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REFLECTIONS ON *POLITICAL PARTIES* *AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT*, FOUR DECADES LATER

Joseph LaPalombara

ABSTRACT

Several generalizations about political parties that appear in the symposium volume, *Political Parties and Political Development* (1966), seem to be equally valid 40 years later, while some others do not. The decline of the political party as perhaps the chief instrument for integrating previously excluded groups into political participatory modes was already apparent then. Similarly, it was predictable that universal suffrage and elections would not necessarily lead to democracy. Less apparent back then was that a proliferation of political parties would both reflect and also radically change the cleavage structure of society and, consequently, attenuate the tendency of parties and party systems to 'freeze' into predictable and enduring patterns. Above all, it was not imagined that revolutionary technological changes of the past several decades would so profoundly affect the nature of elections, and the role of political parties in them, as to raise disturbing questions regarding the future of representative democratic polities.

KEY WORDS ■ cartel party ■ catch-all party ■ externally created party ■ 'freezing hypothesis' ■ 'law of duality' ■ political party

Introduction

I am flattered, as would be my lamented friend and colleague, Myron Weiner, by the attention that this conference may call to the symposium volume he and I edited four decades ago. Weiner's and my first direct encounter with political parties and electoral politics occurred during our graduate student years at Princeton. We were retained to do some opinion surveys for a leading Democrat, who was then making his first stab at becoming New Jersey's governor, a position he was later to occupy.

We learned much from that experience, including how vital it is to exercise quality control over survey data because, in our random checking of the completed questionnaires, suspicion fell on one of the several classmates we had hired as interviewers. It turned out that, instead of going to where our stratified probability sample dictated, he had a better idea. He conducted his interviews only with those persons who, randomly or otherwise, happened to come into the pub where he spent his working hours. He then assigned to each respondent the age, gender and other 'face-data' called for by our sampling format.

A few years later, along with Sidney Verba, Weiner and I were the first of our generation to be invited to join the SSRC Committee on Comparative Politics. *Political Parties and Political Development* (1966)¹ was the sixth volume in the series sponsored by the Committee. Initially, the assignment to edit it was to have been the responsibility of Sigmund Neumann. This was an obvious arrangement, given that Neumann was the author of an early study of Germany's political parties under the Weimar Republic (1932), as well as of *Permanent Revolution* (1942), a brilliant analysis of the totalitarian party and state, and the editor (1956) of one of the earliest books to treat political parties from a deliberate comparative perspective.

It was Neumann who kept at us not to go overboard with empirical models, propositions and generalizations based on events associated with the so-called New Nations then emerging from the era of colonialism. His admonishments that we must look at the political party and at party systems, not abstractly but, rather, with careful attention to the historical contexts within which each of these institutions emerges seem as valid today as they were 40 years ago. Several of the papers prepared for this Conference also provide ample evidence as to the importance of concepts like *time* and *sequence* in our explications of the birth, the behavior and the political effects of political parties and party systems.²

Sigmund Neumann became ill, however, and he died before the international conference, at Rome, from which the political parties volume emerged, took place. In our organization of that conference, and indeed of the book itself, Myron Weiner and I profited from the advice that Neumann so generously imparted. We like to think that something of his humanist spirit and his deeply European approach to scholarship permeates the pages of the book itself.

What Appears Enduring, or Valid, Forty Years Later?

Some of what our book contains seems to me to be of enduring interest and validity. Concepts like Otto Kirchheimer's 'catch-all party', Sartori's 'polarized pluralism' and Hans Daalder and Stein Rokkan's respective sophisticated handling of societal cleavages and political party and party system origins have served and continue to serve scholars well.³ In addition, Immanuel

Wallerstein's treatment of the decline of political parties in sub-Saharan Africa, and the emergence there of what he dubbed the 'party state', goes a long way to explaining political developments on that continent during the past four decades.⁴

Political parties today are of course not what they were several decades ago (Schmitter, 2001). As van Biezen and Kopecký (2007, in this issue) point out, for example, several of the societal functions that were once central to the mass political party have abated, while others have become much more prominent, particularly as the party is increasingly able to operate more or less free from its base and its own electorate. These transformations are important and I will return to them later in this article.

It is equally apparent that, as we then argued (L&W, 1966: 3–7), the political party, as an institution, is ubiquitous; that it is present in all forms of the state and in all manner of political systems and governments. Even dictatorial and, indeed, totalitarian systems seem unable to do without at least one party. This ubiquitous presence of the political party calls our attention to its instrumental value. Whatever else may be its functions, it appears to be a universally adopted tool for mobilizing large numbers of persons to engage in forms of political participation, voluntary or coerced, that are not limited to voting. It is perhaps this instrumental utility of the political party that explains the emergence of the so-called 'cartel party' (Katz and Mair, 1995). The implied generalization is obvious: where there does not exist at least one political party, those who hold the reins of power will create one, and use it for their own purposes. A second, equally striking, implication is that, even where the party may lose its electoral salience, it may increase its power to gain control of the institutions of government (Katz and Mair, 2002: 112–35).

In the volume's concluding chapter, Weiner and I tried our hand at some generalizations. One example in particular seems entirely apt for the present era. We anticipated then that political parties of the future might increasingly be based not just on distinctions like social class, religion or geography, but also on tribal, ethnic, racial and other narrowly defined interests, including, of course, religious ones. We not only expected that this would complicate the development of integrated nation-states, considered legitimate by their own populations; we also predicted, somewhat balefully, that such conditions would tend to foster one-party states, and the so-called 'party-state', as well (L&W, 1966: 399–419). Our authors themselves were not at all convinced that the onset of mass electoral participation among the New Nations would lead to democratic polities, a fear that has since come to materialize, often dramatically.

We wished also to avoid definitions of the political party that are essentially only nominal. We did not agree with one of our authors, Rupert Emerson (L&W, 1966: 269), that a political party might be defined as any organization that named itself such. We wrote instead that an organization qualifies as a political party if it is expected to endure beyond the lifespan

of those who bring it into existence; if, in organizational terms, it is articulated at the local as well as national level; and if it competes in elections with the intention of capturing the major institutions of government, through which, alone or with others, it intends to exercise power in its own name (LaPalombara and Anderson, 2003: 281; L&W, 1966: 6). Or, as Richard Katz (1987: 4) once put it, the essence of the political party lies in its intention and willingness 'to rule and to take responsibility for ruling'.⁵

Definition is not a trivial matter, particularly in cross-spatial comparisons. In the developing world, but in the post-communist nations as well (Mainwaring and Zoco, 2007; McAllister and White, 2007), the so-called political parties are often little more than a small band of oligarchs, with limited and volatile electoral followings. Some of these may one day meet minimal denotative criteria of the political party; most of them are destined to disappear (L&W, 1966: 29–30).

The suggested definition skirts the pitfall of associating political parties exclusively with democracies, or with countries where competitive elections occur. It also allows us to assess the 'reach' and the 'grasp' of the party or parties that are in power, namely, their ability actually to rule, and to be responsible for doing so (Daalder, 1966: 59–60; Katz, 1987; King, 1969). Particularly in transitional democracies, we require better empirical indicators to establish whether it is in fact those persons elected under party labels, and not a few oligarchs or other institutions of the state, that actually rule in these places (van Biezen and Kopecký, 2005; Katz and Mair, 2002).

We were dubious, four decades ago, as to how far in time and space some of the then extant theoretical formulations about parties and party systems would 'travel'. Maurice Duverger's (1954) 'Law of Duality' provides a good illustration. It seemed highly doubtful among the emerging New Nations, irrespective of the electoral systems they might adopt, that political party systems would evolve in the bipolar, two-party configuration suggested by Duverger. Not only were these doubts justified, we now have additional evidence that Duverger's 'Law' works, at best, only imperfectly, and in exactly those cases where he believed it should and would have the greatest purchase (Chhibber and Kollman, 2004: 223–5).

It also seemed obvious to us then as it still does to me now that, beyond the *number* of a country's political parties, there are other critically important aspects of these organizations that require careful scrutiny. One thinks of factors like their size, geographic spread, ideology, leadership and cadre characteristics, organizational articulation, internal decision-making arrangements, attitudes toward and intentions regarding existing institutions, electoral capability and following, and so on.

Party characteristics of this type will help us to flesh out and to interpret findings about the mobilizing capacities of political parties, such as those reported by Karp and Banducci (2007). It remains a lingering intellectual problem for our discipline that relatively little is known about those aspects of political party organizations and systems treated by Panebianco (1988).

The literature on political parties remains bereft of the theoretical and analytical approaches to this important subject pioneered by writers like Roberto Michels and Moshe Ostrogorski (LaPalombara and Anderson, 2003: 386–8).

More and better information about political parties, as organizations, would help us to make stronger predictions regarding the important questions about types of institutionalization raised by Dalton and Weldon (2007) and Mainwaring and Zoco (2007), or about the probable behavior of parties-in-legislatures treated by Carey and Reynolds (2007). Indeed, only in-depth knowledge about internal characteristics of parties will permit us to sense when it is that, for example, dangerous-to-democracy configurations of ‘polarized pluralism’ (Sartori, 1966: 156–60) are likely to emerge. Questions of this kind appear to be of critically increasing proportion if, as more and more writers note, political parties effectively separated from their own base and electors are nevertheless growing in their ability to gain control of and to dominate institutions of government.

With the exception of some of the parties found today in post-communist countries, almost all contemporary political parties are of the variety Duverger (1954: xxiii–xxxvii) typed as ‘externally created’. However, in terms of their probable impact on transitional democracies, these parties differ markedly from those that emerged earlier in the West. I mean by this essentially that the many parties in these new places neither have attachments to previously existing representative institutions, nor are they in any way constrained by them. Earlier in the West, even the declared anti-system parties of the left or the right displayed at least some of this historical institutional anchorage. And, indeed, with well-known but rare exceptions, the radical parties eventually came around to accepting and to playing by the pre-existing rules of the political game.

This pattern of accommodation seems much more improbable among contemporary democracies in transition. Fragmented party systems are characterized by highly sectarian party groupings that, if and when they come to power, will attempt to rewrite the rules of the game in their favor. Political adversaries in these places are seen not as opponents but, rather, as enemies, oftentimes to be treated with extreme prejudice, including violence. Above all, the elites of these political parties, those who, unlike mass publics, are the real and major architects of the extreme polarization of society and politics (Fiorina, 2005), are rarely inclined to institutionalize peaceful systems for the transfer of governmental authority and powers. If the cleavages among these elites jell, and then ‘freeze’, the implications for democratic development would appear dismal.

Most of the papers prepared for this conference supply supporting evidence for this surmise. Fragmented party systems encourage weaker party identifications. Transformations in systems of communication and other factors tend to erode party discipline in legislative bodies. A myriad of parties contributes mightily to electoral volatility. Governments in these places are inevitably

made up of coalitions, maximizing thereby the ability of coalition members to engage in 'political outbidding' and 'political extortion'. Far from placing a country on the road to becoming a stable pluralist democracy, elections and parties in such places may perversely have the opposite effect.

Typically in the West, party proliferation and fragmentation have been the exception, not the rule. Externally created parties tended to mobilize new voters on the basis of very broad societal cleavages of the kind discussed by Lipset and Rokkan (1967). This led in turn to the 'freezing hypothesis' about party-and-electoral configurations, which many of the conference papers show does not seem to hold for countries involved in the third wave of democratization efforts.⁶

Some of these well-known cleavages still obtain, but they have been added to and sometimes replaced by much more fragmenting factors; for example, race, tribe, ethnicity, territory and religious sectarianism. Forty years ago we wrote that, somewhat ironically, newly established opportunities of political participation might have the perverse effect of rendering less likely the same democratic development that extended suffrage is expected to encourage (L&W, 1966: 402–6).

The contemporary political situations in Africa and the Middle East would seem to justify the pessimism the authors in *Political Parties and Political Development* articulated 40 years ago. However, the papers written for the NDI conference and revised for this new symposium are not as pessimistic, and perhaps rightly so. Broad democratizing movements, however fragile, are apparent on several continents. Where Central and Eastern Europe are concerned, the proximity of established West European democracies represents a proximate and positive influence. Indeed, for nations recently admitted to the European Union, or aspiring to such membership, the development and maintenance of basic democratic institutions and practices is a mandatory condition.

Even in these places, however, as well as among the older democracies, there are signs that some of the historical institutional underpinnings of vibrant and healthy democracy may be eroding. The erosion itself seems to be most apparent among political parties widely recognized to be, along with popularly elected legislatures, the key institutions of representative democratic systems (Dalton and Weldon, 2005).

Political Parties Today and Tomorrow

None of us, 40 years ago, foresaw the disintegration of the Soviet system and empire. And none would have imagined that, today, the most probable second economic and military power on earth would be the People's Republic of China, still under rigid one-party rule. We were in error then, in denying as we did (L&W, 1966: 432), that rulers of authoritarian or one-party systems would ever be as good as, to say nothing like better than, leaders

of democracies in bringing about rapid improvement of the economic and material conditions of their countries.⁷

Nor did we anticipate how radically changed would be societal conditions that directly impinge not only on what the political party does politically but on the nature of the political party itself (Schmitter, 2001). I refer of course to the well-known electronic revolution, to the monumental changes in systems of communication and of information storage and exchange that are still in the process of revolutionizing the world we share. These and related changes have made possible the emergence of political parties that are more oriented to gaining and holding power in their own right, as opposed to doing so as representative institutions of some segment of the general public (Gunther et al., 2002).

The changes in technology, one must add, have also improved markedly the arsenal of weapons that groups are now able to utilize in political combat. Terrorist acts are essentially an extreme form of the violent methods that can be and often are used by men and organizations, including political parties, which seek to gain access to and control over the instruments of government.⁸ This same technology offers dissidents and counter-elites a new and wider-ranging array of instruments to use in opposition. At the very least, available transportation and communication systems facilitate unprecedented means to reaching and mobilizing large numbers of persons. And, at worst, the angriest and most unprincipled among these people and organizations are able to utilize instruments of violence unheard of in the past.

Given these unprecedented conditions, it would be astonishing if political parties did not change as well. Forty years ago, Kirchheimer correctly showed that the 'catch-all' party was created because, even then, the political party was losing its once central role as the key instrument for the integration of groups into the existing political order, or for modifying the order itself (Kirchheimer, 1966: 189–90; L&W, 1966: 426–7). Even as Converse (1969) was writing his classical article on party identification, the conditions were rapidly eroding that once made possible encapsulated political party subcultures in Western countries. The 'catch-all party' therefore was a weaker instrument than its predecessors for the creation and generational transmission of the type of strong party identification discussed by Converse and treated by Dalton and Weldon (2007).

Kirchheimer's formulation might have suggested a reduction of the number of parties competing in given jurisdictions, as opposed to the type of party proliferation that so many of the papers prepared for this conference show to be the case. The existential and contextual conditions that underlie the birth and death of so many parties and the volatility of fragmented electorates among so many different parties obviously raise new questions, not only about the nature of personal party identifications but also of the lowered probability that anything like a 'freezing hypothesis' is likely to be successfully used to predict or explain political alignments in these more or less democratizing countries.

The proliferation of parties, and the rapid shifting electoral allegiances among them, has clearly contributed to a lack of public confidence in these important organizations, thereby impeding or eroding their legitimacy status. It seems fair to say, therefore, that the political party as it has existed in the past is in steady decline, so much so that even the definition of the political party we utilized four decades back may require revision. In particular, it appears that the existence of organizational articulation at the local level is no longer a necessary condition that would qualify an organization to be numbered in the political party category.

One might wish to qualify the definition even further, perhaps in the sense suggested by Carey and Reynolds (2007). That is, in situations where party discipline is difficult or impossible to enforce, where both voters and candidates are highly volatile as to their party identifications, and where, within legislative bodies, their members act and vote as individuals, rather than as party members, the political party may well be *unable to govern in its own name*, even if this is what some of its leaders may desire.

