UC Irvine
CSD Working Papers

Title
HOW POLITICAL PARTIES SHAPE DEMOCRACY

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/17p1m0dx

Author
van Biezen, Ingrid

Publication Date
2004-11-01

This paper assesses the relationship between the nature of political parties and varieties of democracy[1]. It is argued that the changing role of parties can be attributed to an ideational transformation by which parties have gradually come to be seen as necessary and desirable institutions for democracy, and that this has contributed to a changing conception of parties from voluntary private associations towards the political party as a 'public utility', i.e. the party as an essential public good for democracy. Recent cases of democratization, where parties were attributed a markedly privileged position within the democratic institutional framework, provide the most unequivocal testimony of such a conception of the relationship between parties and democracy. At the same time, however, fundamental disagreements persist about the meaning of democracy and the actual role of political parties within it. Regrettably, however, the literatures on parties and democratic theory have developed to a large degree in mutual isolation. This paper provides a preliminary attempt to move beyond the consensus which exists on the surface that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties by considering varieties of party and different conceptions of democracy.

On the Paradox of Party

As Schattschneider famously asserted more than half a century ago, 'the political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the political parties' (Schattschneider, 1942:1). This affirmation of the centrality of political parties for modern democracy is generally accepted both by contemporary scholars and by policy-makers charged with fostering the development of newly emerging democracies or with improving the quality of democracy in established democratic polities. While parties were not necessarily seen as inevitable, let alone desirable, political institutions when they first emerged, they have now become firmly rooted in the established democracies and have rapidly acquired relevance in more recently established democracies in Eastern Europe and elsewhere in the world, to the point that they are widely seen as a *sine qua non* for the organization of the modern democratic polity and for the expression of political pluralism.

Behind the apparent consensus concerning the desirability of democracy and the centrality of political parties to the actual functioning of contemporary democratic states, however, there lies considerable disagreement. Most immediately, there is disagreement concerning the performance of existing parties. Much of the recent anti-party criticism stems from disappointment with the ways in which parties operate. As recently articulated by Schmitter (2001), political parties are not what they once were. More specifically, their perceived failures have given rise to a debate on the 'decline' of parties, underlining that they are losing relevance everywhere as vehicles of representation, instruments of mobilization, and channels of interest articulation and aggregation. At the same time, however, they have retained the more or less exclusive control over candidate recruitment and the organization of parliament and government. Distinguishing between the two broader sets of representative

functions, on the one hand, and procedural or institutional functions, on the other, Bartolini and Mair (2001) thus argue that, while the representative functions of parties may have declined, their procedural role is still intact or might even have been enhanced.

Perhaps paradoxically, therefore, parties are seen to be the key institutions of representative democracy but are also perceived to be increasingly incapable of performing those functions that are essential to a healthy functioning of democracy. The seeming incompatibility between these two propositions, simultaneously maintaining that parties are necessary institutions for representative democracy but that they perform inadequately with regard to their representative functions, is indicative of a changing role of parties in modern democracy and of changing conceptions of political parties themselves. More particularly, modern strands of thinking reflect an ideational transformation of political parties from the traditionally voluntary private associations – a conception with its roots in the liberal traditions of democratic thought in West European democracies – towards a conception of parties as an essential public good for democracy (see Katz, 1996). Recent cases of democratization in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, where parties were attributed a markedly privileged position in legal and constitutional terms, where the state plays a decisive role in party financing, and where state regulation exercises a degree of control on party activity unprecedented in the context of a liberal democracy, provide the most unequivocal testimony of such a conception of the relationship between political parties and democracy (van Biezen, 2004).

Moreover, underlying these debates about the contemporary performance of existing parties and party systems, there are deeper and perhaps more fundamental disagreements about the meaning of democracy and the actual role of political parties within it. Complaints about the decline of party, the growing disengagement from partisan politics, increasing dissatisfaction with and distrust in parties and politicians, the weakening of their representational and governmental roles, or the problems of accountability, responsiveness, and legitimacy, all rest upon, usually implicit, normative assumptions concerning what is valuable about democracy and about how democracy should work. Indeed, any discussion of the role of parties in modern democracies tends to involve strong normative overtones and *a priori* assumptions that are rarely spelled out (Daalder, 1992; Bartolini and Mair, 2001). But with relatively few exceptions (Katz 1997), even when these assumptions are made explicit, they generally are simply stated as self-evident truths, rather than being recognized as contentious choices. At the same time, and equally surprisingly, the literature on democratic theory has remarkably little to say about political parties, or at best implicitly views parties as an obstacle to democracy. In other words, notwithstanding their importance to one another, the literatures on parties and democratic theory have developed in a remarkable degree of mutual isolation.

As Bryce argued, no one has shown how representative government could work without parties (Bryce, 1921: 119). If it is true, however, that representative democracy presupposes the presence of political parties and that parties are transforming such that they are losing their capacity to act as agents of representation, this obviously has far-reaching implications for the nature of democracy. It is only with reference to theories of democracy that we can address the fundamental tension between the centrality of parties and their marginalization in an area quintessential to any modern democracy, and that we can try to make sense of the place of party in contemporary democracy more broadly. In particular when faced with the challenges of consolidating more recently established democracies, resolving problems arising from the changing nature of parties in the established democracies, and addressing the democratic deficit of the European Union resulting at least in part from the lack of adequate channels of representation, it is imperative that the literatures on political parties and democratic theory take more notice of one another. For this

reason it is important to assess European traditions of democratic thought and to consider how particular conceptions of democracy and political parties relate to one another. The remainder of this paper will examine this question, focusing in particular on the twentieth-century literatures on political parties and democratic theory.

