Abstract
The declining public trust in political parties is a striking phenomenon that has attracted lots of attention from scholars. This however has rarely been theoretically connected to debates within democratic theory, and in particular those discussing the role of parties as institutions of representative democracy. This paper will address this gap by looking at parties as quintessential representative institutions, which themselves attempt to find new avenues to engage citizens directly. The central aim is to ask what the introduction of new participatory mechanisms within parties means for their modes of political representation. Two recent empirical examples serve as illustrations: The 2013 SPD membership vote on the German coalition accords and the participatory online candidate selection of the European Greens for the European Elections 2014. Drawing on new advances in the theory of representation, the paper comes to the conclusion that both examples point to insufficiencies in the conventional view of political representation and are expressions of parties’ transformation to actors closely linked to the institutions of the state.
Introduction

Falling electoral turnout, decline in party membership numbers and weakening of partisan identities are the three defining trends of political parties’ predicament across Western European democracies. It has led observers to speak of a ‘crisis of representation’ (Michelsen & Walter, 2013) or of “a process of mutual withdrawal or abandonment” between parties and citizens (Mair, 2013a: 16). Indeed, parties are today amongst the least trusted and liked political institutions, as surveys have repeatedly shown (Beetham, 2011: 127). In the scholarly literature, Peter Mair’s (2013a) Ruling the Void and Colin Crouch’s (2004) Post-Democracy are among the most forceful criticisms of political parties for abandoning their historical role as the carriers of representative democracy.

Far from accepting this state of affairs, citizens have chosen other ways to make themselves visible in the political arena. In a number of countries, social movements critical of the entire political spectrum have gained momentum in recent years. In others, populist parties, claiming to be the true representatives of the people, have enjoyed considerable electoral success. However, also those parties that have existed as established parts of the political system for decades have attempted to react. Recently, many parties have set out to forge new links with citizens. The aim of this paper is to critically assess these attempts and ask what they can tell us about the role and functioning of political parties as institutions of representative democracy in Western Europe.

The paper is divided into two sections. In the first section, I show how the theory of political representation and party research have talked past each other despite both dealing with the connection between citizens and its elected representatives. Specifically, I show how the notion of ‘representation’ is poorly defined in many studies on political parties, which can lead to confusing conclusions and misunderstandings between different scholars. Recently, this shortcoming has been noted and attempts to rectify it have been initiated. I draw on the work of Michael Saward and present a modified notion of ‘statal representation’ that allows to think outside the conventional understanding of representation that underlies most studies.

In the second section, these theoretical tools are applied to two cases in which political parties have recently attempted to re-engage citizens: The 2013 SPD membership vote on the German coalition accords and the participatory online candidate selection of the European Greens for the European Elections 2014. I will show that while both examples constitute flawed attempts to introduce participatory mechanisms as a remedy for the crisis of political party representation, they also point to a process of ‘etatisation’, in which parties become agents of the state and of transnational governance structures such as the EU.
Political parties and the theory of representation

As has recently been noted, there is a striking disconnect between empirical political scientists and political theorists when it comes to the issue of political parties (van Biezen & Saward, 2008. As Rosenblum’s (2008) appreciation of parties and partisanship notes, “parties are the orphans of political philosophy” while “they are the darlings of political science.” (Ibid.: 3). Urbinati and Warren (2008: 400) echo the call for more attention to political parties by theorists who view parties and partisan conflict as inimical to the democratic ideal of ‘reasoned deliberation’.

In political science, political parties are highly relevant for a number of sub-fields. Electoral studies and the study of voting behaviour do obviously treat parties and partisanship as central categories. Research on decision-making and public policy also treat parties as crucial strategic actors (e.g., Müller & Strøm, 1999). Furthermore, there is a wide literature that deals with parties as institutions to be investigated in their own right. There have been manifold attempts to categorize parties and trace their development within changing political systems, giving rise most prominently to the ‘mass party’ and ‘catch-all party’ concepts (cf. Gunther & Diamond, 2003). More recently, Katz and Mair’s (1995) ‘cartel party thesis’ has given new momentum to the debate about party organisation and its adaptation to a changing environment. Since, political scientists have begun to deal more extensively with questions of the internal functioning of parties, relating to candidate-selection, the role and power of different layers in party hierarchies as well as party financing. I will return to some of these themes in the later sections of this paper.

