, which is fostered by the fact that member parties have to hold to some common principles as a condition of their registration. Beside this, it can also be observed that there are now fewer and fewer dissenters from the parliamentary party lines and an increasing tendency for political groups to vote in unison inside the EP, although it could be said that much diversity remains at national level between member parties.

Since its founding, the EP has considerably expanded its share in political power among European institutions. And as a result, the political groups have also progressively gained more power. However, with the increasing party fragmentation of the EP, majorities can now only be achieved by consensus between several political groups. This is fatal for the perception of a group's specific identity and profile. Namely, the Eurosceptic conservatives of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the right-wing populists of Identity and Democracy (ID) achieve a higher degree of

202 Regulation (EC) No 2004/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 November 2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding and its amendment by Regulation (EC) No 1524/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2007.

203 EP Resolution adopted on 22 October 2014, (Regulation, EU, Euratom, No 1141/2014), The new regulation came into force on 1 January 2017 only.

recognition through their strong opposition. For the EPP group, which traditionally sees itself in the role of a decisive motor for progress and the shaping of the European integration process, this raises questions not only about programmatic positioning but also about strategic orientation and coalition building.

Political parties as democracy-promoting actions of the European Parliament

The EP has established its own Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG). These programmes are actively supporting the EU's international efforts to promote democracy and human rights within the EU and worldwide. In addition, the EP permanently adopts resolutions on democracy and related issues inside and outside the EU. The declarations on cybersecurity in recent years also serves the goal of defending democratic processes and institutions (especially elections). All these activities are relevant actions to strengthen democratic resilience also in individual member states[204]—though not directed towards the EU itself.

All those actions and resolutions are carried out or adopted by the majority of the parliament. While the impetus for individual actions and resolutions often comes from individual groups, the parliament's position is the result of negotiations between different groups. Whether one grouping is more active or effective than others in promoting and defending democracy remains often unclear and might even come at the expense of individual parties' distinct identity. While centrist parties such as the EPP contribute much to these activities, the right-wing ID hardly engages in that debate. While more active, the conservative ECR also shows a rather low engagement and does not participate in these votes, or often abstains or even votes at times against the resolutions.[205]

204 One of the most noted actions in recent EU history was the resolution of 15 September 2022, in which the European Parliament endorsed a report stating a 'breakdown in democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in Hungary, turning the country into a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy' and condemning the 'deliberate and systematic efforts of the Hungarian government' to undermine European values and demands (P9_TA(2022)0324).

205 Tanja A. Börzel and Miriam Hartlapp, 'Eurosceptic contestation and legislative behaviour in the European Parliament', in Petra Ahrens, Anna Elomäki and Johanna Kantola (eds.), *European Parliament's Political Groups in Turbulent Times,* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 97–121.

The 'political' role of European parties in the constitutional system of the EU

European parties as organs of political decision-making in Europe have not yet kept pace with their institutional consolidation. This means, for example, that they have not yet built strong organisational structures, including party apparatuses, or local branches. Neither do delete they perform a function of articulating and aggregating societal interests, or rather they do this indirectly, through the inputs they receive from their national member parties. In the eyes of many European citizens and even many professional observers, national governments and EU institutions dominate the Union's decision-making processes, not political parties. However, this does not do justice to the actual role European political parties play. Even interest groups are often given a higher degree of influence than European parties.

In the run for the last European elections in 2019, once again the national parties have very much shaped the election campaign according to national issues and priorities. The role of the respective European party families was often side-lined and diluted into the 'European election' (as opposed to 'European' election) programmes. Yet, the debate about the *Spitzenkandidat* (or top candidate nominated by the European parties for the post of president of the Commission) has generated some attention and contributed to the higher turnout.[206]

Despite those setbacks, there are some arguments to support a stronger role of European parties to further the democratisation of the EU:

- The first is the close interlinkage between the European parties and their parliamentary groups in the EP. This is particularly important for the two largest party groups, the EPP and the PES, which are composed only of parties which are members of their respective European family (as opposed to individuals or parties that are affiliated to a parliamentary group but not affiliated to a European party). This grants the

206 The turnout was also pushed by the mobilisation of part of the electorate in support (or rejection) of the right-wing populist and extremist parties.

