Patterns of Party Persistence, Decline and Disintegration

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Topic of the workshop

This workshop aims at comparatively analysing patterns of party persistence, decline and disintegration. It explores how these phenomena have been treated in the literatures on old, new, semi- and non-democracies and - by linking these subfields more closely - attempts to engage in new empirical research. It is particularly interested in the organisational dimension of these phenomena following Pedersen’s (1982) plea that we need to study parties as ‘mortal organisations’ focusing equally on party decline and death as on those parties forming part of the supposedly ‘established party system’. The reason is simple: if we do not know what makes parties decline and fail, we do not know what makes them persist.

Taking a brief look at the literature on parties in long-established democracies, the notion of party decline has been discussed with regard to parties as a *species* rather than *individual parties*, pointing to the decline of the mass party as such. While the former has implications for the latter, we lack a coherent approach or theory to understand parties’ various patterns of persistence, decline and disintegration operating within the same or in different institutional settings. The literature on new democracies has been more aware of the vulnerability of political parties. Yet while the weakness of party institutionalization and party disintegration have been more explicitly examined, and party decline has been identified as a trigger for regime change in the literature on semi-democracies and authoritarian regimes, there has been little discussion about which analytic tools and measurements are able to travel across these various contexts. Core questions to be addressed in the workshop are therefore the following:

1. Is it possible to develop concepts of party persistence, decline and disintegration equally applicable to parties in long-lived, new, semi- and non-democracies?
2. How do different forms of decline (e.g. electoral and organisational decline) interact?
3. How do parties assess their own performance and based on which indicators do they decide to dissolve?
4. Moving towards a theory of party persistence, decline and disintegration, how relevant are contextual factors like electoral systems or party finance laws as compared to party characteristics to explain the empirical patterns observed within and across systems?
Related to these questions, core empirical aspects to be explored are: the intra-organizational repercussions of electoral success and failure, pushing for organizational reform (Harmel & Janda, 1994) or potentially triggering disintegration (Panebianco, 1988); the consequence of resource shortages of various kinds and the working and adaptation of mechanisms of conflict resolution affecting how parties cope with electoral, financial or leadership crisis.

Relations to existing research

As highlighted already, the comparative study of party persistence, decline and disintegration cross-cuts several research areas which the workshop attempts to link more strongly.

1. As already mentioned above the topic of the workshop talks directly to the popular debate on the ‘decline’ the mass party in Western democracies (Kirchheimer 1965). Decreasing membership figures are paralleled by parties’ intensifying relations to the state (Katz and Mair 1995; Mair and Biezen 2001). This can be interpreted as decline but also as form of persistence through adaptation. Addressing such issues theoretically and empirically allows us to arrive at a more multi-faceted understanding of persistence and decline.

2. Leaving case studies aside (e.g. Levy 1988; Allum 1997), the scholarship on parties usually does not study ‘failure cases’ systematically. Looking at new parties more particularly, the organizational roots of party failure are crucial to explain why we sometimes observe new parties occupying a niche and ‘becoming established’ and sometimes the succession of parties addressing the same electoral demands replacing each other – each of them unable to create stable roots (Art 2008). Although crucial to specify under which conditions the rise of new parties leads to party system change, such aspects have received little attention.

3. Issues of party persistence, decline and disintegration are essential for the study of new democracies where parties are weak and we are regularly confronted with the rapid rise and decline of parties driven by the strategic manoeuvring of political entrepreneurs (e.g. Biezen 2003; Millard 2009). Factionalism, to mention one potential trigger of decline, is particularly pronounced in such systems. Yet so far we know little about which types of factionalism lead to decline and disintegration and under which conditions (see on this Boucek 2009).

4. The issue of factionalism finally brings us to the study of semi-democratic or non-democratic regimes. Research indicates that the persistence of the ruling party able to moderate intra-elite conflict is more important for the survival of hybrid regimes than multiparty elections (e.g. Brownlee 2002; 2004; Ishiyama and Quinn 2006). In a similar vein, party persistence and decline is crucial to understand the resilience and breakdown of one-party systems (e.g. Kalyvas 1999; Solinger 2001).
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Participants:

The workshop invites scholars from various disciplines engaged in the comparative study of parties, in particular, party organization. We are equally interested in conceptual work on how to conceptualize and measure party persistence, decline and disintegration comparatively and over time as we are interested in empirical studies. While we are open to in-depth studies of the evolution of crucial single cases starting from their emergence, periods of persistence to their decline, we are particularly interested in cross-national comparisons.

It is worthwhile to note that the workshop has the full support of the ECPR Standing Group on Political Parties.

Directors:

Nicole Bolleyer is Lecturer in Politics at the University of Exeter. She was a Lecturer at the University of Mannheim and received a PhD in political science from the EUI in Florence. She also studied at Johns Hopkins University, was a fellow at the University of Pittsburgh and currently holds a Marie Curie fellowship at the University of Leiden working on a project on ‘The Indirect State Funding of Political Parties in Europe’. Her recent research focuses on party organization in Western democracies. Her work has been published in *West European Politics, Comparative European Politics, Political Studies, Publius and Regional and Federal Studies*. Her first monograph *Intergovernmental Cooperation – Rational Choices in Federal Systems and Beyond* has been recently published by Oxford University Press.

Kris Deschouwer is Professor of Politics at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. He has always been involved in research on parties and party systems, with particular attention to party organization and published a large variety of books and articles. More recent research looks at the way parties deal with and adapt to multi-level political settings. Kris Deschouwer published in 2007 the edited volume ‘New parties in Government’, looking at successful cases of new party development. From 2003 to 2009 he was editor of the *European Journal of Political Research*. 
References:


