

The discreet charm of political parties

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Abstract

The article reflects on Peter Mair's work in addressing the claims of the decline of party thesis. The cartel party model is discussed, the relationship between parties and the state, the collusion of parties, the quality of representation provided by them, their organizational responses to environmental change, and their patterns of competition. Critical assessment of the theoretical arguments and a review of the relevant empirical evidence indicate that parties possess more autonomy and influence than suggested by the decline of party thesis and its attendant components, such as the dealignment model. Some of the commonly cited symptoms of party decline are corroborated, but the article highlights the adaptive organizational and social strategies of parties. These strategies, together with the success of parties in maintaining an essentially bipolar pattern of competition, contribute to the resilience of party politics.

Keywords

dealignment, democratization, party decline and adaptation, party government, party system, representative democracy

Introduction

Our way of thinking about the role of parties after the collapse of the Berlin Wall is shaped primarily by the dealignment model and by the cartel party theory. Both point towards the increasing redundancy of party politics. In this article, I identify the principal underlying arguments of the party decline thesis, discuss several of its conceptual ambiguities, place its expectations in juxtaposition with the empirical findings, and offer alternative interpretations. The works¹ of Peter Mair are used to elucidate the decline thesis; once a sharp critic² of this thesis, he became one of its most prominent champions. I also engage with the partisan dealignment model, with particular reference to the works of Russell Dalton.³ Both approaches, however, are embraced by a vast group of scholars.

The core of the redundancy-of-party narrative that is intrinsic to the party decline thesis can be summarized relatively easily. Political parties are no longer able to fulfil their representative and legitimizing functions because they have lost contact with the citizenry. Ordinary citizens have withdrawn from party politics partly because modernization, individualization and cognitive mobilization have changed their social and political needs and partly because parties have stopped offering genuine policy alternatives, have ceased supporting collective political identities, have transformed themselves into a professionalized and insulated social caste, and have shifted their focus toward

governing rather than voice-giving. The external constraints placed on the scope of governmental action; the delegation of authority to non-political, or at least non-majoritarian, bodies; the increased ideological similarity between parties, or rather their joint lack of ideology; their cooperation in policy-making, their promiscuous coalition-building strategies and, concomitantly, the lack of a clear separation between government and opposition, have all contributed to causing a reduction in the significance of elections. Alongside macro-political changes, alterations to the organizational structure of parties have also led to decreases in bottom-up input as well as to the dominance of electoral logic over partisan logic. The subsequent outcome is the depoliticization and disenchantment of the citizenry and the inability of parties to shape not only the attitudes of citizens but also the agenda of the media.

Many aspects of this overall assessment resemble the previous body of literature on depoliticization, technocracy and loss of popular control. While parties were originally detested because of their 'partiality', i.e. they were divisive, extremist and conflictual, since the end of the 1950s⁴ the

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opposite criticism has dominated: parties are accused of being non-distinctive, technocratic, aloof and centrist, and, consequently, the ‘opposition is vanishing’, to use one of Kirchheimer’s (1996) chapter titles. Martin Heisler (1974) succinctly summarized the depoliticization thesis, identifying the main elements to be: decline of meaningful participation; irrelevance of elections for policies; disappearance of ideological differences among parties; decreasing emotional involvement of citizens; institutionalization and bureaucratization of the political process; blurred responsibility; and the victory of administrators over parliaments, of cooptation over opposition, and of system maintenance over large-scale reforms.

Twenty years later these claims, together with complaints about privatization and the empowerment of non-state bodies, reappeared in the discourse on party redundancy. But there are important differences between the two models and the two realities they tried to capture. The original criticism made by the depoliticization theory targeted a corporatist setting that had inherited and maintained high levels of participation in which communication between social segments was monopolized by elites and the political system was sustained by extensive, diffuse popular trust. By the 1990s, these conditions all but vanished, and depoliticization now appears to be a more serious threat to the legitimacy of the entire political system. In the 1960s, even the most moderate and pragmatic parties were seen as representatives of some socio-political unit or other. Today, mainstream politicians are primarily considered professional governors. As such, they cannot depend on the loyalty of their electorates; their reduced credibility consequently becomes a systemic problem (Mair, 2008). Parties may be able to fill public office, but they are no longer able to justify doing so (Mair, 2005). Parties submerged into the state in order to compensate the loss of the citizens’ enthusiasm, but this led to further alienation, one that is only temporarily counterbalanced by the resource-intensive, personality-centred electoral campaigns.

