Democracy and Political Parties

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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 parties.’ (Schattschneider 1942: 1) 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 become firmly rooted in the established democracies. Moreover, they have rapidly acquired relevance in more recently established democracies, 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. Indeed, despite their relatively recent appearance on the political stage, parties have put such a strong mark on contemporary politics and democracy that twentieth century democracy could be best described as ‘party democracy’.

While Schattschneider’s observation has developed into a conventional wisdom and is being repeated *ad nauseam* among party scholars, it obscures the considerable disagreement which lies behind the apparent consensus on the desirability of democracy and the centrality of political parties to the actual functioning of contemporary democratic states. 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 and with what is seen as their increasing failure to perform many of the functions that have been assumed both to be essential to the healthy performance of democracy and to be uniquely the responsibility of political parties. In particular the perceived inability of parties to serve as adequate channels of representation has given rise to debates on the ‘decline’ or ‘failure’ of parties, and to lamentations such as Schmitter’s, that political parties today are not what they
once were (Schmitter 2001). More specifically, parties 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 more or less exclusive control over candidate recruitment and the organization of parliaments and governments. Distinguishing between the two broader sets of representative functions, on the one hand, and procedural or institutional functions, on the other, Bartolini and Mair thus argue that, while the representative functions of parties may have declined, their procedural role is still intact or might even have been enhanced (Bartolini & Mair 2001). Perhaps paradoxically therefore, while parties have come to be seen as the key institutions of representative democracy, they are also perceived to be increasingly incapable of performing those functions which are essential for its healthy functioning.

Underlying these debates about the contemporary performance of existing parties and party systems, however, there are deeper disagreements about the meaning of democracy and the actual role of political parties within it. Complaints about the decline of party, 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. But with relatively few exceptions (e.g., Katz 1997, Lijphart 1999), even when these assumptions are made explicit, they generally are simply stated as self-evident truths, rather than being recognized as contentious choices. In other words, notwithstanding their importance to one another, the literatures on parties and democratic theory have developed in a surprising degree of mutual isolation.

II

The works of such authors as Ostrogorski, Michels or Weber demonstrate that, in contrast to the majority of contemporary party scholarship, the early tradition at the turn of the twentieth century was closely related to theorizing on democracy. Indeed, early party scholarship is firmly embedded in a tradition which centers on competing theories of democracy and on values underpinning rivalling
conceptions of democracy. The early twentieth century party scholars, however, differed in their emphasis from many of their predecessors, who would typically deny the legitimacy of any form of organized opinion, believing this to be detrimental to individual liberty and popular sovereignty, and hence to democracy. Indeed, ever since they first emerged, factions and parties had been perceived as threats to the general interest or common good, or as overriding the interests of the individual. Fundamentally, their existence was incompatible with the predominant liberal and radical democratic traditions, inspired by and rooted in the political philosophy of Locke and Rousseau respectively. Both these traditions are difficult to marry with partisan institutions, which by their very nature transcend individual interests and deny the existence of a *volonté générale*.

It was the advent of mass democracy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which made direct links between the state and the individual increasingly unrealistic and which thus contributed to the legitimization of political parties as intermediary institutions between individual citizens and the state.

The emergence of the bureaucratic mass parties prompted a concern with their undemocratic and oligarchic tendencies. However, political parties organizing interests or opinions were not perceived to be inimical to democracy *per se*, although the lack of internal party democracy and leadership accountability and the inevitable tendencies towards oligarchy caused Michels to cast doubt on the viability of genuine democracy. Acknowledging that the context of mass democracy required the organizing capacities of intermediaries but concerned with the suffocating internal discipline of the party machine, Ostrogorski proposed a polity with temporary leagues, rather than permanent parties, which would deal with one issue at a time and then be dissolved. While Weber reveals similar concerns with the centralization of power and the plebiscitarian tendencies of party organizations, in his view the lack of internal party democracy is less consequential for democracy at the system level. Strong political leadership is necessary for a healthy functioning of democracy because it keeps unaccountable bureaucratic officials in check. Moreover, as Sartori later put it, ‘democracy on a large scale is not the sum of many little democracies’ (Sartori 1965: 124). As democratic elitists and pluralists began to emphasize, the essence of democracy
and democratic accountability rests in effective political competition rather than in internal party democracy and participation.