The Turn of the Twentieth Century

It is important first to recall that the party as a political institution is a relatively recent phenomenon and that its presence at the time of its initial emergence was not necessarily seen as inevitable or desirable. Parties when they first appeared were primarily perceived as a threat to the general interest or as overriding the interests of the individual. Indeed, their existence was fundamentally incompatible with the liberal democratic tradition rooted in the political philosophy of Locke and the radical democratic tradition inspired by Rousseau, both of which are difficult to marry with partisan institutions, which by their very nature transcend individual interests and refute the existence of a *volonté generale*. It was the advent of mass democracy which made direct links between the state and the individual increasingly unrealistic and which thus served to legitimize the existence of parties as intermediary institutions between individual citizens and the state. While early democratic theory typically tended to view parties as obstacles to democracy, reflections on the emerging political parties of the nineteenth century did not necessarily deny the democratic legitimacy of the political party per se. Rather, as the works of such authors as Ostrogorski, Michels and Weber illustrate, their primary concern was with the lack of internal party democracy and with the undemocratic and oligarchic tendencies of bureaucratic mass parties in particular.

Ostrogorski's monumental two-volume study of the English and American parties of the late nineteenth century essentially draws two key conclusions, i.e. that organized political parties emerged to serve the needs of mass democracy and that party organization itself is pernicious (Scarrow, 2001: 251). In this sense, it can be seen to be a typical reflection of the dominant mode of thought on political parties and democracy at the turn of the twentieth century. While Ostrogorski acknowledged that parties had been relatively successful in 'ensuring the daily working of the governmental machinery in a democratic community whose volume was increasing with unprecedented rapidity', it was also argued that they had 'failed miserably' in 'upholding the paramount power of the citizen' (Ostrogorski, 1902 (II): 539). In other words, and in the vernacular of the contemporary party literature, while parties were successful in carrying out their procedural and institutional functions they could be seen to be failing with regard to their representational functions.

This is so, Ostrogorski argues, because party organization fundamentally brings about a dwindling of individuality and a waning of individual autonomy. It obliterates the individual by creating a loyalty to the party and its official doctrines, thus wiping out independent thought, initiative and political conscience. Dominated by professional politicians, the party 'machine' had come to provide the electorate with their convictions, and their sympathies and antipathies, and to prescribe their political conduct and choice. Ultimately, and taking the mechanistic metaphor to its extreme, this would result in 'a government by machine instead of a responsible government by human beings' (Ostrogorski, 1902 (I): 595).

Ostrogorski's solution to what he saw as the suffocating internal discipline of mass parties was to create a polity without permanent parties. Parties were to be eliminated altogether and to be replaced by leagues or temporary parties, which would deal with one issue or one problem at a time. Party organizations would be dissolved and members would be free once their objectives had been achieved and the problem for which they were constituted had been resolved. In this scenario, any loyalty to the party would be finite given the provisional

nature of the organization. There are of course reasons to doubt the practical viability of his theory, not least because it makes rather heavy demands on the cognitive and organizational skills of 'amateur' politicians (Katz, 1997: 41) and because it might lead to the dominance of administrative officials as the exclusive holders of continuity in expertise and organization (Ranney, 1962: 129). More importantly in the context of the present argument, however, this proposal underlines how Ostrogorski sought to reconcile liberalism with the idea of popular sovereignty, thus attempting to address a fundamental concern which had pervaded much of the nineteenth century (see Quagliariello, 1996).

Ostrogorski's views were echoed by those of Robert Michels. As a student of (Italian and German) socialism, the political views of Michels were, in part influenced also by the political thought of Georges Sorel, those of a romantic revolutionary syndicalist with little sympathy for the political course of the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD), the most influential socialist party of the early twentieth century. Similar to Mosca's, the elitist political theory of Michels emphasizes that the power of an elite rests upon its organizational abilities. Indeed, it is his contention that every organization produces its elite, and that this is not merely an observed empirical and law-like regularity but, in epistemological terms, a 'law of nature'. In Michels' own celebrated formulation of the 'iron law of oligarchy': 'It is organization which gives birth to the domination of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization says oligarchy.' (Michels, 1962: 365)

In other words, in any large organization leadership will inexorably become a necessity. The nature of any organization is such that leadership activities are free from control and can never be fully held accountable by those who hold subsidiary positions within the organization (Cassinelli, 1953). Hence, while organization is inevitable in complex societies and mass democracies, any organization that reaches a certain size and attains a certain degree of complexity also inevitably produces a situation of domination of leaders over their followers, with oligarchization as the (unintended) consequence. Of the two broader sets of causal mechanisms which produce oligarchization – i.e. 'technical' and psychological – the former (division of labour, specialization, the 'technical indispensability of leadership') are considerably more important.

