Partisanship and Political Affection.
The normative and epistemic functions of partisan discourse

Abstract
Political Parties have rarely been appraised as they pose a normative puzzle to political scientists. Sometimes understood as the inherent problem of parliamentary democracy they are criticized for following short-termed, self-interested policies and pursuing particular interests instead of a common good. Accordingly, some scholars appreciate the marginalisation of partisanship and advance a model of “policy without politics” or “depoliticized politics” for the sake of effective problem solving. Political Analysis additionally emphasizes that parties, once in power, play strategic games of “credit claiming” and “blame avoidance”. Parties occasionally diffuse or deny responsibility by referring to constraints and a lack of alternatives. These strategic games can blur transparent and accountable decision-making and thus raise political disaffection. Against this backdrop, my paper reflects on normative and epistemic values of political parties. It follows three strands: First, it reflects on democratic theory. With Laclau and Mouffe (1985; Mouffe 2005, 2015) I substantiate the claim of agonistic democracy that conflict is essential to democracy. Articulations of antagonistic identities provide indispensable frames for distinct interests and political projects. Second, I address the question of democratic legitimacy of governments and oppositions as functions fulfilled by parties. I argue that chances of revision and reversal of political decisions are key; outvoted representatives and voters can accept decisions as binding and legitimate when they know that after a legislature cycle it could be their turn. Consequently, parliamentary democracy and the rule of political parties immanently refer to time horizons and to a reflection on contingency and complexity. Legitimacy and trust in democracy paradoxically depend on parties that communicate themselves as parties and as one interest group in power. Finally, I discuss my argument in the light of empirical reflections on strategies by parties that seek to blur accountability and partisanship and thus internalize the critique of political parties themselves.
Introduction

“But what we do have going for us: We are not corrupt. Not yet.” (Yanis Varoufakis 2015)

„There is no alternative to austerity.“ (Christine Lagarde 2013)

Lately, both the advocates of agonistic democracy and of rational or technocratic ‘policy-making without politics’ (Schmidt 2006) could be bewildered. Amidst the Eurocrisis both politicisation and depoliticisation have gained momentum. Politicisation can be found in „three inter-related dimensions: issue salience, actor expansion, and polarization“ (Hutter/Kerscher 2014: 269) while at the same time, “state managers […] seek to place at one remove the politically contested character of governing and in so doing paradoxically enhance political control“ (Burnham 2014: 189). Depoliticisation is indeed a political strategy. While Olli Rehn, Christine Lagarde, Angela Merkel, Wolfgang Schäuble and many others deploy the rhetoric of “there is no alternative” to portray the contingent measures of crisis-muddling through as necessary and to end putatively futile debates on how to solve the Eurocrisis, fresh movements and parties like Podemos or Syriza gain support and meanwhile form a government in Greece. Their protagonists like Pablo Iglesias and Alexis Tsipras claim to be an alternative to well-established parties and to the neoliberal programme of fiscal conservatism and austerity measures. They disapprove the apparent institutionalisation of technocratic governance in order to stabilise the Eurozone and disrupt the procedures of European executive federalism (Habermas 2013: 93).

Since 2008, ‘business as usual’, that is ordinary policy-making and policy cycles do not seem to work out. The crisis has altered and shaken political architectures and discourses. Throughout Europe, many people find themselves supporting political parties such as Podemos or Ciudadanos in Spain, the Five Star Movement of Beppe Grillo in Italy and the ‘Alternative für Deutschland’ (AfD) in Germany and/or they find themselves protesting against allegedly corrupt and untruthful elites of politicians and journalists like the in recent demonstrations in Germany.1 Calls for a more plebiscitary polity and public defiance are

1 Beside the apparent islamophobic and neo-nationalist side of those demonstrations of Pegida, Legida, Bagida etc., many demonstrators aligned themselves with the organisers to express their distrust and frustration in politics.
getting louder while ‘traditional parties’ continue to lose members. Elite collusion and policy drift of the existing party system are omnipresent narratives. Taking a closer look at those new parties and movements, we recognise that they display features of populism:\(^2\) They articulate a critique of existing party politics and proliferate cleavages of ‘us against them’. Their tendency toward anti-politics (e.g. Schedler 1997) is reflected in the fundamental claim of a true representation of a ‘volonté générale’ and thus of a higher responsiveness to the ‘people’s will’. They play strategic games of being young and fresh parties in contrast to well-established parties and thus pursue a critique of party politics from within.

