

The Cartel Party Thesis: A Restatement

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We restate and clarify the idea of the “cartel party,” a concept that has found considerable traction in studies of parties throughout the democratic world, including those far from the original research site and data on which the cartel model was based. The cartel party thesis holds that political parties increasingly function like cartels, employing the resources of the state to limit political competition and ensure their own electoral success. The thesis has been subject to varied empirical testing and to substantial theoretical evaluation and criticism. Against this background, we look again at the cartel party thesis in order to clarify ambiguities in and misinterpretations of the original argument. We also suggest further refinements, specifications and extensions of the argument. Following a background review of the original thesis, we break it down into its core components, and then clarify the terms in which it makes sense to speak of cartelization and collusion. We then go on to explore some of the implications of the thesis for our understanding of contemporary democracies and patterns of party organization and party competition and we identify a possible agenda for future research in party scholarship.

In this article we restate and clarify the idea of the “cartel party,” a concept that we first advanced in a paper presented to a workshop in the European Consortium for Political Research Joint Sessions of 1992 and was later published in the launch issue of the journal *Party Politics*.¹ While perhaps not an entirely satisfactory denomination, the notion of the cartel party has found considerable traction in studies of parties throughout the democratic world, including those far from the original research site and data on which the cartel model was based.² The thesis has also been the subject of varied empirical testing—with some apparent confirmation and some apparent failure to find confirming evidence—as well as being subjected to theoretical evaluation and criticism.³ Against this background,

it makes sense for us to revisit the cartel party thesis, both to clarify ambiguities in (and in some case misinterpretations of) the original argument, and to suggest refinements and extensions. Following a brief account of the background to the original paper in this first section, we go on to unpack the argument into its various components, and then we clarify the reasons why it makes sense to speak of a cartelization of ostensibly competitive political parties. In the final section, we look at some of the implications suggested by the cartel thesis.

The cartel party thesis⁴ emerged inductively from a data collection effort that had been designed in the late 1980s to document party organizational forms and the adaptation of these forms to social and political change in a cross-nationally comparable way. Despite an extensive literature on different aspects of party politics, the study of party organization was then relatively underdeveloped, and it had often been assumed that it would be too difficult to gather cross-nationally comparable data on organizational forms and development. By the time we began the project, this had become an obvious lacuna in party studies. Numerous other aspects of party were being studied by major cross-national research projects, but nobody was dealing with organizational developments in a systematic way. There was plenty of theoretical argument, including the then-recent book by Angelo Panebianco,⁵ but no systematic empirical work. Hence we developed our data-gathering project, a project that had no real ambition other than—to paraphrase Stein Rokkan—“to pin down numbers” on comparative variations.⁶ In other words, when developing the cartel thesis we started from a project that was intended to chart how party organizations in long-established democracies had developed since the 1960s,

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rather than from any prior expectations about what those developments had been.

Moreover, instead of designing the project in order to test a particular theoretical model, we deliberately tried to gather new data that would be appropriate to the testing of a wide range of hypotheses derived from a wide range of theoretical perspectives employed not only by ourselves but also by unknown future researchers. And while the hypotheses that we ourselves advanced to account for the trends that we believed were emerging were clearly intended to be applicable beyond the thirty-year period for which we sought to gather data, and beyond the eleven West European countries plus the United States that we included in the project, the terms of reference for expectations such as a “weakening of ties between parties and civil society” remained predominantly west European. In this case, for example, the weakening of ties was understood to be relative to expectations regarding the mass party of integration; whether one should expect ties also to weaken in cases in which they had never been particularly strong remained to be seen.