Although rarely emphasized, the theory does acknowledge that the recent changes in party politics occurred within the context of a democratization process. Countries labelled ‘democratic’ in the 1950s would not today be considered democratic enough to be accepted in the EU. The progress made in horizontal accountability, procedural legitimacy, transparency, legality, non-majoritarian decision-making, and in the guaranteed access to decisions by stakeholders has not been denied by Mair and his colleagues. Mair acknowledged that a constitutional democracy without mass engagement could signify government *for* the people. However, this is not government by the people. Democracy without parties, is democracy without the demos (ibid.).

I discuss several of the central claims of the party decline thesis, with particular reference to the dealignment and cartel models below. It follows from the summary above that the partisanship of society, the relationship of

parties to the state, the collusion among parties, the quality of the representation they provide, their organizational responses, and their patterns of competition are the principal dimensions along which we must assess these claims. The underlying question of this analysis of all these dimensions is whether or not political parties are relevant. By relevance I mean primarily two elements: autonomy and impact, i.e. parties have relevance to the extent that their actions are not determined by their environment and if they shape their environment.

The partisanship of society and the influence of parties

First, let us consider how far the de-participation of society has progressed, the area in which the dealignment theory perhaps produces the most robust evidence. Tendencies in election turnout, electoral volatility, party membership, party identification and anti-party sentiment indicate a decline in the popular legitimacy of parties. The erosion of bonds between parties and society is mainly exemplified by the gradual decrease in the impact of ‘long-term’ factors – e.g. class, religion or party identification – on electoral choice; by the increased relevance of candidate and performance-evaluation; and by increasing electoral volatility (Dalton and Weldon, 2005; Poguntke and Scarrow, 1996; Thomassen, 2005; Schmitt, 2003).

The first fundamental conceptual problem with the decline literature is that it tends to conflate the relevance of parties – understood as impact and autonomy – with the partisanship of the socio-political context, when the two must be treated separately. A society characterized by partisanship limits party autonomy and therefore relevance. The fact that parties today are less bound by their immediate organizational-cultural context may indeed pose a problem to the consistency of interest-aggregation (Poguntke, 2004), but it also means that internal party mechanisms are not corollaries of external factors.

From a normative perspective, party autonomy may be seen as problematic insofar as the agent becomes disconnected from its principal. But the identity of the principal was unclear to begin with: was it the party members, the activists, or the social group? It is highly unlikely that the preferences of these ‘principals’ ever coincided; therefore, some degree of agency-loss was already built into the mass-party model. Were parties, during the ‘golden age’ of mass parties, relevant only as the instruments of social groups, or because they were actors in their own right? If it was the former, one cannot speak of proper party government since the important decisions were determined by the social environment. If it was the latter, parties must have neglected their representative role right from the beginning.

The issue may be considered from another perspective: standard approaches treat the influence on the vote of social cleavages and of partisan identification as equally fitting

and as proof of the mass party model. But empirical studies show that there is often a trade-off between the two; party attachments start to make a difference when cleavages lose power (Schmitt, 2009).

Moving from conceptual issues to empirical considerations, the limited nature of the party–society decoupling process must be noted. Scholars working on established democracies often forget that the electoral markets in their countries are still stable in absolute terms: the majority of citizens do not change parties. Net electoral volatility is considered high if it exceeds 10 percent, even if the theoretical maximum is 100. According to a British five-wave panel study, between 1992 and 1997 fifty-seven percent of all respondents reported the same party preference every time (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009); and this was a period of dramatic change in British electoral politics.

Stability may continue to prevail partly because parties still make efforts to reach out to their voters. Dalton et al. (2011), for example, show that door-to-door canvassing hasn't disappeared from the repertoire of parties, and in some countries it has actually intensified, even if this is complemented by the use of sophisticated databases to target specific groups of voters. The fact that the new modes of contact (direct mailing and the various subtypes of new technologies: email campaigns, Internet, social media, smartphone applications, etc.) tend to bypass party organization and face-to-face interactions fits the decline narrative (Poguntke, 2002; Scarrow, 1999). Replacing debates in congresses and branch meetings, and, more generally, collective action with opinion polls, surveys and focus groups – particularly if this aims exclusively at tracking the median voter – indeed undermines societal partisanship. The decline of partisan communities, however, probably has to do less with communication techniques used by parties and more with larger socio-political processes. A number of scholars, most especially Kris Deschouwer, have noted that parties lose the diffuse support of the citizenry thanks to the successes of modernization, as a result of which citizens become less interested in collectivistic solutions. One must not forget, however, that the success of modernization also happens to be the success of parties (Deschouwer, 1996).