Meanwhile, the study of political parties and party organizations took an increasingly empirical turn. Whether concentrating on party membership levels, processes of candidate selection, internal patterns of decision-making, levels professionalism, or party financing, these analyses are rarely embedded within the broader theories of democracy. While in recent years the changes in the way parties organize clearly reveal a weakening of the linkages between parties and society and a strengthening of their linkages with the state, Katz and Mair are among the few who have cast the various models of party in relation to the associated conceptions of democracy (Katz & Mair 1995). If parties are transforming such that they are losing their capacity to act as agents of representation, this has far-reaching implications for the nature of modern democracy.

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). Indeed, while support for democracy continues to be high today, citizens have lost faith in the agents of representative democracy. 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, seems to be undermining the role of parties as the primary agents of interest aggregation (Dalton 2004: 154). Contemporary developments may signal the advent of a new style of democracy. In what Cain et al. call ‘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. With unelected interest groups increasingly gaining
status as policy-makers, however, ‘advocacy democracy’ clearly creates fundamental questions of representation and accountability.

Just as the empirical study of political parties rarely includes reflections on conceptions of democracy, democratic theory tends to pay only scarce attention to the role, functions and types of political parties. In democratic theory, parties are often at best understood as simply consisting of ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’; linkages of representation between ‘constituents’ and ‘representatives’ tend to be depicted as shaped in the absence of intermediary structures. When their existence is acknowledged at all, parties are treated rather generically, as amorphous entities or mysterious ‘black boxes’. As institutions positioned between citizens and the state, moreover, they are often seen as distorting the popular will. Hence, parties tout court are frequently considered as obstacles to the achievement of real or authentic democracy, in particular in the more participatory varieties of democracy and the recent models of deliberative democracy.

While for liberals, pluralists and democratic elitists individual participation in politics is not in itself an important ideal, for participatory and communitarian democrats a high degree of political participation and a sense of civic responsibility is necessary for a political system to warrant the label democracy (e.g Pateman 1970; Barber 1984). As direct participation advances citizen acceptance of policies more than mediated decision-making, thereby enhancing democratic legitimacy, they therefore advocate direct involvement and engagement of ordinary citizens in everyday decision-making. Citizen participation, moreover, contributes positively to the personal and intellectual development and the increasing virtue of the citizen. Because small-scale communities offer the best opportunities for direct involvement in decisions that affect the people 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.

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, political parties are often conspicuous by their marginality and often complete absence from the vocabulary of the participatory democrat.

More recently, the theory of democracy has taken a strong deliberative turn (e.g. Manin 1987; Cohen 1989, Dryzek 1990), in part boosted by the support of both the liberal political philosophy of John Rawls and the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas (Rawls 1993; Habermas 1996). Deliberative democracy is inspired by the Rawlsian conception of a just society, and draws heavily on the notion of the ‘ideal free speech situation’ elaborated by Habermas, with free and equal discussion (ideally unlimited in duration) between participants who are oriented towards mutual understanding and the common good, in which consensus would be arrived at by ‘the force of the better argument’ (Habermas 1990). For most deliberative democrats, democracy primarily exists in the capacity to transform, rather than simply articulate and aggregate, preferences and interest, and especially in transforming people’s self-interest towards a concern for the common or public good. Any existing democratic deficits in contemporary politics are to be understood principally as ‘deliberative deficits’ (Gutmann and Thompson 1996: 12).