Similarly, although the theory that we later developed was intended to be about party organizations in general, the choice of the specific aspects of party development that we emphasized in the original papers was driven as much by the availability of data in our project as it was by any *a priori* assessment of their relative importance. Of particular relevance here is the emphasis that we put on the increasing dependence of parties in many countries on public financial subventions. While we certainly saw this to be one of the expected reactions to the conditions that we speculated were underlying the process of cartelization, both later analysts⁷ and we ourselves may not have been justified in giving this such a pre-eminent position as the key indicator of cartelization.⁸ Beyond the question of data availability, this emphasis on party funding was also reflective of our initial concern with the individual party as the unit of analysis, and the dynamics of organization and the balance of influence among what we had earlier identified as “the three faces of party organization”⁹ within those individual parties as the principal *explanandum*. It also seemed worth emphasizing by virtue of the unexpectedly large amount of subsidies—defined in terms of both range and value—that our project had begun to document. In general, however, the purpose of the original papers was to capture—largely under one broad heading and by means of one broad concept—a number of different developments that had been observed empirically.

Our early papers were also intended to take conceptions of party away from what was then a continuing over-reliance on the notion of the mass party.¹⁰ It was widely assumed then that most parties could be understood as mass parties or as the more modern catch-all variant of mass parties. This was not only the key empiri-

cal model, it had also become the key normative model: for many scholars this was what parties should be like, how they should be organized and behave, and to the extent that they did not meet the standards of a mass party, then they were, essentially by definition, somehow weak or failing. Philippe Schmitter’s critical evaluation of the role of parties in post-communist Europe offers a useful, if somewhat late, example of this mode of thinking.¹¹ In the original papers, we tried to show that the process of organizational development and adaptation was more varied, more fluid, and more open-ended than that narrow conception allowed.

There were also limitations in that original argument, particularly with regard to how we sought to explain party change. Writing in 1992, virtually all of the emphasis in our explanation of party change rested on domestic factors, whether social, political, or institutional. In retrospect, it is clear that the influence of external factors drawn from the worlds of international politics and economics also needed to be taken into account. In the early 1990s, economic globalization began to be recognized as a serious constraint on the capacity of all governments to manage the economy. In 1989, the Berlin Wall was breached and the Cold War ended. Less than three years later, in February 1992, the Maastricht Treaty was signed by the member states of the European Union. And in January 1995 the World Trade Organization was established. That short period marks a major watershed in the development of democratic politics, and has had a profound—and still largely underestimated—impact on the configuration of domestic politics in most of the European countries we originally studied. And although Maastricht is specific to the European Union, it is evident that the impact of the collapse of the Soviet empire and of globalization has been felt far more widely.

The principal effect of these developments was substantially to undermine the stakes of traditional electoral competition, first by undermining the perceived importance of the left-right ideological divide that lay at the heart of most western party systems, and that, whether implicitly or explicitly, fed off the Cold War divide; second by transferring control and competences upwards towards a technocratic and *non*-partisan European Union system; and third, even beyond the transfer of competences to the European Union or the WTO, by underlining the new conviction that the traditionally central political concerns of inflation and unemployment now lay outside the control of national governments, and thus outside the control of the parties that occupied those governments.

All three changes helped to foster *depoliticization* and hence also—most crucially for the cartel argument—made it that much easier for the parties to cooperate and collude. Collusion, which is obviously an important element in the cartel argument, becomes easier when the stakes of competition are reduced, and this, in turn, is

owed at least in part to developments at the international level, which were neglected in the original paper.

In sum, the concept of the “cartel party” was first proposed as a means of drawing attention to patterns of inter-party collusion or cooperation as well as competition, and as a way of emphasizing the influence of the state on party development. The cartel party is a type that is postulated to emerge in democratic polities that are characterized by the interpenetration of party and state and by a tendency towards inter-party collusion. With the development of the cartel party, the goals of politics become self-referential, professional, and technocratic, and what substantive inter-party competition remains becomes focused on the efficient and effective management of the polity. Competition between cartel parties focuses less on differences in policy and more—in a manner consistent with Bernard Manin’s notion of “audience democracy”—on the provision of spectacle, image, and theater.¹² Above all, with the emergence of cartel parties, the capacity for problem-solving in public life is manifested less and less in the competition of political parties. The election campaigns that are conducted by cartel parties are capital-intensive, professionalized and centralized, and are organized on the basis of a strong reliance on the state for financial subventions and for other benefits and privileges. Within the party, the distinction between party members and non-members becomes blurred, in that through primaries, electronic polling, and so on, the parties invite all of their supporters, members or not, to participate in party organizational activities and candidate selection. Indeed, it is through participation in activities such as primaries that citizens become defined as supporters.

