

**The Literature on Political Parties:
a Critical Reassessment**

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Students of democratic politics may have mixed feelings about the value of yet another book on political parties¹. Some scholars may have concluded that the existing literature on parties is sufficient, and that there is little more that can be learned through additional study in the aftermath of a century of scholarly research on the topic. Others may be led to dismiss further empirical study of parties on the grounds that parties are becoming increasingly irrelevant, since they are failing to respond successfully to a series of challenges, and many of their functions are performed better by less formally organized social movements, by direct contact between politicians and citizens through the broadcast media or the internet, or by innovations in direct democracy. In the view of this group of scholars, parties may be seen as in an inexorable process of “decline”. Finally, there may be some who have concluded that scholarly research on parties has failed to advance the task of developing rigorous and persuasive theory, and that further efforts along these lines are doomed to fail. Such an assertion might be especially appealing to those scholars who have embraced analytical approaches that place little value on the study of complex organizations or political institutions and who may simply dismiss the study of parties as irrelevant to the development of a more universalistic theory of politics.

We shall begin this paper by reviewing each of these assertions. It should not surprise the reader to find that we conclude that such negative views are unwarranted. We shall argue that political parties in the early twenty-first century are confronting a number of new challenges, many of which had neither been anticipated nor adequately addressed by the existing literature on parties. And while we acknowledge the general weakness of theory-building efforts regarding political parties, we believe that the continuing importance of parties in all democratic systems, in combination with the extent to which challenges facing contemporary parties have raised a wide variety of new questions crying out for empirical research, make it all the more important to continue to push towards the formulation and systematic testing of more sophisticated and empirically

grounded hypotheses, with the ultimate objective of developing a more compelling set of middle-range theories. While such advances have been made with regard to the study of party systems, we believe that a critical reassessment of traditional concepts and models of parties *per se* is long overdue, particularly concerning their capacity to deal adequately with recent developments and the new challenges that have confronted parties over the past two decades.

The growing literature on parties

We must begin by conceding to the first hypothetical group of sceptics that there is no shortage of books and articles on parties. As Strøm and Müller have noted (1999, 5), “the scholarly literature that examines political parties is enormous”. Indeed, parties were among the first subjects of analysis at the very birth of modern political science, as exemplified by the classic works of Ostrogorski (1964 [1902]), Michels (1962 [1911]) and Weber (1968 [1922]). Over the following years, a number of extremely important works were published (e.g. Merriam, 1922; Schattschneider, 1942; Key, 1949), but it was really in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s when studies of parties fully blossomed as a subfield in political science. Such works as those of Duverger (1954), Ranney (1954), Neumann (1956), Eldersveld (1964), Sorauf (1964), La Palombara and Weiner (1966, which included Kirchheimer’s seminal contribution), Epstein (1967), Lipset and Rokkan (1967) and Sartori (1976) established the conceptual and empirical bases for countless studies in comparative politics. In terms of the sheer number of publications, the growth of this subfield has been spectacular. Since 1945, approximately 11,500 books, articles and monographs have been published that deal with parties and party systems in Western Europe alone (Bartolini, Caramani and Hug, 1998)². Isn’t that enough?

We would reject such a conclusion. Contrary to assertions that “the golden age of party literature may now have passed” (Caramani and Hug, 1998, 520), we believe that it is more important than ever to study political parties and the roles they play in modern democracies. To begin with,

parties have always been among the handful of institutions whose activities are absolutely essential for the proper functioning of representative democracy. Given the centrality and fundamental mission of political parties, it is not surprising that students of democracy have, since the very beginnings of modern political science, recognized the importance of constantly monitoring and analyzing their evolution and the quality of their performance. Bryce (1921, 119), for example, argued “that parties are inevitable: no free country has been without them; and no one has shown how representative government could work without them”. In the early 1940s, Schattschneider (1942, 1) succinctly summarized their importance by stating that “modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties”. Several decades later, similar words were used by other scholars to illustrate the central role played by parties. As described by Stokes (1999, 245), parties are “endemic to democracy, an unavoidable part of democracy”. Americanists have long believed that “political parties lie at the heart of American politics” (Aldrich, 1995, 3). Not to be outdone, West Europeanists have asserted that “European democracies are not only parliamentary democracies but also party democracies” (Müller, 2000, 309)³.

Following several years in which scholarly interest in political parties appeared to have waned, there has recently been a notable revitalization of the subfield of party studies. The appearance in 1995 of the journal *Party Politics* –which is devoted explicitly to the systematic examination of parties and party systems from a variety of perspectives– has been accompanied by a substantial outburst of comparative studies of parties⁴. In the aggregate, the reawakening of interest in political parties has been so considerable as to make the temporary decline of this subfield following its “golden age” appear as a puzzling aberration⁵. As Peter Mair (1997, vii) has pointed out, “little more than a decade ago, students of party politics were often accused of being engaged in a somewhat *passé* branch of the discipline; today it is a field which is brimming with health and promise”. Far from declining in importance, we believe that a re-

examination of both the prevailing theories of political parties and their actual behavior in a variety of political systems should continue to occupy a prominent place on the research agenda of political science.

Assessing party decline

Paradoxically, this revitalization of scholarly interest in parties has coincided with frequent assertions that parties have entered into an irreversible process of decline. Indeed, if the “decline of party” hypothesis were found to be substantiated in many contemporary democratic systems, one might conclude that new studies of political parties would be increasingly irrelevant. We believe that the exact opposite is true. Rather than assuming that an alleged decline of parties should imply a decline in the literature on parties, we think that the confrontation of new challenges suggests a reassessment of parties and the contemporary relevance of some aspects of the traditional party literature. As many chapters included in the most recently published books on parties demonstrate (e.g. Strøm and Svasand, 1997a; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000a; Diamond and Gunther, 2001; and Gunther, Montero, and Linz, 2002), these venerable organizations have been forced to confront a wide variety of new challenges. What is not at all clear is the extent to which parties have failed to meet these challenges and have therefore begun to decline in importance as institutionalized actors in democratic politics. As Strøm and Svasand (1997b, 4) have noted, “doom-and gloom treatises on political parties have become a growth industry over the past two decades. But this gloomy picture of contemporary parties is far from self-evident”. Thus, one set of research questions arising out of this line of speculation concerns the extent to which parties have, indeed, declined organizationally, as objects of citizen loyalty, as mobilizers of votes, and as key actors in democratic politics. All of these are empirical questions, answers to which should not be assumed or generalized excessively.

Accordingly, a second line of potentially fruitful research that emerges from speculations about party decline concerns the nature of the

challenges facing contemporary parties, as well as their reactions to those challenges. Some of these challenges have their origins in the changing nature of society. In many countries, levels of affiliation with parties and with allied mass-membership organizations upon which many mass-based parties have depended for support have declined significantly, thereby calling into question the viability of mass-based institutional structures that had their origins in earlier times. Trends towards secularization have sapped the strength of denominational parties, at the same time that increasing affluence and expanding middle classes have shrunk the potential electoral base of working-class parties. The greater participation of women in the labor force has both placed new demands on the policy agendas of parties, and created a transformed constituency in need of party representation. Massive international migration has introduced many individuals into societies who had not been represented by previously established parties, and in some quarters has given rise to xenophobic reactions feeding the growth of new kinds of right-wing parties.

Other challenges to parties have emerged as consequences of higher levels of personal resources possessed by citizens. Better educated individuals who had never experienced economic deprivation have tended to adopt postmaterialist values that both conflicted with the traditional ideologies of many parties and have given rise to participatory expectations better suited to new social movements, single-issue interest groups, and unconventional forms of political involvement. Better informed citizens are also able to enhance their participatory capabilities, expand the range of their access to independent channels of information, and develop their own attitudinal orientations towards politics and parties independent of guidance from secondary associations or "opinion leaders". Some of these trends have weakened the structural and psychological linkages between citizens and parties, as reflected in lower levels of party identification, and increases in feelings of political dissatisfaction, cynicism and even alienation.

Still other challenges have their origins in technological developments. The mass-communications media have opened up new channels for direct access between citizens and their political leaders that need not pass through traditional partisan channels. The rapid spread of access to the internet has created massive and complex networks of direct horizontal communications among citizens, while at the same time establishing a potential basis for “narrowcasting” messages between politicians and specific if not highly specialized sectors of society. The downside of these communications advances involves the enormous cost of establishing such networks, paying consultants for the purpose of crafting messages and attractive images of politicians, and in some countries (especially the United States) purchasing television or radio time for the broadcasting of commercial advertisements. Dramatic increases in the cost of campaigning has compelled parties to seek massive volumes of revenue from both public and private sources, and this has sometimes spilled over into the adoption (or suspicion) of corrupt practices of various kinds. Finally, the trend towards devolution of governmental authority from center to regional or local levels of government in several countries has posed new challenges associated with electoral competition at both the national and subnational levels⁶.

The cumulative effects of these challenges have given rise in some Western democracies to a literature characterized by its somewhat fatalistic analysis of the organizational, electoral, cultural and institutional symptoms of party decline (e.g. Berger, 1979; Offe, 1984; Lawson and Merkl, 1988a). Some scholars regard these challenges as so serious as to threaten the very survival of parties. As Lawson and Merkl (1988b, 3) have noted, “it may be that the institution of party is gradually disappearing, slowly being replaced by new political structures more suitable for the economic and technological realities of twenty-first-century politics”.

Parties in new democracies have had to confront an additional set of challenges, in addition to those described above. With the “third wave” of democratization, party institutions have been born or re-established in

dozens of political systems that had either lacked a tradition of democratic stability or never experienced truly democratic governance. Not only do they have to perform the standard functions of political parties in established democracies (including the recruitment of candidates for public office, the mobilization of electoral support, the structuring of policy agendas, and the formation of governments), but have also been key actors in the establishment and consolidation of new democratic regimes, at the same time that they must institutionalize themselves as viable partisan organizations⁷.

These challenges have often been quite severe, and have forced parties to undertake considerable efforts to adapt to the changing conditions of political competition. They have also affected politics in Western democracies by facilitating the emergence of new types of parties associated with social movements. But in no instance have they led to the disappearance of parties and/or their replacement by other types of organizations (such as interest groups or social movements) or institutionalized practices (such as those of direct democracy). Thus, much of the alarmist literature regarding the decline of parties must be reassessed. As Tarrow (1990, 253) has pointed out, the literature on the relationship between parties and new social movements has been undermined by an overestimation of the distance between those two sets of actors, as well as an underestimation of the ability of parties to adapt to the demands of the New Politics. Aldrich (1995, ch. 8) is even more sweeping in his reassessment of this literature, suggesting that studies dealing with “the three *Ds*” (party decay, decline, and decomposition) should be replaced by “the three *Rs*” (party re-emergence, revitalization, and resurgence), in light of the profound changes in the functions and objectives of contemporary American parties⁸. To an even greater extent, Western European parties have been, and still seem to be, able to successfully meet these challenges through processes of adaptation over the past three decades⁹. Indeed, Kuechler and Dalton (1990, 298) have suggested that the principal (and clearly unintended) impact of the

emergence of new social movements has been to force parties to adapt and initiate evolutionary processes of change that have helped to guarantee the long-term stability of the political system. This may very well be true, but if it is, it certainly suggests that the literature on party decline should be substantially reformulated in several ways. First, it should abandon the deterministic quality of its assessment of the negative impact on parties of a wide variety of causal factors. Second, it should acknowledge the important roles played by party elites in adopting strategies to meet external challenges and in successfully maintaining reasonably cohesive and electorally competitive organizations (see Rose and Mackie, 1988). To date, the net effect has been that, despite suffering through periods of electoral dealignment over the past three decades, most available indicators suggest that “parties are alive and well within the governing process” (as described by Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000b, 273). And contrary to predictions of party decline in the 1980s, parties remain the most important actors in democratic systems. In the words of Mair (1997, 90), “parties continue to matter. Parties continue to survive. The old parties which were around well before Rokkan elaborated his freezing proposition are still around today, and, despite the challenges from new parties, and new social movements, most of them still remain in powerful, dominant positions (...). Following Rokkan, the party alternatives of the 1960s were older than the majority of their national electorates. Thirty years on, these self-same parties still continue to dominate mass politics (...). Nowadays, in short, they are even older still”.

Strengthening party theory

A third possible source of scepticism about the value of a new book on political parties might be rooted in disappointment over the underdevelopment of theory concerning parties, and in pessimism that it will ever culminate in a persuasive body of middle-range theory that might serve to orient future research in a coherent and consistent manner. While we acknowledge the general weakness of theory in this field (certainly

compared with the broader consensus regarding concepts, terminology, and operational indicators which underpin research in some other related subfields of political science), we regard some of these criticisms as excessive, and we do not share their pessimism about the future evolution of this literature. First, it must be noted that the literature on political parties has, from the very beginning, sought to rise above the level of mere description (see Daalder, 1983). Over the past half-century, in particular, many students of parties have attempted to generate broad, theoretical propositions regarding the behavior of parties, have proposed a number of typologies in an effort to make sense of the extraordinary variety of parties in existence, and/or have sought to establish concepts that might serve as the cornerstones of middle-range theoretical propositions. As Caramani and Hug have documented (1998, 507), over a third of the publications they surveyed concerning European parties are of a theoretical or analytical nature¹⁰. Given the prominent role played by parties in democratic politics, the continuing impact of the classic contributions to this literature that we cited earlier, and the considerable volume of publications that have appeared in recent decades, one would have expected that by now there should have been some scholarly convergence on a systematic theoretical framework. Despite the potential presented by this rich and complex aspect of democratic politics, however, no such consensus has emerged. Much of the theorizing concerning parties has been unpersuasive, so inconsistent as not to have served as a basis for systematic hypothesis-testing or cumulative theory-building, or so divided among diverging research traditions as to have impeded cumulative theory-building.

This theoretical weakness was first noted by Duverger (1954, xiii). In the very first paragraphs of his classic book, he called for a breaking of the vicious circle that afflicted the parties literature: on the one hand, a general theory of parties must be based upon empirical studies; on the other hand, empirical studies should be guided by hypotheses derived from some putative body of theory, or at least a commonly accepted set of

theoretical propositions. In actuality, neither of these conditions was met, to the detriment of the development of this field of research. A generation later, Sartori (1976, x) began his book with a criticism of the imbalance resulting from the continuing weakness of a theory of parties and the abundance of empirical materials which were not easily cumulative or comparable. And today, widespread dissatisfaction with this literature appears to have continued insofar as it has made little progress towards the development of theory built upon systematic comparative empirical analyses, general and testable hypotheses, and valid explanations of key phenomena (Wolinetz, 1998c, xi and xxi; Crotty, 1991).

Over the past several decades, there have been some noteworthy attempts to build theory based upon approaches that were sometimes complementary, and sometimes competing and even incompatible. These various approaches have been categorized by many authors as historical, structural, behavioral, ideological, and functional-systemic (for instance, Lawson, 1976, ch. 1; Ware, 1996, ch. 6). Other overviews, more centered on party systems than parties *per se*, classified them as genetic, morphological, competitive, and institutional (Bartolini, 1986; Epstein, 1975). It is clear from this brief enumeration that such efforts have been both numerous and diverse.

One of the most significant of these efforts towards theory-building occurred in the midst of the great outpouring of party studies in the 1960s. Since at the same time structural-functionalism was the most attractive paradigm in comparative politics, it is not surprising that many such studies were closely tied to its core premisses. This approach had a substantial impact on the study of parties in part because this was a critical period for the definitive institutionalization of parties in Western democracies, and it coincided with the appearance of many new parties in the short-lived democracies that emerged from decolonization in Africa and Asia (see Kies, 1966). Under these circumstances, characterized by the proliferation of greatly divergent types of political institutions in societies at greatly different stages of socio-economic development, adoption of a common

structural-functional framework offered an ambitious promise of serving as the basis for the scientific and comparative study of politics. It was claimed that theorizing about parties and other important political phenomena would be advanced by the identification of common attributes and functions played by parties in all political systems irrespective of their institutional, social, and cultural diversity. To facilitate comparison, or at least to try to discern common themes among widely diverging developmental trajectories, it was posited that parties are the principal performers of the functions of interest articulation and aggregation, and, to a lesser extent, political socialization, recruitment, and communication. It was thought that this common ground could serve as the basis for the elaboration of concepts, deductive reasoning, and ambitious theoretical propositions¹¹.