This echoes a phenomenon of political affection: In Germany, for instance, surveys show that people trust political institutions in general, and in particular the impartial Federal Constitutional Court, while simultaneously a majority distrusts political parties (Gabriel/Holtmann 2010).\(^3\) Political parties apparently divide citizens, experts and political scientists alike (Niedermeyer et al. 2013; Gabriel/Holtmann 2010): On the one hand, they are criticized as top-down clientelist, bureaucratic machineries articulating particular interests, supporting power-seeking and reckless personalities. Instead of a genuine representation, their organisational structure would foster an oligarchy of party bureaucrats (Michels 1911). On the other hand, one could appreciate them as representatives of interests, vehicles of bottom-up political articulation advancing a genuine debate on political matters and as a guarantee of political self-rule in a parliamentary mass democracy. Hence, this brief and stylised sketch of a political panorama raises the subsequent questions: Why are political parties an object of political criticism and distrust? Is there any intrinsic normative value of political parties that we can highlight in favour of parties and which helps to deepen our understanding of democratic politics as well as the intricacies of party politics in parliamentary systems?

To answer these questions, this paper discusses the notion of democracy in its ontological and epistemic dimension so that the normative and epistemic role of political parties can be elucidated. We have to reassess democracy as a mode of politics in modern society in order to oppose the fixation with “democratic purism” without party politics (Gabriel/Holtmann 2010: 308). We can thus scrutinise the problem of party politics, partisan discourse and

---

\(^2\) This being said, the term ‘populism’ is not used pejoratively but analytically. For an analytical assessment of populism cf. Laclau 2005.

\(^3\) Several statistical surveys support this; cf. Infratest dimap 2009, 2014.
democracy. To examine the relation between politics, political affection and party conflict, Chantal Mouffe’s theoretical model of agonistic democracy will be outlined to discuss if ‘agonism’ is an inherent normative surplus of political parties. Then, the paper will tackle the question of the ‘supply side’ of the critique of party politics. It is worth asking if leaders of political parties themselves contribute to scepticism toward or even lack of trust in the political function of parties. This finally leads to a brief outlook on contemporary politics and the question why parties decide to restrict their own political influence and consent to limit parliamentary power.

**Reassessing democracy**

Research on party politics as well as on political discourse can be related to a broader debate in political theory: On the one hand, democratic theory discusses whether we entered a post-democratic phase and face a disempowerment and displacement of politics (Crouch 2004; Honig 1993). This diagnose is, however, debatable when it comes to defining the status ex ante or the ‘pre-post-democracy’ age since we risk to stylise embedded liberalism and corporatist management in the nation-state of a bygone era to a democratic arcadia that in fact never existed so nobly.

On the other hand, political theory detects a structural and irreducible politicisation of Western modern societies. Modern society is characterised by a significant increase of the realm of feasible policy choice, of political decisions, interventions and meaning-making – and by a “fundamental politicisation” (Greven 2000: 26). The structural politicisation in modernity has two relevant aspects: one concrete and one epistemic. The concrete side is that politics is confronted with a quasi all-encompassing allocation of competence and responsibility (Greven 1999; Kieserling 2003): Citizens communicate a need for action to elected politicians while we all openly analyse and discuss the challenges and limits of the actual realm of feasible policy choice – for instance in times of crises of financial capitalism. Citizens constantly demand regulation and intervention of political representatives in the democratic nation-state. Simultaneously, the nation-state is increasingly embedded in multi-level governance regimes and globalised settings that transform the state from a

---

4 This structural politicisation is not identical with dynamics or waves of politicisation as defined above.
“monopolist of power” to a “manager of power” (Genschel/Zangl 2008). Still, the national level stays the major level of political regulation.