Disentangling the Cartel Party Thesis

As noted above, the original cartel party article has been much cited and discussed during the last decade. This is obviously very gratifying. But the paper has also been heavily criticized, not least by Koole, who played a major part in the original data-gathering project, and Kitschelt, and while some of these criticisms may have been valid, others were not.¹³ Rather than revisit the criticism, to much of which we have responded elsewhere,¹⁴ it is perhaps more useful to unpack the concept itself, and deal with the different elements.

Although our data-gathering project on party organization did not start from a particular hypothesis or theory, our attention was quickly drawn to a series of real-world developments that appeared to be striking, to be reasonably pervasive, and to have been generally unremarked upon. Two of these in particular need to be emphasized.

The first such development was the evident movement of parties towards the state, in the sense that party organization was becoming ever more dependent on rules and laws laid down by government, and the parties themselves

were becoming much more obviously defined by their institutional roles. In contrast, up to that point most of what had been theorized or hypothesized about party organizations and their development, and most of the writings on the mass party and catch-all party in particular, had looked to the society as the key driving force and as the place where explanations for party change could best be sought. There were exceptions to this general approach, of course. Wolfgang Müller (1993) had written an interesting and challenging paper on how state rules impacted on parties and party systems, and albeit unbeknownst to us, Otto Kirchheimer (e.g., 1957) had also drawn attention to what he called “the state-party cartel,” although, as with his catch-all party, the explanations that he used were primarily social and economic rather than—as with us—institutional. Indeed, while the original paper has been faulted for lack of reference to Arend Lijphart’s earlier use of the term “cartel democracy,”¹⁵ it could perhaps be faulted more forcefully for having failed to note this reference by Kirchheimer to the party cartels, in which he underlined—already in the 1950s—how parties were being drawn into an excessively close relationship with the state.¹⁶

These influences from the state and the government included the now well-documented but then less-known practice of state subventions—the use of substantial amounts of public money to fund party organizations and the parties in parliament; the various and increasingly common party laws, which had often accompanied the introduction of state subventions, and which laid down sometimes in quite strict terms what parties could or could not do regarding their organizational practices; the rules regarding public service broadcasting and sometimes even commercial broadcasting and media, which were becoming more and more important for party campaigning and publicity; the access to the state machinery that parties enjoyed, and that provided a source of patronage and support; and access to government office, which we found had become increasingly commonplace—such that already by the end of the 1980s, there were very few parties of note that had not enjoyed a recent experience in government office at the national level.

These signs of movement towards the state represent one of the most striking things to have been empirically identified by the original project, and they suggested a number of hypotheses or conclusions that were subsequently important in the cartel argument. First, we found parties to be much more influenced by the state than was realized. It was an important new finding, and was undeniable. When we unpack the cartel argument, this is the first self-standing element to emerge, and it is not now contested.

What we hypothesized to follow from this uncontested finding was more open to challenge. In the first place, if parties were more influenced by the state, and were drawing closer to the state, then, in our metaphor,