This change in the conception of the role of lawmakers is today widely diffused. It represents a dangerous degeneration for any representative democratic system. At the very least, it both reflects and encourages (on the part of both voters and their elected representatives) a single-minded concentration on the 'electoral moment', a widespread development underscored by several of the papers prepared for this conference. These studies suggest that the party has lost, perhaps forever, the centrality it once enjoyed in the life space of ordinary citizens. As a consequence, the change undermines, indeed it makes it impossible, for citizens to hold political parties, and not just individual lawmakers, responsible for what it is that governments actually do.

Concentration on the electoral moment is also aided and abetted by three other factors. The first of these are the technology changes already mentioned. Almost everywhere the citizen in search of information, political or otherwise, can turn to sources other than the parties and their leaders, and particularly to NGOs and the mass media, to obtain it. Much of this type of information now comes over the Internet. The price paid for this, however, is that face-to-face exchanges among citizens and voters, exchanges that were once considered vital to healthy democratic societies, now almost never occur (Putnam, 2000).

The second factor is the political party itself, its leaders and its potential political candidates. These men and women are now able to reach great numbers of their actual and potential electoral supporters directly, through the mass media and the Internet, and *without the intervention of traditional party cadres or local party organizations*. Technology, in effect, has served to make *personalismo*, once considered the bane of Latin American political systems, the major characteristic of contemporary electoral politics essentially everywhere.

One of the earliest signs of this transformation was Fillipe Gonzalez's rise to power in Spain a political generation ago. Gonzalez was elected and

became prime minister, depending less on the organizational prowess of the PSOE and immensely more on himself and his personal qualities. It was Gonzalez's charisma, his direct and effective appeal to voters via television, which rendered the official party under whose banner he was elected less critical to his success than was typical of the past. Left-wing parties throughout Western Europe took due and alarmed note of this transformation, and, indeed, some have been at pains to find candidates who are 'naturals' for this media-and-expert-dominated type of electoral campaign.⁹

An even more dramatic example of this transformation would be the election and re-election of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. Four months after this highly telegenic personality created *Forza Italia*, a so-called political party that meets none of the definitional criteria I mentioned earlier, he became Italy's prime minister. In the years that followed, he has steadfastly refused to bring into existence the kind of organizational apparatus we typically associate with the political party. It remains apparent that he does not need it. Indeed, even after almost five years of unfavorable publicity, at home and abroad, Berlusconi came within a hair of being elected a third time in 2006, and no one with a sense of mass-media-dominated electoral politics is ready to write his political obituary.

The third factor that privileges the electoral moment is the rise of the electoral specialists, the experts who 'package' and 'market' political candidates. They are pollsters, consultants, speechwriters and speech teachers, the 'spin masters', the stage managers, the slogan creators, the media mavens, the dressmakers and make-up artists, and the talk-show personalities who have become the key figures in electoral campaigns. This type of degeneration occurred first in the United States, but it is rapidly spreading to every place in the world where elections are held. Left-wing parties too have joined this trend with a vengeance.

The general conclusion, supported by papers prepared for this conference, is that the political party is everywhere in decline. Party identification is weakened. Party legitimacy is problematical. The professionals have replaced old-line party leaders, and the once-critical party activists or cadres have largely disappeared. Electoral participation is also generally lower than in the past. Somewhat ironically perhaps, this degeneration has been aided and abetted by the public funding of electoral campaigns, a step presumably intended to help parties survive.

If parties are in the process of losing or deliberately shedding their principal *raison d'être* (Daalder, 1966; Katz, 1980), we can readily generate nightmarish scenarios as to what mode of choosing and replacing political office-holders will come to prevail in democratic polities. Kay Lawson (1980), for example, has pointed out that if parties are no longer interested in linking their followers to the day-to-day policy-making and policy-implementing institutions or government, one should expect a high degree of instability in the party system to develop. Some erosion of this type is already visible in the fact that it is the NGOs that are primarily salient not just in mobilizing

voters for electoral purposes but also in linking them to the day-to-day making and administration of public policies. It is these same NGOs that can be counted on to mobilize their adherents on the basis of the very narrow interests with which these groups are identified – like the environment, gun control, abortion, esoteric moral codes, and so on.

