

Are political parties in decline?: recent contributions in the field

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Resumen: No hay duda de que los partidos políticos han venido experimentando una serie de cambios en los últimos años, la creencia convencional sugiere que a finales del siglo veinte muchas sociedades, principalmente postindustriales, experimentaron una retirada ciudadana de la participación política, introduciendo en las ciencias políticas los vocablos tanto de apatía partidaria como de política. El artículo presenta dos tendencias que parecen confirmar esta suposición: en primer lugar, los partidos políticos han visto que sus socios desaparecieron y en segundo lugar, ciudadanos ordinarios son ahora más escépticos sobre la idea de hacerse a la política. A pesar de esta realidad, los partidos se han adaptado a los cambios sociales uniéndose a los votantes, organizándose internamente y manejando campañas electorales, y hasta quizá el modo en que gobiernan

Palabras clave: Autorregulación partidaria / Democracia interna del partido político / Militancia política / Apatía partidaria / Descontento político / Reforma del partido político / Renovación de estructuras partidarias / Renovación interna del partido político.

Abstract: Undoubtedly, political parties have experienced a series of changes in the last years. Conventional belief suggests that at the end of the twentieth century many societies experienced citizens' desertion of political parties introducing in the vocabulary of political sciences the phrases political apathy as well as partisan apathy. The article presents two trends that seem to confirm this supposition: in the first place, political parties have seen their members disappear, and in the second place, ordinary citizens are now more skeptical about the idea of getting involved in politics. In spite of this reality, political parties have adapted to the social changes, joining with voters, organizing themselves internally and managing electoral campaigns and maybe even the way in which they rule.

Key Words: Partisan self-regulation / Internal democracy of political party / Political partisanship / Partisan apathy / Political discontent / Reform of political party / Renewal of party structures / Internal renewal of political party.

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1. Introduction

Definitions of political parties abound in literature. The contributions of Maurice Duverger, Anthony Downs, Leon Epstein, Giovanni Sartori, among others have had a profound impact on how political scientists conceptualize, define and understand these institutions. Duverger's definition of parties emphasizes the party's structure and the nature of their organization (Duverger 1963). The Sartorian minimal definition of parties conceptualize parties as "any political group identified by a label that takes part in elections and through them is able to get their candidates into public offices" (Sartori 1976). Downs introduces the strategic component when defining parties "as a team of men seeking to control the governing apparatus by gaining office in a competitive election" (Downs 1957). Others define parties in a much narrower way: "any group seeking votes under a recognizable label" (Epstein 1967).

Regardless of the limited scope and selective number, the preceding examples, reveal the fact that there is no consensus in the field regarding what exactly a political party is and as we can see later something similar occurs when we analyze political party changes. In spite of that, implicitly in this literature is the assumption that parties are quintessential actors in democratic regimes and even in some autocratic polities when present. Indeed, many studies of party politics assert with Schattschneider that "modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties" (Schattschneider 1942). Others have gone even further arguing that "parties are inevitable. No one has shown how representative government could be worked without them" (Bryce 1921).

Conventional wisdom suggests that in the late twentieth century many societies, principally but not exclusively, postindustrial ones, experienced a wave of citizen withdrawal from the traditional channels of political participation that includes antiparty sentiments and the decay of civic organizations (Norris 1999; 2002). A significant amount of evidence points to a declining role of parties in shaping politics. According to Aldrich (1995), with few exceptions, in the 1970 and 1980, the scholarly study of parties (mostly the American ones) turned from the foundational theory to the examination of party decline, decay, and decomposition.

Two trends seem to confirm this widespread assumption in a broadly comparative perspective. Firstly, many established political parties have seen their membership vanish and secondly, ordinary citizens are now more skeptical about the idea of getting involved in politics. Despite the extensive body of literature on political parties, scholars remain divided on the overall pattern of partisan changes (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000).

In the literature regarding party politics we can identify three main approaches for understanding partisan changes and the extent to what parties are in decline, and if so, what are the main manifestations and implications of this phenomenon.

2. The functional approach to party changes

In the first approach, parties are viewed as crucial to democracies because they play several key functions within the society. For Dalton and Wattenberg (2000) a natural starting point for studying partisan change is to consider the functions that parties perform in any democracy. According to them, political science literature is replete with an impressive

and diverse list of party functions. For instance, using a tripartite framework, V.O. Key (1964) disentangles parties' functions as follows: *parties in the electorate, parties as political organizations, and parties as governing institutions*. For Epstein (1967) parties are the products of their respective societies, and so their functions are conceived as relevant to the maintenance of their respective systems. For him parties perform two functions: structuring the vote choice and conducting the government. Also, other scholars (Almond and Powell 1978) enumerate a variety of political functions associated with political parties. Parties, they observed, are involved in socialization, recruitment, communication, interest articulation, and especially, interest aggregation. In sum, according to this framework, in any study of partisan change, it is fundamental to begin by asking whether parties continue to perform the roles traditionally attributed to them.