Michels made his case by analyzing the socialist parties and trade unions, and the German socialist party in particular, which *prima facie* seemed to constitute the counter-example to the iron law (Parry, 1969: 42). In other words, through what contemporary comparativists would call a 'critical case study' he demonstrated that even party organizations which are formally organized according to a model of internal democracy ultimately cannot avoid being dominated and controlled by an unaccountable elite. The corollary is that the iron law must apply *a fortiori* to political parties with less or no concern for internal party democracy and, therefore, to all parties. Moreover, and more broadly, the law is meant to be valid not only for political parties but also for all large and complex organizations.

The question whether Michels has himself ever been a committed democrat is at best contentious (cf. Cassinelli, 1953; May, 1965), as is indeed the extent to which elite theories such as his did not in fact encourage the acceptance of such undemocratic ideologies as Fascism (Beetham, 1977). The extent to which his theory can be seen to legitimate undemocratic principles, however, or indeed Michels' own personal values and beliefs, do not need to concern us at this moment. What is more important to recognize here is the relevance of his theory for the question of the extent to which political parties should be seen as obstacles or the very antithesis of democracy. Michels's own conceptualization of 'democracy', however, is rather ambiguous, as is indeed his answer to this question. Nevertheless, if internal party democracy is a precondition for democracy or if the iron law of

oligarchy should be seen also to apply to the organization of the State itself, Michels suggests we should be pessimistic regarding the chances for the ultimate realization of democracy.

Like Ostrogorski and Michels before him, and as Duverger (1954) would argue in greater detail a few decades later, Weber in *Politics as a Vocation* observes that the early forms of party were little more than cliques of notables and that the introduction of mass democracy had produced a new type of party with a strong and permanent organization. Facilitated by the psychology of the followers and the charismatic authority of the party leader, these 'machines' had taken a plebiscitarian form and were being dominated by a political elite or a single leader.

Taking the historical development of political parties in England as point of departure, Weber observes that parties were, at first, primarily followings of the aristocracy or parties of notables, formed according to class interest, family traditions or for ideological reasons. Originally, parties as organized permanent associations between localities did not yet exist and parties were active only during periods of election; cohesion was created only at the level of the parliamentary delegates. A member of the parliamentary party would act as the leader of the party central office and maintained contact with the local organizations. Paid professional politicians were absent outside the central party bureau: 'Politics was formally and by far predominantly an avocation.' (Weber, 1946 [1918]: 102)

The modern forms of party organization, brought about by the democratization of the franchise, which encouraged the development of an apparatus of apparently democratic associations, stand in sharp contrast to the old types of party. 'These modern forms are the children of democracy, of mass franchise, of the necessity to woo and organize the masses, and develop the utmost unity of direction and the strictest discipline.' This is when professional politicians outside parliament take control of the party organization, when power comes to rest in the hands of those who continuously work for the party, and when those who direct the whole apparatus (or machine) keep the members of parliament in check. In the English context, and the development of the Birmingham caucus in the second half of the nineteenth century in particular, '[t]he result was a centralization of all power in the hands of a few and, ultimately, of the one person at the top of the party', with the party machine becoming completely oriented to the charismatic personality of the leader (Weber, 1946 [1918]: 106). In these forms of party organization, the party leader thus comes to occupy a special position, for it is the leader whom the machine now follows. 'In other words', Weber argues, 'the creation of such machines signifies the advent of *plebiscitarian* democracy' (Weber, 1946 [1918]: 103; emphasis in original).

This generally leaves Parliament as a rubber stamp, as members of Parliament are reduced to nothing better than well-disciplined 'yes' men. 'Therewith', Weber goes on to argue, 'the plebiscitarian dictator actually stands above Parliament.' In addition, by bringing the masses behind the leader by means of the party machine, a state of affairs has been created which one might call 'a dictatorship resting on the exploitation of mass emotionality.' (Weber, 1946 [1918]: 106, 107). In America in particular, party organizations could be seen as structured upon the plebiscitarian principle in its purest form.

Although Weber seems to leave little doubt about the implications of this development for the political system, it should also be noted that his interpretation of the relationship between political leadership and democracy is rather more positive than it would seem at first glance. While for both Ostrogorski and Michels the absence of internal party democracy seems to undermine the democratic system as a whole, Weberian analysis, in a conception of democracy rather akin to that later embraced by Joseph Schumpeter, suggests that strong and responsible political leadership may in fact be a necessity for the healthy functioning of democracy. This is so because, unless it is controlled by strong political leadership, bureaucracy could, by virtue of the efficiency of its organization, easily obtain a

predominant political position and become the *de facto* ruling group, without being accountable to the public. Responsible and principled political leaders are therefore needed to keep bureaucratic officials in check and to ensure that they take care of 'impartial administration' and do not engage in politics.

In sum, this brief overview of some of the most influential reflections on the early political parties emerging around the turn of the twentieth century generally demonstrates a concern with their internal workings and with the lack of internal democracy and accountability in particular, although interpretations vary as to the implications this has for democracy. Ostrogorski believed that permanent political parties were so harmful that they should, and indeed could, be dispensed with. Most of his contemporaries, however, would acknowledge that as political institutions in a context of mass democracy they were there to stay. Indeed, while parties when they first emerged were not necessarily seen as inevitable, let alone desirable, it was with the advent of mass democracy that the notion of the party as a necessary intermediary between individual citizens and the state became more widely acknowledged.