they were also likely to be drawing further away from society. This was hypothesized very clearly in the original paper, but without being comprehensively researched. Later data, summarized very comprehensively in Russell J. Dalton and Martin P. Wattenberg's *Parties without Partisans*,¹⁷ have suggested that the hypothesis is indeed valid, and that it is evidenced, *inter alia*, by the sharp decline in party membership in the 1990s,¹⁸ by the consistently declining levels of party identification, and by the more erratic but nonetheless pronounced falls in turnout. Second, if parties were strongly influenced by the state and had become drawn more closely into the institutions of the state, then it was likely that they would begin to resemble one another. Much more would be shared on a cross-party basis, including their means of communication, their principal sources of finance, their internal organizational form and modes of adapting to party laws, and their ever more common experience of occupation of public offices. In other words, when speaking of party experiences or the nature of a party, it had begun to make more sense to speak in terms of "the parties" or "the party system" rather in terms of any individual party. To be sure, the influence of the state on the parties was only one of a number of factors pushing parties to resemble one another and thereby promoting organizational convergence.¹⁹ Other influences stemmed from the parties' need to appeal to similar and overlapping constituencies and from their use of the same modern campaign technologies. Adaptation to party laws, state subvention requirements, and the exigencies of holding government office were also crucial, however, and it was precisely these factors which had tended to be overlooked by the literature.²⁰ Third, although parties were more influenced by the state, by public regulations, and so on, this did not imply that they were being influenced by something that was entirely exogenous to them. That is, the laws and rules influencing parties were those that they themselves, *as governors*, had been centrally involved in devising and writing. Once this point is recognized, parties are no longer seen simply as objects, but are also subjects. Moreover, they are unique in that they have the ability to devise their own legal (and not only legal) environment and, effectively, to write their own salary checks.²¹

Given all this, it also makes sense for us to expect that parties will cooperate with one another. In fact it is necessary for parties to cooperate with one another if general party regulations are to be accepted and if a system of public financing is to be introduced. And it is clearly a small step from consideration of cooperation and agreement to consideration of collusion. But to recall: all of this starts from the empirical observation that shows that parties are moving towards the state. And while what followed in our reasoning may be contested or qualified, the original observation nevertheless still stands.

From the very beginning we conceived of party organizations as being akin to political systems, with three important constituent units or "faces."²² This was different from the approach commonly used up to that point to discuss party organizations, which simply distinguished the party in parliament and the extra-parliamentary party. Our division was also similar to, but not identical with, V. O. Key's tripartite division of U.S. political parties into the party as organization, the party in government, and the party in the electorate.²³ Our concern was only with the party itself, and for the most part with parties that (unlike American parties) have formal membership organizations, and hence we distinguished among the party in public office (PPO), which included the party both in parliament and in government; the party in central office (PCO), which was constituted by the permanent bureaucracy, national executive organs, and so on; and the party on the ground (POG)—the organized membership. We had expected that the balance among these might shift, and this is indeed what we found. This led to our second uncontested finding: in those long-established democracies for which we gathered data,²⁴ the weight of power within the party, as measured by changes in the locus of decision-making, as well as by the distribution of internal resources—finance, staff, etc.—has moved much more firmly into the hands of the party in public office.²⁵

This finding then led to additional hypotheses that subsequently fed into the general cartel thesis and which, of course, proved more disputable. The first of these emphasized the sheer self-interest of those actors who actually occupy the public offices in the name of the parties and who, like the politicians and administrators observed by Theda Skocpol, "have ideas and organizational and career interests of their own, and they devise and work for policies that will further those ideas and interests, or at least not harm them."²⁶ Our hypothesis was and is simply this: that as the party in public office gains ascendancy within the party as a whole, its particular interests will be treated as being the interests of the party writ large. Moreover, although it might seem at first sight that the interests of the PPO could be summarized simply to lie in winning, in our view it made more sense to see those interests as lying equally in having the possible costs of losing reduced as much as possible. After all, *always* winning is unlikely. We also further hypothesized that this would be true for the PPOs in all (mainstream) parties. And this, in turn, would be likely to encourage a system of mutual cooperation, that should, under normal circumstances, lead to the emergence of a Nash equilibrium: an equilibrium or compromise from which no one participant will have an incentive to defect.