European parties relevant political influence on the work of the parliamentary groups.

- Second, the value of coordination and networking between the national and European levels cannot be underestimated—thanks to the institutional make-up of the EU, it actually complements rather than obstructs the work of the parliamentary groups. During the meetings of the heads of government with 'their' European parties before the European Council, those national parties that do not send a representative (i.e. head of government) to the Council meetings have the opportunity to express their opinion on the matters on the Council's agenda, and, in the best case, to influence the stance of 'their' Council members.

- Third, the European parties have a major influence on member states, and especially in the newer members of the Union, on the development of their ideological–programmatic orientation and political strategy. Thereby they also exert a considerable influence on citizens' attitudes towards the Union. This was especially the case in the processes of democratisation during the enlargement process in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.207 During this process, the coordination with and within European umbrella organisations was of great importance for many national parties. When national parties in the candidate countries joined a certain European party, even if the ideological ties were not yet very solid, the latter had a decisive influence on the former's political stance at home. This has been the case for the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)'s affiliation to the EPP, which has contributed to strengthening its pro-European stance and has influenced its policy positions on issues such as EU integration and regional cooperation. When the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) joined the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE), this also had an impact on the party's conservative and Eurosceptic positions at the national level. Directly and indirectly, the European parties have indeed influenced the political awareness of citizens in the sense of Article 10.4 of the Lisbon Treaty. This role is sometimes overlooked as too much attention is

207 Benjamin von dem Berge, *Im Osten was Neues. Die Osterweiterung der Europarteien und ihr Einfluss auf mittel- und osteuropäische Partnerparteien*, Baden Baden: Nomos, 2015; See also Teona Lavrelashvili, *The EPP's Engagement with its Sister Parties in Serbia and Georgia*. Leuven: Dissertation, 2022; and Olaf Wientzek, *The European People's Party and the East: Party Cooperation in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019.

paid to bilateral relationship with the major parties of the larger member states. It must also be acknowledged here that the volatility of the electorate in several accession countries and the resulting fluctuations in the political weight of national parties has also affected the position of the European parties. This is particularly evident in the shifts in the composition of the EP after the last elections in 2019.

The democratic deficit of the EU and the discussion about the 'Spitzenkandidat' as a symbol of the European processes' democratisation

The issue of democratic legitimacy has been a topic for the European unification process almost from the beginning. Political and social actors, as well as numerous academic publications, criticise the so-called 'democratic deficit' of European decision-making procedures. Above all, the negotiation processes between the governments of the member states and the EU executive are seen as opaque. Further, nation-state competences, previously exercised by directly democratically legitimised and controlled institutions of the member states, are being handed over to European institutions that do not possess this legitimacy and do not derive it from any other source.[208] Eurobarometer surveys show that despite a high level of positive attitudes towards the EU, citizens' trust in the EU institutions is not exceptionally high. The numbers recently came close to 50%, after many years at a constant 43%.[209] At the same time, the chronically low turnout in the EP elections shows that many citizens do not expect their vote to have any influence on European decisions. Yet, the increase in turnout in the 2019 elections to 50.6% after hitting a low with 43% in the two previous elections of 2004 and 2009, cannot be considered a turning point towards more trust in the electoral and democratic processes, because a good part of the mobilisation is due to the right-wing, populist and Eurosceptic parties.

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208 Jürgen Mittag and Janosch Steuwer, *Politische Parteien in der EU*, Köln-Weimar-Wien: Böhlau, 2010.

209 Eurobarometer 2020/2021. Available online: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/screen/home.

It is true that the Union has gradually extended the EP's powers since the treaty of Maastricht in 1993 and has also increasingly institutionalised the recognition and financing of European parties. According to the ideal model of a (national) parliamentary system, the people's representation has the right to elect the government, introduce and pass laws, control the government and overthrow it by a vote of no confidence. Despite the considerable expansion of competences in treaty revisions since the 1990s, the EP still only has legislative competences in limited fields in the European legislative process. Many decisions of the heads of state and government or other actors in the multi-level system are still taken outside the parliamentary or public sphere of influence and discussion. Neither the EP nor national parliaments nor the media exercise effective control over these decisions.