In many of these writings, we find repeated mentions of or allusion to the ‘representation’ of citizens as carried out by political parties, in particular those who deal with the systems of party competition. This is hardly surprising, given the widely accepted notion “that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties” (Schattschneider, 1942: 1) and the attendant fact that really existing modern democracy is representative democracy (Dahl, 1998). Similarly, Sartori (2005 [1976]: 16-21) notes the parties’ role in transforming state governments into responsive institutions. Nevertheless, the concept of representation is rarely specified, and if it is, then it is done almost in isolation from the work of democratic theorists. Nevertheless, the use of a concept always entails an implicit theoretical understanding of what is meant by it, and this then determines how it is put to use in terms of operationalization and empirical testing. In the next step, I will attempt to work out these implicit theoretical notions about political representation held by many party researchers.
The standard account of party representation

Democratic theorists have in the recent past been engaged in a renewed debate about the function and meaning of political representation. Prior to this reassessment, a ‘standard account’ of representation was firmly established within the scholarly community (Urbinati & Warren, 2008: 389). According to this view, political representation is a principal-agent-relationship, in which the representative stands in for and acts upon the interests and preferences of a pre-defined, territorially bound, constituency. While this view already entails a number of possible interpretations, what remains the same is the view that representation “means acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them.” (Pitkin, 1967: 209). The information on these interests flows uniquely in a ‘one-way street’ from the represented to the representative. The representative merely ‘reads off’ the interests upon which he is then to act. This is moreover true for positions on both sides of the independence-mandate controversy (Ibid.: 144-167). In either case, the constituency interests are already given, regardless of whether the representatives or the represented are deemed to be in a better position to understand them.

As I have argued above, most writings on political parties implicitly contain elements of a theory of representation. As a consequence, the standard account of political representation is also present in party research, in a form that I will call the ‘standard account of party representation’. The classic mass party model that was prevalent in Europe for most of the twentieth century saw parties as the representatives of a certain segment of advanced industrial societies, acting in the political arena on behalf of the various sides of the cleavage structure (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Bartolini & Mair, 1990). Even when the stable social structures of industrial societies began to transform, giving rise to new identities and values (Inglehart, 1977; 1990), the evolution of parties and party systems was merely seen as a reaction to evolutions in the to-be-represented electorate (for instance, Kitschelt, 1989; 1994; 1995).

In all these studies, the logic of representation thus clearly follows the standard account: Parties exist as agents of given constituencies, defined by social class, ethical or religious identity or ideological preference, and channel given interests into the political system. A standard principal-agent relationship is thus reproduced. In a recent contribution, Katz (2014) challenges the standard principal-agent model, arguing that parties are complex institutions that do not conform to a single pattern. Rather, its different organizational parts may have a different impact on the actions taken by the party. Nonetheless, as figures 1 and 2 show, in the
underlying logic the practice of representation is still uni-directional, positing the electorate as the ultimate principal.

Figure 1. Mass party principal-agent model with party 1 disaggregated into its ‘three faces’ [POG = party on the ground; PCO = party in central office]. (Source: Katz, 2014: 186).

Figure 2. Downsian principal-agent model with party 1 disaggregated into its ‘three faces’. (Source: Katz, 2014: 186).

What has this meant for the way political representation through parties has been studies empirically? As Eulau and Karps (1977) already critically note, the bulk of studies is limited to detecting a congruence of party behaviour and constituency opinion as collected through large-scale surveys, which is then read as a an indication for a functioning representational link (for a recent prominent example in the American context, see, for instance, Bartels, 2008). In some cases, the congruence used to determine the quality of the representational link is also established between party positions and constituency attitudes (e.g., Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2012).

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1 Rohrschneider & Whitefield (2012: 2-3) present a model of party representation that is emblematic for the lack of engagement with democratic theory and is based on the following three elements: (1) “[P]arties must offer specific policy choices on the relevant issue dimensions structuring the party systems.” (2) “[P]arties must offer coherent programs which means that the specific policy stances over different issues are sufficiently related”. (3) “[T]he preferences of citizens must overlap with the stances of parties.” Only the third element touches upon representation as a link between citizens and parties, and does so, as I argue in this paper, insufficiency.
To be sure, studies in this tradition do indeed often present valuable findings: Adams and Ezrow (2009) discover a causal mechanism by identifying time differences between opinion shifts of opinion leaders and the wider public and the position shifts of parties. Mattila and Raunio (2006; 2012) find a considerable, and still growing, gap between the opinion of party elites and voters with regards to European integration. These findings can however only be a starting point to rethink political representation and how it is carried out by those who are deemed the relevant actors. Recent advances in the theory of representation and some initial applications to the study of political parties provide useful tools in this endeavour, as I will discuss next.

**Recent advances in the study of party representation**

Andeweg and Thomassen (2005) note that besides the dominant model, “[o]ther (less Rousseausist, more Madisonian or Schumpeterian) views of political representation are not unidirectional and see representative democracy as a wedding of leadership and popular control.” (Ibid.: 510-511; emphasis mine). They draw on the distinction between ‘representation from below’, in which pre-defined preferences of the electorate are simply responded by MPs or parties, and ‘representation from above’, in which parties become active themselves to persuade voters of their programmes (Esaiasson and Holmberg, 1996). From their discussion of the literature it becomes clear that much of the party literature has implicitly fused both dimensions into the standard model of party representation.

This insight comes as one contribution to a recent widespread reappraisal of political representation amongst scholars of democracy. At the centre of this effort is the recognition that empirically, practices of representation go beyond the territorially-bound and election-based standard account (Mansbridge, 2003). The theory of ‘representative claims-making’ as developed by Saward (2006; 2010) goes the furthest in redefining ‘representation’ as a relationship that is wilfully constructed by political entrepreneurs and not a stable link between a given constituency and an elected representative. In his ‘constructivist’ account (Disch, in: Schaap et al., 2012: 114-118), anyone can make a claim (claim-maker M) to an audience A that subject S is representing object O that is related to a referent R (Saward, 2010: 36). In the most standard case, an MP may claim at a campaign event to his home constituents that he is representing them in the national parliament. Saward’s example for a representative claim at the other extreme is that the pop artists Bono can claim that he represents millions of poor African children in global policy-making. Inevitably, the Sawardian argument has stirred up a lot of debate and thrown up normative questions about
the legitimacy of representative claims.² I will here focus on the implication of it for the study of party representation.

In one article, Saward (2008) himself applies his approach to deal with political parties as representative claim-makers. He distinguishes between three modes of representative claims-making in this context: the ‘popular’, the ‘statal’ and the ‘reflexive’ representative claim. The ‘statal’ mode refers to parties claiming to ‘represent’ the interests of the state or the nation, and is seen to be the prevalent mode of representation since mainstream parties have become organisations with long histories of governing state institutions. This goes against the traditional notion of ‘popular’ representation in which parties were claiming to exclusively represent a certain segment of the population. Saward draws on a significant branch of the party research literature in which parties have come to be seen to continuously move closer to the institutions of the state, a process I will call ‘etatisation’. In the next step, I take Saward’s ideas as a starting point to discuss how the role of parties change in light of the ‘etatisation’ literature, and develop my own, modified version of ‘statal representation’.

The ‘etatisation’ of parties: What happened to representation?