For a variety of reasons, that analytical approach became extinct. Its disappearance may have been partly attributable to the disconcerting, anti-cumulative (and therefore non-scientific) trendiness that has too often led to radical paradigm shifts in the discipline of political science. But its extinction was also a consequence of flaws that were inherent in the approach itself –particularly its static quality, its ethnocentrism, and the tendency of many of its practitioners to stress equilibrium, stability, and the functionality of institutions over conflict and change. More radical criticisms focused on its tautological character, its confusion over basic definitional dimensions, and the often weak and tangential link between the theory's core propositions and the actual empirical analysis carried out in its name, with this latter deficiency a logical outgrowth of its lack of operationalized concepts and testable hypotheses¹². In any event, this attempt to establish a universalistic framework for the analysis of politics in general, and parties in particular, disappeared as a guiding force for empirical analysis by the mid-1970s.

A second significant effort to develop a universalistic theory of party politics is the emergence over the past decade of a number of studies analyzing parties from a rational choice perspective. Following the

classic book by Anthony Downs (1957), the various currents of rational choice scholarship have sought to formulate compatible sets of highly stylized hypotheses based upon a common set of assumptions about individuals and their goals. In the United States, this perspective has, since the mid-1960s, progressively transformed the study of American political parties. Previously, as Aldrich (1995, ch. 1) points out, American parties were seen as coalitions among numerous and diverse groups whose interests are aggregated around a platform that is attractive to the majority of voters, and which seek to advance those interests through their presence in government (see Key, 1964; and Sorauf, 1964). A second earlier focus of the literature on American parties adopted a more normative tone in proposing the need for parties to be responsible by offering voters sets of policy commitments which they would implement when they are in office, or serve as alternative sets of choices when they are in opposition (see Ranney, 1975; Epstein, 1968). Beginning in the 1970s, the unfolding of a number of propositions derived from the works of Schumpeter (1942) and Downs (1957) served as the basis of a new phase in the study of American parties increasingly dominated by the rational choice perspective.

This third phase, based upon an analogy between the functioning of economic markets and the so-called political market, has reduced parties to groups of politicians competing for public office. While party models thus focusing on electoral competition have facilitated an extraordinary growth of studies by distinct schools of rational-choice scholars, they are problematic for the purpose of generating a theory of parties beyond the extremely formalized model of the American two-party system. To be sure, the definition of party set forth by Downs (1957, 25) presents clear advantages over the functionalist approach in its characterizations of parties as goal-oriented, of politicians as rational actors, and of their objectives as ranked according to preferences which can be achieved through access to government posts. But this approach is also problematic in so far as its analysis is based on a series of highly

simplifying assumptions whose correspondence with reality is most questionable. One of these conceives of the party as a unitary actor or a unified “team”. As Downs explained (1957, 25-26): “By team, we mean a coalition whose members agree on all their goals instead of on just part of them. Thus every member of the team has exactly the same goals as every other (...). In effect, this definition treats each party as though it were a single person”. Also problematic are simplifying assumptions about the motivations of politicians. Again as described by Downs (1957, 28), “We assume that they act solely in order to attain the income, prestige and power which come from being in office (...). [T]heir only goal is to reap the rewards of office per se. They treat policies purely as a means to the attainment of their private ends, which they can reach only by being elected”. Accordingly, “parties formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections in order to formulate policies”. This extremely reductionist characterization ignores the organizational complexity of parties (but see Schlesinger, 1984, 1991), interactions among party members, the obvious existence of party preferences over policies, and their sometimes conflicted stands regarding objectives and preferences¹³. It also focuses its attention exclusively upon interparty electoral competition, which it portrays as competition between candidates¹⁴. Parties have virtually disappeared as significant actors in rational choice analyses¹⁵. Indeed, most analyses of this kind go so far as to avoid explicit references to “parties”, subsuming the concept of party under the rubric of “candidates”. And when such references do appear, they are often subjected to oversimplifications that run counter to reality and give rise to hypotheses that are of dubious validity¹⁶. As Roemer (forthcoming, Introduction) contends, the Downsian model and many of those who have adopted it make a grave error when they simplify these dynamics to the point of eliminating politics from political competition.

As a product of these conceptualizations and core assumptions, the contribution of the rational choice literature to the development of theory regarding parties has been notably weak (notwithstanding the

exceptions noted below). The criticisms of rational choice applications in political science (such as by Green and Shapiro, 1994) have been particularly pertinent to the study of parties: the universalistic claims of the axioms and assumptions of this approach have improperly and arbitrarily ignored the great variation in types of political parties; the method-driven (rather than problem-driven) selection of their hypotheses have greatly restricted their applicability and even relevance to many actual facets of party behavior; and the explanatory capacity of the interactions between parties and voters or with other parties is also weak. Thus, the very same consistency and simplicity of the assumptions underpinning this approach that are allegedly so beneficial for the purpose of launching complementary, mutually compatible, and potentially cumulative theory-building and hypothesis-testing are also sources of weakness when applied to the study of political parties, particularly with regard to their inability to capture the complexity, multidimensionality, and interactive nature of the objectives parties and their leaders pursue, the strategies they adopt, and their actual behavior in the real world of politics. As has been noted, the analysis of party competition is a good case in point. Bartolini (2002) has carefully analyzed the problems inherent in the one-dimensionality and ambiguity of the concept of competition, borrowed initially from economics and applied, often uncritically, to the political arena. As he demonstrates, many of the simplifying assumptions inherent in that economic approach do not fit with important aspects of actual competition in the world of politics. Accordingly, theory-building concerning political parties has been undermined by the poor fit between an often complex, messy, and multidimensional empirical reality, on the one hand, and an “elegant” but often simplistic and unrealistic theory-building enterprise, on the other. Given these incompatibilities between simple models and a highly complex reality, doubts even arise concerning the extent to which these efforts to establish a single common framework for the deduction of hypotheses and the construction of a cumulative theory of politics may, in the end, prove to be counter-productive.

