Part V

Party systems and political parties
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Introduction

Political parties are central to European politics: by organizing parliaments they provide the building blocks on which cabinets rest, and by contesting elections they provide voters with choices of who will govern and what policies they will pursue. There is little doubt regarding the ability of parties to perform their governmental functions. Most parties in public office are sufficiently disciplined to sustain cabinets and provide them with the support that they need to govern. Parties’ links to society are another matter: rates of party membership are declining (van Biezen et al. 2012), and the proportion of the electorate identifying with parties has also declined (Dalton 2000: 25–9; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012: 25–7). Eurobarometer data show that Europeans – like their counterparts elsewhere – expressed lower confidence in parties and politicians than other actors or institutions (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000: 265).

European citizens are not the only ones to have doubts about parties. Katz and Mair (1995) argue that European parties have become cartel parties: unable to recruit or retain members or finance their activities with their dues, parties have instead come to rely upon subventions from the state. In the process, they have become increasingly remote from their members. Parties that once represented segments of society to the state and later mediated between state and society have thus become part of the state. At best, they serve as public utilities and a service provided by the state (Katz and Mair 1995, 2002, 2009); at worst, they have become self-referential and rent-seeking (van Biezen and Kopecký 2007: 250–2).

However, others have suggested that parties are actually more robust. Data collected by the Manifesto Research Group indicate that parties offer voters a wide range of alternatives, and that party positions have remained consistent over time (Volkens and Klingemann 2002: 165–6; Budge 2006: 426–30). Two recent studies demonstrate that parties in competitive democracies not only perform the linkage functions attributed to them (Dalton et al. 2011) but also represent both the partisans who identify with them and the independent voters who support them (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012).

In this chapter, we examine European parties, exploring their variety as well as the ways in which they differ from parties in other parts of the world. We begin with the literature, examining...
the central role that European parties play in it; we then consider how we can differentiate parties and identify the ways in which they may be changing. Operating at multiple levels of governance, European parties are complex organizations. Some may be detached from their members, but others are not. We consider their focus – whether they emphasize policy, office-holding or votes (Strøm 1990) – as well as the problems many parties face. These include retaining members and navigating the policy environments that constrain the programmes they can offer. Parties operate in increasingly competitive electoral environments, in part because the electorates of belonging on which many relied have shrunk. Mainstream parties – those that in Gordon Smith’s (1989) terms constitute the ‘core’ of the party system – compete not only with each other but also with smaller parties on their flanks. Populist parties pose a particular challenge: articulating anti-immigrant, anti-European Union and anti-establishment themes, some such organizations have not only siphoned support away from mainstream parties but also become influential political actors in their own right. This makes it risky for parties to remain as remote from their members and voters as Katz and Mair (1995) suggest.

What we know and how we know it

The literature on parties is one of the oldest branches of research in the field of Political Science. European parties and party systems constitute its core. Until recently, Western Europe was one of the few places in which relatively similar parties in liberal democracies could be compared. Similarities among parties reflected late nineteenth and early twentieth century mobilization. Many European parties mobilized around deep-seated cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 26–8; Bartolini and Mair 1990: 213–20), borrowing programmes and doctrines and modes of organization from each other. On the left, parties and trade unions were intertwined in a system underpinned by extensive networks of societal organizations. Christian Democratic parties drew support from similar networks, as did Agrarian parties in Scandinavia (Einhorn and Logue 2003: 131). Other parties were less extensively organized, but similar kinds of parties appeared in many countries across Europe (Duverger 1954: 1–3ff.; Epstein 1967: 111, 130–8; von Beyme 1985: 159–66, 191–6).

Although Europe is no longer the only setting in which parties in competitive systems can be studied, it still provides fertile ground for comparative analysis. This reflects not only the presence of similar parties in many countries but also their exposure to similar forces. Factors framing party competition in Europe have included depression and war, as well as the sustained economic growth that characterized the 1950s and 1960s and the slower rates of growth in subsequent decades. In Western Europe, Social Democratic parties had to grapple with the consequences of growth and the challenges that managed economies presented. Parties on the right had to come to terms with the success of state intervention and the welfare states built by Social Democrats and Christian Democrats. Christian Democratic parties had to cope with decreasing religiosity.

Political factors were also important. The Cold War divided Europe, indirectly fostering the networks, alliances and transnational institutions that brought Western Europe closer together; it also deepened the divide between Social Democrats and Communists. Initially, only Socialist and Communist parties were organized in transnational federations, but after World War II Liberals and Christian Democrats across Europe began to cooperate as well. From its inception, members of the European Parliament organized in party groups rather than in national delegations; such cooperation increased as the European Parliament acquired more power (Hix and Lord 1997: 11–13), reinforcing links among kindred parties.
Nor was this the only impact of Europe: expanding EU competences subjected member-state parties to similar constraints with regard to the policies they could pursue. Transitions to democracy in Southern and Central and Eastern Europe introduced more countries and parties into established networks. As democratizing countries applied for EU membership, transnational federations and the parties affiliated with them provided assistance to kindred parties, and parties in the newer democracies became members of established party families. Europe is no longer the only setting in which parties in competitive democracies can be studied, but it still provides fertile ground for comparative analysis, especially since more is known about its parties than their counterparts elsewhere.

The literature

The literature on European parties is vast. It includes research on parties as well as party systems, drawing not only on national literatures but also on related literatures on legislative behaviour, coalition formation, mass attitudes and electoral behaviour. Older foci include how parties have developed and changed, attempts to make sense of their variety, party positions and ideologies, party organization, the role of party members, who wields power within parties, and parties in relation to democracy. More recent foci include Europeanization and the changing relationship between parties, the state and society. Early studies focused primarily on parties in larger democracies, but, beginning in the 1960s, parties in smaller democracies were also investigated. In the late 1970s, parties in Southern Europe began to be incorporated into studies as well, and from 1989 onward parties in former Communist countries were included. Reflecting the different circumstances under which parties emerged, the West European (WE) and Central and East European (CEE) literatures are subsets of a broader literature. However, many studies treat them as one category.

Not only the geographic scope but also the ways in which parties are studied have changed. Earlier scholars relied on description and analysis, sometimes extracting bold conclusions from a handful of cases, as Kirchheimer (1966) did – or, as Michels (1962) famously did, from only one case. The earlier literature was primarily the work of individual scholars, many of whom used case studies to examine how parties operated. This produced rich material, but the range of parties studied was limited. The literature contains multiple studies on British parties (e.g. McKenzie 1955; Jennings 1960; Pulzer 1967; Minkin 1980; Ball 1981; Kavanagh 1982; Seyd 1987; Shaw 1988, 1996, 2007; Pelling 1991; Seyd et al. 1996; Whiteley and Seyd 2002), the Social Democratic Party in Germany (Schorske 1955; Roth 1963; Chalmers 1964; Hunt 1964; Braunthal 1983, 1994), Communist parties in France and Italy (Tarrow 1967; Blackmer and Tarrow 1975; Amyot 1981; Jenson and Ross 1984; Hellman 1988) and other parties of the left (e.g. Barnes 1967; Simmons 1970; Clift 2003), but far fewer on Christian Democratic parties (Kalyvas and van Kersbergen 2010) and parties of the right. Despite their importance in national politics, studies of the Christian Democratic party family (Fogarty 1957; Einaudi and Goguel 1969; Irving 1973; van Kersbergen 1995; Kalyvas 1996; Kselman and Buttigieg 2003) outnumber studies of individual parties (Leonardi and Wertman 1989). Liberal and conservative parties outside Britain and France (Knapp 1994) fare no better: Kirchner (1988) addresses the former, Layton-Henry (1980, 1982) the latter.

Contemporary scholars frequently draw on the work of their colleagues, share their knowledge in workshops, collaborate on team projects and take advantage of the large datasets available to them. Scholars who used to be limited to national election studies to frame analyses of parties and their electoral prospects can now draw on public opinion polls, such as the EU’s
Eurobarometer (2014), which has posed similar (although not necessarily identical) questions to citizens of member states since 1973, as well as cross-national and longitudinal datasets. These include the World Values Survey (2014), its European counterpart, the European Values Survey (2014) and the European Social Survey (2014).

Party specialists also make use of specific datasets that they have generated. Examples include the data on parties’ election manifests since 1945 assembled by the Manifesto Research Group (2014) and the Katz–Mair data on party organization (Katz and Mair 1992). In addition, scholars use expert surveys to poll their colleagues in order to systematize and aggregate hands-on knowledge of specific parties and party systems. Examples include Castles and Mair (1984), Benoit and Laver (2007), Marks et al. (2007), Steenbergen and Marks (2007), Whitefield et al. (2007) and, more recently, the expert surveys underpinning Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012).

What is novel here is not the sharing of information, but rather the use of devices such as expert surveys to ensure comparability and reliability.

The availability of large datasets and the capacity to analyse them has resulted in a literature that is much more data-driven than before. Scholars of parties now know more about a wider range of parties than they did in the past. In addition, what they know is different. Case studies have not disappeared, but they constitute a small portion of the contemporary literature. This shift has not been without its costs: case studies allow scholars to investigate parties in the context in which they operate. Exchanging depth for breadth, the contemporary literature now treats facets of parties rather than parties as a whole.

Significant gaps remain. As indicated, some parties have been studied in greater detail than others. Although party organization is central to the field – classics such as Ostrogorski (1964) and Michels (1962) concentrated on this aspect – we know less about party organization and the internal politics of parties than we should. Only recently have scholars begun to study candidate selection (Hazan and Rahat 2010). Panebianco (1988) and Katz and Mair (1992, 1994) stand out for their focus on party organization. Panebianco (1988) applies the precepts of organization theory to parties; however, his work occupies a peculiar place in the literature. His assertion that parties remain true to their genetic types is often cited, but his classification is rarely applied.

Katz and Mair (1992, 1994) and their colleagues have used parties’ rules and procedures to determine how parties in ten European democracies and the United States are organized. Their research reveals not only the dominant position that parties in public office have assumed but also parties’ growing dependence on subsidies for a substantial portion of their revenue. Van Biezen (2003) extends their approach to parties in four newer democracies. Updating the Katz–Mair data and extending it to an even broader range of countries, the Party Organization Database (2014) that Susan Scarrow and Paul Webb are developing will ensure that we know more about a larger number of parties, but considerable challenges remain. One obstacle is the sheer number of parties to be studied. Another involves going beyond ‘the official story’ (Katz and Mair 1992: 6–8; 1994: vi) to explore the extent to which actual practices correspond to formal rules and procedures. In many instances they do, but in some cases (for example clientelistic parties) they may not. Also missing are detailed studies of parties in electoral competition. In contrast to the American literature – with the exception of Bowler and Farrell (1992), Farrell (2002), Farrell et al. (2002), Plasser and Plasser (2002) and Bowler and Farrell (2011) – there have been few studies of election campaigning or the increasing role that political consultants are thought to play. The literature on political marketing (Wring 2005; Lilleker et al. 2006) does more to highlight than fill this gap: focused on the extent to which the precepts of marketing are followed, it takes scant account of the parties’ role in the marketing.
Classifying parties

Students of European parties use two kinds of schemes to differentiate parties. The first scheme groups parties according to the families to which they are thought to belong. The second uses ideal types to differentiate key features and highlight suppositions about how they have changed.

Party families

The most common way to differentiate European parties is by party family. Often (but not always) indicated in parties’ names and transnational affiliations, party family suggests a common lineage and shared perspectives and beliefs. Not only researchers but also commentators and practitioners use party family to frame comparisons of similar parties in different countries and as a basis for broader comparisons. Examples of the former include Fogarty (1957), Paterson and Thomas (1977, 1986), Kirchner (1988), Moschonas (2002) and Cronin et al. (2011); examples of the latter include Camia and Caramani (2012) and Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012). One advantage of party family is that it requires minimal explanation: researchers (as well as informed observers and citizens) already know the major party families, what they stand for and who their supporters are likely to be, although this can be a mixed blessing. Party families are under-theorized, the criteria for demarcating families vary and researchers disagree on their number (Mair and Mudde 1998: 214–15ff.). In addition, there is a degree of variation not only among party families but also within them.

Mair and Mudde (1998) distinguish four approaches to party families: classification according to their origins and political sociology, transnational affiliation, current ideology and party name. Classification according to origins and sociological factors is useful, but many parties have shifted considerably from their original position. Affiliations with transnational or European-level federations are subject to change and may represent little more than a convenience; although membership is usually contingent on meeting certain conditions, parties may be admitted because the federation has no local affiliate or denied because it already has one. Classification according to party ideology taps into underlying predispositions but requires considerable effort to discern. Finally, classification according to party name can be problematic because names may mask as much as they reveal (Mair and Mudde 1998: 214–18, 220–1). Mair and Mudde (1998: 223–5) recommend using either party origins and political sociology or ideology to differentiate party families. Party origins and political sociology establish baselines from which change can be traced; in contrast, ideological distinctions facilitate comparison across countries.

The party families present in Europe include the Communists, Social Democrats, Agrarians (in a few countries), Christian Democrats, Liberals and Conservatives. However, the party families represented in some countries may be absent in others. In addition, important changes have occurred over time: in many countries, Green and left-libertarian parties and a new breed of left socialist parties have supplanted the Communists, who (apart from the Portuguese, Spanish, Cypriot, Finnish, Czech and French parties) have all but disappeared. An older extreme right that includes parties such as the Republikaner and the National Party (NPD) in Germany persists, but a new family, the Populist Radical Right, has emerged in some, though not all, countries. Populist parties have also appeared in other parts of the political spectrum. In addition, regional and nationalist parties are found in countries as diverse as Britain, Belgium, Italy and Spain.

The bases used for the identification of party families differ. In some instances – Communists, Social Democrats and Christian Democrats in Western Europe – the parties share not only an ideological patrimony but also a common history and a history of interaction. In other cases – the Conservatives, for example – what is shared may be little more than a political position.
rather than a distinct mode of thinking that is sometimes but not always articulated. Appearing in the 1970s and 1980s, Green and left-libertarian parties share concerns about the environment, quality of life and intra-party democracy that the established parties were initially reluctant to embrace. Although some are much older, populist radical right parties gained prominence in the 1990s and 2000s. Their commonalities include the populist style employed by their leaders and some of the issues they raise. Such parties are usually anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-EU and, more generally, anti-establishment. Their leaders claim to be defending the people against an establishment that has forgotten their concerns (Mudde 2007: 23; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012: 8–9).

Party families can provide important clues about how parties view themselves, the ideas and patrimony with which they grapple and their bases of support, as well as the parties with which they interact in transnational settings. However, it is easy to shift from one definition of party family to another. For some purposes (for example comparing how similar parties respond to problems), it makes sense to define party families in terms of origins and political sociology. In other cases (e.g. comparing parties from the same family in Western and Central and Eastern Europe), it is more logical to define families in terms of current ideology and affiliations. Whatever approach is used, caution is advisable: although some parties, such as the Czech Christian Democrats, draw on a common Christian Democratic heritage, party development in Central and Eastern Europe was interrupted by 40 years of Communist rule. In some instances, older parties were allowed to exist on the fringes of systems otherwise dominated by a single ruling party. Several ‘successor’ parties contested elections after the fall of Communism, but of these only the Czech Christian Democrats have survived. However, this has not prevented other parties from appropriating labels in the hope that it will enhance their position. One consequence is that parties that appear to share common origins may not actually be related: another is that there are important differences between Western European and Central and Eastern European party systems. In the former, Christian Democratic parties have often occupied pivotal positions, able to ally both with Social Democrats to their left and Liberal and Conservative parties to their right, although this has varied from country to country. For a long time, the Christian Democrats had a minimal presence in Scandinavia, where the Social Democrats were typically the dominant party.

The picture is different in Central and Eastern Europe: outside the Czech Republic, Christian Democrats have only had a minimal presence (Grzymala-Busse 2013: 320–1). In contrast, the Social Democrats are well represented in CEE party systems; however, with the exception of the Czech Social Democratic Party (SSD), most of these organizations are former Communist parties that have rebranded themselves as Social Democratic parties (Grzymala-Busse 2002: 169–88; Hloušek and Kopeček 2010: 37–9). In Hungary, the Social Democrats opened their party structures in an effort to distance themselves from the past (van Biezen 2003: 124–5). Other parties followed suit, but not necessarily in the same way. Many CEE parties of the right originated from the civic platforms that emerged during the transition to democracy or, in the case of Poland, from the Solidarity trade union movement. As Lewis (Chapter 29) points out, only a few of these organizations have survived. Those that did had to decide how to define and position themselves. In the case of Fidesz, the principal party on the right in Hungary, its choices reflected a conscious decision by leaders to reposition the party – originally a youth movement – further to the right as a conservative nationalist party (Enyedi and Linek 2008: 456).

What identification with an ideology or a party family actually means varies. In many parties, ideology and familial identity provide points of reference against which positions on issues can be assessed, but ideology rarely serves as a blueprint from which positions are derived. Instead,
European political parties

Parties position themselves on the specific issues and problems confronting them. However, factions within parties and competitors may use ideology as a point of departure to launch critiques of party positions. In addition, parties interact in European and transnational federations. Data on party manifestos indicate that the positions parties take are relatively consistent from election to election, changing gradually if at all. As Budge (2006: 422–3ff.) indicates, this can be taken to reflect either a programmatic orientation or a strategic calculation to maintain consistent positions (as Downs [1957] argued that parties should). Among older parties with a clear ideological heritage, there is a good chance that this consistency reflects underlying values. Even so, most parties have moved a considerable distance from their initial points of origin.

Types and typologies

Types and typologies are central to the literature. Classificatory schemes differentiate similar cases from those that diverge. Typologies operate in a different fashion: rather than relying on a single characteristic or dimension, types (or ideal types) isolate clusters of characteristics that all or most cases share. Highlighting differences and similarities, types are useful because they set key characteristics off in sharp relief. However, cases fitting a type rarely conform to all the characteristics delineated. Inevitably, some conform more closely than others and not all share the same characteristics (Kaplan 1964: 82–3; Lange and Meadwell 1991: 86–7).

Typologies in common use include Duverger’s distinction between cadre and mass parties (Duverger 1954); Neumann’s (1956) distinction between parties of individual representation, parties of mass integration and parties of total integration; Panebianco’s (1988) distinction between mass-bureaucratic and electoral-professional parties; and Katz and Mair’s (1995) distinction between elite parties, mass parties, catch-all parties and cartel parties. Originally part of a broader scheme that included militia and cell parties, Duverger’s typology not only differentiates parties but also predicts a progression from cadre to mass parties. Neumann’s distinction between parties of individual representation, parties of mass integration and parties of total integration references the same kinds of parties as Duverger but focuses on the functions that parties perform (Wolinetz 2002: 139–40).

Kirchheimer’s catch-all party occupies an unusual place in this literature. Kirchheimer (1966) argued that former parties of mass integration were transforming themselves into catch-all parties. He attributed this shift to affluence and the parties’ realization that they could no longer win support in the ways that they once did. In response, the parties abandoned ideology and their defence of a *class gardée*, emphasized the qualities of their leaders and bid for the support of interest groups (Kirchheimer 1966: 184–90; Wolinetz 1979: 4–6). Reflecting on the ways that he thought major European parties were changing, Kirchheimer was not specifying a type, but the catch-all party has been turned into one and the transformation he described has been grafted onto earlier classificatory schemes (Wolinetz 2002: 145–6).

More recent typologies include Panebianco’s distinction between mass-bureaucratic and electoral-professional parties and Katz and Mair’s re-specification of earlier distinctions between cadre (or elite), mass and catch-all parties, to which they add the cartel party. Concluding his discussion of different types of party organization, Panebianco (1988) argues that mass-bureaucratic parties are under pressure to become electoral-professional parties. Panebianco specifies several differences between the two: mass-bureaucratic parties are inwardly focused, internally financed by membership dues and collateral organizations, have strong vertical ties and promote up through the ranks. In contrast, electoral-professional parties are vote-seeking, more loosely structured, financed externally by interest groups, led by professionals who take on specialized tasks, and give greater prominence to leaders and elected officials (Panebianco...
1988: 262–7). Cast in this way, the electoral-professional party is a variant of the catch-all party, but it could also be considered to be a hybrid, sharing characteristics of both the catch-all and the cartel party.

The most recent typology is Katz and Mair’s (1995) distinction among elite, mass, catch-all and cartel parties. This scheme not only adds an additional type, the cartel party, but also reaches backward, re-specifying elite (or cadre) parties, mass parties and catch-all parties (Wolinetz 2002: 148). Unable to enlist as many members as they once could or rely on them for financial support, cartel parties become increasingly reliant on public subsidies stemming from election finance regimes that they, collectively, put in place. In the process, they become not only increasingly professional but also more distant from their members and activists. Party organization is no longer closely integrated, but instead stratarchical. Katz and Mair argue that this disengages the middle levels, in which party activists are presumed to have wielded greater influence. In addition, the status of party members is downgraded: although members gain additional rights in some parties they are allowed to participate in the selection of leaders – supporters are accorded the same privilege. Party members are no longer seen as an army whose efforts might be engaged in election campaigns, but instead as a cheering section whose primary role is to legitimate the party leadership. Rather than relying on their members, cartel parties use public money and privileged access to the media to spread their message (Katz and Mair 1995: 15–21).

Katz and Mair (1993) differentiate three faces of party organization: the party in public office (elected representatives), the party in central office (its headquarters or staff) and the party on the ground (its members). Katz and Mair (1995) argue that these three faces have become distant from each other. Power is concentrated at the top. Parties in public office are increasingly well staffed and professionalized, and dominate not only parties on the ground but also parties in central office. Katz and Mair (1995) argue that fundamental changes in the relationship between parties, the state and society have occurred: elite parties originated within the state, but mass parties originated in society and were an expression of it. In contrast, catch-all parties positioned themselves between the state and society and mediated between the two. However, cartel parties are part of the state and function more like public utilities than vibrant representatives of the public. Katz and Mair associate each type with distinct historical periods; of these types (the authors assert), only the catch-all party, dating from 1960, and the cartel party, dating from 1990, continue into the present. Although elite, mass, catch-all and cartel parties can co-exist, most parties today should be either catch-all or cartel parties. (Katz and Mair 1995: 8–23; 2002: 113–26).

By extracting key characteristics, types and typologies help us think about different kinds of parties. Unusually, they are rarely used to classify contemporary parties or to examine the extent to which they share common characteristics. One reason for this is that we do not know enough about a sufficiently large number of parties. Another reason may be the strong suggestion, built into these typologies, that most parties are changing in similar ways: if all parties end up the same, then there is less need to sort or classify them. Unfortunately, this makes it difficult to determine the conditions under which different types of parties are likely to be more or less prevalent (Wolinetz 2002: 138–9, 148–49).

Katz and Mair’s assertions have provoked considerable discussion. Critics such as Koole (1996), Kitschelt (2000), Pierre et al. (2000: 12–22), Detterbeck (2005) and Koss (2011: 22–4, 204–10) have tried to chip away at parts of their argument, while supporters have amassed evidence of declining party membership, weakening ties to society and parties’ growing entanglement with the state. We will consider these factors after we explore differences and similarities among Europe’s parties.
European parties today

Most European parties are policy centred, membership based, compete in multiparty systems and depend on the state for at least a portion of their funding. Most also compete on local, regional, national and European levels, but their presence at the European level is different from that observed in domestic politics. Parties organize around national and sub-national elections, and it is here that they deploy most of their resources. At the European level, most parties are affiliated with transnational federations and the equivalent party groups in the European Parliament (Hix and Lord 1997: 14–16, 27–32). However, European Parliamentary elections are contested not by European parties but by member-state parties competing on domestic issues (Mair 2000: 38–9, 46). In addition, many parties operate in regulated environments that impose conditions on their internal organization. One consequence is that in some countries – Germany is a notable example (Poguntke 1994: 210–11) – the ways in which parties are organized have converged.

State support and state regulation do not necessarily mean that parties have become identical to one another or that they all behave like cartel parties. A close reading of the chapters on party organization in individual countries in Katz and Mair (1994) suggests that parties that were once mass parties have retained some of the features associated with them, such as greater organizational depth. This was particularly true of parties in Scandinavia (see Bille 1994: 136–9; Pierre and Widfeldt 1994: 336–43; Sundberg 1994: 161–7, 177–8ff.; Sväsand 1994: 304–14ff.), as well as in certain other countries, such as Austria (Müller 1994: 59–67). The country experts surveyed by Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012: 123–5) corroborate this point: asked to evaluate parties on different scales, most were able to distinguish mass parties from others.

However, retaining features of mass party organization does not mean that parties have retained masses of members. Data on aggregate numbers of party members per country by decade have been assembled since the late 1980s (Katz 1990; Mair and van Biezen 2001; van Biezen et al. 2012). These present a stark picture: membership levels, which were not very high at the end of the 1980s, declined in the two subsequent decades. In 2010, the average percentage of European voters who were party members was 4.7 per cent, but only 3.5 per cent of voters in newer democracies were party members. Among former Communist states, the figure was 3.0 per cent. In Western Europe, only Austria, Cyprus and Finland had notably higher levels than average, and only Spain registered an increase. Britain and France registered sharp declines. As expected, the data show that the percentage of voters belonging to political parties declined in most countries (including some, like Austria and Belgium, where it was once higher) and remained low in others – for example in Eastern Europe, where it was never high in the first place (van Biezen et al. 2012: 27–9).

The country chapters in Katz and Mair (1994) investigated links between parties and society. These indicated that formal links to societal organizations were weaker than in the heyday of the mass party. Formal ties between Social Democratic parties and trade unions had for the most part been severed. Only the Danish Social Democrats enrolled trade unionists as indirect members (Bille 1994: 139). Links between Christian Democratic parties and Christian organizations were also weak; only in the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) did earlier forms of corporate membership persist (Müller 1994: 56–60). Drawing on the data assembled for the Katz–Mair study, Poguntke (2006: 400) found that although many parties retained youth and women’s associations, formal links to societal organizations had all but disappeared.

In contrast, there is considerable evidence of a growing orientation towards the state. Parties in most countries receive some form of state subsidy, but the proportion of party expenses covered and the parts of the party funded vary (Koss 2011: 18–19). In Britain, only opposition parties
receive subsidies. In the Netherlands, party research bureaus and educational foundations receive subsidies, but until 1999 parties received no money for election campaigns or operating expenses. In addition, the offices of members of parliament and parliamentary caucuses are well staffed (Koole 1994: 291–2). German parties and party foundations affiliated with them receive extensive subsidies (Poguntke 1994: 191–7).

European parties are also subject to a growing body of regulation, set out in constitutions or party laws specifying not only their role but, in many instances, how they are to operate (Müller and Sieberer 2006: 438–9; van Biezen and Kopecký 2007: 239–40; van Biezen and Rashkova 2012). Investigating the regulation of parties in 33 European democracies, van Biezen and Rashkova found that 28 included parties in their constitutions; in addition, 20 countries regulated parties through party laws and another 19 had enacted laws regulating their finances. Regulation is often a quid pro quo for state financing (Katz and Mair 1995: 15–16), but in Germany, where it first originated, and in new democracies, it also reflects attempts to ensure that parties fulfil the roles assigned to them (Poguntke 1994: 189–91; Müller and Sieberer 2006: 436–9). This reinforces Katz and Mair’s (1995: 21–2) assertion that parties have become regulated public utilities (Epstein 1986: 156–8) and a service provided by the state. Nevertheless, both the programmatic orientation of many European parties and the increasingly uncertain circumstances under which many parties in Europe compete raise questions about the validity of the cartel thesis and the durability of cartelization (if it has indeed occurred).

