Political Theory and Parties: Towards a Conceptual and Normative Appraisal of Political Parties

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Ben Crum (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), b.j.j.crum@vu.nl
Ronald Tinnevelt (Radboud University Nijmegen), r.tinnevelt@jur.ru.nl

Outline

In remarkable contrast to empirical political science, political parties have found little favor in political thought (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006: 100, Van Biezen and Saward 2008: 21). Despite the long tradition of theorizing about the relationship between citizen and state in general and about political representation in particular, political theorists seem to consider parties as a means without much, if any, intrinsic value. Thus parties are and remain, as Schattschneider already put it, ‘the orphans of political philosophy’ (1942: 16).

Yet, in recent years, a number of political theorists from different strands of thought have turned to them and argued for a reappraisal of the role and value of parties for meaningful collective self-rule and the democratic ethos of citizens (Rosenblum 2008, Muirhead 2011, Ypi and White 2010, Rosanvallon 2008, Mouffe 2013). Notably, this reappraisal takes place in a context in which empirical research suggests that the position of parties in democratic politics is severely challenged by trends like declining membership, the personalization of politics and the displacement of politics from its home ground (i.e. parliament).

Against this background, the goal of this workshop is to make significant progress regarding the ‘great labor of revision and reconsideration [that] awaits the political philosopher’ (Schattschneider 1942: 16). The workshop aims to bring together experts from the field of political theory and political science to explore the justification, status and responsibilities of political parties within democratic societies and the functions of the system of party competition and conflict.
Specifically, we propose four theoretical questions to be central in the workshop:

1) Are political parties merely a means to handle the complexities of modern democracy or can they also be intrinsically justified?

2) How is the status of political parties to be conceptualized and grounded given their roles in both the ‘weak’ public sphere of (civil) society at large and the ‘strong’ public sphere of institutionalized politics?

3) Are political parties merely vehicles to promote particular interests or can and do they also have responsibilities towards the common good; and

4) What kind of normative or epistemic functions can be attributed to the system of party competition and conflict as a whole?

This workshop aims to build on several research strands within political science, political theory and political philosophy that either explicitly or implicitly deal with parties as political institutions and partisanship as a political practice:


3) Research regarding the importance of partisan passions for political mobilization and political activism (Young 2001).

4) Research regarding the relation between partisanship and ideas like public deliberation and political justification (White and Ypi 2011).

5) The longstanding tradition within political science regarding the status and function of political parties (e.g. Duverger 1969, Sartori 1976, King 1967; White 2006).

The workshop convenors welcome both theoretical and more empirically-oriented papers that address either one or several of the workshop’s four research questions. Given the nature of these research questions, however, we expect papers and paper givers to have a clear theoretical
interest and a conceptual focus on the role and value of parties for democratic politics. Thus, while the workshop is open to all political scientists working on political parties, the directors specifically welcome contributions from researchers in the field of political theory.

References