Modernization and democratization perhaps may not inevitably lead to cynicism and disenchantment, but they do make the expression of such sentiments infinitely easier. A few decades ago, the Pirate parties, the Five Star Movement or the Icelandic 'Best Party' would never have stood a chance. The terrain from which such anti-party parties have sprung is fertile not only because of the alienation of the citizenry, but also because of the disappearance of the culture of deference, increasing interest in the quality of democracy, and the increasing transparency of politics. The fact that the public tends to regard party politicians as a governing class may be a sign of disenchantment, but it is also accompanied by their expectations of higher standards from them, which is, in itself, a healthy development.

Before the habitual support of voters declined, parties were less compelled to respond to the needs of the moment and maintaining programmatic and value-consistency was easier. However, as tribal considerations decline and inherited and exclusive collective identities wane, more room is made for reason-based debates. Electoral volatility provides the preconditions for the responsiveness of the party system. Mass parties, combined with the responsible party system model, may have induced a higher level of participation, but the quality of this participation was rather questionable because of its occurrence in hierarchical settings.

The motivations given by the participants are also suspect. As Richard Katz (Katz, 2002; Blyth and Katz, 2005) acknowledged, the success of mass parties was based, to a large extent, on the distribution of club goods. Today, citizens have direct access to jobs, social benefits and other assets that were used in the past as selective incentives. Over the last half-a-century parties have lost many of their non-political functions (Kitschelt, 2000; Thomassen, 2005). Alongside the de-clientalization of the state and the decline of large homogeneous social groups, this has led to less solidarity within constituencies; however, the remaining solidarity is more political (Kitschelt, 2000).

This perspective is at odds with the claim – put forward by the cartel and the dealignment schools (Dalton, 1996; Deschouwer, 1996) – that the influence political elites have over the way ordinary people think is rapidly decreasing (Dalton et al., 2002). In fact, although party-owned mass media outlets have disappeared, parties have been much more than defenceless victims of this process. Empirical studies indicate that the agenda of the media is still heavily influenced by the parties, while the parties themselves pursue their strategies relatively independently from the concerns of the media (Brandenburg, 2002, 2004).

Similarly, the impact of parties on certain attitudes of citizens may have decreased (Thomassen, 2005), but it is still strong (Aaroe, 2012; Brader and Tucker, 2010). One way to gauge the relevance of parties is to check whether citizen satisfaction with democracy is related to whether their favoured party won or lost the election. If this is so, then citizens continue to look at politics through a partisan lens. The CSES data allow us to test the veracity of this statement. Between 1996 and 2009, 45 studies were conducted in Western Europe. Table 1 indicates that in 33 of these cases the relationship between satisfaction with democracy and pro-government voting was significant. In 28 cases, pro-government voters were more satisfied with democracy than opposition voters were; the opposite pattern was found in only five instances.

More importantly, the difference between winners and losers increased during this period. By regressing the difference in satisfaction on the time variable (years) and taking into account the clustering effect of countries with fixed effects, the coefficient is revealed to be significant

Table 1. Difference between opposition and government-party voters in terms of their average satisfaction with democracy, per CSES study.

