Introduction

We cannot understand contemporary representative democracy without understanding party system dynamics. Party systems represent the institutional equilibrium between citizens’ party support (the demand-side) and party crafting by elites (the supply-side), which together shape political processes and outcomes, drawing increasing attention from political scientists.

Despite this attention, our understanding of party system dynamics remains cloudy. In many countries it has become the norm for parties to appear, split, splinter, merge, “de-nationalise” (fragment in multilevel units) or die with great speed. A certain amount of coming and going can be expected in any party system, and the rate of change appears to be increasing. Furthermore, although the changes are most apparent in newer democracies, even some well-established party systems have begun to experiencing high levels of change, instability, realignments, and lack of institutionalisation or de-institutionalisation. Nor is this the result of our present economic uncertainty, since we can see signs of these patterns well before 2008.

New patterns of party system change are affecting political systems in ways that we are only now beginning to understand, but the speed of change actually inhibits our understanding because it also disrupts the very measures we use to look at party system change. This increasing state of constant flux is also stretching our concepts and is more difficult to measure: how we interpret the merging, the splitting, the regionalisation or de-nationalisation of main parties, when we consider a party to be new, how we compute volatility when voters can choose among multiple parties’ candidates or when voters can choose among party lists, and so on. Therefore, we need more comprehensive concepts and new techniques to better measure and understand the nature of changes within party systems.

At the heart of the problem is the most frequent instrument used to study all these dynamics: “electoral volatility”. This is an aggregate measure to calculate how many votes changed hands from one election
to the next. But this index is affected by four basic problems. First, we are witnessing an increasing process of rapid and unpredicted change in almost all democracies, resulting not only from more volatile voters on the demand-side, but also from much more volatile party elites and their party decisions on the supply-side. Therefore, we need to have specific new protocols to take into account all the potential changes produced by party elites’ actions on one side, and voters’ electoral decisions on the other (although both are clearly interconnected). Secondly, the index of volatility is also affected by turnout when it is not randomly distributed among different political parties in the system. Resolving this methodological problem has become even more evident recently because oscillations in turnout are also more dramatic and frequent in today’s democracies. Thirdly, the increasing personalisation of politics and of personal vote/local vote might mask great levels of regional or local volatility into aggregate low levels of volatility and apparent stability. Detecting these shifts requires new methods of local/ regional/ national aggregation of parties to measure volatility in multilevel electoral settings. Finally, electoral volatility has recently been used as a measurement of other phenomena affecting the functioning of party systems: the institutionalisation of party systems, but it is becoming evident that Pedersen’s index of electoral volatility suffers from problems of internal validity when it comes to study the institutionalisation of party systems (see Luna and Altman, 2011).

What we know about party system dynamics?

Although political scientists may agree that a degree of stability is beneficial for the healthy functioning of democracy, agreement begins to break-down when trying to set the correct level of desired stability. Too much instability may be unhealthy, but too much stability may lead in turn to immobilisation and lack of accountability. Disagreement also emerges as to which measure is most appropriate when seeking to assess the degree of stability. Whilst some scholars have used measures of individual actors such as candidate party switching (Shabad and Słomczyński, 2004) and the percentage of independent candidates (Protsyk and Wilson, 2003), others have used party or party system indicators, such as party durability (Lewis, 2006), the “effective” number of parliamentary parties (Horowitz and Browne, 2005; Bielasiak, 2002; Krupavicius, 1999) and organisational affiliation strategies (Kreuzer and Pettai, 2003). In this context, trying to accurately measure party system stability resembles a “fishing expedition” and has created problems of comparability and analytical reproduction. Each of these approaches has its merits, but none is altogether satisfactory.

Of course the most widely-used tool to measure the degree of party system stability has been the statistical measure of volatility (Coppedge 1998; Lane, 2008; Mainwaring and Zoco, 2007; Meleshevich, 2007; Sikk, 2005; Tavits, 2005; Tóka, 1997). Using statistical measures of electoral volatility has many advantages, not least because of its easy operationalisation as a clear and comparable quantitative measure. By examining the extent of change between elections, these measures capture the essence of what researchers seek to explore: the dynamics of party system change and stability (Bartolini and Mair, 1990). Nevertheless, although employing the same tool, scholars have tended to produce distinctly different results thanks to a series of decisions about measurement and classification.
At the heart of these are particular binary decisions about whether individual parties contesting the elections constitute change or continuity from the previous elections. Although there are many cases of absolute continuity and other cases that can be labelled “genuinely new” (Sikk, 2005), a significant amount of party system change falls between these extremes. Although in recent years there have been important attempts to improve Pedersen’s index (e.g. Powell and Tucker 2009; Mainwaring et al 2010), that try to “distinguish between the changes that stem from the dynamics between the previously active parties and the impact of newcomers” (Sikk, 2005:397) such refinements are still insufficient.

In addition to these new considerations, research by the workshop organisers points to significant differences among scholars regarding the size and comprehensiveness of volatility datasets, selection methods and factual assessments of party continuity, all of which lead to differences in volatility calculations that can differ by over 50% for the same country in the same time period (Casal Bértola, Haughton and Deegan-Krause forthcoming). And while there have been an effort to compare aggregate volatility statistics, there has been little comparison of the cross-national and cross-regional differences in the mechanisms and sequences of party- and party-system change.

What we will do in the workshop?