For some time, however, the appreciation of the contribution that parties made to democracy would not exceed that of their capacity to organize large-scale democracies. It was only in recent decades that a more explicitly positive normative connotation came to be attached to the role of parties in representative democracy. Attesting to such a sympathetic view of political parties, and to a conception of democracy in which parties are not only key institutions but in fact a necessary and positive condition for a modern democracy, was their legal codification and their constitutionalization beginning with the restoration of democracy in Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany after World War II. This practice has since been followed in constitutional revisions in many other polities, including the European Union. It is in the more recently established democracies in Southern and Eastern Europe in particular, where the very establishment of democratic procedures was often identified with the establishment of free competition between parties, that the prevailing conception of democracy seems to be one in which parties are the core foundation of a democratic political system (Kopecký, 1995: 516). While political parties have been long neglected in the constitutions of western liberal democracies, in the post-war period their relevance for democracy became more widely acknowledged also in constitutional terms, to the point that pluralism, political participation and competition in many contemporary democratic constitutions have come to be defined almost exclusively in terms of party. Indeed, and despite their relatively recent appearance on the political stage, parties have put an extraordinarily strong mark on contemporary democratic politics, to the point that twentieth century democracy can be best described as 'party democracy' (Castles and Wildenmann, 1986; Katz, 1986).

Parties and Post-War Democracy

In many of the post-war interpretations, the parties that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are seen to have played a powerful integrative role as the main mobilizers of the disenfranchised population. Moreover, by mobilizing and encapsulating the vote of the newly enfranchised electorate they were seen to have ultimately contributed to the structuration and stabilization of the West European party systems, to the point that these became eventually 'frozen' (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). A critical factor in bringing about the structural consolidation of the West European party systems was the appearance of the mass party (Sartori, 1968).

Historically, mass parties emerged after so-called 'cadre parties', which, under nineteenth-century restricted suffrage were generally 'nothing but federations of caucuses'

(Duverger, 1954: 20). In contrast to the closed and limited caucus, in which entrance tended to occur only through co-option or formal nomination, early mass parties on the eve of democratization in the late nineteenth century introduced the organizational principle of relatively open branches and a party structure in which local branches (and cells) are organically conceived of as only part of the whole. While, as Duverger (1954: 23) puts it, the traditional caucus 'evokes an autonomous reality, capable of living on its own', the separate existence of branches is inconceivable. In addition, mass parties display a high level of vertical articulation, with a strong connection of the different organizational levels through the bottom-up representation of lower strata on the higher echelons. Executive organs are normally elected by, and formally accountable to, the national party congress, which usually consists primarily of delegates elected at the lower echelons and, as the representative organ of the membership organization, is ultimately the highest decision-making authority within the party.

Duverger (1954) expected that the mass party would be the most successful type of party in electoral terms. In addition, he contended that it was the most legitimate type of party organization. However, in what is admittedly a highly stylized version of party development, the mass party appeared to be only a transitory stage in a dialectic process of party adaptation and transformation. As Kirchheimer pointed out in the mid-1960s, parties were transforming into catch-all parties, for which the moral and intellectual *encadrement* of the masses was becoming increasingly irrelevant. They drastically reduced their ideological baggage and adopted an offensive strategy, attempting to broaden their appeal by exchanging 'effectiveness in depth for a wider audience and more immediate electoral success' (Kirchheimer, 1966: 184). In addition to this programmatic de-emphasis on the *classe gardée*, party organizations saw a further strengthening of the top leadership groups and a concomitant downgrading of the role of the individual party member. Consequently, politics was seen to become increasingly about electoral competition between professional party elites, rather than the mobilization and representation of socially distinct groups (see also Panebianco, 1988).

Katz and Mair (1995) argue that these organizational changes reflect a movement away from the traditionally strong linkages between parties and society towards an intensification of the relation between parties and the state. They contend that the recent period has witnessed the emergence of a new model of party, the cartel party, in which colluding parties have become entrenched within the state and employ resources of the state, such as public funding and state-regulated media access, in order to guarantee their own survival. No longer positioned between society and the state, parties have effectively become incorporated within the institutionalized structures of the state and have become agents of the state rather than the instruments of civil society.

The originality of the argument presented by Katz and Mair lies not so much in their suggestion for a new model of party organization. Indeed, as the literature on political parties has been steadily growing and the number of party models has proliferated correspondingly, the added value of yet another type of party is bound to be limited. One of the strengths of their argument, however, is their analysis of how various models of party can be located in terms of their relationship between civil society and the state and how these different models can be tied to different conceptions of democracy. The era of the party of notables, i.e. that of the restrictive suffrage of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was characterized by a predominant conception of politics which assumed there was a single national interest which it was the role of government to advance. It was in this context that Burke, in response to Madisonian fears that factions and parties are to be seen as a threat to the 'permanent and aggregate interest of the community', could assert that political parties were 'bodies of men' united for promoting the national interest. Elections were essentially a vehicle to choose

'trustees' rather than 'delegates' and political parties were basically committees of those who jointly comprised both the state and civil society (Katz and Mair, 1995: 9).