Putting these two sets of findings and their related hypotheses together leads to the following conclusions. First, parties are increasingly part of the state, and increasingly removed from society, and this new situation

encourages them, or even forces them, to cooperate with one another. They can write their own checks, but only if there is general agreement to do so. Second, these parties increasingly resemble one another; in terms of their electorates, policies, goals, styles, there is less and less dividing them—their interests are now much more shared, and this also facilitates cooperation. A very important part of their shared interest is to contain the costs of losing, and in this sense to find an equilibrium that suits all of their own “private” interests. This also means cooperation, even if this cooperation need not be overt or conscious. That is, even if parties might be disinclined to rely heavily on overt deals with one another, their mutual awareness of shared interests, and their sense of all being in the same boat and relying on the same sorts of resources, means that we can conclude by hypothesizing collusion (or its functional equivalent) and cartel-like behavior.

Although the idea of a cartel implies concerted action, when translated into the cartel party model the term was not intended to imply or depend on an actual conspiracy and it is particularly in this respect that the choice of denomination may have been less than perfect. Rather, as anyone involved with legislation concerning anti-competitive practices in the economy is well aware, it is possible to produce the *effects* of collusion without any illicit communication or covert coordination. In an oligopolistic market, which the electoral market with only a handful of parties receiving nearly all of the votes certainly approximates, overt signalling can produce virtually the same result as covert conspiracy.

The denomination “cartel” also implies attention to inter-party or system-level dynamics, and in particular to a distinction between those players that are “within” the cartel and those that are excluded from it. Indeed, part of the original argument was that participation in a cartel-like pattern of constrained competition with other parties would both facilitate and, at least to a certain extent, require many of the changes in internal party arrangements that we identified with the cartel party as an organizational form. Thus, even if analytically separable, the idea of a party cartel as a system-level characteristic and the idea of a cartel party as a type analogous to the mass party or the catch-all party, are closely intertwined.²⁷

Attention to the system-level or inter-party side of the argument requires that a further point be clarified, and that is the specification of the set of parties that are expected to be “in” the cartel. We have sometimes identified this as the set of “governing” parties.²⁸ Unfortunately, in practice this phrase has proven to be slightly ambiguous, but what it clearly does *not* denote is simply those parties that are in government (holding ministerial portfolios, or the equivalent) at any particular time. While it does not necessarily extend to all parties that might in theory be considered as potential coalition partners (i.e., that are not excluded from government on *a priori* grounds)²⁹ or that play a

governing role in *any* subnational government, it does extend to all parties that have a reasonable expectation that they *might* be included in a national governing coalition or in a significant share (defined jointly by number, size, and range of competences) of subnational governments within the reasonably foreseeable future. Moreover, while a cartel does imply constrained competition, this refers to the nature of the competition rather than to an absence of electoral turnover—to the question of whether it makes any difference who wins, not to the frequency with which different parties win. Indeed, the absence of an expectation of turnover would be a factor strongly militating against the formation of a cartel. Thus, that the American Republicans in the House of Representatives appeared in the early 1990s to be condemned to permanent opposition status was a major contributor to Newt Gingrich’s “Contract With America” as a way to fracture a cartel that arguably included both Democrats and Republicans in the Senate and in presidential politics. Conversely, the replacement of the Martin Liberal minority government with the Harper Conservative minority government after the 2006 Canadian election may ultimately support cartelization rather than indicating an increase in competition that would be contrary to the cartel model.

Making Sense of Cartelization

Given this background and these clarifications, and ignoring the pre-history discussed in various developments of the cartel party model, the argument itself can be summarized relatively briefly. At least by the 1970s, the dominant form of party organization in most democratic countries approximated what Otto Kirchheimer (1966) had identified as the catch-all party³⁰. While there were still obvious connections, both in terms of formal organization and affective ties between particular parties and particular social groupings, these had noticeably weakened. Increasingly, parties were seen, and saw themselves, as brokers among social groups and between social groups and the state, rather than as the political arms of specific groups. Ideological conflicts had been transformed into amorphous differences in general left-right orientation. A significant component of electoral competition involved the provision of public services, with parties in effect bidding for support from voters by promising more services (especially on the left) and lower taxes (especially on the right), and for support from potential contributors by offering specially tailored legislation that often resulted in the weakening of otherwise desirable regulation or the collection of less revenue.