Programmatic orientation

Unlike many parties in other parts of the world, most European parties are programmatic or policy-seeking. All parties pursue votes in order to gain power, but they place varying emphases on policy, office-holding and votes (Strøm 1990). Policy-seeking parties emphasize policy goals more than office-seeking or vote-seeking parties do. Office-seeking parties seek votes in order to enjoy the spoils of office; they typically use government largesse to reward followers with jobs or other preferences and, in so doing, maintain themselves in power. For vote-seeking parties, maximizing votes is an end in itself. An emphasis on one orientation does not preclude the presence of the other two: vote- and office-seeking parties may use policies to win support, and policy-seeking parties sometimes resort to office-seeking (Strøm 1990: 570). This is particularly true of larger and more broadly based parties.

Unfortunately, there are no systematic data on the incidence of vote-, office- and policy-seeking parties in European or other democracies. Nevertheless, there are ample reasons to suspect that parties in Europe are more policy-focused than parties in other parts of the world. These include the origins of many parties in deep-seated cleavages, the ideologies around which they initially mobilized and the attention that these parties devote to election manifestos, as well as the trade-offs and bargains struck in coalition-building. Their policy orientation should also be reinforced by the kinds of members and candidates whom they attract and the issue-based competition in which they engage. Although parties have difficulty attracting and retaining members, some are specifically attracted by programmes and positions; declining rates of membership mean that parties must rely more heavily on such ‘high intensity members’ (Scarrow and Gezgor 2010: 827–8; Whiteley 2011: 25–6). Active members include not only careerists and functionaries but also others motivated by policies and positions. Although parties may be placing greater emphasis on their leaders, as Kirchheimer (1966) argued, several streams of data indicate they also compete on the basis of their programmes (Dalton et al. 2011: 143–55, 217–18; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012: 82–5; see also Wolinetz 1991).
Whether parties emphasize policies, office-holding or votes depends on the ways in which they mobilize support and entrench themselves in political life. Parties that rely on patronage may find it difficult to wean followers from the flow of benefits to which they have become accustomed. In contrast, parties that emphasize ideology or policy are likely to have neither the means nor the inclination to shift to a patronage system. Shefter (1994: 27–32) argues that the early development of an autonomous bureaucracy capable of resisting politicians’ attempts to allocate selective benefits and the timing of civil service reform can limit parties’ access to patronage. Because this happened earlier in Northern than in Southern Europe and later and differently in Central and Eastern Europe (where the sudden collapse of Communism in 1989 confronted newly formed parties with both the challenge of privatizing economies and opportunities to use the state for their own purposes), we should expect different patterns of party formation and change over time.

If we follow this line of argument, we would expect a greater incidence of policy-centred parties in Northern and Western Europe than in Southern and Central and Eastern Europe. However, such a generalization should be regarded with caution: the strong policy focus apparent to many observers of parties in the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Germany and the United Kingdom is less evident in France, Belgium and Ireland. In France, both the Gaullists, currently organized as the Union for a Popular Majority (Union pour une Majorité Populaire, UMP), and the Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste, PS) are broad formations incorporating divergent factions and tendencies (Knapp 2004: 57–61ff.). Originating as a bloc supporting de Gaulle, various incarnations of the former Socialist Party (Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière), SFIO, smaller parties and political clubs in the Parti Socialiste. To accomplish this, party rules allowed factions and tendencies to compete within the party (Sawicki 1998: 71–3). Parts of both parties may be policy focused, but the broad coalitional character of both the UMP and the PS suggests that if either has a dominant orientation it is vote-seeking rather than policy- or office-seeking. Operating in a system in which regional, ethno-national and segmental interests must be carefully balanced if majorities are to be attained, Belgian parties display a mixture of orientations, with office-seeking more prominent than in Dutch, German or Scandinavian parties. Irish parties are different again. Until recently, the dominant party, Fianna Fail, combined elements of vote- and office-seeking, as did its principal opponent, Fine Gael. The smaller Labour Party is policy-focused.

Differences in state formation and levels of economic development have led to different patterns of party development in Southern Europe. In Italy, parties such as Democrazia Cristiana (DC) developed as hybrids, operating differently in the north from in the underdeveloped south, where they relied on clientelism. DC was not alone in this; its principal opponent, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), behaved in a similar fashion (Tarrow 1967: 81, 210–17). Governing throughout the First Republic (1945–94), DC and its partners colonized the state (Hellman 1987: 364–6). Neither the clientelistic orientation of DC and its coalition partners, nor the vote-seeking of Forza Italia (FI) and its successor, People of Liberty (PdL), in post-1993 Italy indicate that policy has been a primary goal. In post-1974 Greece, both PASOK and New Democracy established themselves as broad coalitions of disparate elements. Characterizations of both parties suggest a mixture of orientations, styles and postures (Pappas 1998: 222–5, 230–2; Spourdalakis 1998: 203–12; Pappas 2009: 317–20ff.). In Spain, both the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and the Popular Party (PP) are broadly based, but they are more policy focused than parties in Italy or Greece. Studies of parties in Central and Eastern Europe indicate that many rely on patronage to assert control over the state; nevertheless, despite the opportunities that
the transition to market economies has presented, recourse to patronage to win electoral support has been less common (Kopecký and Mair 2012: 361–6ff.). Examining the ways in which states were rebuilt in former Communist countries, Grzymala-Busse (2007: 182–6, 193–4) confirms the prevalence of rent-seeking: in Central and Eastern European countries in which governing parties were not challenged by ‘robust opposition parties’, parties did not use policy in order to build support, preferring instead to reap side payments from states, whose reconstruction they delayed.

Differentiating European parties

In this exploration of whether European parties are more likely to be policy-, vote- or office-seeking, we have examined key aspects in which parties differ, not only from each other but also from parties in other parts of the world. Other dimensions along which parties vary include age, institutionalization and their organization and construction. Some variation has already been identified in the smaller universe of Western European parties around which the literature crystallized. More divergence has been introduced by transitions to democracy and the entry of newer parties in Western Europe.

Organizational density: how much party?

Reflecting the degree to which parties build extensive organizations and populate them with members and officials, organizational density is one of several dimensions along which Europe’s parties can be compared. In their introduction to Political Parties and Political Development, LaPalombara and Weiner (1966: 5–6) defined political parties as continuing rather than intermittent structures that seek popular support in order to govern, organize at the national and local levels, and maintain regular communication and interaction between these levels. They excluded loosely structured cadre parties and flash parties that disappeared soon after their entrée. LaPalombara and Weiner set a high bar: if we were to apply their definition to contemporary parties, many parties would be excluded. Nevertheless, they provide us with a prototype of a dense or ‘thickly’ organized party.

Organizationally dense parties are well-staffed entities organized at all levels of governance. Examples include the highly articulated mass parties that Duverger (1954) and others have described, as well as the political machines that have dominated some American cities. Organizationally ‘thin’ parties include parties with either fewer layers or layers that exist only on paper. We can illustrate the difference by contrasting Italian parties before and after the 1993–4 collapse of the country’s party system. Larger parties, such as the DC, the PSI and the PCI, had well-staffed mass organizations (Barnes 1967: 72–4ff., 91–3; Zuckerman 1979: 92–105; Hellman 1988: 122–8ff.; Leonardt and Wertman 1989: 125–32, 136–45); the post-1993 parties are pale shadows of their predecessors. Although many of them recombine elements of pre-1993 parties, most are weakly articulated, with uncertain lines of communication between local, regional and national parties (Di Mascio 2012: 383, 390–1).

Contemporary European parties are more thinly organized than their predecessors, but there is considerable variation among them. Older parties tend to be more densely organized than newer ones. Former mass parties, such as Social Democratic and Christian Democratic parties, continue to organize at local, regional and national levels, but they mobilize a smaller proportion of the electorate than before. Some may marginalize their members, as the cartel hypothesis argues, but most maintain the pretence that members should be active and engaged. This holds true for the Liberal and Conservative parties as well, but not to the same extent. Newer parties
fitting this pattern include Green and left-libertarian parties, many (but not all) left socialist parties and most populist radical right parties. Relying primarily on volunteers, few have the resources to build or maintain dense organizations. Nevertheless, there is considerable variation across families: Green and left-libertarian parties often opt for more open and direct forms of organization. When first established, such parties can be difficult to control; as seen in the case of the Greens in Germany, it may be necessary to modify rules in order to govern (Poguntke 1987: 81–2, 1994: 210). However, elements of direct democracy and thinner organization often persist.

Left socialist and populist radical right parties face similar constraints, but some organize more densely than others. Some left socialist parties mimic older organizational forms; for example, combining mass organization with a populist appeal has helped the Socialist Party (SP) in the Netherlands challenge the position of the mainstream Social Democratic Party (PvdA). Whether the SP can sustain this degree of organization is another matter. Many populist radical right parties tend to be leader-centric. Art (2011: 20–1) argues that those that succeed are necessarily well organized: tight control is required to screen candidates and ensure that parties stay on message. Although Art does not specify what forms this takes or whether this authority reflects rules or sheer force of personality, populist leaders end up with considerable freedom to define and redefine party positions. However, this freedom is not without limits: as in Austria’s Freedom Party, personal authority and the strains of governing can lead to splits (Luther 2003: 139–41, 2011: 459–67). In addition, the extent of organization varies considerably. Bolstered by its own network of societal organizations in areas in which it is strong, the Front Nationale (FN) in France resembles parties of mass integration (Simmons 1996: 187–92; Ivaldi 1998: 56–61). In contrast, the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV) has only one member – its leader, Geert Wilders.

Parties in newer democracies tend to be less densely organized than parties in older democracies. Examining parties in Portugal, Spain, Hungary and the Czech Republic, van Biezen (2003: 161–2, 214–15) found that parties in central office dominated parties in public office, and that few attempts had been made to build or extend constituency organization. This reflects the different circumstances in which these parties formed. Early parties of mass integration were organized in countries grappling with multiple strains. Parties organized not only in response to the strains of industrialization but also to demand democratization. The ‘antebellum’ parties of mass integration whose passing Kirchheimer (1966) mourned were instruments of mobilization as well as agencies providing services to people who needed them. None of these conditions were present following transitions to democracy in late twentieth-century Europe: citizens were fully enfranchised, and former Communist regimes provided substantial services to their citizens. Gaps appeared as the state contracted, but few expected parties to fill them. Moreover, parties emerged rapidly, and their leaders had minimal incentives to build elaborate organizations. Enjoying access to the media and public subventions, parties had little need for members as a source of income or organization as an instrument of mobilization. Instead, most remained thinly developed, with weak links between parties at the centre and parties on the ground. However, van Biezen (2003: 161–2, 214–15) also found that central offices played a larger role than either parties in public office or parties on the ground.

Alternative party forms

Central and Eastern European parties have been slow to institutionalize. Poland, for example, has seen a dizzying array of parties. Initially, this was confined primarily to the right and the political forces that succeeded the Solidarity trade union movement; however, more recently, the left has splintered as well (Millard 2009: 787–8). In the Baltic countries, politicians have
sometimes abandoned the political formations from which they had been elected to compete in new ones as elections approached (Kreuzer and Pettai 2003: 84–6; Millard 2004: 133–4). Parties in Hungary and the Czech Republic institutionalized earlier than parties in other countries, but van Biezen (2003: 210) found that local organizations had not been established in substantial portions of either country.

‘Thinner’ party organization is not confined to Central and Eastern Europe. As described above, the parties established in Italy after the 1993–94 collapse of its party system are quite different from the mass parties that dominated the First Republic’s party system. Although many recombine elements of pre-1993 parties, most parties are more thinly constructed than before. Reflecting changes in the electoral system, parties on the left and right compete in loosely aligned blocs or clusters. On the left, the progressive parties grouped together in a loose electoral alliance, L’Ulivo (Olive Tree), with a substantial portion of the former Communist Party – renamed the Democratic Left, PDS and later DS – as its core. Further reorganizations and mergers resulted in the establishment of the Democratic Party (PD) (Bordandini et al. 2008: 304–9). However, despite changes in the electoral law, the bipolarization of the party system persists. On the right, competing under diverse banners, are the populist Lega Nord (Northern League) and the Popolo della Libertà (PdL), established through the merger of Berlusconi’s Forza Italia with the Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance, AN, a sanitized version of the former neo-fascist party, the Italian Social Movement or MSI) and smaller parties and factions. Divided among competing factions, the PdL is a loosely structured entity that has served as an electoral vehicle for its founder, Silvio Berlusconi, and as an umbrella organization for most of the right (Paolucci 2006: 166–7ff., 2008: 470–5). Initially an extension of Berlusconi’s media empire, Forza Italia has been described as a business-firm party (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999; Paolucci 2006: 167–8), but, along with PdL, it could also be classified as either an elite party (Katz and Mair 1995) or a modern cadre party (Koole 1994: 297–300). However, neither label captures its factional structure or internal organization. To classify the PdL, we would need to know more about how it recruits candidates, maintains cohesion and connects local organizations and regional structures with its headquarters, legislative caucus and leader. Complicating matters, Silvio Berlusconi re-established his earlier vehicle, Forza Italia, in 2013.