There are other features in the European election that tend to increase (rather than decrease) the image of an EU-specific democratic deficit. The low voter turnout, the character of the election (depicted as a national test rather than a continental one), the inconsistent nomination and election procedures, which also help national party presidencies to keep control, as well as a mandated quota 'distorted' by the principle of degressive proportionality, favouring states with smaller populations: all those factors raise doubts about the democratic legitimacy of the EP (even though at least the last two issues also apply to a certain extent to other parliaments, such as in the US). In addition to such institutional and procedural explanations, there is also criticism of the lack of a truly European public, as no European political opinion has so far developed—this leads in turn to a lack of European communication structures, a lack of identification processes and ultimately no European society.

Given such criticism of the democratic character of the EU and the possibilities of more intensive people's participation, the European parties and groups in the EP took the initiative in the run-up to the 2014 elections. They proposed to give the European voters a direct decision on the appointment of one of the most important positions in the Union: the president of the Commission. The *Spitzenkandidat*, or leader of the party list, would run for the post of president, thereby raising media

interest and civic participation in the election.[210] The implementation of this principle in the 2014 election was successful, although it did not push the electoral turnout from the previous elections of 2009. The *Spitzenkandidat* of the victorious EPP party, Jean Claud Junker, was nominated as president of the EU Commission by the Council and subsequently confirmed by the EP.

The European parties wanted to perpetuate and further formalise this procedure also for 2019. The *Spitzenkandidat* of the strongest group should have again been appointed as head of the Commission after the election. This came along with the expectation of a political upgrading of both the EP and the European parties in the European power structure. However, the Council refused to nominate Manfred Weber, the EPP's *Spitzenkandidat*, after the election and pushed through the current president, Ursula von der Leyen. The *Spitzenkandidat* principle thus failed, at least for the time being, not least because the parliament itself didn't adhere to it when the going got tough.

On 18 February 2018, a year before the start of the election campaign, the parliament had threatened to 'reject any candidate who has not been nominated as a leading candidate in the run-up to the EP elections'. It was its right to do so, as the Commission and its president cannot be appointed without the consent of the EP. However, this would have supposed going into a showdown with the Council—and therefore the heads of government in the member states, who enjoy their own democratic legitimacy with much higher popular participation when they are elected. Winning such a showdown would have required the EP to stay united beyond the traditional divide lines. Due to the greater fragmentation of the EP after the 2019 election, no candidate managed to organise a majority for him- or herself. This would have been an important step for the politicisation/parliamentisation of European decision-making processes. For both the EP and the European parties, however, this unsuccessful

210 Steven van Hecke, Wouter Wolfs and Victor De Groof, '25 Years of Spitzenkandidaten. What Does the Future Hold?' *Policy Brief*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, November 2018. See also Stergios Fotopoulos, 'What sort of changes did the Spitzenkandidat process bring to the quality of the EU's democracy?', European View, 18, (2), 2019, pp. 194–202.

attempt to push through the *Spitzenkandidat* principle meant a setback for the idea of a fully empowered parliament, as neither institution could decisively influence negotiation processes at the European level.

But this defeat of the EP has also fuelled the debate for reform for the further democratisation of European procedures. For example, the 'Conference on the Future of Europe' (COFOE) of 2022 singled out European political parties and called for European citizens 'to have the right to vote for parties at the EU level whose candidates come from different member states (transnational lists). During a sufficient transitional period, citizens would still be able to vote for national and transnational parties.' In its resolution on the European elections of 26 October 2020, the EP has already proposed adapting the existing regulation on European parties concerning the participation of parties in the European elections, their financing and their campaigning possibilities.

