

NOMINATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Party as linkage

Party as linkage: A vestigial function?

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Abstract. Until recent years, two major trends in European politics – the growth of State services and increased political participation – have complemented the central role of parties. This paper argues that this complementarity may have started to come unstuck, and questions the future viability of the mass party as a result of a shift in the balance of perceived advantages of the mass party by both leaders and members. The paper discusses several potential costs and benefits of party membership for leaders and members. Using membership statistics and survey data the reasonableness of these arguments is explored.

Nomination:

Costs and benefits of party membership reconsidered

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The modern classics of research on political parties devoted considerable attention to the parties' mass organizations. In his seminal work, Maurice Duverger (1959) provided a comprehensive classification of party organizations and a comparative overview of party organizational development until the mid-1950s. His analysis led him to believe that the mass organization developed by socialist parties was superior to all other models of party organization. Consequently, Duverger expected a 'contagion from the left' – that the socialist model of mass membership would become the dominant one among west European political parties. This perspective was severely challenged by Leon D. Epstein (1967), who brought his American background into bearing. Rather than late 19th and early 20th century socialist mass organizations, he argued, contemporary American parties would constitute the model towards which European parties would converge (see also Kirch-

heimer 1966). Despite the subsequent popularity of the 'catch-all' thesis, its organizational implications remained largely untested and no conclusive answer was given.

Soon, party organizations ceased to be a central topic of party research. The disappearance of party organizations from the central stage of party research after the 1960s is largely due to a major advance in the availability of research instruments (cf. Müller 1993). From the late 1960s onwards, mass surveys increasingly became available as tools for political analysis. This relatively new instrument was particularly well suited to address questions at the level of the electorate. New theoretical perspectives, in particular the question of political cleavages and their continuity (Lipset & Rokkan 1967) and later the questions of value change and unconventional political participation (Inglehart 1977; Barnes & Kaase 1974), provided the intellectual fuel for survey research. Although some of the survey studies occasionally touched questions of party organizations (e.g., Verba et al. 1978) and some surveys even targeted selected layers of party organizations (e.g., the ECPR-sponsored mid-level elites project and other work on party activists [Marvick & Eldersveld 1983]), the major question raised by Duverger and Epstein remained dormant for about two decades.

It is the first achievement of Richard S. Katz's article (1990) to have forcefully reintroduced the classic question of the appropriateness of different models of party organization. He does so by addressing the question of costs and benefits of membership in political parties from the point of view of both party leaders and members.

Katz starts by discussing a wide range of general developments which are likely to have influenced the value of membership in political parties. He concludes that 'members have become more of a nuisance' for leaders and also 'less necessary'. Then Katz goes on, trying to substantiate his reasoning in a truly comparative manner with empirical data. In so doing, he draws on aggregate membership figures of 29 parties from nine countries, compiled from the literature, and survey evidence of party members from the early 1970s from ten countries.

The second major achievement of Katz's article is his empirical analysis of the survey data. The membership data by and large reveal a decline of party membership, which is in line with the arguments derived from the general developments. Katz then uses the survey data to address the 'why' question more specifically. In so doing he tests hypotheses about why political parties may want to have members, in particular because members are the most loyal voters in elections and because they are a source of political resources. He also considers the costs and benefits of party membership from the point of view of members, addressing the question of whether party members

have greater policy influence, believe in their preferential treatment by public officials, and value membership as a source of information as well as social or psychic rewards. He concludes that the balance of costs and benefits of party membership is shifting and that membership has become less attractive for both party leaders and members.

None of the empirical evidence employed by Katz (1990) was specifically collected for the purpose of his study. Admittedly some of the statistical tests are based on small N and strong assumptions. Clearly, 'Party as linkage: A vestigial function?' is an exploratory article. However, its author is very aware of, and explicit about, the limits of the data on which the analysis is based. Also in this respect the article might serve as a model.

The years which passed since the publication of 'Party as linkage: A vestigial function?' proved its value in several respects. First, this article was an important stepping stone for further research. Richard S. Katz, Peter Mair and their associates have collected and analysed data which substantiated several of the claims made by Katz (see Katz & Mair 1992, 1994; Katz, Mair et al. 1992). Second, the article introduced a new genre of empirical party research. It was the first contemporary piece to raise the question of costs and benefits of party membership and to suggest new ways to analyse it empirically. The fact that this question has become a central concern of a wave of recent scholarship underlines its importance (see Seyd & Whiteley 1992; Whiteley et al. 1994; Scarrow 1994, 1996; Müller 1996). Finally, the article also served as a stepping stone for provocative theoretical reasoning. If party members are indeed no longer really required, or are even a nuisance, and the state is replacing members in terms of providing vital resources for the party, what wider consequences does this have? This line of argument is fully developed in the 'cartel party' thesis of Richard S. Katz & Peter Mair (1995), which certainly will be among the most debated in party research in the 1990s.