Understanding the links between national parties and their local and regional affiliates is only a part of the problem. Both the PdL and the Democrats participate in broader electoral alliances (Diamanti 2007: 735–9; Forestiere 2009: 580–7). To fit either into broader categories, we must find out more about their relationships with other parties and how these differ from comparable alliances in other countries. The most obvious comparison is to France, where competition between left and right blocs is an enduring feature of the Fifth Republic party system. There, both the Parti Socialiste and the Union for a Popular Majority (the dominant party on the right) are broad umbrella-like parties that unite disparate groups in order to compete more effectively within the confines of a majoritarian electoral system. Both have been part of larger blocs whose composition, although it has varied over the decades, has been more durable than the left and right in Italy. Clustering and competition between blocs has occurred in Fifth Republic France and post-1993 Italy, but it has also taken place in Poland. In order to understand this observation, we must consider not only types and institutionalization, but also alternate forms of competition in which parties cluster in larger blocs (Wolinetz 2006: 58–60).

**Vertical bargains and multilevel governance**

Until recently, scholars of parties paid little attention to how parties managed the challenge of operating at multiple levels of governance, but the regional issues and internal nationalism in
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countries as diverse as the United Kingdom, Belgium, Italy and Spain have changed this. Well before the European Union added an additional level of governance, most European parties were multilevel organizations operating at local, regional and national levels. Parties manage their relationships among levels of organization in different ways. At one extreme, hierarchically structured organizations operate as though they were in unitary systems. At the other, sub-national units operate autonomously, with little regard for policy or positions of party leaders or directives from party officials. Most European parties fall in between these two extremes. Scottish and Welsh parties are separate from the national party organizations, but there is frequent communication and some degree of coordination. Formerly unitary Belgian parties split into separate Flemish and Wallonian parties in the 1960s and 1970s; however, there is extensive coordination between regional- and national-level organizations in both Flanders and Wallonia (Deschouwer 2012: 102–5). The same is true in semi-federal Spain and the Federal Republic of Germany. In the Spanish case, Detterbeck (2012: 174–6, 195–7) discovered that national party central offices maintained considerable control over provincial organizations, although this was tempered by negotiations to accommodate regional perspectives. The representation of Länder governments in the upper chamber, the Bundesrat, ensures similar coordination in the Federal Republic of Germany (Detterbeck and Jeffery 2009: 70–3, Detterbeck 2012: 191–3).

The European dimension has received considerable attention. However, attempts to demonstrate the impact of Europe on national parties have not changed the portrait we sketched earlier: European channels are important as a source of information, but the European-ization of member-state parties has been limited. Unlike parties in most federations, the centre of gravity remains at the national or member-state level rather than the supra-national or European level (Mair 2000: 37–41; Poguntke et al. 2007: 765–7; Carter and Poguntke 2010: 319–20). If Europe is having an impact, it is through the increase in Euroscepticism, a phenomenon that is accelerating as a result of both the growing success of populist parties and the increasingly visible role of the EU enforcing budgetary norms on its member states.

European parties in the twenty-first century: catch-all, cartel or something else?

Political parties are vehicles for electoral competition. Unlike catch-all parties, whose impetus came from the exigencies of competition, cartel parties are not parties focused primarily on electoral competition, but rather parties that shy away from it. Cartelization stems from the difficulties that parties experience in attracting members and the increasing cost of campaigning, and results in increased professionalization. However, the key process leading to change involves state subsidies for parties. Katz and Mair (1995: 483–4) argue that cartel parties are content to allow others to enjoy subsidies and share power as long as they benefit from the former and have regular access to the latter. Other changes, such as increased staffing, increased orientation towards the state and regulation by it, and weakening ties to society, flow from this.

Katz and Mair (1995: 491–3) acknowledge but nevertheless understate the vulnerable position in which many mainstream parties find themselves. Rates of electoral volatility have increased. Many parties operate in policy environments that make it difficult to put together packages of policies that are likely to increase support: EU member states are constrained by EU policies that limit their freedom of action, as well as by the costs of existing entitlements and, for Eurozone members, EU budgetary norms. Although parties of the right and centre may be able to benefit from these constraints, parties of the left cannot (Cronin et al. 2011: 351–60). Many parties have also had to reinvent themselves to take new issues and concerns and the changing composition of the electorate into account. In addition, electorates of
belonging – the tried and true voters on whose support parties can always rely – have shrunk, and mainstream parties face competition for these voters not only from each other, but also from smaller parties on their flanks. Some, such as populist radical right parties, have proved adept at drawing support from a wide range of parties. They do so by focusing on issues, such as immigration and multiculturalism, that mainstream parties prefer to ignore, employing a populist style that pits the people against a putative establishment indifferent to their concerns. In addition, many populist parties have proved to be nimble, shifting their positions on secondary issues in order to maximize support. Some, such as the PVV, have incorporated the defence of welfare state entitlements against planned cutbacks into their policy repertoire.

Parties can respond to these challenges in different ways. One option is to withdraw further into the state. A second is to rely even more heavily on slickly designed, highly professional electoral campaigns. A third response is to stress their managerial capabilities. A fourth is to emphasize the qualities of their leaders, and a fifth is to recast the party’s appeal so that it can be seen as representing the interests of key social groups. The first four options are consistent with the literature on cartel parties, but the fourth and fifth are also consistent with the ways in which Kirchheimer (1966) expected that catch-all parties would behave.

The view of European parties that emerges from the cartel hypothesis should be surprising to anyone who thinks of parties as vehicles for electoral competition. Arguing that political parties are not only oriented towards the state but effectively a part of it, the literature on cartel parties describes parties that have either withdrawn from electoral competition or have ensured that their access to the state will not be harmed by engaging in it. In contrast to the catch-all thesis, in which the transformation of parties was spurred by electoral competition, the cartel hypothesis says relatively little about electoral competition. Instead, it suggests that parties are willing to, in Herbert Simon’s (1997: 119) terminology, satisfice – i.e. accept sub-optimal election results in exchange for greater security and continued access to patronage.

Whether parties behave in this way and whether it is sustainable if they do is open to debate. European parties now face electorates that are at best weakly aligned. Few can rely on electorates of belonging, and populist parties, sometimes but not always on the right, have demonstrated that they can be effective challengers for support previously won by parties across the spectrum. In many countries, rates of electoral volatility have increased. Under such circumstances, satisficing may be insufficient. Instead, some if not all parties may be tempted to defect from their cartel and use the resources at their disposal to compete more effectively.

The picture of European parties sketched by Dalton, Farrell and McAllister (2011) differs from the perspective of Katz and Mair described above. Using data from the first module of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and from the Comparative Manifesto Project, the authors show that political parties in the 36 countries studied perform the linkage functions attributed to them. Dalton, Farrell and McAllister’s study is one of the few to actually investigate the extent to which parties link voters. Examining data from European and non-European countries, they demonstrate that (1) parties play a central role in the recruitment of candidates, (2) voters are able to place both their own positions and those of the political parties on left-right scales and (3) parties play a central role in election campaigns, not only by providing voters with essential information but also by encouraging them to vote. Dalton, Farrell and McAllister also show that parties act on what they promise, and that government policies do indeed reflect voter preferences (Dalton et al. 2011: 217–18).