The ‘cartel party thesis’ put forward by Katz & Mair (1995) states that while parties once were primarily private interest associations of certain segments of civil society, they have in the past decades transformed into primarily governing organisations, who are characterized by their control of many public offices and other public sector resources (Kopecky, Mair, & Spirova, 2012). This shift is, amongst other things, reflected in the growing reliance on state resources for funding, as declining membership numbers make it hard for parties to finance themselves through membership fees. The work of van Biezen (2004) continues in the same direction and finds that parties are continuously growing into their role as ‘public utilities’, indicated by growing legal regulation and state funding. Also in this rendering, parties have become quasi-public agents of the state (governing organisation) and indispensable parts of the institutional order, which can thus be described as the ‘etatisation’ of political parties.

In his later work, Peter Mair has dealt more extensively with the ways the etatisation of parties affects their role as institutions of representative-democratic systems. In his conception, in the ‘golden age’ of party democracy in the post-WW2 political systems of Western Europe, parties were able to fulfil two crucial functions simultaneously: to represent the citizens and to govern the state. While representing means being responsive (as is usually assumed in the standard view of representation), governing means being responsible (Mair,

² See, for instance, the critical exchange between a number of leading scholars of representation in Schaap et al. (2012).
2009). In the complex governance structures brought about by Europeanization and globalization, Mair finds the gap between these two functions to widen and ultimately become too big to be successfully bridged by mainstream parties with a governing vocation (Mair, 2013b). In the most critical rendering of this argument, popular democracy, synonymous with representative party democracy, has ceased to function in European political systems (Mair, 2013a).

One problem of this account is that the complex view of the function of parties still builds on a simple notion of representation as responsiveness to given constituency interests. An apt illustration where this can become problematic is offered by Kitschelt’s (2000) critique of the ‘cartel party thesis’, in which he arrives at the exact opposite conclusion as regards the representative function of parties:

“The increasing convergence of the main parties’ policy positions, as documented by Mair (1997: 133) is not a sign of the politicians’ ability to undercut representation and to detach themselves from the preferences of their electoral constituencies, but a sign of a fierce struggle to represent voters in a post-industrial capitalism, after the end of the Cold War, when few electoral constituencies believe in the feasibility of radical socio-economic alternatives to the existing social order.” (Kitschelt, 2000: 164).

As one can see, the disagreement mainly stems from the unclear definition of political representation. Relying on a definition of representation as responsiveness to the preferences of constituencies can be interpreted in both ways, depending on what empirical indicators one chooses to deem relevant. A different possibility is offered to us by taking a ‘constructivist’ view of representation, in which parties may also be seen as representatives of the state: Indeed, the ‘etatisation’ literature has implicitly made this claim. In Mair’s words:

“So conceived, the traditional representative role of the mass party eventually wastes away. Or perhaps it gets turned on its head, so that, as Rudy Andeweg suggests, ‘the party ... becomes the government’s representative in the society rather than the society’s bridgehead in the state’ – the party as spin doctor, as it were.” (Mair, 2013a: 94; cf. Andeweg, 2000: 140).

Saward’s ‘statal representation’ allows us to think of this statement not of documenting a simple deviation from the representative-democratic role of parties, but allows us to understand it as intrinsically linked to the nature of representation as a function that is constructed and continually re-defined by the performance of political actors. This now allows me to discuss in the following the two empirical cases of new citizen-party linkages mentioned in the introduction of the paper. One slight change of accent to Saward’s notion is
however necessary: While he focuses mainly on parties’ claims to be representative of a certain object in order to be further legitimized as elected representatives, my example touches upon the legitimation of government policies and transnational public authorities. Through the representation of these policies and authorities to the citizens, parties attempt to legitimize the institutions of the state of which they have become an indispensable part.