Regarding possibly hair-raising future political scenarios, we should perhaps rethink some of the things we have believed about the salutary effects of strong political identities, or strong attachments to political parties. The CSES data arrayed in several of the conference papers clearly show a weakening of strong and enduring party identifications. This being so, we must assume that the ‘freezing hypothesis’ once articulated by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) no longer applies, at least not as strongly as it once may have done in older Western democracies.

Is this necessarily bad for, or inimical to, democratic development? Given what we know about the narrow interests of many of the parties, for example in transitional democracies, given their mutually exclusive value systems and absolute-rationality ideologies, given how each party and its leaders tend to feel about their opponents, it may actually be a blessing that party identities remain fluid and that electoral volatility remains high. That is, one would hope for more enduring party identities not everywhere but principally in places where the number of parties has diminished, and where the rules for the peaceful transfer of political power have been deeply embedded.

We might have had persuasive answers to such questions, as I suggested above and as Hans Daalder (1966) argued four decades ago, if we had at our disposal more information about political parties as organizations. Much of what is published about parties continues to be based on datasets, like those of the CSES, which derive from surveys of mass publics. Rich though these materials and the research based on them may be, they leave us with scant information regarding the internal organizational nature and dynamics of political parties.¹⁰

Even so, several of the conference papers reassure us that, in many of the transitional democracies, the political parties do indeed play a vital role in shaping the parameters, the velocity and presumably the eventual direction of political development in many of these places. A mere reading of the daily press will remind us that in those places around the world where political competition appears to be the most intransigent and violent, it is the political parties, more than any other institution, that play a vital mediating role. Without them, elections would be chaos and anarchy would follow.

Historically, in the West as well as elsewhere, this has been the strongest contribution that parties, party leaders and party systems have made to democratic political evolution. The lingering question, for which conference papers provide some tantalizing hypotheses, is whether this mediating role can survive in a new context where so many other social organizations are able to compete with the parties as never before anywhere on earth.

Notes

- 1 Joseph LaPalombara and Myron Weiner (1966). This book is hereafter designated as (L&W, 1966). The Princeton University Press published all of the volumes in the SSRC series.
- 2 The *time* variable is important in at least two senses. First, it refers to the moment in history in which one or more political parties emerge. Second, it can refer to how long a political party has been in existence and/or in how many elections it has competed, a dimension of considerable importance as demonstrated by the papers in this conference prepared by Dalton and Weldon (2007) and McAllister and White (2007).
- 3 Stein Rokkan's chapter in our volume *Electoral Mobilization, Party Competition and National Integration* (pp. 241–66) clearly established the basis for his later work with Lipset on societal cleavages and the 'freezing' of political party and electoral patterns.
- 4 The chapters written by these authors in LaPalombara and Weiner (1966) are as follows: Daalder (1966: 433–78); Sartori (1966: 137–76); Kirchheimer (1966: 177–200); Wallerstein (1966: 201–16).
- 5 The power-seeking dimension of the political party has long been recognized as essential to its denotative characteristics (Sartori, 1976: 58–64; Schattschneider, 1942: 35; Schumpeter, 1942: 28–31).
- 6 On the question of the enduring validity of the 'freezing hypothesis', see Karvonen and Kuhnle (2001), and especially the introduction by S. M. Lipset and the chapters, respectively, by Peter Mair and Richard Katz.
- 7 Not only China but, arguably, South Korea, another of the so-called 'Asian Tigers', and Japan itself would be evidence for how far off the mark we were.
- 8 This is not the place to pursue the discussion of a 'continuum of violence', but we should note that, in contemporary political conflict, suicide bombers and other well-known terrorist acts are conceptually in the same category as genocide, assassinations, the kidnappings, abuse and torture of political opponents, kangaroo courts, arrests without access to counsel, all manner of invasions of privacy, the deliberate smearing of political opponents, and so on.
- 9 The resurrection of the door-to-door, local-mobilization strategies pursued by the Republicans, directed by Karl Rove in the 2004 American presidential elections, might suggest that the party-as-critical-organization is not all that moribund. Furthermore, as pointed out in several papers in Dalton and Wattenberg (2002, Pt. III), the so-called 'governing function' of these same parties may actually have grown in salience.
- 10 But see Katz and Mair (1994) for indications of the value that derives from a research focus on the political party as an organization.

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