Deliberative democracy rapidly gained momentum in the final decade of the millennium, to the point that, as Dryzek 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.’ (Dryzek 2000: 1) Advancing the eradication of conflict and moral disagreements rather than their accommodation and resolution, deliberative democrats have been criticized for taking the political out of politics (e.g. Shapiro 1999). In addition, like conceptions of democracy belonging to the participatory variety, 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.
Democracy is a messy concept, and there has been endless academic debate concerning its true meaning. The definition of democracy is not just a philosophical question, however, but also a question with profound implications in the world of practical politics. Different conceptions of democracy justify different institutional arrangements and different standards for evaluating their performance – and ultimately differing distributions of authority. Without trying to anticipate the work of the workshop, the relevance of this to the interface between democratic theory and the empirical study of political parties can be illustrated by looking at just one question concerning the meaning of democracy -- Is the objective of democracy to allow the citizens to protect themselves by reactively punishing rulers of whose policies, or results, they disapprove or is it to allow the citizens to rule themselves, by affirmatively deciding the policies to be pursued?

One major strain in democratic theory, which might be called “popular sovereignty” democratic theory, suggests that the people should decide what is to be done: that democracy means the will of the people is to be put into effect. There is, of course, great disagreement concerning how one can either define or identify the ‘will of the people’, ranging in numerical terms from the unanimity of Rousseau’s *volonté générale* to simple majority rule. Nonetheless, in this view government is seen as an instrument of the people, taking positive direction from them.

Theories that stress democracy as a means of self-protection begin with recognition that although effective government is necessary to the protection of individual rights, it may also be among the most serious threats to those rights. As Macpherson (1977: 34) wrote describing what he called ‘protective democracy’, it follows from ‘the grand governing principle of human nature [that] every government would be rapacious unless it were made in its own interest not to be so’. While we might argue about the degree to which liberal civil rights (free speech, free press, free assembly) or a free market economy are prerequisites for the inauguration or sustainability of democracy, they clearly are not sufficient conditions, and hence a liberal free market economy is *not* a synonym for liberal
democracy, let alone democracy *tout court*. For those who take the ‘democracy as self-protection’ view, one point of adding democracy to the phrase ‘liberal democracy’ would be a recognition that ordinary people need some protection against the natural rapaciousness of their leaders.

Even if governments are the unproblematic agents of ‘the people’, however, that does not guarantee that they will be benevolent. Assuming that the will of the people can be expressed by less than unanimous consent, what is to protect the rights of the minority from being trampled by the majority?

In simple, black and white terms, any democratic system would prohibit the majority from denying fundamental political rights to a minority, and similarly the existence of an identifiable minority that is permanently excluded from executive office would also be unacceptable. The problem arises when the exploitation of the minority is not so stark: they are not barred from competing, but severely handicapped; they are not expropriated, but more heavily taxed or less adequately served; they are not permanently excluded from office because of race or gender, but always lose. In these cases, it is not adequate to point to obvious democratic norms, and yet it is also not obvious why those who are permanently on the short end of the will of the people would unproblematically accept the legitimacy of democracy defined simply as government in accord with the will of the people.

When this problem is highlighted, the emphasis in the phrase ‘liberal democracy’ shifts; instead of democracy (in particular elections) being a means of enforcing liberalism, liberalism becomes a rationale for limiting the simple translation of the will of the people into government action – which in terms of the simple will of the people definition would mean it becomes a rationale for limiting democracy itself. The classic example here is the Madisonian concern with majority faction, and the set of institutional prescriptions to which that concern leads.

This distinction between popular sovereignty and liberal theory is too simple, however. Within each category, there are a number of theories that differ, on the one hand, with regard to their assumptions, and on the other hand, with regard to their prescriptions. Drawing on earlier work (Katz 1997), these are summarized in
Tables 1 and 2. While much of the analysis may be debatable, for our purposes in the workshop the point is simply that there is a strong interaction between normative (relative importance of competing values) and empirical (nature of social divisions; structure of issues; relative liberalism of masses and elites) concerns in defining the idea with regard to parties and party systems.

[Tables 1 and 2 about here]

IV

Shapiro argues 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) This mutual indifference of political theory and the empirical study of politics is problematic especially for the study of political parties and democracy.