The assumption behind this first approach is that political parties have lost control of some of the political activities, or functions, they previously performed (Strom and Svåsand 1997). According to this approach, the emergence of "catch-all-parties" illustrate some of the changes in the list of functions parties exercised earlier when we compare those with the most recent ones. No one in the party politics literature would doubt that the role of socialization and the parties as channels for integrating individuals and groups are two important functions, however, as Kirchhmeir has shown (Kirchhmeir 1966), the electoral competition and the hunt for votes to secure immediate electoral victories will induce parties to relax their ideological baggage and become "catch-all-parties". Kirchhmeir himself expressed concern that this new type of political party

signaled the decline of meaningful opposition in political party systems as political ideology becomes increasingly irrelevant for structuring political difference across political parties. In sum, under circumstances of decay, political parties turn incapable of performing the basic functions linked to their existence, providing thus “some grounds to remain pessimistic about the effects this would have on parties, representation and democratic governance” (Hale 2009).

3. The organizational approach to partisan changes

The second approach has been traditionally associated with theories of party organization change. Longitudinal trends frequently document a decline in the number of party members (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). As Norris (2002) has noticed parties in established democracies face contracting memberships rolls, which is considered to be an indirect indicator of eroding activisms. Analyzing the eighteen OECD countries which have been continuously democratic since 1945, Scarrow (2000) provides ample confirmation of recent reports of widespread drops in party membership. However, she also offers clear warnings against exaggerating either the rise, or the demise, of membership-based organizations. She also argues that in absolute terms, party enrollment did not decline in every country. However, because the electorate were expanding in those years, when we standardize using eligible voters, they paint a much more convincing picture of organizational decline.

Similarly, Norris (2002) claims that rather than any “crisis” in party organizations, or even a more steady erosion, the evidence suggests that patterns of party membership vary substantially cross-nationally, with

falls in some nations and increases in others (particularly newer democracies), rather than a consistent short-term erosion apparent across all societies.

For other scholars within this approach, the notion of *party institutionalization* (Panbianco 1988; Mainwaring and Scully 1995) has provided a better understanding of party evolution. *Party institutionalization* refers to a process by which a practice or an organization becomes well established and widely known, if not universally accepted. Focusing on the idea of parties as political organizations at the party level, Panbianco suggests that parties, in their course of their organizational development tend to go from an initial period in which certain needs prevail (domination of the environment) to a subsequent period in which different needs prevail (adaptation to the environment). He describes a model of organizational party evolution that includes three phases: *genesis, institutionalization, and maturity*. Finally, in his theory Panbianco correlates the party's degree of institutionalization and its sub-groups' degree of organization. Essentially, the more institutionalized the party, the less organized are its internal groups (i.e. factions) and consequently, the less institutionalized the party, the more organized are its internal factions. So, this theory suggest, implicitly, that parties at different organizational evolution level can coexist even within the same context where they compete.

The institutionalization framework has been used at the aggregate level (party system) as well. Mainwaring and Scully (1995) argue that for a democratic party system to be institutionalized, four conditions must be met: a) stability in the rules and the nature of inter-party competition; b)

the major parties must have somewhat stable roots in society; c) the major political actors accord legitimacy to the electoral process and to parties; and finally d) parties are not subordinated to the interest of ambitious leaders. Using these four criteria Mainwaring and Scully identify different levels of party institutionalization across Latin American cases. The authors conclude that “where the party system is more institutionalized parties are key actors that structure the political process; whereas where it is less institutionalized parties are not so dominant, they do not structure the political process as much, and politics tends to be less institutionalized and therefore more unpredictable”.

In contrast to the conventional wisdom that trumpet a positive perception of institutionalization, others have provided empirical evidence suggesting that lower levels of organization can be ideal under certain circumstances. Drawing on a detailed study of Argentinian Peronist Party, Levistky (2003) contributes to the organizational approach of party change. His argument is that weak institutionalized party, such as those found in many populist labor-based parties, are better equipped to adapt to rapid environmental changes than are other more bureaucratic labor-based parties. Thus, in spite of the fact that high levels of party institutionalization are almost unanimously considered as better for democracy and political stability, Levistky points that lower levels of institutionalization –though often seen as a source of inefficiency, disorder, and ineffective representation- tend to enhance parties’ flexibility during periods of crisis facilitating its adaptation and survival.

Briefly, party institutionalization has become extremely useful in explaining party evolution and transformation in cases such as Latin

American countries where parties emerge in a very different path that their counterparts in Europe (Dix 1989).