CSES study	Year	Difference in satisfaction with democracy among winners and losers	t-value
AUT_2008	2008	0.409	-6.098
BELF1999	1999	0.003	-0.064
BELW1999	1999	-0.078	1.023
BEL_2003	2003	0.126	-2.488
CHE_1999	1999	0.127	-1.614
CHE_2003	2003	0.031	-0.389
CHE_2007	2007	0.037	-0.602
DEU12002	2002	0.481	-8.561
DEU22002	2002	0.356	-6.594
DEU_1998	1998	-0.044	0.786
DEU_2005	2005	0.178	-3.042
DEU_2009	2009	0.809	-11.899
DNK_1998	1998	0.218	-5.085
DNK_2001	2001	0.141	-4.012
DNK_2007	2007	0.344	-7.669
ESP_1996	1996	-0.425	5.083
ESP_2000	2000	0.491	-8.023
ESP_2004	2004	-0.187	2.866
ESP_2008	2008	0.314	-5.289
FIN_2003	2003	0.039	-0.556
FIN_2007	2007	0.296	-5.154
FRA_2002	2002	0.013	-0.116
FRA_2007	2007	0.437	-7.587
GBR_1997	1997	-0.234	5.307
GBR_2005	2005	0.444	-5.346
GRC_2009	2009	0.625	-7.961
IRL_2002	2002	0.452	-10.854
IRL_2007	2007	0.399	-0.280
ISL_1999	1999	0.539	-9.119
ISL_2003	2003	0.948	-14.530
ISL_2007	2007	0.528	-8.630
ISL_2009	2009	0.134	-1.872
ITA_2006	2006	-0.663	7.351
NLD_1998	1998	0.165	-4.134
NLD_2002	2002	-0.171	3.531
NLD_2006	2006	0.259	-6.242
NOR_1997	1997	-0.002	0.044
NOR_2001	2001	0.175	-3.662
NOR_2005	2005	0.226	-5.829
PRT_2002	2002	0.092	-1.383
PRT_2005	2005	0.216	-3.750
PRT_2009	2009	0.508	-6.032
SWE_1998	1998	0.265	-3.627
SWE_2002	2002	0.413	-6.170
SWE_2006	2006	0.138	-2.329

Source: CSES Modules 1, 2 and 3. The average number of responses of supporters of losing parties to the question ‘How satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your country?’ were subtracted from the average responses in the winning camp. The minus sign indicates that losers are more satisfied. Significant differences are in boldface.

(-0.025, $p < 0.05$). Western European citizens care about election results, and their partisan feelings affect their evaluation of democracy (Figure 1).

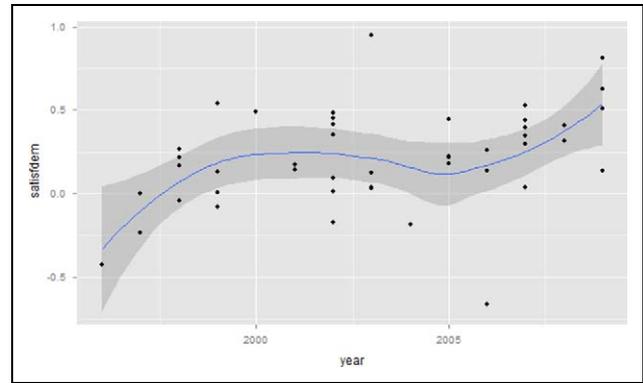


Figure 1. Difference between opposition and government-party voters in terms of their average satisfaction with democracy, ordered by year.

Source: CSES, Western Europe.

The role of the state

The cartel party theory attributes central importance to the proximity of parties to the state. State funding, the regulation of the internal operation of parties, guaranteed broadcasting time and access to governmental positions are the most discussed indicators of party–state proximity (van Biezen, 2008). The *etatization* of party politics is supposed to have been triggered by growing electoral challenges and the preference of mainstream parties for security; however, it has subsequently become a threat in and of itself to the social relevance of parties.

In spite of its plausibility, this approach has a number of questionable assumptions. First, it is unclear why the ‘state’ appears in the theory as the opposite of the ‘society’, and why, in spite of the early critical comments of Ruud Koole, this dichotomy has survived. The cartel theorists do not consider the state as a tool used by the people to achieve common goals. They treat it as an alien force, reproducing, ironically, the neoliberal conceptualization of state–society relations. The unproved assumption seems to be that as long as parties remain ‘private’, unregulated and unfinanced, they retain their connection to the people, but once they are regulated and supported by the state they cease to be agents of civil society.

One may argue that even a benevolent state can harm party autonomy. This, however, is true only in a very abstract and rather inconsequential sense. The state, as opposed to any other sponsor, cannot demand policy or personal concessions from parties. The influence of typically much more aggressive sponsors is limited exactly by state support and by the regulations prescribing transparency (see, e.g., Kitschelt and Kselman; 2010; Webb, 2002). Generous state funding may indeed facilitate or enable parties to divert resources from membership drives, but neglecting member preferences and the de-radicalization of party ideology are not automatic consequences of state financial support.

One must also be careful not to equate direct subsidies with the total amount of subsidies. The former has increased over past decades, but the latter may have been even more considerable in the past seeing that the benefits distributed by party machines (jobs, accommodation, etc.) also, ultimately, come from the state (Kitschelt, 2000). It is true, however, that the direct state finance of parties is more visible to voters and the increase in campaign costs presents a significant threat to party autonomy.