The classic mass party, by contrast, was the first explicitly to claim to represent the interests of only one particular segment of society. In this conception of democracy, politics is primarily about the competition between well-defined social groups or classes. From this perspective, the role of the party is to act as the agent of its segment of society and its goal is the representation of 'class' interests rather than the pursuit of the national interest. Hence, uniting citizens on the basis of 'some common impulse of passion, or of interest', as Madison had feared, became a virtue rather than a vice. 'Elections became choices of delegates rather than trustees and thus, rather than vehicles by which the voters gave consent to be governed by those elected, they became instead devices by which the government was held accountable to the people' (Katz and Mair, 1995: 11). In this context, an extensive membership organization was not only an 'organizational necessity' for the underprivileged segments of society to gain a political voice, but also corresponded with a particular conception of democracy, in which the legitimacy of the party depends primarily on direct popular involvement in party decision and policy making. At the system level, the mass party model provides for prospective popular control over policy, and of the state, through choice (albeit constrained by the encapsulation of the electorate into the subcultural groups that the party represents) among cohesive political parties.

The catch-all party challenged this notion of the party as representative of a well-circumscribed segment of society. The mobilization of voters from predetermined sectors of society is no longer emphasized; rather, voters are believed to have become free floating and uncommitted, in principle available to any of the competing parties (Katz and Mair, 1995: 8). Indeed, the notion of popular sovereignty comes to be seen as unhelpful or dangerously ambiguous. Rather, politics is primarily about the competitive struggle between elites for the people's vote. Elections now seem to revolve primarily around the choice of leaders rather than the choice of policies or programs; accountability comes to be ensured retrospectively on the basis of experience and accomplishment. Popular involvement of the party membership in the formation of party policies or programs is no longer indispensable; this has become the prerogative of the party leadership. Hence Kirchheimer's celebrated downgrading of the individual party members and corresponding increase in importance of party leaders. The corresponding conception of democracy is a pluralist one, where 'democracy lies primarily in the bargaining and accommodation of independently organized interests' and where 'parties build constantly shifting coalitions among these interests' (Katz and Mair, 1995: 14).

Recently, in the era of the cartel party, the goal of politics has become more self-referential, with politics itself having become a skilled profession. Electoral competition is limited and contained, taking place on rival claims to efficient and effective management rather than representative capacity or policy effectiveness (Katz and Mair, 1995: 19). This era has also provided the background for another stage in the process of ideational transformation on the relevance of parties, by which they are now widely seen as necessary and desirable institutions for democracy. Indeed, this conception has legitimized the increasingly prominent role of the state in internal party affairs, which is particularly evident in the growing relevance of public funding of parties and the increasing amount of regulation of party activity through public law (van Biezen, 2004). This attests to a conception of democracy and political parties by which parties are increasingly seen as an essential public good for democracy and less exclusively as the private voluntary associations which are the instruments of civil society (see Katz, 1996). Political parties are to be seen increasingly as public rather than private institutions, to the point that a conception has come to prevail of the party as a 'public utility', as Epstein (1986: 157) observed for the American context, i.e. 'an

agency performing a service in which the public has a special interest sufficient to justify governmental regulatory control, along with the extension of legal privileges, but not governmental ownership or management of all the agency's activities' (see also Ware, 1979). From this perspective, in which democracy is basically understood as a polity with regular elections contested by a plurality of political parties, parties come to be conceived of as an integral part of the democratic apparatus and democracy is essentially seen as a service to society provided by the state.

The role of the party in modern democracy has changed considerably over the past decades, significantly weakening its representative capacity in particular. Indeed, while support for democracy itself continues to be high, citizens have lost faith in the agents of representative democracy more generally. Cross-national research shows that, in the advanced industrial democracies, by almost any standard or measure public confidence and trust in, and support for, politicians, political parties, as well as parliaments, has eroded considerably over the past generation (Dalton, 2004). At the same time, contemporary democracies have witnessed a substantial increase in referenda and other initiatives of direct democracy, as well as a dramatic expansion in interest group activity and influence (Cain, Dalton and Scarrow, 2003). This shift in the primary political actors of modern democracy from parties towards individual citizens and interest groups has damaged the representative capacity of parties. The ascendancy of a myriad of special interest groups, moreover, is undermining the role of parties as the primary agents of interest aggregation (Dalton, 2004: 154). It might be argued that we are witnessing a fundamental transformation of democracy (Warren, 2003), or that contemporary developments signal the advent of a new style of democracy: in an 'advocacy democracy' citizens participate directly in the process of policy formation through channels of direct democracy, or through substitutes such as interests groups and social movements, rather than the conventional representative channels of the political party (Cain, Dalton and Scarrow, 2003). With unelected interest groups increasingly gaining status as policy-makers, however, 'advocacy democracy' clearly creates fundamental questions of representation and accountability.

The exceptions outlined in the previous paragraph notwithstanding (see also Pomper, 1992), analyses of parties only scarcely involve reflections on existing or emerging models of democracy. Conversely, democratic theory scarcely pays attention to the role, functions and types of political parties (cf. Katz, 1997). As will be shown in more detail below, just as scholars of political parties tend to disregard the variety in conceptions of democracy, democratic theorists generally fail to acknowledge the variety of party models. In democratic theory, parties are mostly treated rather generically, as amorphous entities or mysterious 'black boxes', and are often at best understood as simply consisting of 'leaders' and 'followers'. Moreover, as intermediary institutions positioned between citizens and the state, parties *tout court* are frequently treated as an obstacle to the achievement of real or authentic democracy.