4. The electoral approach to partisan changes

The third approach refers to the link between parties and voters. The perception of partisan decline among academics and pundits has been heavily influenced by the trends of party affiliation. In the late 1960s Lipset and Rokkan (1967) published a path-breaking contribution arguing that modern party systems are the product of social conflicts played in the last few centuries. They identify four lines of cleavage in the development of modern industrial societies. Their thesis that “the western party systems of the 1960s reflect, with few significant exceptions, the cleavage structure of the 1920s” dominated the field until mid-1980s.

This approach relies on measures of individuals’ attachment to political parties. The stronger the attachment the better for democracies. Parties are essential for simplifying voters’ choices during elections for two main reasons. First, put it simply, parties help to make politics “user-friendly” for citizens (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). Second, in nearly all democratic politics, parties play an important role in getting people to vote and participate in the electoral process (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Having said that, it is not so difficult to comprehend why party identification has played a central role in electoral politics over time and across cases.

The decline in US partisanship was first associated with exceptional political crises: civil rights conflict and Vietnam’s war opposition. However, similar trends appeared few years later in Great Britain and other

European nations pointing to the existence of a cross-national phenomenon: *dealignment*. The *dealignment* thesis holds that party attachment eroded as a consequence of social and political modernization. Also, this thesis implies that we are witnessing a broad and ongoing decline in the role of political parties, and not simply a downturn in public satisfaction with parties (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). In their book Dalton et al. (1984) identify a broad pattern of weakening partisanship. In seventeen of nineteen nations the percentage of party identifiers has decreased and in every case the party ties have eroded as well.

Although a vast majority of party attachments studies have been conducted in the American context, scholars have explored the same phenomenon in other context. Schikler and Green (1997) suggest that, after some adjustments to the partisan measure for dealing with measurement error effects, party ID in the US has much more in common with partisanship in other countries than it is frequently assumed.

Despite this evidence other scholars have cast doubt on the generalizability and validity of the results. Analyzing many European cases and electoral results for a century (1885-1985) Bartolini and Mair (1990; 2007) challenge the dealignment thesis, arguing, basically that the observed high volatility is not remarkably distinctive to previous historical episodes, providing strong confirmation instead to the "*freezing hypothesis*" of Lipset and Rokkan.

More recently, revisionists have also provided a refined version of this thesis after showing widely varying trends rather than a general move towards dealignment in the Latin American cases (Carreras, Morgenstern,

and Pin-Su 2013). More importantly, the realignment-dealignment thesis assumes the previous existence of alignments, an assumption that does not hold in several cases across the region. In addition, the scholars point to another drawback of the theory: its rigidity to account for weak institutionalized, fluid electoral preferences and multiparty systems. In response, the authors added the cases of continual alignment, realignment, partial alignment and continuation of systems that have never achieved alignment, to the repertoire of possible outcomes.

5. Impact of this decline for democracy

Irrespectively if we are in favor of the proclaim that parties are in decline across much of Europe and the Americas, or if we are skeptical of it, a detailed revision of the literature shows mixed results regarding whether or not parties have declined over time.

The old classic version of the political parties and their functions has evolved as a result of many social and political factors. Theoretically, the loss of functions and the deterioration of their internal organization capacities combined with unstable patterns at the electoral arena, challenge political parties and their roles in democratic regimes. These factors can impact not only the way in which parties function but also democracies' performance. Whatever happens with the political parties might have repercussions in the conditions under which democracy works. Nevertheless, even those who defend the decline thesis do acknowledge that the decay in the electorate are not necessarily mirrored by a decline trend at the organization or in the conducting government dimensions of parties (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000).

Under circumstances of a long and steady process of party deterioration, the new conditions may hinder and put democracy at risk. As someone else suggests “where parties are weak, politics tend to be characterized by extreme volatility, executive legislative conflict, policy ineffectiveness, and the rise of “outsider” or anti-system candidates is more likely” (Levitsky 2003).

In addition, weakening partisanship decreases the number of voters who feel motivated to go to the polls and support “their” party. Therefore, this pattern of decreasing party activity may increase the socio-demographic gaps identified by the literature on turnout.

This party decline proclaim has proved to be very popular among some academics, journalist, political elites and pundits. However, there are still no serious reasons to speculate about the idea of the disappearance of political parties. They remain as key actors in democratic regimes. As stated by scholars in the field, despite these developments, parties remain crucial because they dominate electoral politics. Consequently, democratic governments are elected through parties. As the primary actors in the electoral arena, parties provide access to government. In short, modern democracies involve competition not among isolated individuals, but among parties (Mainwaring and Scully 1995).

Finally, the literature on party politics demonstrate that, instead of their alleged extinction, parties are adapting to societal changes, altering how they connect to voters, organize themselves internally, manage

electoral campaigns, and perhaps the way they govern (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000).

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