It is also important to consider the actual content of regulation. Forcing parties to nominate men and women in equal numbers or to endorse the principles of liberal democracy indeed constitutes a violation of their autonomy. Providing judicial guarantees against the violation of party statutes by party office-holders, however, contributes to the self-determination of parties.

The narrative analysed here takes a rather ambiguous position regarding the question of autonomy vis-à-vis the state. On the one hand, party politicians are said to form a self-serving, self-referential professional stratum. On the other, they are said to represent the interests of the state. The first position implies that parties have an autonomous position; the second denies that. The first assertion echoes populist discourse: politicians are interested only in their own career, just pretend to compete and don't care about their voters, etc. The second couldn't be further from anti-party populism; its portrayal of politicians is one in which they act responsibly, out of a sense of duty, avoid corruption and reckless behaviour and strive to achieve good government. The first position dominated the original formulation of the cartel theory; the second received more emphasis in the analysis of European politics of the 2000s (Mair, 2009). What seems to unite the two descriptions is that they both imply a betrayal of group preferences and the convergence of parties. This, however, does not solve the problem for which these positions are mutually incompatible.

Collusion and polarization

Cartel politics imply the presence of barriers against outsiders,⁵ incorporation of competitors into policymaking, sharing of office benefits and tacit agreements regarding the boundaries of policy debates. Collusion leads to lack of mass engagement and the success of populist parties (Mair, 1994, 2002). Indeed, empirical studies show that if citizens perceive there to be no difference among parties, they tend to abstain from participation in elections (Thomassen, 2005) and to reject partisan identities (Enyedi and Todosijevic, 2009). However, the empirical evidence for collusion, whatever aspect or meaning of the word is considered, is equivocal.

Most tests of programmatic convergence are negative (Lane and Ersson, 1998; Laver and Budge, 1992) or just moderately confirm the thesis (Volkens and Klingemann, 2002). Some actually report an increase in overall ideological

polarization (Kriesi et al., 2008) and most analyses find that party elites continue to be more extreme than their electorates (Dalton et al., 2011; Laver and Budge, 1992; Warwick, 2004). Schneider (2004), for example, demonstrated that while the ideological distance between government and opposition parties increased between 1940 and 2000, this trend was not reflected in the positions of the electorate. The tendency towards polarization is particularly prominent in the US (Poole and Rosenthal, 2007); American voters are aware of the growing ideological differences between parties, their attitudinal positions are better sorted by party than in the past, and straight ticket (partisan) voting has increased (Hetherington, 2009). Bartels (2000) documented an impressive increase of partisanship in voting. Most evidence indicates that this American polarization and ideological crystallization is an elite-led phenomenon (Layman et al., 2006). Polarization in Congress – which started to increase at the end of 1970s – preceded the surge in partisan modes of thinking at the mass level (Hetherington, 2001).

These findings do not necessarily refute the claim that the ideological and material stakes of competition among mainstream parties have decreased, but the threat of newcomers (Kitschelt, 2001), the non-political biases of the core voters (Adams, 2001), and the logic of multiparty competition (Laver and Sergenti, 2012) seem to guarantee that a Downsian-type convergence will not actually materialize.

The other aspects associated with collusion leave less to dispute: that today parties tend to rely on the same sources of funding and to use the same channels of communication, that their internal structures have converged, or that they occupy governmental office in increasing numbers. However, the consequences of these developments for competition are far from clear. One could argue that genuine competition requires similarity of format. The reduced variance in background conditions allows for policy offers to be readily compared. The rivalry between a mass-based, trade-union-financed and eternally oppositional Communist party and a notables-based cadre party may seem to offer a distinct choice, but their competition belonged more to the domain of identification than to that of competition.

Finally, if one intends to place the blame for anti-party sentiment on the lack of larger conflicts among the parties, then one needs to consider the findings indicating that elite divisions tend to increase disenchantment with democracy (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995; Mermin, 1999).

The representative linkage

According to the decline thesis, party elites are no longer able to fuse the functions of government and representation, so they simply opt for the former (Mair, 2009; Mair and Thomassen, 2010).⁶

This sharp contrast between the representative past and the unrepresentative present may be justified for highlighting some important changes in the forms of representation,

but the magnitude of the contrast is clearly exaggerated. First, during the mass party era only some of the parties would have engaged in both representative and governing activities, since, as the cartel theory points out, many parties were not considered eligible to govern. Even the tight partisan control over ministers is a relatively new, largely post-WWII phenomenon (Cotta, 2000).