In another report and resolution dated 11 November 2021, the EP called for comprehensive reforms that would fundamentally change the role and function of European parties. European umbrella organisations, which up to now have operated only as a network of national parties, would expand into party organisations with a membership of individual members to give them more opportunities for participation. Smaller parties could benefit from those changes. Still according to the resolution, the rules on party financing should also be changed to allow European parties to contribute financially to referendum campaigns on EU issues, which would in turn increase their visibility. This would oblige national member parties to display the logos of their European party family on their campaigning material. In addition, not only European parties but also their member parties have to respect the EU's fundamental values, limiting the activities and propaganda of extreme and anti-EU parties.

In response, the European Commission has taken up several suggestions from the EP report. It includes the proposal that in the future political parties should be allowed to participate in referendum campaigns and to use contributions from member parties of Council of Europe countries (not all of which are members of the EU). The Council gave its opinion on the proposals in March 2022 but expressed

rather reserved views. It rejected the demand for the logos of European parties to be displayed on the websites of their members. It was also more reluctant about the demand for a clear commitment to the values of the Union. However, the discussion on those EP proposals will continue.

The amendment of the EU electoral statute on the so-called transnational lists proposed by French President Emmanuel Macron in the spring of 2022 was definitively rejected by the member states in the Council in May 2023, even though the EP had recommended its adoption, with the support of all the four largest political groups in the EP (EPP, S&D, Renew, Greens/EFA). This rejection also affects other aspects of the electoral reform proposal like the introduction of a second vote for EU citizens in the 2024 European elections, with which they could directly elect European parties and also (top) candidates in an EU-wide constituency; the reduction of the voting age to 16 years; provisions on gender equality; and the process of drawing up party lists as well as the introduction of a postal voting option.[211]

Even though they are now definitely buried for the foreseeable future, these proposals might come back on the agenda in future elections, for example, before 2029 or 2034. In any case, they demonstrate that the debate on eliminating or at least reducing the democratic deficit within the EU has developed a new dynamic. There is a firm will to strengthen the democratic participation and resilience of the EU, and the European parties, along with their associated political groups in the EP, are in a position to play a leading role in this debate. It can only be assumed that their importance in the European integration process will therefore increase.

211 Maria Diaz Crego, 'Proposing new rules for European elections', *At a Glance*, European Parliament, May 2022. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729384/EPRS_ATA(2022)729384_EN.pdf. Accessed 5 February 2023.

Democratic resilience against extremist, populist and nationalist parties

The debate on the democratic resilience of the EU has been fuelled by the growth of far-left and right populist and nationalist parties in recent EP elections. In the 2019 elections, the parties of the right-wing ID group significantly increased their share of the votes from 5.3% to 8.7% compared to 2014, doubling the seats of its predecessor, the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) parliamentary group. ID achieved the highest share of seats ever taken by a far-right group in the EP. Of all the political groups, ID is the most concentrated in terms of individual representation, as it boasts only 9 national parties from 9 member states out of 27.

The growth of the right-wing populist (but also left-wing populist) parties is to some extent also linked to the (perceived) democratic deficit of the Union. On the one hand, one can explain their good scores in the unaddressed complaints that the European public has been ignored in the decision-making processes of the Union. On the other hand, it is also true that many voters traditionally regard EP elections as 'second-order elections', meaning that their political significance is considered low, with larger groups of voters 'punishing' national government parties and voting for protest parties in European elections[212]—this in turn mechanically encourages populist votes, which are by nature protest votes against the system. Centrist European parties normally focus their campaigns on policy positions and comprehensive policy proposals. They address challenges and propose solutions that are complex by nature: issues discussed in the EP are often technical, and the decision-making process is also complex, as even in the EP there is a need to balance the positions of the different member states and that of the European political parties. No doubt, this approach is less exciting or easily digestible compared to the simpler, emotionally charged messages of populist parties.

212 Hendrik Träger, 'Die Europawahl 2014 als second-order election. Ein Blick in alle 28 EU-Staaten', in Machael Kaeding and Niko Switek (eds.), *Die Europawahl 2014. Spitzenkandidaten, Protestparteien, Nichtwähler*, Wiesbaden: Springer, 2015, pp. 33-44.