Investigating representational strain, Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012) reach similar conclusions. They argue that parties try to represent not only their partisans, but also independent constituents who have supported them. In order to do so, they must offer coherent policy packages relevant to both kinds of supporters. Using data from the 2004 and 2007 European Social Survey
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and a survey of specially selected country experts, the authors show that parties in ten Central and Eastern European countries and fourteen Western European countries do so, albeit in different ways. Parties in Western Europe must navigate a two-dimensional policy space, positioning themselves both on distributional issues and along a cosmopolitan–traditionalist divide. The parties that represent partisans and independent constituents most effectively are those that country experts flag as retaining mass party organization. Parties in Central and Eastern Europe diverge in this regard: none have developed mass organizations, but the policy space they must navigate is simpler. Both dimensions are present, but the cosmopolitan–traditional dimension loads on the left–right dimension. However, parties on the right take cosmopolitan or libertarian positions, whereas parties on the left do not. Parties manage to represent voters by targeting not only partisans but also independent voters who are positioned closer to the centre (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012: 172–9).

Both studies suggest that parties are neither as remote nor as self-referential as Katz and Mair argue. Confirming this is another matter. There have been few detailed studies of how parties, past or present, plan and execute election campaigns. The presumption is that the former mass parties not only acted as instruments of mobilization but also engaged their members in election campaigns. Clearly, they shaped and reinforced allegiances and preferences, but this may not have required enlisting most members in campaigns. Arguably, it was not necessary to do so. Today, parties would benefit if they could actively engage members in election campaigns and other activities (Scarrow 1996: 171–3), but television and other media provide parties with other ways to get their message across.

Relying on members is one of several ways in which parties can maintain contact with society. Focus groups and survey research provide another way to find out what voters are thinking, as does contact between elected representatives and citizens and organized interests. We assume that the ways in which mass parties were structured provided parties with contact with society, but those contacts were necessarily selective. On the left, the interpenetration of parties and trade unions ensured that the party leadership knew what the leaders of trade unions and other affiliated organizations were thinking, but this did not necessarily reflect the perspectives of members or other elements of society. Organizing across social classes should have put Christian Democratic parties in touch with a broader range of interests and demands, but these were filtered according to religious beliefs.

Ultimately, it may be the electoral process that ensures that parties take account of voters and what they want. In focusing only on how parties are organized or how many members they have, we forget that parties are engaged in electoral competition. Doing so, they may be deaf to what voters are actually thinking. Prominent examples include the 2002 elections in the Netherlands and the Dutch and French referenda on the EU’s draft Constitutional Treaty. In the first case, the Pim Fortuyn List put the question of immigration on the agenda in a way that parties that had previously raised the issue had not. Similar shocks resulted from the 2005 referenda: parties in both the Netherlands and France appeared to be unaware of voter preferences, but, particularly in the Netherlands, some parties shifted positions after the referendum in an attempt to align themselves more closely with the electorate. Even so, it would be a mistake to think that parties position themselves solely on the basis of public opinion polls or electoral shocks. We know from manifesto data that party positions have remained relatively consistent over time. Ideology and political orientation limit the range of positions that parties are likely to take, but parties react to voters and competitors within this range. More information is needed about the ways in which parties formulate and revise their manifestos and about how they package themselves. This means a more intense focus on parties, whom they recruit and nominate, and the ways in which they plan election campaigns.
It is difficult to separate modern European parties from the competitive environment in which they operate. There is a disconnect between the placid image of the cartel party, reliant on state support for its funding and increasingly remote from its members and followers, and the uncertainties that parties face in an electoral environment in which they lack electorates of belonging and are vulnerable to challenges not only from mainstream parties but also from new competitors. Part of this disconnect can be explained by parties’ remoteness from their members, but there has been no examination of what parties do if they are not content to rest on their laurels and simply survive. Some might choose to do so, but others will be driven to innovate, either by taking new positions or by changing the ways in which they campaign for office. One alternative is to imitate New Labour and consider policies and positions in terms not only of the problems they are meant to solve but also of their implications for support. Parties that follow this model may become vehicles for permanent spin. However, this is only one option. Another, chosen by some parties in the Netherlands, is to roll with the punches and hope that sharp losses in one election will be reversed in the next. Still another option is to innovate, developing new means to present themselves and connect with voters. American parties, relying more extensively on targeting voters and using new campaign techniques, have proceeded further in this direction. Parties in Europe have adopted some but by no means all of these techniques. Clearly, there is work to be done, both for European parties, which face multiple problems, and for those who seek to study and classify them.

Conclusions: parties and democracy

In concluding, let us return to where we began. Citing Schattschneider (1942: 1), political scientists insist that liberal democracy is impossible without political parties. In formulating the dictum ‘no parties, no democracy’, Schattschneider was referring to parties in the United States, but Europe is no different. European citizens have several channels through which they can make their views known to the multiple tiers of governance that frame their lives. National and sub-national governments are more susceptible to popular control than the complex structures of European governance, but, with the partial exception of mass protest, that control depends on parties’ abilities not only to shape but also to respond to popular sentiment. Without their intercession, governments would be less likely to take public opinion or popular outrage into account.

From its inception, the literature on parties has been preoccupied with the ability of parties to respond to the common weal. Both Ostrogorski (1964) and Michels (1962) worried about the distorting effects of the parties that had interposed themselves between citizens and their government. Searching for the internal democracy that was nowhere to be found in the pre-World War I SPD, Michels (1962) formulated the iron law of oligarchy and charted the de-radicalization of bureaucratized parties of mass integration. We can draw a direct line from the outrage expressed by Michels (1962) to Katz and Mair’s (1995) critique of cartel parties based on their marginalization of members and aloofness from the society they are supposed to represent. It is less certain whether parties can do everything that we expect them to. Charged with aggregating interests (Almond 1960: 38–40; Almond and Powell 1966: 102–3, 114–27) and mediating between citizens and their governments, parties are pre-programmed to disappoint. Forced to compromise in order to maintain cohesion and build majorities, parties cannot do everything that everyone wants. Forced to rely on a small number of members, parties must also do more with less. Some professionalization is inevitable, as is a degree of distance from publics that choose not to participate or opt to participate in other ways.
Whether parties can afford to be remote from their remaining members is another matter. The threat of exit – if not to competing parties, then to other organizations – should give weight to members and voters’ voices (Hirschman 1970), as should electoral volatility. The problem is not whether parties are oligarchical per se, but rather whether they can find ways to respond to members, organized interests and the larger public. Whether parties can do so while posing meaningful choices and governing in ways that both lead and follow remains to be seen. Citizens in liberal democracies have a right to expect more; whether parties can provide it is an open question.

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