Any meaningful discussion of the erosion of popular support for representative democratic institutions and increasing discontent with politicians and political parties requires that empirical developments are assessed with reference to theories of democracy and that normative postulates are evaluated in relation to empirical realities. The failure to take questions of democratic theory to heart, and to identify the relationship between normative and institutional prescriptions, is particularly worrisome given the important challenges that have to be faced by modern democracy in the first decades of the 21st century. One 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.

A second challenge is that of the consolidation of democracy in Eastern and Central Europe and elsewhere in the world, a process in which parties are likely to play a critical role. However, the habitual equation of democracy simply with regular elections contested by a plurality of political parties, and the ignoring of differences among party types and the peculiarities of local history, culture, and society, provide inadequate guidance for domestic political actors or international agencies, and thus risk undermining the democratic project as a whole.
References


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.


Table 1. Summary of Popular Sovereignty Theories of Democracy and Competitive Party Systems (derived from Katz 1997:ch. 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory of Democracy</th>
<th>Assumptions</th>
<th>Prescriptions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal number of parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binary</td>
<td>1. All issues cluster into two complexes, so that choice is between ‘this’ and ‘that’. 2. The choice of the majority is ‘the will of the people’</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downsian</td>
<td>1. All issues can be summarised in terms of a single dimension. 2. The first preference of the median voter along the assumed single dimension of politics (the Condorcet choice) is ‘the will of the people’.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ostrogorskian</td>
<td>1. Each problem has two alternative ‘solutions’. 2. The choice of the majority is ‘the will of the people’. 3. Problems can be addressed one at a time, serially.</td>
<td>2 (at any one time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative</td>
<td>1. The issue space is multidimensional. 2. While there is no Condorcet choice, the ‘will of the people’ can be approximated through the formation of a parliamentary coalition representing a majority.</td>
<td>As many as there are distinct combinations of policy preferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tory</td>
<td>1. There is a single national interest, for which strong and effective government is a prerequisite. 2. There is a natural ‘ruling class’ 3. The proper role of the people is to choose and then support one team of leaders rather than another.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist</td>
<td>1. The fundamental unit of politics is the social class, of which there ultimately are only two. 2. There is a fundamental harmony of interest within the working class, to the discovery of which all can contribute. 3. Class solidarity is essential.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory of Democracy</td>
<td>Assumptions</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Ideal number of parties</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Benthamite          | 1. Society is basically homogeneous, with no politically relevant and stable subgroups.  
2. Majority rule is adequate to protect against elite tyranny, and majority tyranny is not a concern.  
3. The primary danger to liberty is from “sinister” leaders | 2 | low | yes | strong |
| Shumpeterian        | 1. Society is basically homogeneous, with no politically relevant and stable subgroups.  
2. Majority rule is adequate to protect against elite tyranny, and majority tyranny is not a concern.  
3. The primary danger to liberty is demagogues and “the mob” | 2 | low | yes | weak |
| Madisonian          | 1. Society is made up of stable, but cross-cutting, groups.  
2. The problem of majority tyranny can be mitigated through multiple veto points, privileging different combinations of political resources. That at least one of these veto-points is majoritarian is adequate protection against elite tyranny.  
3. The primary danger to liberty is from “sinister” leaders | 2 | low | yes | strong |
| Polyarchal          | 1. Society is made up of stable, but cross-cutting, groups.  
2. The problem of majority tyranny can be mitigated through multiple veto points, privileging different combinations of political resources. That at least one of these veto-points is majoritarian is adequate protection against elite tyranny.  
3. The primary danger to liberty is demagogues and “the mob” | 2 | low | yes | weak |
| Concurrent Majorities | 1. Society is divided (pillarised) into stable and non-overlapping groups.  
2. Majority tyranny can be avoided only by giving each politically relevant group unilateral veto power.  
3. There is a natural harmony of interest between leaders and followers within the same social segment. | At least one for each social segment | high | no | strong |
| Consociational      | 1. Society is divided (pillarised) into stable and non-overlapping groups.  
2. Majority tyranny can be avoided only by giving each politically relevant group unilateral veto power.  
3. Autonomy of leadership is necessary to contain popular animosities. | One for each social segment | high | no | weak |