Two empirical illustrations

The SPD membership vote on the German coalition accords

After the general elections in Germany in September 2013, the conservative parties CDU and CSU entered into negotiations with the social-democratic SPD over the formation of a coalition government. The SPD leadership announced in the course of the talks that it would, in case of an agreement reached, submit the text outlining the government programme to a binding vote by all SPD members. Eventually, over the course of one week in December 2013, nearly 475,000 party members were called to decide whether the SPD should join the coalition government on the basis of the accords in question. It was thus a simple plebiscitary yes/no vote, and conducted according to the ‘one member-one vote’ principle. The result of the vote was clear: With a turnout rate of about 78%, almost 76% of the votes were in favour of the coalition accords.

How to make sense of this membership vote now? I see three possible ways of interpreting it, and I will dwell mostly on the second and third reading, as it is those two that concern the theories of democracy and representation. The first reading simply pertains to the political manoeuvring of the SPD leaders during the negotiations. There are two strategic objectives involved: The first is clearly to extract concessions from the conservative side in the negotiations, as pointing to the possible rejection of an unsatisfying programme from a social-democratic point of view by the party base is a formidable instrument of pressure. The second is to legitimize the SPD leadership’s own positions, so that in the case that the government participation proved harmful in electoral terms, as it has done in 2009, the fault would lie with the party in its entirety and not just a few single individuals in the top layers of the party.

The second reading pertains to democracy in a broad sense. One could argue that the membership vote is the beginning of democratisation of party structures, and it is has indeed been welcomed as such by party members and the wider public. If that is the case, then it can be put in the perspective of wider debates about the need and shape of democracy today. This is clearly a form of plebiscitary democracy, and the involvement of the members was not about the control of the agenda, about any substantial contribution or about the selection of
the personnel. In this sense it clearly follows a growing trend of promoting more direct democratic involvement of citizens through referenda. In the realm of party politics, those developments have already been present, especially within the British Labour Party, where the introduction of ‘one member-one vote’ procedures are seen to have given more autonomy to the leadership at the expense of the intermediary ranks of the party hierarchy (Mair, 2000). Crouch (2004: 70-72) sees the evacuation of the activists from the party and the establishment of those direct linkages as an indication of ‘post-democracy’, leaving the party as an institution of democracy in place but emptying it of its substantial content. This is valid criticism, but as much of the literature, it remains wedded to the standard view of party representation.

Therefore, a third reading introduces a constructivist twist to the story: What if the party still represents, but does so in a different way, for a different purpose and with a different principal behind its actions? This is what has been suggested, as I noted, by a number of contributions to the ‘etatisation’ literature, but it is Saward who has begun to spell this out in terms of representation theory. If we apply the notion of ‘statal representation’ as defined above, we can start to think about the party as representing the government pact, the programme of the governing elite (or of a cartel of mainstream party leaders), to the citizens. More precisely, in this case, one party represents the government programme to a segment of the citizenry, namely the SPD party members.

From Saward’s work, it is not possible to derive any normative criteria for this mode of representation. However, it is clear that this opens up a number of questions about the democratic nature of this procedure: Is it legitimate that parties change their role within a representative system which is, according to many, in transformation, and become a representative of the state within society? And if so, the the question becomes a different one: Why do only less than 500,000 out of an electorate of nearly 62 million get to vote on the government programme, simply by virtue of paying a membership fee to a political party? Importantly, there is no direct link between being a party member and having voted for that very party in the elections preceding the coalition negotiations.

Indeed, the procedure was heatedly debated in the German public: A number of constitutional lawyers have argued that the membership vote is indeed unconstitutional, as it contributes to de-parliamentarisation: The decision over who is to be in the next government is not taken by the parliamentary parties anymore, but by a minority of citizens. The Constitutional Court did rule against this interpretation and upheld the process as
constitutional, but it nonetheless indicates a number of changes to our understanding of party representation.