Contemporary Democratic Theory

While for theories of popular sovereignty the quintessence of democracy lies in 'rule by the people' implementing the 'will of the people', liberal democratic theories tend to conceive of democracy as a political method. In Schumpeter's now celebrated formulation, democracy is 'that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.' (Schumpeter, 1962: 269) For the liberal democrat, democracy is not an end in itself. Rather, support for democracy is contingent upon the extent to which it safeguards liberty better than any other political method (Katz, 1997: 46). In most contemporary versions of liberal democratic theory

the role of political leadership is essential, while the main role played by citizens is that of the acceptance or rejection of their leaders by means of elections (see also Sartori, 1965). In the pluralist version, autonomous intermediate groups provide a key forum for political participation and it is competition between a plurality of these groups which constitutes the bulwark of liberty (Dahl, 1961).

However, here also the discussion scarcely pays any attention to the nature of parties as crucial intermediaries between the leadership and the individual citizen. For Schumpeter, for example, a party is simply 'a group whose members propose to act in concert to the competitive struggle for political power.' (Schumpeter, 1962: 283). At best, parties must be organized so as to 'facilitate the recruitment-by-cooptation by means of which the continuing democratic commitment of elites is assured and to enable leaders to govern effectively.' (Katz, 1997: 53) The polyarchal conception of pluralism as advanced by Dahl (1971) pays slightly more attention to the social basis of parties. Namely, parties should crosscut the major social and ideological cleavages of society so as to avoid any single interests becoming predominant, as well as to nullify the effects of the system of multiple decision points (Katz, 1997: 60). More generally, however, questions of how parties organize internally, how they relate to their external environment or which functions they ought to perform largely belong to uncharted territory in liberal democratic theory.

Critics of the liberal theories of democracy would argue that these approaches have redefined democracy such that they can be seen to accommodate an elitist situation (Bachrach, 1967). While for pluralists and democratic elitists individual participation in politics is not in itself an important ideal, for participatory democrats a high degree of political participation and a sense of civic responsibility is necessary for a political system to warrant the label democracy (Pateman, 1970; Mansbridge, 1980; Barber, 1984). From this perspective, democracy is not a political method but is rather about the process by which decisions are reached. Man is by nature a political animal; political apathy is largely a consequence of structural obstacles embedded in the existing system. Participatory democrats therefore advocate direct involvement and engagement of ordinary citizens in everyday decision-making, as direct participation rather than mediated decisions is believed to advance citizen acceptance of policies and thereby enhance democratic legitimacy. In addition, it is assumed to contribute positively to personal and intellectual development and to increasing the virtue of the citizen.

Because small scale communities offer the best opportunities for direct involvement of people in decisions that affect themselves and because actual self-government at the level of the national state is practically not viable, power should be devolved as much as possible to the level of local government and the workplace. However, in large and complex societies some centralized, representative state institution must exist as a necessary device for enacting legislation, protecting rights, enforcing obligations, implementing policies and mediating conflicts between local or particular interests. Representative institutions, including an elected parliament and a competitive party system, are therefore unavoidable for authorizing and coordinating these activities (Held, 1996: 314). With its emphasis on direct involvement, however, participatory democracy is ill-equipped to confront the more remote governing processes at the level of the nation state (or beyond) and has generally failed to reflect on how to organize the election of representatives, or how to link the local with the national more generally. On the face of it, it would seem crucial to incorporate these organizing principles and linkage mechanisms into the theory, and it seems equally evident that it is precisely through the agency of party that state and society could be interlinked. However, with few exceptions (Macpherson, 1977), political parties are conspicuous by their marginality and often complete absence from the vocabulary of the participatory democrat (see also Katz, 2004).

Likewise, models such as associative democracy (Hirst, 1994; Cohen and Rogers, 1995) where democracy is built from the bottom up from cultural and educational associations and workers' cooperatives, have remarkably little to say about the role of political parties in democratizing civil society or the state. More recently, the theory of democracy has taken a strong deliberative turn (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Elster, 1998; for early explorations, see especially Manin, 1987; Cohen, 1989). Deliberative democracy is inspired by the conception of a just society as advanced by Rawls and draws heavily on the notion of the 'ideal free speech situation' developed by Habermas, with free and equal discussion, ideally unlimited in duration, between participants who are oriented towards mutual understanding rather than being guided by self-interest, in which consensus would be arrived at by 'the force of the better argument' (Habermas, 1990). From the perspective of the deliberative democrat, democracy is primarily about the formation and transformation rather than the simple articulation and aggregation of preferences. Legitimate choice is ultimately the product of deliberation among free, equal and rational citizens. Existing democratic deficits are often seen as essentially 'deliberative deficits'. Deliberative democracy has rapidly gained momentum in the final decade of the millennium, to the point that, as Dryzek (2000: 1) contends, the essence of authentic democracy is 'now widely taken to be deliberation, as opposed to voting, interest aggregation, constitutional rights, or even self-government.' For the critics of deliberative democracy, politics is about the accommodation and resolution rather than the eradication of conflict and moral disagreements (Shapiro, 1999). Either way, like many models of the participatory strand, deliberative democracy raises questions of practical feasibility and illustrates that to some degree theorizing on democracy has become increasingly detached from political reality and actual practice.