The epistemic side of modern politicisation is the following: By acknowledging and grasping the opportunity of shaping our lives and our society by democratic self-rule (via representatives) and emancipating from ideas like fate, providence or Machiavellian fortuna, there is a growing awareness of contingency and complexity in modern society. According to Niklas Luhmann’s definition, the task of a modern political system is “to maintain the capacity of collectively binding decisions” (Luhmann 2002: 184). Decisions are acts of communication that reflect and demonstrate contingency (Luhmann 1984: 338). They do not follow any ahistorical, transcendental logic or determinism, but reflect a choice of options in a procedure that is open to different outcomes. In the end, other decisions could have been taken; other political paths could have been chosen. Taking decisions means excluding options. Ultimately, parliamentary democracy, as a political regime, is in itself contingent.

Against this backdrop, we can argue that the emergence of political parties is a very modern puzzle in politics. Parties institutionalise different options and thus a visibility of contingency. They institutionalise and legitimise the idea of ‘it could be different’ as they, theoretically speaking, conceptualise and suggest different policies within a given system. Sometimes they even claim radical policy change or a reform of polity. They articulate ways of interpreting social and political reality and how to manage and design politics and society. If we translate contingency into political terms, we can grasp it as “the explicit public perception of openness and opportunities of shaping and manufacturing societal progress, in particular as a pluralisation and diversification of the formulated and […] legitimate options of societal progress” (Blatter 2012: 207).

Due to this awareness of political opportunities and capabilities politicians can decide, but they also have to decide without being able to ground legality, social validity and liability of political decisions in ‘truth’, ‘fate’ or other metaphysic or transcendental determinisms (Greven 2000: 62). The collective liability of decisions in modern, secular and plural societies cannot be obtained by a simple “acknowledgement of claims of truth” (Lübke 1986: 162). Instead, a whole set of ‘beliefs’ (Max Weber) in legal procedures, political authorities and in fair interest representation via institutions and parties is the prerequisite for assuming and accepting legitimacy. Citizens can attribute legitimacy to the idea of democracy while disapproving its operating procedures and way of functioning.
As a consequence from this review of contingency and modern democracy, we can deduce that decisions have to be framed as political and fallible; elected politicians have to demonstrate responsibility and responsiveness. Transparency, accountability and the chance to revise decisions by voting for another government (i.e. for another party) are key to modern parliamentary and liberal democracy. Thus, we can understand modern democracy as a contingency-aware, fallacy-friendly institutionalisation of political experimentalism.

However, we might find this understanding of democracy rather challenging for political parties. Do they really understand themselves as instituting and managing ‘contingency’ or is this a clear case of theoretical overload? We shall now turn to an analysis of political parties and partisan discourse.

**Party politics and intricacies of (non-)partisan discourse**

Disguised into a joke, as often containing a bitter grain of truth, the current Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis said in a TV interview: “But what we do have going for us: We are not corrupt. Not yet.”

So what does policy-making in institutional frameworks such as parliamentary democracy and European (crisis) governance do to parties? How does it ‘corrupt’ them and cause an evolution from idealism to disillusioned pragmatism, from transparency to (pecuniary) corruption beyond the simple ‘fate’ of bureaucratisation and oligarchisation?

Parties articulate interests, they filter and transform political claims and they offer frames of political orientation and identification for citizens. Within a plural society, they can render pluralism and conflicts visible. Yet, there is a thin line in democratic politics between claiming a universal and impartial common good, a volonté générale, sheer necessity or rationality of governmental decisions and the inherent logic of democratic choice and action in party states and parliamentary systems. Parties are, by their very definition, partial; they represent parts of society. If voted into government, they – and, if necessary, their coalitions partners – form an executive representing the political majority. The majoritarian government takes obliging and collectively binding decisions for every citizen.