Past elections have shown that not only right-wing populist parties are benefiting from this, as the results of The Pirates, VOLT (which is an EU-federalist party), several regional nationalist parties or some extreme left-wing and left-wing populist parties show. But it is nonetheless true that the right-wing populists and right-wing extremists tend to benefit from these protest votes the most. They conduct their European election campaigns particularly aggressively, emphasise their Euroscepticism and do not shy away from negative, uncivil and emotional campaigning methods to mobilise a certain class of voters.[213] Additionally, the media likes to prioritise covering controversial or sensationalist statements made by populist parties, contributing to the perception of their campaigns being more engaging or attention-grabbing. Centrist parties, on the other hand, may receive less media attention if their campaigns are seen as lacking sensational elements or if the media prioritises highlighting conflicts or controversies.

The presence of regional nationalists in the EP is also a challenge.[214] The different demands of minority nationalist parties, including independence, from Scottish and Catalan parties, have been rejected by the Council of Europe, the EP and the European Commission's president; and they don't have the institutional support of a single political group. The pro-European groups try to surround the populist and nationalist parties by a *cordon sanitaire* at European level when these take positions that go against the mainstream of European politics. The types of claims by minority and populist nationalist parties target issues that are highly contentious in contemporary European democracies: the definition of the boundaries of communities and identity.

For the established European parties and the EP, the rise of right-wing populists and nationalists and the disregard for EP elections as 'second-order elections' have had serious consequences. Both have contributed to the continuous fragmentation of the EP, which has broken the dominance of the mainstream EPP and S&D groups. The

213 Dimitar Lilkóv, *European Parliament Elections: The Disinformation Challenge,* brief by the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, May 2019. See also Alessandro Nai, Mike Medeiros and Jürgen Maier, 'Euroscepticism and the use of negative, un-civil and emotional campaigns in the 2019 European Parliament election: A winning combination', European Union Politics, 23, (1), 2022, pp. 21–42.

214 Margarita Gómez-Reino, *Nationalisms in the European Arena: Trajectories of Transnational Party Coordination*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

ideological and programmatic differences between these two groups have become somewhat blurred in the context of years of cooperation and joint distribution of posts and offices, and for voters it has not been so easy to identify the individual profile of each of these two groups. This has come along with the continuous questioning of the democratic legitimacy of the EP and other EU institutions by Eurosceptic parties. Building democratic resilience must therefore involve new ways and means. New institutional arrangements must address the democratic deficit of the EU and the EP. The European parties and the parliament have indicated a high degree of willingness to act. However, due to their limited scope for decision-making, strengthening democratic resilience will largely depend on the next stage of political–institutional reforms in the EU, which will probably happen before the next election to the EU parliament in 2024.

The wider network: the role of 'para-party' organisations

European parties' history has clearly shown that the stability and vitality of democratic party systems have always been dependent on parties being embedded in a wider network of party-affiliated organisations (*Vorfeldorganisationen*). This relation can be described as a system of communicating vessels that provide essential resources for the core functions of parties, such as recruitment, the representation of different groups in society, the development of programmatic positions and so forth. To a large part, the current crisis of European mainstream parties can be explained by the transformation, weakening or even disappearance of those 'para-party' organisations. Any steps for enhancing the resilience of the party system itself have therefore to consider strengthening those 'support centres' too.

