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Lessons from Brexit and Trump: populism is what happens when political parties lose control

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The shock of Brexit and Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential elections have dramatically increased interest in populism. Much attention has been devoted to the motives and identities of those who voted for Brexit and Trump. Stories of alienation and neglect of the "losers of globalization" abound. This contribution to the anniversary issue of the German Journal of Comparative Politics takes a different approach and starts by asking why voters had a chance to opt for Brexit and Trump in the first place. Why did the British prime-minister decide to hold a referendum on membership of the European Union (EU)? How did Trump become the Republican party's presidential nominee? Moreover, why did the British Labour party not campaign more actively for remain? The answer to all three questions is the same: because party organizations lost control over the choice of their leaders and leaders lost control over the formulation of major policies. This analysis thus highlights the intimate connection between two of the main challenges facing Western democracies: the rise of populism and the decline of political parties. The crisis of the Republicans in the US and of the two main parties in the UK is also a crisis of party democracy. If weak parties are part of the problem, stronger parties may be part of the answer to populism.

"What do the British referendum vote to leave the EU and Donald Trump's winning of the US presidential election have in common?", asks Schmidt (2017, p. 248). The short answer is: populism. Likewise, Wilson (2017, p. 548) notes "similarities in rhetoric, campaign styles and bases of support between the Brexit and Trump campaigns". In both campaigns populism, conceived of as the struggle between the pure people and the corrupt elite (Mudde 2007, p. 23), set the tone.

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Much of the literature on populism focuses on populist challengers: parties and candidates on the margins of the party system that campaign against mainstream parties (See, for example, Flinders 2015). Mair (2002, p. 88, 2013, p. 19) calls this "populism as protest". He is far more interested in another version of populism, which he terms "populist democracy" and which he contrasts with party democracy.

Populist democracy can be described as government *by* the people *without* parties. The people are undifferentiated, the relationship with their government is unmediated, and the government serves the national interest. This last point may seem rather obvious, what government does not claim to serve the national interest?, but for Mair party politics is inherently partisan and so is party government. The fundamental contrast, therefore, is between populist and *partisan* democracy. Populist democracy is fully compatible with constitutional or liberal democracy. Mair thereby provides a new perspective on the question whether populism is a threat or corrective to democracy (See Kaltwasser 2012; Pappas 2016).

Mair (2013, pp. 17–44) has amply documented "the passing of popular involvement" in party politics. Voter turnout, party identification, and party membership have all decreased among Western democracies, while electoral volatility increased. The rise of populism and the decline of party are connected in two ways, presenting West European politics with "a double populist challenge" (Kriesi 2014, p. 375). First, populism as protest is a reaction against the declining legitimacy of parties and "the privileges of an apparently self-serving and non-functioning political class" (p. 90; see also Mair 2013, p. 19, 2014, p. 582; more broadly: Pickel and Pickel 2017). Second, and more fundamentally, populist democracy builds on "the declining relevance of parties as organisations or intermediaries" (Mair 2002, p. 90). The withdrawal of parties (see also Mastropaolo 2008) has created a void, leaving voters with populists versus technocrats (Müller 2014).

Mair (2000, 2002) sees Tony Blair's New Labour as a prime example of the trend towards populist democracy. Reviewing Labour's electoral appeal, party organization, and policies, Mair (2002, p. 96, emphasis in original) concludes: "These are non-partisan leaders with a non-partisan programme running a non-partisan government (...) This is, in short, *partyless* democracy". It all started with the choice of Blair over Brown, which signaled a shift in the motives for the (s)election of party leader: media appeal and attractiveness to the wider electorate rather than support within the party (Mair 2013, p. 67). Does the election of Corbyn as the leader of the Labour party "represent a form of party revival, or another step towards party decline?" (Russell 2016, p. 22). The argument for party revival centers on the motives of his supporters: they elected Corbyn party leader because of his policies and despite what even his supporters saw as poor chances of winning the next general elections (Quinn 2016, p. 767). The argument for party decline is, first, about Corbyn's lack of support among Labour members of parliament. Even so, Corbyn's election could be construed as a victory for the party on the ground over the party in public office. However, Corbyn's support came disproportionally from outside the party, thanks to new election rules, which allowed groups of non-party members to vote. Quinn (2016, p. 762) compares this system to an open primary. Arguably, Labour's leadership contest affected the referendum result. In recent times, the Labour party has never been more than a "soft Europhile" party, but even so, after the 2015 elections,

almost 85% of party members said they would certainly vote "remain" (Hertner and Keith 2016, p. 83). In the end, only 62% of Labour identifiers did (Curtice 2017, p. 32). Corbyn's ambivalent stance towards the EU and his lukewarm campaign for remain might well have made the difference.