---

5 Yanis Varoufakis in an interview with German television (ZDF) on 05.02.2015.
and wants to keep and gain votes. Therefore governments need to engage in universally convincing discourses of policy justification and to frame policies in a plausible way. Subsequently, recognizable partial parties remind us of an inherent problem of power and representation. When being openly partisan or party political, they cannot claim to represent or address every citizen’s interest; they can only claim to make one offer of policy choice, of political identification and affinity. So when elected into government, party members are well advised to go through a sort of discursive ‘transubstantiation’ and seek to represent the entity of a citizenship. The previous conflictive setting of election campaigns generally turns into a ‘statesmanlike’ discourse. That is why German chancellor Angela Merkel hurried to explain that she would be the “chancellor of all Germans”. 

In case of Angela Merkel, she largely marginalises and refutes party politics even in periods of election campaigns and seeks to avoid conflict and controversial debates (Kurbjuweit 2014). Merkel’s unfussy political style benefits from the Germans’ fatigue of party politics; she strategically positions herself as an impartial head of state. This strategy gains credibility due to the German multi-actor system that tends to disperse political responsibility in a highly coordinative policy-making process. Additionally, two of her governments since 2005 are grand coalition governments so that partisan discourse is diminished anyway.

Leaving aside Merkel’s strategy, one could assume that there is temporal dimension in party politics and partisan discourse. In times of opposition, party members can be frankly polemic and partisan, in times of government the members of the executive have to ‘represent’ and govern a pluralistic collective. But blunt party politics can also be problematic for opposition parties, as they appear openly partisan and thus potentially irrational, ‘unobjective’ agents. To reduce the visibility of partisanship, specific rhetorical devices of ‘blame avoidance’ and ‘credit claiming’ can be fruitful (Pierson 1994, 1996; Weaver 1986). When forming a government, there is a temptation to deny contingency and to blur political responsibility for unpalatable decisions. To avoid blame, politicians can for example refer to international or national institutional arrangements or to the imperative of international competitiveness. They can claim that the political choices once

---

promoted by their respective *party* are no longer feasible in *government*. The banal power of ‘reality’ seems to ‘corrupt’ political idealism or inexperience. Yet at the same time, credit claiming can be expressed in a discourse that tries to render contingency, partisanship or partiality invisible by strategic claims of higher legitimacy and rationality which transcend the ‘shady’ routines of party politics. This can take many forms: an invocation of a ‘*volonté générale*’, asserting constraints and imperatives (Vis/van Kersbergen 2007), reference to judicial obligations or to epistemic authorities like scientists can be useful when claiming credit and impartiality.

The examples of the Social Democrats pursuing a ‘Third Way’ under Tony Blair in Great Britain and a ‘new middle’ under Gerhard Schröder in Germany show that policy discourses on liberal reforms made use of blame avoidance and credit claiming simultaneously. Both parties claimed to adjust to “changed and harsh realities” (Blair/Schröder 1999) while they portrayed themselves as politicians courageously tackling necessary reforms in spite of the menace of electoral punishment and against all odds for Social Democrats. They intensively mobilised expertise to justify political reforms so as voters would appreciate their policies as part of a necessity-, rationality- and evidence-based approach.

For parties, it is both crucial and problematic to deploy strategies of obscuring or transcending party politics and partisanship. Two examples can help to illustrate this: First, it comes as no surprise that both German politicians and citizens increasingly appeal to the Federal Constitutional Court when either contesting, reviewing political decisions or seeking confirmation. The high level of trust in the judicial branch reflects latent shifts of political control from a parliamentary opposition to a ‘proficient’ and ‘apolitical’ institution and it displays distrust in intra-parliamentary mechanisms. The court’s legitimacy and trustworthiness is just bound to the idea that judges are not participating in party politics; they are not part of any party oligarchy or network.

Second, taking up the point of the rhetoric of “there is no alternative” (so called TINA) that dominated the German political discourse during the Greek debt crisis, one can also understand that this prevalent political discourse during the Greek debt crisis, one can also understand that this prevalent narrative went along with an invocation of rationality and necessity, of time pressure as well as moral and scientific evidence in order to *subvert* or *defy* the awareness of decisions being political and reversible. The influence of the German parliament was diminished; deliberation and legislation took place under top-down pressure. Such rhetoric and policy-making thus endanger democratic processes in favour of
scaling back democracy and party politics. Fittingly, Thomas Oppermann, group chairman of the Social Democrats in the German Bundestag, just recently commented on Greek calamities by stating: “What Greece needs now, is solid governance skills and technocracy” (Bollmann/Nienhaus 2015). A higher level of rationality and responsibility is attributed to technocratic arrangements than to democratic party politics since ‘technocrats’ cannot be held accountable by electoral or plebiscitary procedures. Thus, they are not ‘forced’ to concessions designed to win votes. As an organisation, every party needs votes for its political and financial survival. Party oligarchy and the dark side of responsiveness, namely political opportunism, are repeatedly considered more problematic than administrative bureaucracy.