Second, most empirical studies tend to show relatively high levels of policy representation, at least on the left–right super issue (see, e.g., Dalton, 1985; Dalton et al., 2011; Thomassen and Schmitt, 1999). Like society, party systems have fragmented; consequently, the likelihood that the various issue publics can find their own party has also increased. Accordingly, Kitschelt and Rehm (2011) find an increase in the left–right homogeneity of party constituencies. At the same time, it is probably correct to conclude that differences across electorates are more ad hoc; they are less supported by enduring identities. The challenge seems to be not so much the decline in the closeness of the relationship between the preferences of the principal and the programmes of the agents, but rather the uncertainty surrounding the identity of the principal and, consequently, of the agent.

One of the reasons why parties may have been able to fulfil their representative role even under conditions of increased fluidity and uncertainty is that they may receive more help than in the past from monitoring agencies; these organizations inform citizens about the behaviour of parties and governments. Vigorous media action and courts not only form constraints on cartel tendencies (Katz and Mair, 2009), they also provide voters with information, rendering it more difficult for parties to shirk. The rise in education is primarily conceptualized by the dealignment approach as a force able to challenge parties, but the very same force can also assure a more meaningful control of party behaviour and thereby more representative parties.

Alongside these *ex post* controls, parties can improve the quality of representation and accountability by submitting themselves to various *ex ante* controls. Pre-election manifestos still guide government policies (Klingemann et al., 1994) and there is a growing tendency among coalition governments to draft policy agreements (De Winter, 2002; Strøm et al., 2003); over time the agreements have grown in length and detail and tend to be taken seriously (Müller and Strøm, 1999).

Kitschelt's (2000) sanguine statement according to which parties have nothing left but to slavishly track their voters' preferences may be an exaggeration in the opposite direction. The dynamic changes in the positions of parties and constituencies seem to suggest that elite-led adjustments often prevail over bottom-up constraints (Holmberg, 2011). But whatever the mechanism, high congruence seems to be the rule as far as the left–right dimension is concerned.⁷

The analysis of the representative linkage would be incomplete without an account of what parties actually do in government. While barriers to newcomers, cooperation

across established party lines, and intra-organizational changes played the most central role in early formulations of the cartel theory, declining stakes and the diminishing difference in policies pursued by subsequent governments later received more attention. The claim that the scope of government decision has diminished has recently received strong support in the literature (Garrett, 2000; Huber and Stephens, 2001), although some find the partisan composition of governments still to be a major determinant of policies (Dalton et al., 2011; Keman 2002; Klingemann et al., 1994). It seems plausible that globalization and regional (European) integration have placed governments under heavy constraints; the transfer of portions of government authority to specialized agencies is indeed a quasi-universal process. Next to the factual loss of sovereignty, electoral competition may be further truncated by the belief that many of the classical issues of domestic politics, including inflation and unemployment, can no longer be tackled by nation-states (Katz and Mair, 2009).

Having said that, it is wrong or at least premature to take the reduction in the scope of party politics for granted. While a number of policy issues were successfully depoliticized, others (e.g. information or reproductive rights) appear and polarize hitherto consensual elites. The recent trajectory of a number of developed countries to the verge of default revealed that the image of party politicians as responsible bureaucrats or as EU and market-conform managers was often a camouflage. Behind this image politicians fiddled with numbers or sabotaged EU directives in order to achieve partisan purposes, to increase the chances of their electoral victory or to satisfy the patronage needs of their clientele.⁸ The surviving possibility for ideological contestation is illustrated by the emergence of heads of government, such as Kaczyński or Orbán, who question the post-war liberal democratic consensus.

Organizational responses

The collapse of party membership and the increasing success of parties that lack traditional, leader-independent, structures (Five Star Movement, Forza Italia, Team Stronach, the Dutch PVV, the Czech ANO 2011, etc.) recall the internal deconstruction envisaged by the party decline thesis. Similar parties, however, existed before WWII, and therefore the long-term organizational trend is probably more curvilinear than linear. More importantly, the literature indicates that parties have responded to disenchantment by adopting some form or other of internal democratization, including more inclusive selectorates for decisions on leaders and candidates, and increasing the decision-making rights of members concerning policy issues (Caul-Kittilson and Scarrow, 2003; Hazan and Rahat, 2006; Leduc, 2001; Wauters, 2010; Whiteley, 2011). On the face of it, this 'ongoing shift in authority away from the parliamentary party towards grassroots members' (Cross and Blais, 2012: 128) does not appear

to conform to the contention of the cartel thesis that there had been secular and quasi-complete marginalization of the party-on-the-ground and the supremacy of the party-in-public-office. However, the original formulation of the cartel theory already contemplated this paradox, asserting that these forms of internal democracy (direct mail, postal ballots, etc.) are instruments of elite control, insofar as they enable leaders to bypass mid-level activists and regional representatives. The fact that these organizational reforms failed to stop membership decline (Mair and van Biezen, 2001; van Biezen et al., 2012) justifies the scepticism of the cartel theorists.