Reflections:

Party as linkage

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When something is taken as the norm, it is easy to overlook its problematic nature. One of the advantages of studying European politics as an 'outsider' is that one has consciously to learn the cultural understandings that shape thinking about our subject. A complementary pair of lessons that I learned early on as a participant in the ECPR Joint Sessions was that the European

conception of American politics often is seriously distorted by imposing European meanings on organizations and institutions that have the same name on both sides of the Atlantic, but that are fundamentally different, and that my understanding of European politics might be similarly distorted by failure to appreciate all of the additional implications that the concepts of comparative politics might have within the context of a particular country.

These lessons have been particularly clear with regard to the study of political parties and of their place in the study of democratic governance. The study of parties as organizations has been a largely European phenomenon in substance if not in personnel. While there are notable exceptions (e.g., Ostrogorski 1964: vol. 2; Eldersveld 1964), both the classics (Ostrogorski 1964: vol. 1; Michels 1962; Duverger 1954; Kirchheimer 1966; Sartori 1976; Panebianco 1988) and the bulk of contemporary analyses of parties focus on Europe. This is hardly surprising given the greater organizational strength and political salience of parties in Europe than in the United States, or the rest of the world.

One consequence has been a strong tendency to equate 'democratic government' with 'party government' and to think of parties, both empirically and normatively, in terms of the European mass party of integration. While this has been true in the USA (e.g., Ranney 1962; APSA 1950), the disparity between theoretical inclination and observable reality has been great enough to problematize these connections. In Europe, however, the fit is, or has been, or has appeared to be, much better, and thus the appropriateness of the mass party/party government assumptions is more rarely questioned. Even as additional models of party have been recognized, there has been a tendency to judge them against the standard of the mass party. Thus Kirchheimer concludes the essay that popularized the idea of the catch-all party with the fear that 'we may yet come to regret the passing – even if it was inevitable – of the class-mass party and the denominational party' (1966: 200).

It was with a background of thoughts and discussions along these lines that I wrote 'Party as linkage: A vestigial function?' (Katz 1987a; revised, 1990) for the 1987 workshop on 'Party Strategies and Party-Voter Linkages'. My assumption was that most participants would take the idea that parties should perform a linkage function for granted, and thus that papers would be concerned with how party strategies contribute to linkage; what structures impede or facilitate performance of the linkage function; etc. Instead of accepting the reality of party-as-linkage as my starting point, however, I tried to address the question of whether, or to what extent, it (still) makes sense to assume that party is or will be 'the interconnection between mass opinion and public decision' (Key in Lawson 1987: 14).

Framing the question in this way involved making two related decisions, one about the definition of ‘party’ and the other about the definition of ‘linkage’. First, should the ‘party’ of ‘party-voter-linkages’ be understood as a label for a team of leaders who, as suggested by Schumpeter (1950) or Downs (1957), present the voters with policy alternatives as tools in their private quest for office or power? Or alternatively, should party be understood as an organization, which on one hand might be deployed by its leaders as an electoral tool and on the other hand sets the policy on the basis of which its leaders compete in the electoral arena as a result of its own, internal, political processes? That is, in the terms that Tsebelis (1990) would shortly popularize, should party be seen as one arena in a nested game?

Second, should party being a ‘linkage’ be understood as requiring only that parties present voters with alternatives among which to choose (with the additional assumption that an electorally victorious party will, in fact, implement the programme which the voters have chosen)? Or alternatively, should party being a ‘linkage’ be understood as implying that the party as an organization provides a set of opportunities for citizens actively to influence public decisions, and from the other side provides elites with channels of communication to the citizenry?

Either decision on each of these points would be compatible with most models of party and democracy, but the second, by virtue of its greater specificity about parties (active organizations rather than simply collections of leaders) and the more central role assigned to them, is particularly appropriate to the mass party model of party and the party government model of democracy. Moreover, the second answers were also particularly appropriate to my own frame of mind, given that this paper was written shortly after I had completed work on the Wildenmann ‘Future of Party Government’ project (see Castles & Wildenmann 1986; Katz 1987b) and as Peter Mair and I were organizing the project that would become our comparative party organization project (see Katz & Mair 1992, 1994). Thus, the focus was to be on the use of party by citizens and by political leaders, rather than on the *place* of party in some broader conception of the political system; on how people act, rather than on what role party plays. The approach, as in much of my work, would be what might be described as ‘soft’ rational choice: no theorems, but deduction and inference based on the assumption that behavior is goal-oriented and efficient.

Addressing the question in this way presented several problems of data. Some were presumably temporary, reflecting the profession’s failure to that point to have collected the requisite information, or my failure to be aware of data that were available. Others reflected the classic and enduring problem of data and inference in the rational choice approach: how to find evidence of motivation that is not simply the behavior that one is seeking to explain.

As always, one does the best one can with the materials at hand. A search of the literature and the ICPSR archive produced data which, if not perfect, at least allowed preliminary testing of hypotheses. The problem of motivation was 'solved' by broad-gauged stipulation; in the absence of surveys asking people their motivations (and recognizing that such data in any case would be highly questionable, especially in the case of politicians), I tried to think of as many plausible motivations as I could, and explore the implication of each.