When decisions are justified by – judicial or technical – impartiality, TINA-rhetoric or higher morality and rationality, they have an aura of being irreversible, incontestable and irrefutable. Alas, those claims and rhetorical devices do not reflect the immanent partisanship in party parliamentarianism and blur political responsibility. Hence, we can argue that even a government should not deny its origin in party politics.

When politicians invoke a volonté générale, impartial morality and rationality, they run risk of discrediting parties in opposition and non-parliamentary protest. In parliamentary systems, dissent is supposed to be articulated in the relation between government and opposition. Following our line of argument, a lack of agreement fulfils a vital function in democracy as it renders contingency visible, reflects realms of feasible policy choices and room for manoeuvre, it demands reversibility and articulates alternatives. Consequently, an opposition does not undermine the liability of decisions of the parliament’s majority, but increases it. Every opposition works as an amplifier of legitimacy since outvoted citizens (as voters) can see their political interests represented in the parliamentary process; they can wait and hope for a change of government. Citizens show either an affirmative or pragmatic acceptance of a government’s legitimacy since they can wait for their turn – and they voted for the opposition as their trustee of dissent. Democracy is, according to the minimalist conception of Adam Przeworski, „a system in which parties lose elections“ (Przeworski 1991: 10, 1999). Parliamentary mechanisms have a temporal dimension; they keep promises of ‘windows of opportunity’. Democratic regimes stand out because questioning themselves does not take away more validity that it can generate. Consequently, party politics increases legitimacy.
But what if politicians themselves refute party politics and political discourse sabotages elections as a possible window of opportunity for change and revision? If politicians insinuate that the opposition cannot question or revise decisions, norms or arrangements because they are universally right, rational and incontestable, this may lead to frustration, political disenchantment and to a transfer of parliamentary opposition to extra-parliamentary forums. It can also result in a renewal and radicalisation of the opposition, like in right- or left-wing-populism (Mouffe 2005). A denial of a genuine and frank partisan discourse reflecting on pluralism, distinct interests as well as on political responsibility and reversibility can engender disillusionment and growing detachment between political parties and society; it can destabilise democracy. Therefore, theorists like Chantal Mouffe plead for an agonistic understanding of democracy that fosters vital debates on alternatives and considers conflict as essential (Mouffe 2007; Laclau/Mouffe 2001; additionally: Honig 1993; Connolly 1991). We shall now discuss whether this understanding of democracy may serve as heuristics for party politics.

The agonistic model of democracy as heuristics for party politics?

In the 1990s, Chantal Mouffe criticised the dominant political discourse as one of a post-political era that, inspired by authors like Anthony Giddens, fetishized a ‘Third Way’ and a ‘political middle’. Until today, she criticises that political agents such as party leaders seek to flee ‘the political’ by denying political conflict and claiming a rational and pragmatic ‘middle approach’ (Mouffe 2005, 2007). In her view, fundamental questions are no longer addressed in political terms but framed as problems that are to be solved in rational, administrative, moral or judicial ways. Since the conflictive and antagonistic dimension of politics is left blank by this apolitical, non-partisan discourse, populist parties revitalize the political sphere and engage in political conflicts. Right-wing populist movements do so by using ethno-national conceptions that – at least – challenge liberal-democratic norms and values.