Instead of the conventional view, in which parties were to organize society and aggregate the citizens’ demands, and then channel those demands into the political system via elections and via the parliament, we arrive at a much more complex picture. The standard view of representation is increasingly contested by low electoral turnout, falling membership numbers, and general decline in trust in parties, as well as by the emergence of populist parties, social movements and citizens’ initiatives. At the same time, we see parties forging new links with party members, through which an already defined programme, derived though the traditional mode of representation, is represented back to society. While beyond the scope of the paper, one may add yet another interesting element, which is the binding nature of the membership vote, thereby calling into question the principle of the free mandate of parliamentarians.

**The European Greens online primary**

My second empirical illustration comes from the campaign for the 2014 European Parliament elections, and concerns the online primary that was to select the top candidates (Spitzenkandidaten) of the European Greens. In line with the decision of the major European party federations, the European Green parties have decided to field candidates for a Europe-wide campaign for the first time. To do so, they allowed every European voter over the age of 16 to choose amongst four candidates for the post. Membership in any member party of the party federation was not required, as a simple indication of the user that he/she supported green principles was sufficient. On the website, one could view short video clips and texts by the four candidates, indicating the priorities they would focus on during the campaign and the subsequent EP term. The selection of the candidates did however not have any direct link to the creation of the election manifesto of the party, which was published only after the completion of the selection procedure. In the end, a disappointing 22 000 users participated in the online primary, and selected the German Ska Keller and the French José Bové to be Europe-wide Green candidates.

As in the previous case, I look at this participatory process from three angles. First, from a strategic point of view, one can regard the decision to hold the primary to be motivated by the wish to present the Green party as open to new technologies and new avenues of participation and thereby address the younger segments of the electorates, particular as various European Pirate Parties have in the recent past enjoyed some successes by emphasizing these themes. In
addition, an online primary may be a simple way of testing the popularity and presentability of potential candidates in the mass media, an activity that has become central to the communication and campaign officers of political parties.

From the point of view of democracy broadly defined, the primary can be seen within the context of the growing interest in the role of new communication technologies as a means of democratization, often subsumed under the labels ‘e-participation’ or ‘digital democracy’ (Michelsen & Walter, 2013: 217). In the case of the Green primary, it should not be difficult to see how the process falls short of the ambitions connected to those concepts, also besides the low participation rate. The very shallow nature and low intensity of participation by selecting a candidate with a number clicks, which can be done within a few minutes, is immediately obvious. The phenomenon of this type of superficial political participation has been called ‘clicktivism’ with a mostly negative connotation (Ibid.: 240). Moreover, even when ignoring this criticism, a participatory mechanism conducted exclusively over the Internet automatically includes a great number of citizens who lack the knowledge of this medium, which may apply to elder generations, but also those with the lack of necessary resources. As has been noted with regards to internet-based participation, the existing digital divide may thus turn into a democratic divide (Ibid.: 218).

For a third reading, I now turn back to the theory of party representation as developed thus far in this paper. While a primary that allows citizens to choose a candidate based on his personality certainly involves an element of ‘descriptive’ representation in the traditional view (Pitkin: 1967: 60-91), a constructivist reading can once more lead to a more complex view of party representation. As one of the slogans on the website for the Green Primary states:

“In times of financial crisis and declining trust in European institutions, we will demonstrate that European politics can be different - participatory, interactive, democratic and fun!”.

This is an apt illustration of what is at stake: the trust and legitimacy of European institutions and its politics. The European Green party federation therefore is not only concerned with winning votes in the elections, but also to mobilize people to vote in the first place and thereby to legitimize the EU institutions. It is thus the EU and its institutions that are represented in this instance by the Green party campaign.