Fortunately, over the past several years some scholars have employed “soft” rational choice approaches in their studies of parties. They acknowledge that the reduction of “parties” to individual candidates in their models of electoral competition has weakened empirical analyses of parties. As Strøm concludes (1990b, 565), “rational choice models of political parties (...) have failed to generate a simple, coherent theory of competitive party behavior or to produce robust results that apply under a variety of environmental conditions”. In contrast, these “soft-rational-choice” studies have relaxed many of the core assumptions of the more rigid applications of this approach in their empirical analyses; their representations of the rationality of political actors are much more plausible (albeit still quite stylized); they have broadened the range of objectives pursued by politicians, and included in their analysis considerations of the constraints imposed on party behavior by varying contexts; and they have paid more attention to empirical data in developing theoretical propositions regarding parties¹⁷. These studies have been based on systematic empirical analysis, and have sought to improve theory-building by taking into account the organizational complexity of parties, distinctions among party goals (differentiating among vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking parties), and the interaction between the demands of voters and the nature of the offers extended by parties. Accordingly, they treat parties as endogenous variables whose organizational, ideological and institutional characteristics are conditioned by the strategies pursued by party leaders (functioning as rational actors), and by the various contexts of the political systems within which they act. This literature has made significant advances towards establishing a common framework for theorizing about the behavior of parties, the preferences of their leaders, and the conditions which affect the formation of governments in polities with distinct institutional structures. In our view, they have much greater prospects for making significant contributions to theory-building relevant to parties than do applications of simplistic economic models to the study of complex party organizations, and their interrelationships with distinct set of actors in society and government.

Some problems remain, however, particularly with regard to the ability of this approach to integrate assumptions about the behavior of the leaders of different kinds of parties within similar political systems, or of parties with common organizational characteristics in different systems. In this sense, Wolinetz (2002) has recently made an effort to connect the classificatory schemes based upon the differing objectives pursued by party elites with operational criteria better suited for the generation of testable hypotheses and theory building with regard to parties.

A third intellectual tradition is one that seeks to generate theoretical insights by employing an inductive approach to the study of parties. This more traditional and time-honored school has elaborated large numbers of models and typologies of political parties. While much has been learnt about the structure, strategies, and behavior of parties from based upon middle-range hypotheses derived from these party types, this effort has also fallen short of expectations for the development of party theory. This is for a variety of reasons. First, most typologies of parties were based exclusively on the historical experiences of surprisingly few West European democracies during the first six decades of the twentieth century. This generally static conceptualization has limited applicability to parties in other countries (even in established democracies like that of the United States), is in many respects incapable of coping with the new challenges confronting parties that we noted earlier, and has become increasingly irrelevant to studies of the large numbers of parties that have emerged from the Third Wave of democratization that has swept across many parts of the world. Neither the classic (e.g. Duverger, 1954; and Neumann, 1956) nor the more contemporary categorizing schema (e.g. Kirchheimer, 1966; Panebianco, 1988; Katz and Mair, 1995) have been able to capture the full range of variation in the extremely large number of parties in the world today, particularly given the very small number of party types elaborated in each of these contributions.

Neither has this approach led to cumulative theory building, or even consensus on a categorization of parties according to a consistent set

of criteria. Indeed, as Gunther and Diamond (2001) have pointed out, the various typologies have differed substantially with regard to the fundamental nature of the criteria used to distinguish among party types. Some (e.g., Neumann, 1956; Kitschelt, 1989; and Katz and Mair, 1995) of these categorizations are based upon functional criteria, differentiating among parties on the basis of an organizational *raison d'être* or some specific goal that they pursue; others (Duverger, 1954; Kitschelt, 1994; Panebianco, 1988) are organizational, distinguishing between parties that have thin organizational structures and those that have developed large infrastructures and complex networks of collaborative relationships with other secondary organizations; while others (e.g. Michels, 1962 [1911]; Eldersveld, 1964) have adopted sociological criteria, implicitly or explicitly basing their work on the notion that parties are the products of (and ought to represent the interests of) various social groups. Finally, there are some prominent scholars who indiscriminately mix all three of these sets of criteria, such as Kirchheimer (1966), who posits four party models: bourgeois parties of individual representation; class-mass parties; denominational mass parties; and catch-all people's parties.

As useful as these typologies are in identifying distinguishing characteristics of political parties, they are not inherently explanatory. Their greatest utility, as Rokkan (1967, 174) noted, is when multidimensional criteria have been employed to capture complex configurations of features, including elements that may be significant in a particular political context but at the same time allowing for comparative analysis on various dimensions. When misapplied, however, these typologies can induce scholars to fall into a methodological trap based upon the implicit assumption that a particular party type will become dominant and will characterize an entire phase in a long-term process of historical evolution, only to be followed by its displacement as the prototypical party by a different type in a subsequent period¹⁸. Moreover, a superficial and inappropriate use of party models can actually weaken both empirical studies and theory-building by leading to gross oversimplifications of party

characteristics, unwarranted assumptions of commonalities (if not uniformity) among parties that are in fact quite varied, and the inappropriate application of labels (such as “catch-all”) to parties whose organizational, ideological, or strategic characteristics differ significantly from the original prototype. In short, scholars may feel compelled to attempt to cram round pegs into square holes because the available options are insufficient in number and variety to capture the essential nature of many real-world political parties. This leads, in turn, to inattention to potentially significant differences among parties, or strains and evolutionary tendencies within parties, that might have considerable theoretical relevance.