Starting from a discussion of Carl Schmitt’s notion of ‘the political’ and his critique of parliamentarism (Schmitt 1932; 1923), Mouffe formulates her harsh critique of supposedly unideological politics and cosmopolitan and deliberative models of democracy. Instead of
trying to reach ‘neutral’ or ‘rational’ judgements, democratic societies should acknowledge the contingent and power-based character of every social order. She postulates that (potentially totalitarian) antagonisms need to be transformed into *democratic agonisms*. Agonistic politics means that political agents and positions compete and clash. Yet, they accept each other’s quest for power (Mouffe 2000). Political agonism can follow the cleavage of right versus left politics. Indeed, these positions are not understood as ‘essentialist’ categories but as flexible political positions in the discursive arena.

Political positions are linked to subject positions between people thinking *differently* about ‘the good society’. Profound democratic pluralism needs flexible differences and changeable constellations, not any stable, identity-fixing, moral, ethnic or religious friend-foe-distinctions that cannot be reversed. Not friend-foe, but adversarial relations shape politics, Mouffe argues. This is supposed to leave enough room for a ‘hegemonic’ construction of a pluralistic ‘demos’. Therefore, Mouffe imagines a civil ‘communality’ that does neither negate differences nor marginalise them or transcend them, but integrates them in agonistic conflicts and makes adversarial relations compatible with pluralism and plural ways of life. Although ‘the people’ is absent as a ‘substantial body’ in modern democracy, it is still a point of reference in political battles (Hildebrand/Séville 2015). The people’s will still is a *functional fiction* of liberal democratic politics. But with Mouffe’s approach, we are able to understand this fiction as a discursive and contingent construction – and as a crucial imaginary.

Agonistic conflict is entrenched in and protected by the constitutional principles of liberal democracy. Liberty and equality are the guiding principles of democratic politics for Mouffe. As an anti-essentialist post-structuralist author, she intends to formulate a normative model of democracy that is based on the irrefutable moment of antagonism; she wants to break with the conventional focus on stability, peace and rationality in political science.

Concerning our question of an intrinsic normative and epistemic value of political parties, Mouffe is indeed helpful but with two *caveats*. First, her agonistic model of democracy has (at least) one weakness concerning its ontological assumptions. It juxtaposes a critique of essentialism and essentialist politics obsessed with rationality and consensus with an anti-essentialist model of antagonism. Mouffe and her companion Ernesto Laclau deduce the inherent antagonism as the basis of social (and political) discourse from the structuralist

---

8 Mouffe’s model of agonistic democracy thus is only loosely linked to Carl Schmitt; cf. Sigglow 2012: 179.
idea of difference as the general basis of meaning. There is only significance in the face of difference; there is only a (political) chain of equivalence and a flexible collective identity if there is an alterity, an adversary (Laclau/Mouffe 2001). Mouffe emphasizes the discursive construction of agonistic politics; but she hypostatises conflict to the genuine model of politics. She evades elaborating on institutional procedures and thus on political compromising or bargaining. This overrating of conflict is politically blindsided.

To avoid this trap we suggested a weaker normative argument than the model of an immanent agonistic democracy. Without losing the epistemic and normative point of our critique of non-partisan discourse, we can restrict the normative argument to the model of democracy as a fallible and fallacy-friendly logic of experimentalism. Non-partisan discourse is not exclusively about a negation of agonism, but it reacts to, limits or defies fallibility, insecurity, partiality and contingency in various ways. Agonism is but one mode of democratic politics, it is not inherently necessary.

Second, Laclau’s and Mouffe’s emphasis put on flexible political positions and “subject positions” leads to one difficulty. On the one hand, parties need to fix identities; they need to assemble and filter interests under empty signifiers (Laclau 1996) such as ‘social justice’, ‘freedom of choice’, ‘market freedom’ etc. When ‘fixing’ and filtering interests, they can offer stable frames of political orientation and thus help to contribute to political affection and learning. On the other hand, parties have to tolerate political adjustments, political coalitions and cleavages. Policy targets vary; discourses and positions gradually evolve. Parties institutionalise and organise political positions into ‘representable’, ‘pursuable’ and ‘decidable’ units. The daily business of policy-making is in fact rather a business of compromising, bargaining and muddling through than a permanent adversarial discourse.