The situation for European parties[215] is even more demanding, as those support networks are very much linked to the national party organisations at the local, regional

215 See Simon Hix and Christopher Lord, *Political Parties in the European Union*, London: Palgrave, 1997; see also John Gaffney, *Political Parties and the European Union,* London: Taylor and Francis, 2017, and Michael Weigl, 'Europäische Parteien', in Werner Weidenfeld and Wolfgang Wessels (eds.), Jahrbuch der Europäischen Integration 2019, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019, pp. 165–70.

and national levels. At European level, however, those networks are equally weak, and they face the same structural challenges as the national parties. In post-war Western Europe, and later, in the democratisation processes in Central and Eastern European countries, German political foundations had often been very instrumental in providing the 'seed bed' and training ground for party officials.[216] Despite their important role, European political foundations[217] still operate under certain restrictions in terms of cooperation and direct funding of national partner organisations.[218]

In many member states the legal framework for national party-affiliated organisations is not very supportive either. Fears of foreign interference, lack of sustained and transparent funding, unclear organisational separation from the party organisation—all those factors have either prevented the establishment of political foundations or made it more difficult. This institutional weakness must be contrasted with the indisputable role played by party-affiliated actors in transformative societies with weak party organisations.[219] In addition, there are good reasons to believe that a party-affiliated approach has specific advantages in comparison to multiparty approaches.[220]

Is a coherent pan-European ideology necessary for the resilience of European parties?

In their analysis of the evolution of the EPP, Jansen and Hecke claimed in 2011, that '[m]aking the party's basic ideas and values explicit has also proven to be important

216 Winfried Schneider-Deters, 'Civil diplomacy: Politische Stiftungen in Ost- Und *Ostmitteleuropa*', *Osteuropa,* 55, (8), 2005, pp. 117–25. See also Swetlana W. Pogorelskaja, 'Die parteinahen Stiftungen als Akteure und Instrumente der deutschen Außenpolitik', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte,* 6–7, 2002, pp. 29–38.

217 For the legal framework, see https://www.europarl.europa.eu/contracts-and-grants/en/political-parties-and-foundations/european-political-foundations, 2022. Accessed 23 December 2022.

218 See Pascal Schonard, 'Europäische politische Parteien und europäische politische Stiftungen: Ein Kurzbeitrag zum unionsrechtlichen Rahmen', *MIP,* 3, 2022, pp. 311–21.

219 As a recent case study for Serbia and Georgia, see Lavrelashvili, 2022.

220 See, e.g., the EU Defense of Democracy Package, International IDEA and the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD), or The Netherlands Institute for Multi-party Dialogue.

whenever the EPP wants to properly distinguish itself from other political parties and families. This seems particularly true at the European level, since European parties, unlike those at the national level, cannot rely as much as they might want on people . . . or on policies, which in the European context are first of all attributed to the groups in the European Parliament (EP).'[221] This observation is still valid, but it also explains the difficulties mainstream political parties, in particular conservative and Christian democratic parties, have been facing during the last decade. The constant decline of traditional milieus (e.g. Christian churches) reflects the massive secularisation and individualisation processes within Western European societies. The enlargement of the EU and the large number of new centre–right parties joining the EPP has brought additional complexity in terms of shared—but sometimes also divisive—values and joint programmatic projects.[222] This made the basic idea of a 'people's' party (or catch-all party), that is, to integrate a large range of different positions under on single tent, more and more difficult. For some years, this development had been covered up by strong political leadership in major member states. But the loss of elections, the European polycrisis, and the internal and external threats, as well as global system competition have now brought this purely pragmatic approach to an end.

With rising competition from right-wing and (to a lesser degree) left-wing competitors,[223] the quest for ideological (re-)positioning is back on the table. In the past European Conservatives and Christian Democrats have been able to spearhead major steps in European integration. This momentum has currently been lost, as much of decision-makers' focus has been on the management of crises rather than grand visions—indeed, a new vision for the 'European Project' is seldom discussed, and it is the subject of deep disagreements, even inside the EPP family. This debate

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221 Steven van Hecke and Thomas Jansen, *At Europe's Service*, Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer, 2011, p. 273.

222 Roughly a third of the member parties of the EPP are currently from Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

223 See Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021; see also Christopher Bickerton, *Technopopulism: The New Logic of Democratic Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

itself is inextricably linked to the future constitution of Europe as a whole, and how the principle of subsidiarity will be applied, as many intra/inter-party controversies are centred around cultural values.[224]

Yet, there is no doubt that a renewed and open debate on joint values is necessary today, perhaps more than ever, at least on the centre–right. The success of European conservatism has always stood on two feet: its governance capability to provide pragmatic solutions for the security and wealth of Europeans, on one hand; and a distinguishable profile based on clear values as a complement. Both legs had been weakened over the last two decades, and they need to be strengthened in a joint effort by the EPP and its member parties.