Cartel party literature converges with the presidentialization thesis (Poguntke and Webb, 2005) regarding the claim that leaders are selected primarily due to their electoral appeal and not according to some autonomous intra-party logic (Katz and Mair, 2009; Webb and Poguntke, 2005). Tension between the two models underlies this consensus, however. While the cartel party thesis points to the danger of technocratic rule, presidentialism highlights the dangers of plebiscitarianism. Populist, plebiscitarian regimes are characterized by charismatic and visionary leaders. Cartel professionals, on the other hand, given their shared interest in job security, must be defenders of the status quo.

Ironically, neither approach considers the possibility that apparatchiks – i.e. party officials who have not held public positions and lack charisma – could become the standard-bearers of parties. At the time when these theories were developed, during the rule of Thatcher, Blair, Berlusconi, Schröder, Sarkozy and Clinton, the rule of old-style party workers seemed to be precisely that, old-style. The subsequent victories of Holland, Merkel, Rajoy, Bersani and others indicate that the trend towards presidential figures is not irreversible. Apparently, old-fashioned party socialization and the ability to represent the policy positions of the party's core constituency may still help the career of a politician as much as charisma and media-savvy appeal to the median voter.

Patterns of competition

The cartel literature notes with dismay the bifurcation of party systems into pragmatic and centrist cartel parties, on the one hand, and anti-cartel populist parties engaged in the politics of outbidding, on the other. This division is indeed detrimental to effective democratic competition, but the very same pattern prevailed at the dawn of the mass party era. The difference between the two periods is that today the 'out-parties' have more access to governmental office (Kitschelt, 2000), a shift that boosts accountability and the quality of competition.

Neither the de-alignment nor the cartel theory offers explicit claims regarding the patterns of party alliances, but their respective internal logic suggests the de-structuration

of alliances. The oft-claimed promiscuity of parties during coalition-making (e.g. Mair, 2008) is consistent with this logic. In his later writings, Mair called attention to an ongoing tendency towards the bipolarization of electoral campaigns, writing (Mair, 2008, 2009) that the boundary between government and opposition was clearer today than in the past because parties tend to group themselves into two competing alliances. But he also considered this phenomenon to be limited to the electoral arena, and therefore essentially amounting to a theatrical ritual. If it can be demonstrated that bipolarization actually has consequences for government-building, then the alleged tendency towards open-ended, unconstrained configurations would be contradicted.

In order to be able to answer this question, one can rely on one of the most distinctive contributions Peter Mair made to party system theories: the concept of party system closure (1996). He suggested that party systems should be analysed using an open, unpredictable, versus closed, institutionalized, continuum. The consolidation of party systems is supposed to make government formation predictable, i.e. closed. An open system allows new parties to frequently join government formations; it experiments with new coalitions and allows for some coalition members to remain in government while others leave and new partners join. He found Western Europe to have moved toward an open system (Mair, 2007), in line with the cartel and dealignment theories.

Using a new operationalization of the three components of closure, alternation, access and formulae (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2010) and a more complete dataset of government compositions (created by Fernando Casal Bértoa), I checked how patterns of closure have changed in Western Europe by comparing the inter-war (1918–1945), post-war (1945–1989) and post-Berlin Wall (1990–2012) periods. The expectation was that the post-1990 period would exhibit markedly lower levels of governmental closure not only because of the alleged de-structuration tendency but also simply because it is the shortest period – it spans only 12 years, while the pre-1990 period is almost four times as long. Longer periods can be expected to produce higher ratios of familiar governmental formulae, unless new actors appear in particularly large numbers.