Consequently, we could rather argue that parties first articulate, then mediate and resolve conflicts through the procedures of parliamentary democracy. As said above, partisan discourse and party politics are related to a temporal and institutional-functional dimension of the particular party: Potentially more conflictive in opposition, incumbent parties in government are dominated by a logic of decision-making and problem-solving agency.

However, Mouffe helps us to understand that politics has an inherently discursive dimension; it is a question of how to perceive, frame, narrate, counterpoise and contest political projects and decisions. Parties need a vivid interplay of conflict, compromise and deliberation. If there is no political opponent because everyone invokes or indulges in an imaginary middle position or if opposition is politically prohibited, parties cannot fulfil their
genuine functions. Politics can get rough and conflictive – conflict and dissent are not symptoms of party political decadence or blockade. They should be understood as one mode of vibrant politics and a functioning polity. They can be the normative surplus of political parties. But conflict should neither be overrated nor negated. The public dismay of political conflict as a symptom of irrational politicians locked in an impasse of their incompatible and obstructive interests is based on a ‘misunderstanding’ of democratic policy-making. To some extent, we need to appreciate conflicts of interests and therefore political parties. Nevertheless, we shall inquire why this interpretation of parliamentary democracy is commonly reproduced and results in popular suspicion of political parties.

**Conclusion: Appreciating party politics?**

Political parties have multiple assets: First of all, they play an important role in controlling the government, making governance strategies visible and contesting executive authoritarianism and policies or rhetoric. Attempts of denying party politics can be contested by revealing and debating alternatives. In so doing, parties themselves regularly make us of partiality, irrationality and clientelism as a tool to discredit each other. Media and public discourse, too, reflect on party politics, they can reveal partisan projects and ideological embedding where politicians try to hide them. But the common claim of ‘less party politics’ is also risky: Rational and technocratic governance emerge as a phantasm of problem-solving.

Parties must find a way both to organise their organisational interests and not to reproduce prejudices on the inherent corruption or political irresponsibility of parties. If they openly pursue party politics, they get into trouble. If they seek to blur or transcend party politics by apodictic invocation of the ‘people’s will’, they materialise the phantasm of an immediate populist expression. Likewise, assertions of all-encompassing rationality or truth and rhetoric of “There is no alternative” foster scepticism toward democratic institutions and political apathy since politicians subvert their own function as bottom-up vehicles of political negotiation and deliberation. The open reflection on party politics is, paradoxically, the prerequisite for trust in modern, secular democracies.
Still, we can ask if it is a task of political parties to understand themselves and their function as an institutionalisation of contingency. In the beginning, we raised the issue of theoretical overload. Now, we can conversely argue that the denial or negation of contingency and of party politics is indeed a plausible technique of power. Political agents such as party representatives disguise the partisan and voluntaristic moment of their decisions. Conflict and compromise are not communicated in terms of power relations and party politics but as a reasonable quest for solutions.

Following Slavoj Žižek one could discuss whether politics needs a negation or elimination of contingency and power instead of a revelation or demonstration of the very process of decision-making. Politics seems to be caught in a dilemma: “Is power only efficient under conditions of its self-extinction? Is self-aware power not impossible?” (Žižek 2005: 185) Luhmann, too, suggests that power as a modern medium tends to a “zero method”, i.e. its non-usage (Luhmann 2002: 46, 345). In the course of modernity, power is no longer bound to concrete persons; it evolves from a traditional to a bureaucratic, from an authoritarian to a legal and rational relation. In democracy as a system of popular self-rule, power itself is a paradox (Luhmann 2002: 324, 342). Power remains the medium of democratic politics while self-rule seems both omnipresent as invisible (Bonß/Lau 2011: 10).