In 2011, the coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats introduced the EU Act, making further transfers of powers from the UK to the EU dependent on popular approval in a referendum. The EU Act of 2011 is widely seen as an erosion of parliamentary sovereignty, a boost for Eurosceptic populism, and an ultimate attempt to hold the Conservative party together in light of a deepening division between soft and hard Eurosceptics (Gifford 2014; Wellings and Vines 2016; Dorey 2017). In the end, prime-minister Cameron did not wait. Pressured by Conservative backbenchers, in January 2013 Cameron announced that he would renegotiate the UK's relationship with the EU after the next parliamentary elections and on that basis hold a referendum on EU membership. Cameron's discretionary decision to commit to a referendum on European integration is a perfect example of what Oppermann (2013) calls a "depoliticizing" referendum commitment. The reasons for this type of referendum are domestic and defensive. In this case: to preserve intra-party unity. There is nothing novel about this: other British politicians have made the same choice, beginning with Labour prime-minister Wilson back in 1975 (Smith 2016). However, this time the stakes were much higher.

How did Trump secure the nomination of the Republican party to run in the 2016 presidential elections, despite having no history in the party and despite the opposition of the party establishment? There seem to be two reasons, one institutional and historical, the other contingent and proximate. It is only in the 1970s that the Republican state parties, following the example of the Democrats, moved from selecting presidential candidates in caucuses and conventions, dominated by party politicians, to primaries. As a consequence, party elites have less ability to control the nomination process (Ware 2016). The second factor that helped Trump is that "Republican Party insiders largely stayed on the side-lines" in the crucial early stages (Steger 2016, p. 712). "Who decides when the party elites don't?", MacWilliams asks (2016, p. 716), providing the answer himself: "America's authoritarian voters". Ceasar (2017, p. 49) concludes that "the party, understood as its elected officials and regular members, must therefore assume greater control of the nominating process", but he doubts that American political parties "feel strong enough", thereby establishing a direct link between party weakness and populism.

In their introduction to a special issue devoted to the work of Mair, Bardi et al. (2014, p. 249–250) divide the contributors into three groups: (1) the pessimists (who recognize party decline and acknowledge its detrimental effect on party democracy and therefore democracy as such); (2) the optimists (who may agree that parties are in decline but are optimistic about democracy); (3) the "continuists" who see parties as changing and adapting, as they always have done. Surveying the party politics literature, it would seem that optimists and continuists are in the majority (but see Schaal 2016). Dalton et al. (2011, p. 14) complain that "the evidence of decline is too selective, emphasizes changes in the mass public rather than in party performance, and is arguably too focused on the mass party ideal" (See also Westle 2012). Kriesi (2014) regards Mair's assessment of the empirical situation of

West European party systems as "largely accurate" (p. 268), but does not share his conclusions, viewing populism as "a productive force" (p. 361). Andeweg (2012, p. 366), admits that, yes, parties are weakened, but couldn't new forms of elite-mass linkage, as yet unforeseen, develop? Van Biezen (2014, p. 190; see also Enyedi 2014) concludes that "the reported death of the parties or party democracy appears to be an exaggeration".

Such sanguine accounts seem to be based on a misunderstanding of Mair's (2013, p. 1) famous phrase that "the age of party democracy has passed". Parties are still around, aren't they, so what is the problem? But that is not the point. As Dalton and Wattenberg (2001) already noted, parties as institutions will survive. The problem, as detailed in Mair's work on cartel parties (Katz and Mair 2009), is that the role of political parties has changed from agents of society to agents of the state, weakening their representative function. Put differently, the problem is that parties are no longer partisan. Continuing efforts at data collection and documentation of party organizations (See, for example, Poguntke et al. 2016) are important but in and of themselves do not help to address the questions at the forefront of Mair's later work.

After Brexit and Trump, it is tempting to see party-decline-driven populism as a special problem of majoritarian democracies. This would be a mistake. There are good reasons to suspect that what Lijphart calls consensus democracies (See Bogaards 2015) provide a fertile environment for Euroscepticism (Cf. Lees 2008). The self-surrender of the Austrian Christian Democratic party to its youthful leader is another indication.

Reflecting on Chekov's play The Cherry Orchard, the Dutch essayist Heijne (2016) writes that "the Barbarians hardly ever come from the outside. And when they do, somebody opened the door for them". Brexit and the election of Trump happened because somebody made these outcomes possible. Political agency could have made a difference (Ignatieff 2017). The literature on party decline and especially Mair's work helps to understand the background of these fateful decisions, but there is nothing automatic or inevitable about them. There is no "evolutionary process from party government to party governance" (Helms 2014, p. 135). If weak parties are aiding the success of populism, then (re)building stronger parties is imperative.

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