As the figures in Table 2 show, the systems in the inter-war (1918–1944) period were particularly open. The post-war decades exhibited almost instant consolidation and very high levels of closure. The contrast between the post-war (1945–1989) and post-Berlin Wall (1990–2012) periods is less distinct. Since 1990, West European party systems have seen more new parties govern and more unfamiliar coalition formulae. However, there are fewer cases of partial alternation in government than before.⁹

In general, the data do not support the de-structuration thesis during the last phase. In fact, never before have parties moved so much in and out of government in teams. The

Table 2. Closure of governmental arena in three historical periods in Western Europe.

	1918–1944 (N=15)	1945–1989 (N=19)	1990–2012 (N=19)
Formula	87.3	94.5	92.2
Access	93.14	97.8	95.5
Alternation	82.4	89.9	94.1
Composite closure index	87.7	94.1	93.4

Note: The inter-war period includes data on Austria, Denmark, Finland, France (the figures of the Fourth and Fifth republic are averaged), Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Malta, Italy, Greece and Iceland were added to the post-war and post-Wall periods. The composite index is the average of the three components. For details on measuring the components, see Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2010.

bipolarization observed by Mair in the electoral arena applies to the governmental arena as well. Parties resist the pressure of de-structuration by sticking together. Opening governments to newcomers is counterbalanced by the bipolar logic of competition and governing. The practice of pre-electoral coalitions – which is also more common now than during the mass party era – is an additional self-limitation mechanism that contributes to structuration and vertical accountability.

Conclusion: The continuing relevance of parties?

Much is known about what individual parties do when in crisis: they change image, programme, leaders, organizational structure, introduce new issues, change the social coalition underpinning the party, or try to alter the rules of competition. Today, parties must do one of these things more than in the past in order to survive. Paraphrasing Rose and McAllister's publication *Voters Begin to Choose* (1986) – which documented tendencies in Britain toward dealignment – one can claim that parties also began to choose.

Party systems also have several ways of adapting to the changing demands of society. On one extreme, completely new parties embracing the new demands of the environment appear. On the other, continuity in actors persists, even if they incorporate the new demands into their platforms and partially or completely abandon their previous agenda. A third alternative is the creation of abstract principles, cognitive frames and styles that are capable of accommodating the new demands while preserving ideological continuity. Finally, parties can outsource the management of new demands to other actors. These actors may still fall within the party orbit, such as the specialized parliamentary committees, or may be independent agencies, such as the judiciary or various non-

partisan regulatory institutions. One can find examples from the past two decades of European history for all these options.

Peter Mair considered the last option to be the most pertinent, and also the most dangerous. These tendencies were a source of worry partly because of his normative, popular conceptions of democracy but also because he was afraid that the position of parties would be undermined. He expected that the mobilizational power of parties would decline further as the visibility of contextual constraints of government activities increased. Without mass support and without a clear identity, parties will become marginal organizations even if they are well entrenched in their institutional environment.

The assessment of my, inevitably partial, review is more positive. The mobilizational capacity of parties has diminished, but their levels of autonomy and impact have not declined *tout court*. The preconditions for representative and accountable party elites may not be ideal, but in many ways they were even worse in the mass party era.

Although my conclusion differs from some of Mair's, its underlying logic actually springs from his work. It was Peter Mair who most consistently argued in favour of the importance of inter-party relations, claiming that they could be conceptualized as the independent variables behind mass behaviour. Although parties cooperate with each other on many fronts, they organize elections and government-building along clear demarcation lines. In line with their original rationale, they give continuity and structure to the political field and contribute to the long time-horizon of mass politics.

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Notes

1. Several key texts are Mair (2005, 2008, 2009), Katz and Mair (1995, 2009).
2. In a recent book, Dalton et al. (2011) refer to this shift in Mair's position as a Damascene convergence.
3. Particularly, Dalton (1985, 1996, 2005), Dalton et al. (2000), Dalton and Weldon (2005). For a different conclusion, see Dalton et al. (2002).
4. These criticisms were not without predecessors; see Michels (1911).
5. This article does not address the question of whether established parties have erected barriers to outsiders and, in the event they have, whether these barriers are effective.

6. The EU elections are the only arena in which parties can express and represent, since therein they have no responsibility.
7. I don't mean to place the blame for the recent financial crises on domestic political elites. Mechanical loyalty to the directives of international monetary institutions led to collapse as often as 'reckless' and politicized economic decision-making.
8. It is another question whether the left-right concept captures political orientations well. Most studies show that the complexity of the space issue is increasing, thus undermining the Responsible Party System model.
9. Only the difference on access reaches the 0.05 significance level. This is not surprising given the low number of cases.

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