Even where theories of democracy acknowledge the role of political parties, the lessons drawn from comparative empirical research frequently go unnoticed. Consider for example the observation by Cohen that 'political parties supported by public funds play an important role in making a deliberative democracy possible.' Indeed, he argues that it is difficult to see how the deliberative conception can be approximated 'in the absence of strong parties, supported with public resources.' This is so, because parties supposedly transcend narrow local, sectional and issue-specific interests and can provide arenas to articulate conceptions of the common good. The need for public funding helps 'to overcome inequalities in the deliberative arena that result from material inequality' and contributes to the autonomy of political parties because it frees them 'from the dominance of private resources' (1989: 31-32). Plausible and convincing as this may seem, especially for those dissatisfied with the strong influence of private money on the political system, perhaps in American politics in particular, this observation fails to acknowledge the considerable experience with the actual practice of public funding in the European democracies, both in the established ones and in democracies which have emerged more recently. Here, the voluminous, and expanding, body of literature demonstrates that we should be careful regarding state funding of parties as a panacea for the inadequacies and the unwelcome aspects of political finance. In fact, state regulation and public subsidies encourages the entrenchment of parties within the state and produces a concomitant weakening of their linkages with society. Furthermore, it may erect insurmountable thresholds for new entrants to the political system and thus serve to preserve the status quo (Katz & Mair, 1995; van Biezen, 2004). All of this should be of immediate concern for the democratic theorist, deliberative or otherwise.[2]

---

[2] However, if parties were not to operate in this way, in other words if his postulates were to be empirically unfounded, Cohen would find that 'this is not especially troubling' (Cohen, 1989: 32).

Shapiro has argued that the detachment of political theory from empirical practice is true for the study of politics more generally. He contends that an ongoing process of professionalization and specialization has dissociated political philosophy from the rest of political science, and has separated normative from empirical theory, 'with political philosophers declaring a monopoly over the former while abandoning the enterprise of 'positive' political theory to other political scientists.' As a consequence, 'normative theory […] is no longer informed, in the ways that the great theorists of the tradition took it for granted that political theory should be informed, by the state of empirical knowledge of politics.' This separation has not only resulted in an increasing tendency of normative political theory to disregard any trifling concerns over practical feasibility but 'has also fed the tendency for empirical political theory to become banal and method driven – detached from the great questions of the day and focused instead on what seems methodologically most tractable.' (Shapiro, 2002: 597) These observations ring true especially with regard to the gap between normative democratic theory and the empirical study of political parties.

Conclusion

Political parties occupy an ambiguous position in modern democracies, which is in part a product of the tension between the centrality of political parties as key institutions of modern democracy and their increasing inability to perform many of the functions seen as essential to a healthy performance of democracy. The centrality of political parties is demonstrated empirically by the fact that they are firmly rooted in the established western democracies, and have rapidly acquired relevance in the more recently established democracies which have emerged out of what Huntington (1991) has called the 'Third Wave', that it is difficult even to conceive of a contemporary democratic polity without political parties.

However, the failure to take questions of democratic theory to heart, and to identify the relationship between normative and institutional prescriptions, difficult as it may be to unite the two paradigms, is rather worrisome, particularly given the important challenges that have to be faced by modern democracy. One is that parties are likely to play a critical role in the process of consolidating the more recently established democracies, in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. However, the customary equation of democracy simply with regular elections contested by a plurality of political parties, while ignoring differences among party types and the peculiarities of local history, culture, and society, provides inadequate guidance for domestic political actors or international agencies, and risks undermining the democratic project as a whole. A second challenge is that of adapting to changes in the established democracies. More particularly, it is important to reflect on the functions traditionally assigned to parties in the functioning of democracy, and to ask how the apparently declining capacity of parties to perform these functions can be reversed, or alternatively how both parties and democratic systems more generally can adapt to the shift of those functions to other arenas. Finally, there is the challenge of how to accommodate the process of European integration with the search for adequate channels of representation, even more acute given the imminent enlargement of the European Union. Hitherto, the noticeably marginal position of political parties in the arena of EU politics has only contributed to the continuation of the perceived democratic deficit of Europe.

In democracies of the modern age, the principle of representation has become widely accepted as a solution to transform democracy from a doctrine suitable only for small city-states to one applicable also to large nation-states. However, as Dahl (1989: 30) observes, the large scale of modern nation-states also created a conflict 'between the theory and practice of representative democracy and earlier conceptions of democratic and republican government that were never wholly lost.' It is perhaps because we have not been able fully to transcend

our 'polis envy' (Fishkin, 1991: 90)[3] that we continue to have difficulties developing coherent theories of democracy which are appropriate for the context of modern society. It is in the fact that democratic theory has never fully caught up with the reality of representative democracy that much of the contemporary dissatisfaction with both parties and democracy is rooted.

---

[3] Fishkin attributes this phrase to Bruce Ackerman (Fishkin, 1991: 119, fn. 31).

References

Bachrach, P. (1967). *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: a Critique.* Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown.

Barber, Benjamin (1984). *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bartolini, Stefano and Peter Mair (2001). 'Challenges to Contemporary Political Parties', in Larry Diamond and Richard Gunther (eds.), *Political Parties and Democracy.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 327-43.

Beetham, David (1977). 'Robert Michels – from Socialism to Fascism', *Political Studies*, 25: 161-181.

Biezen, Ingrid van (2004). 'Political Parties as Public Utilities', *Party Politics* 10/6: 701-722.