The article concluded with a series of questions, and with the customary call for further research. Fortunately, part of that research has been done, some by my collaborators in the Katz/Mair party organization project and some by others (e.g., Scarrow 1996; Seyd & Whitely 1992; Whitely, Seyd & Richardson 1994). In part, this new research strengthens the evidence for the original conclusion that 'the balance of costs and benefits of party membership is shifting, both for political party elites and for ordinary citizens . . . to make membership less attractive for both' (p. 158), and in part it adds to the list of questions.

Certainly, today we are in a far better position to talk about trends in party membership. We now can look at membership trends in 69 parties from 11 European countries (Katz, Mair et al. 1992), and if these data cover the shorter period 1960 to 1990, they have the compensating advantage of being far more comprehensive than the longer but more idiosyncratic data concerning 29 parties from nine countries in the original article. While these data strongly support the general conclusion that party membership is decreasingly attractive, or at least decreasingly common, they also show that some parties have been able to grow nonetheless. While this is not the place to begin try to explain those exceptions, and while the absolute numbers are generally small, it is nonetheless suggestive that in eight or nine (depending on how one interprets the British Liberal Democrats) of the 11 countries, the party with the largest proportionate growth is one opposed to 'politics as usual' and/or the established party system.

One of the problems I confronted in trying to assess the economy of party membership from the perspective of the members is that the proportion of members in the electorate is so low that few national surveys even ask about the fact of membership, let alone motives for joining. Seyd & Whitely (1992, chap. 4) and Whitely, Seyd & Richardson (1994, chap. 4) have given us a rich analysis of why people join British parties, based on surveys of the members themselves. As the international project that Seyd and Whitely are coordinating generates comparable data from other countries, our understanding of party membership as seen from the base will increase exponentially, especial-

ly if some comparable questions from surveys of the general electorate will allow comparison of members and non-members.

We also know more about the economy of membership from the elite perspective, thanks in large measure to Scarrow's (1996) study of British and German parties. Scarrow finds more interest in membership on the part of party elites than I might have expected on the basis of the 'Party as linkage' analysis alone. She explains this with strong evidence of the role of elite incentives for maintaining or increasing party membership about which I could only speculate. Prominent among these is the increase of legitimacy that leaders believe will follow from a large membership base. In particular, Scarrow's analysis demonstrates the continuing strong appeal for party leaders at least of maintaining the appearance, and for many of maintaining the reality, of reasonable adherence to the mass-party model (pp. 175–176; see also Pierre & Widfeldt 1994: 352).

This presents an important puzzle for future research. On one hand, there are strong theoretical arguments to suggest that party leaders ought to be less concerned about maintaining membership, but at the same time we have strong evidence of party efforts to retain their members and recruit new ones. There are many plausible explanations. Most simply, the theories and their tests or elaborations may be wrong, either because they have ignored or incorrectly estimated some of the costs and benefits of maintaining a party membership organization, or because they have misspecified the objectives of politicians or incorrectly assumed rationality.¹ Alternatively, party leaders may have miscalculated. These possibilities call for far more detailed analysis than we now have of the strategic thinking of party leaders.

If the last two of these hypotheses suggest that party leaders may be 'dumber' than the theories assume, it is also possible that they are cleverer than the theories assume, not just in estimating the true costs and benefits of a membership organization, but in adapting their organizations so as to manipulate those costs and benefits. While assessing the full consequences of party adaptation will be a major and multifaceted enterprise, one important question can be taken as illustrative. Many parties have adopted reforms that appear to empower the ordinary members, especially with regard to the crucial question of candidate selection. At least in appearance, these reforms generally have involved some transfer of authority from the central party organization to the members, but even more they have transferred power from local committees to the members as individuals. This can be interpreted as an effort to increase

¹ If one accepts Kelley's (1957) observation that even a psychotic's withdrawal from reality must be judged rational within the broadest terms of the rational choice approach, so that meaningful theories can only be derived by stipulating a narrower class of 'rational' objectives, these two are effectively synonymous.

membership by increasing the benefits of being a member (e.g., Scarrow 1996: 201–202). But it also can be interpreted as an attempt to decrease the cost to party leaders of maintaining a membership organization, by weakening the (incentives for) local activists, and thus lessening the ability of ordinary members to organize and coordinate challenges to central suggestions (Katz & Mair forthcoming; Seyd & Whitely 1992: 209–210). These are, of course, not mutually exclusive; empowering one's supporters is a time-honored way of increasing one's own power or independence, but it does not mean that those supporters feel any less empowered.

As this suggests, the distinction between power (the ability to give orders that will be followed) and authority (the ability to make suggestions that will be adopted), and the distinction between behaviour based on material interest and behaviour based on conformity to norms (e.g., belief by leaders and/or citizens that the mass party/party government models represent the way one should behave in a democracy), will require careful attention as we try to understand the evolution of political party systems in Europe. In doing this, two complementary points must be borne in mind. First, even a vestigial function may be important if it shapes the way in which people react to an institution or distracts attention from the place in which the function currently is being performed. Second, even if parties fail to perform the functions that are assumed central by the mass party/party government models, that does not necessarily mean that they are in crisis, or failing. Not every change is a change for the worse, and the difference between crisis and opportunity often lies in the eye of the beholder.

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