Where do we go from here?

The study of parties should not be fundamentally different from other subfields of political science. As a scientific enterprise, it should reverse the vicious circle mentioned earlier into a virtuous circle, in which theoretical propositions help to stimulate and structure empirical research, and will, in turn, be validated, rejected, or modified on the basis of the findings of that empirical research. Accordingly, the basic canons of science reserve important roles for both inductive and deductive analytical processes. Induction is most appropriate for the generation of theoretical propositions that accord with the reality that they purport to explain. Deduction is necessary in order to derive from putative theoretical propositions testable hypotheses that can either be supported or rejected on the basis of empirical evidence. To date, this dialogue between the inductive and deductive phases of theory-building has been inadequate with regard to the study of political parties.

We have briefly surveyed two predominantly deductive efforts to establish a general theory of parties (if not of politics, more broadly construed): one of them, structural-functionalism, was imported from the fields of anthropology and sociology; the other, rational-choice analysis, from economics. In our view, neither has achieved its objective of

establishing a common analytical framework, generally acknowledged by a consensus among scholars within the discipline as an acceptable if not fully valid basis for research and for theory-building¹⁹. The paradigmatic status of structural-functionalism in political science lasted less than a decade before it was virtually abandoned as a framework for analysis. Rational-choice approaches have been much more persistent: with regard to the study of parties, they have been employed by a minority of scholars over more than four decades. But by the end of the twentieth century, the more rigid and orthodox versions of rational-choice theory had failed to remotely approach paradigmatic status in the field, or even to convince a majority of scholars working in this area that it provided a valid, or even useful, way of framing both theoretical and empirical studies of party behavior. To be sure, much of value has been derived from “soft” applications of this approach, which rigorously test selected rational-choice-generated hypotheses using empirical data. Given the advances made by practitioners of this related approach, it is unlikely that there will be many scholars who choose to employ the more orthodox, overwhelmingly deductive, and non-empirical versions of rational-choice theory: indeed, for the reasons also stated above (and more elaborately in Bartolini [2002]), we have doubts about the validity of the fundamental analogy between simple economic models of profit-maximizing individuals, on the one hand, and complex, multidimensional parties, pursuing a variety of objectives within widely varying contexts, on the other. Indeed, we question whether it is reasonable to strive for the formulation of a single, all-encompassing theory of parties, let alone of politics in general. We share this scepticism with a number of other scholars who reject the notion that a general theory could be constructed that would explain, through a series of interrelated propositions, such diverse phenomena as those ranging from the organizational features of parties to the impact of party activities on the lives of citizens. In short, we fear that the search for a general theory of parties (or politics) may prove to be as fruitless as the search for the Holy Grail.

This is not to say that the predominantly inductive, empirically based studies that dominate the parties literature have culminated in the development of a satisfactory body of middle-range theory. While many interesting theoretical insights can be gleaned from this enormous literature, and many rich empirical studies represent significant contributions to political science, this field of study is excessively cluttered with concepts, terminologies, and typologies that are either unnecessarily redundant (with different terms used to describe the same basic phenomena) or not comparable or cumulative (being based on fundamentally different classificatory criteria). While “let a hundred flowers bloom” may be an excellent strategy for encouraging the proliferation of novel developments in a new field, at a certain point it becomes desirable to remove the weeds from the garden and concentrate on the cultivation of the more fruitful offspring. Thus, we believe that the study of parties would benefit from adopting analytical strategies solidly based on the middle ground between the deductive and sometimes excessively simplifying, method-driven and barely empirical approaches, on the one hand, and the empirically driven studies that have occasionally culminated in a cacophony of sometimes compatible but redundant, sometimes incompatible and non-cumulative concepts, typologies, and models, on the other. As Janda (1993, 184) has proposed, “Our challenge is now to assimilate, develop, and extend existing theory rather than to wait for a general theory to descend on high”²⁰.

What kinds of steps could be taken to strengthen middle-range theories and testable hypotheses concerning political parties? One approach (as proposed by Beyme, 1985; and Wolinetz, 1998c) is to develop partial theories dealing with specific aspects of parties, but which go well beyond mere schematic description or empirical generalization. This approach has been effectively utilized in closely related subfields in political science. In the subfield of electoral behavior, for example, this kind of approach is best exemplified by “social cleavage theory”, in which a coherent set of explanatory hypotheses (based upon a common set of

assumptions and concepts, and consistently using a common vocabulary and generally compatible empirical methodologies) have been systematically tested over more than four decades. This body of theory has not only been able to reach broad consensus in its empirical findings, but it has also generated fruitful theoretical innovations, and has been highly sensitive to changes in the strength of the cleavage-anchoring of the vote over the past several decades²¹. A second approach would be to further lower the barriers between predominantly deductive approaches, such as rational-choice theory, and more inductive traditional approaches. Such a course of action has been endorsed by prominent scholars in both camps. Barnes (1997, 135), whose roots are in the more traditional inductive-empirical camp, has, for example, called for the development of general theories through the integration of what he calls inductive islands of theory and the principal achievements of rational choice. In many respects, the gaps between the two approaches are not that great, as the recent flourishing of “soft rational-choice” studies would attest. From the rational-choice camp, Schlesinger (1984, 118) has argued that claims concerning the absence of theory on parties are simply overstated, since there exists a common framework underpinning the majority of monographs on parties, even though it may be necessary to polish, systematize, and empirically test this theoretical framework. Relatedly, Müller and Strøm (1999b, 307) call for much more frequent engagement between research traditions characterized by formal modelling and by more empirical and inductive approaches. While such an approach would entail an abandonment of the universalistic pretensions based upon strict assumptions of rationality, which often preclude systematic empirical testing, it could also push otherwise atheoretical descriptive studies of parties towards the more conscious generation and testing of hypotheses oriented towards theory-building.