Bryce, James (1921). *Modern Democracies*. New York: Macmillan.

Cain, Bruce E., Russell J. Dalton and Susan E. Scarrow (eds.) (2003). *Democracy Transformed? Expanding Political Opportunities in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cassinelli, C.W. (1953). 'The Law of Oligarchy', *American Political Science Review* 47/3: 773-84.

Castles, Francis G. and Rudolf Wildenmann (eds.) (1986). *Visions and Realities of Party Government*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Cohen, Joshua (1989). 'Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy', in Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit (eds.), *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State*. Oxford and New York: Blackwell.

Cohen, Joshua and Joel Rogers (1995). 'Secondary Associations and Democratic Governance', in Erik O. Wright (Ed.), *Associations and Democracy*. London:Verso, pp. 7-101.

Daalder (1992). 'A Crisis of Party?', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 15/4: 269-87.

Dahl, Robert A. (1961). *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Dahl, Robert A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Dahl, Robert A. (1989). *Democracy and its Critics.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Dalton, Russell J. (2004). *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dryzek, John (2000). *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Duverger, Maurice (1954). *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activities in the Modern State*. London: Methuen.

Elster, Jon (1998). 'Introduction', in Jon Elster (ed.), *Deliberative Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-18.

Epstein, Leon (1986). *Political Parties in the American Mold.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Fishkin, James S. (1991). *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Gutmann, Amy and Dennis Thompson (1996). *Democracy and Disagreement.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1990). 'Discourse Ethics: Notes on Philosophical Justification', *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhart and Shierry Weber Nicholson. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Held, David (1996). *Models of Democracy.* Cambridge: Polity, 2nd ed.

Hirst, Paul (1994). *Associative Democracy: New Forms of Economic and Social Governance.* Cambridge: Polity.

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

Katz, Richard S. (ed.) (1986). *Party Governments: European and American Experiences*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Katz, Richard S. (1996) 'Party Organizations and Finance', in Lawrence LeDuc, Richard G. Niemi and Pippa Norris (eds.) *Comparing Democracies: Elections and Voting in Global Perspective.* London: Sage, pp. 107-33.

Katz, Richard S. (1997). *Democracy and Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Katz, Richard S. and Peter Mair (1995). 'Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: the Emergence of the Cartel Party', *Party Politics* 1/1: 5-28.

Kirchheimer, Otto (1966). 'The Transformation of West European Party Systems', in Joseph LaPalombara and Myron Weiner (eds.), *Political Parties and Political Development*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 177-200.

Kopecký, Petr (1995). 'Developing Party Organizations in East-Central Europe: what Type of Party is likely to emerge?', *Party Politics* 1/4: 515-34.

Lipset, Seymour M. and Stein Rokkan (1967). 'Cleavage Structures, Party Systems and Voter Alignments: An Introduction', in Seymour M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan (eds.), *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross National Perspectives*. New York: The Free Press, pp. 1-63.

Macpherson, C.B. (1977). *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Manin, Bernard (1987). 'On Legitimacy and Political Deliberation', *Political Theory* 15/3: 338-368.

Mansbridge, Jane (1980). *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. New York: Basic Books.

May, J.D. (1965). 'Democracy, Organization, Michels', *American Political Science Review* 59/2: 417-29.

Michels, Robert (1962). *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. New York: The Free Press.

Ostrogorski, Mosei (1902). *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*, 2 vols. New York: Macmillan.

Panebianco, Angelo (1988). *Political Parties: Organization and Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pateman, Carole (1970). *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Parry, Geraint (1969). *Political Elites*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

Pomper, Gerald M. (1992). 'Concepts of Political Parties', *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 4/2: 143-59.

Quagliariello, Gaetano (1996). *Politics without Parties: Mosei Ostrogorski and the Debate on Political Parties on the Eve of the Twentieth Century*. Aldershot: Avebury.

Ranney, Austin (1962). *The Doctrine of Responsible Party Government: its Origins and Present State*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Sartori, Giovanni (1965). *Democratic Theory*. New York: Praeger.

Sartori, Giovanni (1968). 'Political Development and Political Engineering'; reprinted in Peter Mair (ed.) (1990), *The West European Party System*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 75-7.

Scarrow, Susan E. (2002). *Perspectives on Political Parties: Classic Readings*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schattschneider, E.E. (1942). *Party Government*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Schmitter, Philippe (2001). 'Parties are not what they once were', in Larry Diamond and Richard Gunther (eds.), *Political Parties and Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Schumpeter, Joseph A. (1962). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row.

Shapiro, Ian (1999). 'Enough of Deliberation: Politics is about Interests and Power', in Stephen Macedo (ed.), *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 28-38.

Shapiro, Ian (2002). 'Problems, Methods, and Theories in the Study of Politics, or what is wrong with Political Science and what to do about it', *Political Theory* 30/4: 596-619.

Ware, Alan (1979). *The Logic of Party Democracy*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Warren, Mark E. (2003). 'A Second Transformation of Democracy?', in Bruce Cain, Russell Dalton and Susan Scarrow (eds.) (2003). *Democracy Transformed? Expanding Political Opportunities in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 223-249.

Weber, Max (1918). 'Politik als Beruf'; translated and reprinted as 'Politics as a Vocation', H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.) (1946), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 77-128.