Within this setting, parties function as vehicles of power and of a negation of power. Furthermore, politicians themselves internalise the critique of party politics. We already illustrated two tempting strands of blurring and denying party politics: The phantasm of increasing responsibility by rational and technocratic governance and the populist phantasm of a ‘volonté générale’ directly expressed in ultra responsive politics. These strands display recurrent topoi of party politics criticism. Gabriel and Holtmann systematise them along three dichotomies: community against society, unity against difference, rational problem-solving against political conflicts of interests and party ideology (Gabriel/Holtmann 2010: 311). Thus, we realise that the disapproval of party politics and the shortage of normative defences of parties are related to a counterfactual leitmotif of social theory: The fiction of one self-identical, morally decent community that is not divided by cleavages and ideally does not need representation by power-seeking bureaucratic organisations such as parties that ultimately distort political reason. Rousseau famously nurtured this phantasm of a ‘genuine and pure democracy’; his ideas still haunt our political ‘subconscious’. But paradoxically, the very reproduction and internalisation of

---

9 Luhmann argues that power is de-legitimized by the notion of democracy. Ibid.: 358.
those topoi of party politics criticism by politicians, public intellectuals, journalists and citizens do not solve the problem but can aggravate it. The criticised phenomena are reproduced as a matter-of-fact.

Current developments seem to confirm the paradoxical effect of this internalisation. In the crisis of the Eurozone, the European crisis management entails an executive federalism, i.e. intergovernmental decision-making that asserts and deepens supranational and transnational governance beyond parliamentary procedures. The most famous example is the Troika of European Central Bank, European Commission and International Monetary Fund delegates. The net power gain of those institutions results in a governance regime that seeks to diminish opportunities of change and reversibility and utilizes “shielding mechanisms” against politicisation (Schimmelfennig 2014). Democracy always implies the risk of uncertainty and reversion. Symptomatically, the case of an installation of debt brakes in constitutional law illustrates that political parties consent to restrict their own power as parliamentary and democratic forces and to induce certainty. Party politics and democratic reversion are to be limited.

In the context of this paper, we can only highlight three motivations for governments – that are built by political parties – to agree to self-binding rules: Firstly, the persistent crisis forces governments to re-gain trust of financial markets. The promise of being able to pay back debts must be held up if governments want to be considered reliable and trustworthy. Secondly, politicians seem to have internalised the thesis of time-inconsistency in macroeconomics (Hay 2004). They bind themselves and future governments to the mast of fiscal conservatism because they believe that self-binding rules prohibit the temptations of deficit spending and the dangers of political business cycles. Politicians thus auto-restrain party politics to a defined realm of feasible policy choice (Sturm 2013). Beyond the people, the second constituency of democratic politics is the ‘market’, as Armin Schäfer and Wolfgang Streeck point out (Schäfer/Streeck 2013: 19). Responsibility and responsiveness of parties are still highly valued. But we could finally ask the provocative question: Responsive to whom? Thirdly, the growing interdependence of political economies has made it profitable to converge in fiscal rules. Especially in the Eurozone, self-binding rules are understood as a remedy for the architectural failures in the Eurozone’s governance mix of fiscal intergovernmentalism and monetary supranationalism.

Political parties articulate their programmes in this current age of turmoil. These days, parties go through times of multiple unpalatable decisions with “deferred gratifications”
(Elster 1979) that are not even taken as given; they take decisions in a “world of unknown unknowns” (Asmussen 2012). Faced with these new challenges, new parties, new movements, and new cleavages proliferate politicisation. Parliaments, parties and elections can thus (re-)gain importance – debates and conflicts might get more intense. It is time to reassess and re-appreciate democracy and party politics, including compromise and conflict.

**Bibliography**


Bollmann Ralph/Lisa Nienhaus (2015): Denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 08.03.2015.


Infratest dimap (without author) (2009): Vertrauen der Bürger in die Politik gestiegen, online: http://www.infratest-dimap.de/service/aktuell/vertrauen-der-buerger-in-die-politik-gestiegen/, [03.03.2015].


Le Monde (2013): Selon Christine Lagarde, „il n’y a pas d’alternative à l’austérité“; 02.05.2013, online: http://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2013/05/02/selon-christine-lagarde-il-n-y-a-pas-d-alternative-a-l-austerite_3170174_3234.html, [17.05.2013].


Press Release of the German Government: Merkel: Der Islam gehört zu Deutschland, 12.01.2015, online: http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Artikel/2015/01/2015-01-12-merkel-islam.html [13.03.2015]


Varoufakis, Yanis: Interview with German television (ZDF) on 05.02.2015.