A third approach would be to maintain a largely inductive/empirical stance but to facilitate hypothesis generation and testing by consolidating the myriad existing typologies, and adopting a standard terminology to

describe fundamentally equivalent models of parties that are currently grouped under different labels. This, in turn, would require a standardization of the criteria upon which parties are categorized and, if necessary, elaboration of additional models to capture the essence of parties that have emerged in some of the new Third Wave democracies outside of the heavily studied West European and North American regions, or in the long-established democracies since the traditional typologies were formulated²². The benefits of such an approach can be seen in another two closely related subfields, such as the dynamics of party systems²³ and the effects of electoral systems²⁴: both have greatly facilitated by a common set of concepts, vocabulary, and formulas for calculating their main operational indicators. General agreement on the meaning and operationalization of these concepts has made it possible to consistently and precisely compare democratic party systems with one another, and to monitor their evolution over several decades. No such standardization of concepts, terminology, or operational indicators has taken place yet with regard to the study of political parties, *per se*.

Another, more modest but necessary approach is to critically reexamine these old typologies, concepts, and the assumptions underpinning them. This is precisely the approach adopted in Gunther, Montero, and Linz (2002). The ultimate development of more comprehensive, systematic, and coherent models of parties, for example, requires an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing typologies. This book also explores some of the standard criticisms of political parties, with the objective of identifying common errors in empirical studies based upon these concepts, as well as new questions upon which empirical research could profitably be focused. For example, in the book Hans Daalder (2002), discusses the analytical biases and value-laden assumptions that undermine the credibility of many contributions to the party-decline literature. Similarly, Hans-Jürgen Puhle (2002) criticizes the misapplication of the term “catch-all” to parties very different from those Kirchheimer (1966) had in mind when he formulated that concept.

Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair (2002) also goes beyond the traditional approach to the use of party models by analyzing the interrelationships among different models of party organization (the cadre, mass, catch-all and cartel parties) and among different “faces” of parties²⁵. In a similar vein, Jean Blondel (2002) argues that the differing roles played by party patronage within various institutional settings have important implications for party performance and decline. Steven B. Wolinetz (2002) critically re-examines the existing classificatory schema and proposes that we focus our attention on the distinction among vote-seeking, policy-seeking, and office-seeking parties. And, as already said, Bartolini (2002) rigorously explores the assumptions underpinning the application of simple economic models of competition to the study of party and electoral competition. In the same book, the chapters by Serenella Sferza (2002) and Richard Gunther and Jonathan Hopkin (2002) undertake analytical case studies of particular parties, and demonstrate the extraordinary importance of different party models for their performance and even survival. Finally, comparative analyses of survey data enable Mariano Torcal, R. Gunther, and José Ramón Montero (2002) to challenge common assumptions about the meaning, the origins and the behavioral consequences of anti-party attitudes among the general public. Juan J. Linz (2002) concludes by raising a number of issues that he believes should serve as the basis of future empirical analysis. In short, they all attempt to lay the groundwork for future theory-building efforts regarding political parties by re-examining some of the established concepts, models, and linkages that have underpinned this field for the past five decades, and by further exploring their applicability to parties today. From a variety of perspectives –both conceptual and empirical– these recent contributions are intended to the refinement of cumulative knowledge about political parties, to the formulation of testable hypotheses that can serve as the basis for the building of middle-range theory, and to theoretical propositions with greater explanatory power.

Notes

1. This paper is a shortened version of the introductory chapter included in Richard Gunther, José Ramón Montero, and Juan J. Linz (eds.): *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges*, to be published by Oxford University Press in 2002.
2. Of these publications, about half have appeared in journals, about one fourth percent in books, and the others in edited volumes; see Caramani and Hug (1998, 512); for two different and more limited data bases, see Norris (1997), and Karvonen and Ryssevik (2001).
3. The chapters included in Gunther, Montero, and Linz (2002), of which this paper is basically the introductory chapter, also recognize the importance of parties, and present illuminating discussions of the roles played by parties in various dimensions of democratic political life.
4. Among the many such books that have recently appeared are Katz and Mair (1994); Kalyvas (1996); Scarrow (1996); Ware (1996); Mair (1997); Boix (1998); Müller and Strøm (1999a); Dalton and Wattenberg (2000a); Diamond and Gunther (2001); and Farrell, Hollyday, and Webb (forthcoming). In addition, Wolinetz (1998a, 1998b) has edited two very useful volumes reprinting noteworthy journal articles on parties and party systems that have appeared since the 1960s.
5. Moreover, over the past two decades the study of political parties has emerged as a clearly identifiable field within the discipline of political science. Accordingly, chapters specifically devoted to political parties have been published in several systematic overviews of this academic discipline; see Epstein (1975, 1983); Crotty (1991); and Janda (1993).
6. See the systematic exploration of these themes in Strøm and Svåsand (1997b). While that volume was focused on the case of Norway, its findings have broader implications for democratic political systems throughout the industrialized world; see also Dalton and Wattenberg (2000b); and Bartolini and Mair (2001).
7. These arguments are developed more extensively in several recent volumes dealing with parties in the new democracies of Southern Europe (Pridham and Lewis, 1996; Morlino, 1998; Ignazi and Ysmal, 1998; Diamandouros and Gunther, 2001), Latin America (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995), Central and Eastern Europe (White, Batt, and Lewis, 1993; Evans and Whitefield, 1996; Hofferbert, 1998; Hermet, Hottinger, and Seiler 1998; Kitschelt et al, 1999), and East Asia (Stockton, 2001).