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3 The statement can be found under <http://europeangreens.eu/votegreen2014>, retrieved on 29 June 2014. Although I do not develop this further in this paper, one may ask whether this statement can be considered a ‘statal representative claim’ as envisioned by Saward. It immediately shows the problem of systematic empirical application inherent in the approach: The statement does, as I argue, pertain to the act of representation, although it does not contain the word ‘represent’. What are then appropriate criteria to identify a representative claim?
Again, this sits well with the ‘etatisation’ thesis and Saward’s ‘statal representation’. Euro-parties have become an integral part of the complex institutional framework of the European Union, are mentioned in the Article 10 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and are subject to a number of regulations. While not decisive in determining European policy, the European party federations (Europarties) of the mainstream party families (that is, the social-democratic PES, the christian-democratic EPP, the liberal ALDE and the European Greens) have become permanent institutions based in Brussels close to the political centre of the EU. In a climate of growing scepticism towards the European institutions, the Europarties are thus inclined to defend these institutions’ legitimacy. There are a number of other examples of the recent European election campaign, in which the campaigning material of pro-integration mainstream parties consists of large sections in which the EU, its workings and its benefits are explained, before the actual policy programme of the respective party is presented. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional role of parties in bringing the demands of their respective constituency into the institutional realm.

These observations are backed up for instance by recent research on Euroscepticism in online media: As is argued, the main bulk of contestation does not concern specific policies, but the legitimacy of the polity as such (de Wilde, Michailidou, & Trenz, 2013; Michailidou & Trenz, 2013). In this context of ‘polity contestation’, the mainstream Europarties, in our example the European Greens, can be seen as the representatives of the European polity towards a sceptic citizenry. Again, there is no automatic normative judgement attached to this Sawardian interpretation, as a Europhile and politically involved citizen might very well agree with parties engaging in “bringing the EU closer to the citizens”. It however opens up new pathways to think about the role of political party in contemporary systems of representative democracy, and the potential normative judgements may follow in further work.

Conclusion

This paper has started out with the observation of a disengagement of voters from traditional party politics and of an attempted counter-movement by parties to re-connect with citizens. I have argued that in order to assess the quality of these new linkages, we must engage research on political parties with theories of democracy and representation. Most theorists and empirical party researchers have only recently begun to talk to each other in this context, and I built upon the advances made in this endeavour. By drawing upon a new ‘constructivist’ approach to political representation, I argue that party can take on the role of representatives not only of society but also of the state.
I have then attempted to illustrate this argument by way of discussion by two recently introduced mechanisms of citizen participation in the decision-making process of parties, the SPD membership vote on the German coalition accord and the online candidate selection of the European Greens. On the one hand, the attempts to involve citizens have in both cases proven to be symptomatic of the crisis of representative democracy rather than a solution for it. In the other hand, however, an expanded notion of political representation shows us how parties, having become closely tied to public authorities, attempt to represent policies or institutions to the citizens it engages in the processes I have discussed.

Why then is this relevant to the study of political parties and of contemporary democracy? My answer is that while I recognize the important insights and sharp criticism of much literature on the current failings of parties, the conclusions are not satisfactory. I have mainly drawn on two critical engagements, Crouch’s ‘post-democracy’ and Mair’s ‘end of party/popular democracy’ accounts. In both perspectives however, the end of the story of representative democracy seems to be reached in the present conjuncture. By positing the really existing system of representative democracy of the second half of the twentieth century as the ultimate benchmark, any potential for a meaningful and normatively satisfying reformulation of representative democracy for our current age is closed off.

The implications for a future agenda are two-fold. First, systematic empirical studies for the theoretical advances I have discussed and then sketchily illustrated along two empirical cases. This calls for a qualitative and discourse-focused research agenda in which it is not only of importance what parties do, but also what they say in the various arenas of public speech and contestation. A fruitful approach in this direction has begun to emerge, for instance with the development of ‘representative claims analysis’ (de Wilde, 2013) and the analysis of ‘substantive claims’ (Severs, 2012).

Second, from a normative perspective, it is important to come to a fuller understanding of how and for what purpose political parties function today. Only then we can move from viewing parties be doomed as institutions of representation to asking meaningful questions: Do we allow parties to take on different representative functions? Do we have to replace them as vehicles of popular mobilization and the peoples’ democratic self-government with other forms of organization? What steps can be taken to restore citizens’ trust in and engagement with political parties under the changed circumstances?
References