Conclusions and recommendations

- The full potential of European parties has not been tapped yet. Unleashing it will require not only strong leadership but also more efforts in in-depth research, in particular on the relation between the European parties and their member parties. While there is broad expertise on the national level, the characteristics of parties at European level and the interaction with other levels are still not well understood. It thus seems necessary to improve the exchanges and links between European and national parties in terms of joint programmatic development, recruitment and communication strategies. This relationship is hampered by the specific role of the political groups in the EP. In this context, one should also consider a revision of

224 See Federico Reho and Anne Blanksma Ceta, *Standing in Unity, Respecting Diversity*. Brussels: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2022. For a recent regional case study for Central and Eastern Europe, see Zora Hesová, 'Culture wars are a dead end', in Lucie Tungul (ed.), *Shaping EU Presidency Priorities: National Challenges in a European Context*, Prague: TOPAZ, 2022, pp. 33–40.

legal framework for European political parties and European political foundations, for example, in terms of funding and transparent internal processes. This should take place before the next round of enlargement of the EU.

- When it comes to conservative parties, a first recommendation would be to refocus on the vast network of societal organisations that constitute a valuable source of their own resilience. These links with civil society are currently better exploited by their political competitors.
- More generally, constitutional and institutional matters are of utmost importance for the future of European parties. Even though the European Council has rejected an amendment of the electoral system for the EP, in a longer-term perspective this topic should be put back on the agenda with the intention to modify the EP's (and thereby indirectly the European parties') participation in the nomination and election of the president of the EU Commission. Such a reform should be decided in view of the aim to increase the importance of the EP elections, contribute to a higher mobilisation of voters and the parties themselves and thus send a clear signal in favour of the democratic legitimisation of European processes and decisions, and against the allegation of a democratic deficit of the EU.
- Regarding the election processes, European party logos should be displayed clearly next to national party logos on ballot papers to improve the visibility of European parties and the EU dimension in EP elections.
- In order to increase the links between European parties and civil society, the former should engage more intensely with the later to enhance grass-roots-level input in EU decision-making and to improve connections with civil society in daily party life. European parties should develop and maintain permanent forums for citizens in the EU member states (together with their national member parties) to facilitate debates on Europe-wide issues and enhance citizens' understanding of EU policymaking.

- To raise awareness for the EP elections, public and private broadcasting in the EU member states should organise debates between the main candidates for the EP.
- Last but not least, European parties and their affiliated foundations should be encouraged and supported to significantly increase the exchange of their affiliated party members, especially youth and women. This would increase the knowledge and commitment of the future generation of political leaders to the cause of the EU and its democratic legitimacy.

Certain political "truths" are taken for granted: the story of the decline and even disappearance of political parties in Europe is a famous example. Outdated communication, undemocratic decision-making processes, lack of compelling ideologies, susceptibility to corruption are all criticisms directed towards political parties to explain why they are a relic of the past.

But, perhaps surprisingly to some, political parties haven't disappeared. They have remained the core political acteurs in all Western-style democracies. Much acclaimed alternatives such as "movements" or other forms of "direct democracy" had not been able to substitute those old-fashioned institutions from the 19th century.

How have political parties across Europe reacted to a rapidly changing environment? Are there lessons from different European countries worthy of being adopted by others? How can the legitimacy of Western democratic systems be strengthened, and what specific contribution can political parties make to this? And last but not least, what is the particular role of European political parties as a relatively new type of political actor?

To find answers to these and many other questions, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has set up an ambitious project for a comparative analysis of selected national party systems across Europe, which the Wilfred Martens Centre for European Studies is pleased to publish. Leading experts from political science, think tanks and parties had been invited to provide a comprehensive insight into the diverse landscape of political parties on the continent.

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