8. For similar reassessments of party-decline arguments by Broder (1972), Crotty (1984), and Wattenberg (1990), see Schlesinger (1991) and Coleman (1996).
9. For critical reassessments of the party-decline literature, see Strøm y Svåsand (1997a); Reiter (1989); Beyme (1993, ch. 2); Schmitt and Holmberg (1995); Mair (1997, chs. 2 and 4); Dalton and Wattenberg (2000b); and the special issue of the *European Journal of Political Research* (vol. 29 [3], 1996) edited by T. Poguntke and S. E. Scarrow and devoted to "The Politics of Anti-Party Sentiment".
10. Another third of this literature has been dedicated to the study of party organization, to their participation in the electoral process, or to their bases of electoral support. The remaining third have dealt with studies of party ideologies, the formulation of public policy, and their roles in parliament and in government. Also see Bartolini, Caramani and Hug (1998).
11. Among the many classical contributions in this genre, see Almond (1960); Almond and Powell (1966, ch. 5); Holt (1967); and several of the chapters in La Palombara and Weiner (1966).
12. See Meehan (1967, ch. 3) and Flanagan and Fogelman (1967) for two critical evaluations of the basic approach, and Lowi (1963), Scarrow (1967), and King (1969) for specific criticisms of functionalist studies of political parties.
13. Gunther (1989), for example, found through an extensive series of interviews with Spanish party leaders that their behavior was often not guided by calculations of short-term electoral advantage. Instead, they sometimes formulated strategies and oriented their behavior in efforts to achieve two other objectives –to fully consolidate Spain's new democratic regime, and to establish durable party organizations– both of which proved to be incompatible on several notable occasions with short-term vote maximization.
14. The electoral process is conceptualized as a model of competition based upon the voter's perception of the issue positions of candidates, with the voting decision based upon the perceived proximity among these issue stands; a party is therefore little more than the aggregation of issue stands by its candidates in a given election (see, for example, Davis, Hinich and Ordeshook, 1970, 426 and 445). For a subsequent treatment of these themes which used formalized conceptions of parties, see Hinich and Munger (1997).
15. In the textbook of Shepsle and Bonchek (1997), for example, parties are notably absent from explanations of interactions among political actors, processes, and institutions. Parties only appear in the penultimate chapter on "Cabinet government and parliamentary democracy [in Western Europe]".

16. Brennan and Lomasky (1993, 121), for example, assume as one of the premisses upon which they base their research “the existence of a stable two-party system in many Western democracies”.
17. See, for instance, Strøm (1990a, ch. 2); Budge and Keman (1990); Aldrich (1995); Laver and Shepsle (1996); Müller and Strøm (1999a, 1999c); and for case studies of two specific families of parties, Koelbe (1991) and Kalyvas (1996).
18. As Bartolini has observed (1986, 259), in no historical phase has there been a homogenization of parties. On the contrary, several different types of parties have coexisted throughout the history of multiparty democratic competition, with preexisting parties overlapping with newly emerging types. This has continued to the present day: even though there has been a general trend towards “organizationally thin” parties, a number of very different types of parties can be found in most democratic systems.
19. This stands in contrast with the discipline of physics, where a broad consensus has existed for decades concerning which kinds of phenomena can be adequately explained by hypotheses derived from the Newtonian paradigm, which phenomena entail dynamic processes best captured by relativistic physics, which require analysis rooted in the precepts of quantum physics, etc.
20. Also see Janda (1980), where the author contributes to comparative theorizing by empirically testing and analyzing the concepts originally advanced by Duverger (1954).
21. See, for instance Lipset (1960, 1981); Lipset and Rokkan (1967a); Rose (1974); Bartolini and Mair (1990); Franklin, Mackie, Valen et al (1992); Evans (1999); Bartolini (2000a); Karvonen and Kuhnle (2001); and Gunther and Montero (2001).
22. See Gunther and Diamond (2001) for one such effort.
23. Among the many noteworthy analyses of party systems over the past five decades are Duverger (1954); Lipset and Rokkan (1967); Sartori (1976); Merkl (1980); Daalder and Mair (1983); Beyme (1985); Wolinetz (1988); Ware (1996); Mair (1997); Pennings and Lane (1998); Broughton and Donovan (1999), and Karvonen and Kuhnle (2001).
24. A continuous line of development of theory and operational indicators in this subfield can be trace from Duverger (1954) to Rae (1971); Nohlen (1984); Grofman and Lijphart (1986); Taagepera and Shugart (1989); Lijphart (1994), and Cox (1997). Although still in Spanish, an excellent recent contribution is Penadés (2000).

25. As already mentioned, these three “faces” are those of the party on the ground, the party in the central office, and the party in public office, as restated in their earlier work (Katz and Mair, 1993), and as originally formulated by Key (1964) and Sorauf (1964); see also Beck (1996) and Dalton and Wattenberg (2000a). Aldrich (1995, ch. 6) has added, as a fourth “face”, that of party in elections, and Blondel and Cotta (1996, 2000) have respecified the party in government inside the party in public office.

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