- **Identify the components of party system dynamics:**

  Finding ways in which parties change that may affect party systems (splitting, merging, regionalisation, and more) and producing a roster of the ways that parties change that covers all the possibilities affecting or producing party change in all of the various countries and continents. As part of this process, we are interested in taking steps toward developing tools that better clarify the distinctions and relationships between demand-side, electoral phenomena of party dynamics (realignment, dealignment, critical elections, deinstitutionalisation, etc.), and supply-side, elite-driven phenomena (merging, splitting, new parties, de-nationalisation.)

- **Develop better measurements of party system dynamics:**

  Elaborating a set of conceptual and operationalisational protocols that might affect electoral volatility and, therefore, party system change, such as: merging, splitting, new parties, regionalisation, etc. This should constitute an effort to understand the degree and kind of connection among those various changes. For example, how we should think about the relationship between a party merger versus an electoral coalition, a small splinter versus a larger one, a splinter which takes the bulk of the organisation but not the leader or the name (or some combination thereof). This is related to, but much larger than, the question of “what is a genuinely new party” (see Barnea and Rahat, 2010; Sikk, 2005).
• Apply the methods to actual political systems:

Once we have established what kinds of transformations actually occur, how do we place these in a single framework that can provide a useful set of indicators of change within party system as a whole? Our goal is ultimately to provide a coherent set of reliable, evidentially-based assessments of party change by country experts that can serve as a successor to comprehensive but general accounts (Bartolini and Mair, 1990; Rose and Munro 2009) and to the detailed but episodic judgments of sources such as the *EJPR Political Data Yearbook*. We believe that the evidence gathered by participants will improve the theoretical underpinnings of our understanding of party change and to develop new and better measurement techniques that will allow us to set that evidence in clear and useful comparative perspective.

How will we organize the workshop?

Unlike most workshops, which culminate in delivery of papers at the joint sessions, we propose a three-step process that is more demanding on participants but that will also maximize the usefulness of the workshop. Early in the process we will request participants to provide comparable data, and we participants will then engage in joint efforts to compare cases and develop broader conclusions:

• **Step 1. Create single-case narratives and databases**

We will request that all participants begin immediately upon acceptance to use the data and narrative of the *Political Data Yearbook* and other similar sources to produce a brief but comprehensive narrative paper that details the changes in all relevant political parties in a particular country during the 1990s and 2000s (and earlier, where permitting) as well as a preliminary database with quantitative and qualitative judgments of party inter-relationships over time. We will ask participants to submit this work in draft form quite early in the process—the beginning of February—so that others have access to the data and the narrative. All participants will provide brief summaries of their findings on the first day of the workshop.

• **Step 2. Share papers**

We will select workshop participants on the basis of how well their projects correspond with the goals discussed above, particularly those that use comparable data (of the sort produced in Step 1) to explore key cross-case differences that affect the measurement, validity, and reliability of existing measures of party system dynamics. Authors will present these analytical findings on the second and third days of the workshop.

• **Step 3. Develop a common framework**
We will reserve the fourth day and the morning of the fifth day for efforts that find underlying patterns and draw broader conclusions about party system dynamics and work toward developing a common framework that can accommodate as many cases as possible while also preserving the integrity of the concepts and measures. This common framework will provide the basis for revision of the country-studies and for the creation of a new body of scholarship on theoretical questions of measuring, understanding and coping with party system change.

Who should apply?

We seek authors with both knowledge of party politics in particular countries and the aspirations and ability to use local knowledge as the basis for broader analysis and theory-building. Among the three organizers we have a mix of senior, mid-career and junior scholars, living in three different countries and studying three distinct regions. We seek the same mix in the workshop itself, both in terms of career status and geography, and we will deliberately work to achieve a gender balance and include graduate students. The unusual nature of the workshop’s organisation offers strong incentives for seeking geographic diversity of participants and also allows for consideration of less-traditional modes of scholarship, including database development efforts and large-multi-country efforts with multiple participants. Please contact the organizers if you have any questions about what might be considered appropriate. We look forward to receiving your application.

Who are the organizers?

- Mariano Torcal is Full Professor of Political Science at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, and National Coordinator of the European Social Survey in Spain. He has published articles on the topics of political disaffection in new democracies, electoral behaviour and political participation in major international journals. He is co-editor of *Disaffected Citizens: Social Capital, Institutions and Politics* (Routledge, 2006) and *The Europeanization of National Polities? Citizenship and Support in a Post-Enlargement Union* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

- Kevin Deegan-Krause is Associate Professor at Wayne State University and Research Associate with the CEU Center for the Study of Imperfections in Democracy, and author of *Elected Affinities* (Stanford, 2006), many articles and chapters. His 2007 workshop on cleavages yielded *The Structure of Political Competition in Western Europe* (Routledge/WEP 2010). His 2010 workshop on populism led to *The Diversity of Populism in Europe* (under review). With Rainbow Murray and Daniele Caramani he co-edits the *EJPR Political Data Yearbook*, overseeing its interactive, online database.
Fernando Casal Bértola is a Post-doctoral Fellow at the University of Leiden. He obtained his PhD (The Institutionalization of Party Systems in East Central Europe: Explaining Variation) at the European University Institute under the supervision of Peter Mair. With Mair, he wrote "Party System Institutionalization across Time", in Keman and Müller-Rommel's Party Government in the New Europe (Routledge, 2012). He is co-author of "Political Parties and Democracy: A Tribute to Peter Mair" (under review) and has published in the Hungarian Political Science Review, Party Politics and Government and Opposition.

Selected bibliography


Standing Group Endorsements

• Standing Group on Political Parties
- Standing Group on Comparative Political Institutions
- Standing Group on South East Europe
- Standing Group on Central and Eastern Europe