This situation confronted the parties with three inter-related classes of problems, some of which might be characterized as largely exogenous, but others of which were largely the result of actions taken by the parties themselves in the past. First, the moderation of class and other

subcultural conflicts, and the increasing homogeneity of experiences and expectations of the vast majority of citizens associated with the rise of mass society and the welfare state (mass media and mass culture, mass education, near universal provision for health care, unemployment, and old age insurance) reduced the value of appeals to class or cultural solidarity. Concurrently, the process identified by Ronald Inglehart and Russell Dalton as “cognitive mobilization” contributed to a general decline in affective attachment to parties per se as part of a process of partisan dealignment.³¹ Formal party membership declined, as well as party psychological identification. As the other side of the same coin, electoral supporters (party members, party voters, organizational contributors) became less reliable.

Second, with the increasing reliance on mass media as the most effective mode of campaigning, and with the attendant increase in the need for professional expertise (pollsters, advertising consultants, direct-mail fund raisers and marketers), the economic costs of remaining competitive were rising more rapidly than the ability or willingness to pay of the party on the ground. The initial response of turning to a range of interest organizations (primarily unions) and corporations also began to reach the limits of willingness to pay, at least without *quid pro quos* bordering on, or entering, the realm of the corrupt. These changes also meant that the resources that the party on the ground could bring to the table (e.g., volunteer labor for campaigning or knowledge of local opinion) were becoming relatively less valuable to the party in public office (in comparison to mass media space or information gathered by professional pollsters).

Third, if one accepts the idea that there is a real limit beyond which the provision of public goods cannot be expanded without creating a fiscal crisis, then the governments of many welfare states appeared to have backed themselves into a corner from which the only escape without, and potentially even with, untenable tax increases was equally untenable service cuts.³² Moreover, the public debts accumulated while deferring addressing this dilemma threatened to convert tax regimes that originally had been intended to redistribute income from the rich to the poor into devices that instead transfer wealth from the productive elements of society to the bond holders.

Although of a different type, one additional development can be added to this list. As politics has become an increasingly specialized profession, the potential personal costs of electoral defeat or organizational contraction have increased. Further, the separation of parties from ancillary and other interest organizations that was characteristic of the catch-all party has proceeded even farther, and has reduced the availability of jobs in those organizations for politicians who are (to use the theatrical euphemism) “resting” between engagements. Simply put, when politics is a person’s primary source of income, the stakes are higher.³³

One implication of this is to reorient the meaning of party rationality away from maximizing the expected (average) pay-off or probability of victory, and toward maximizing the reasonably anticipated *minimum* pay-off (“maximin”). Significantly, this is something that all the mainstream parties can do simultaneously. Complementing the decline in ideological differences among mainstream parties, this reinforces the truth of the French aphorism that “there is less difference between two deputies, of whom one is a revolutionary and the other is not, than between two revolutionaries, of whom one is a deputy and the other is not.”³⁴

These problems are shared by all governing parties, and set up the conditions for the formation of what is effectively a cartel, in which participating parties serve their joint interest in providing for their own security and survival. In terms of relations among parties, this has two primary aspects. The first is restriction of policy competition, with policy promises effectively playing the role of quantity offers in an economic cartel. This is evident in the increasingly common moves to take issues out of the realm of party competition by delegating them to non-political agencies like independent central banks, courts, or the EU Commission, by privatizing previously public functions (e.g., pension reform or health care reform), and by the increasingly common acceptance of various models of governance,³⁵ new public management,³⁶ and the regulatory state,³⁷ all of which privilege questions of technical and managerial expertise over those of values or political preference. Even in the case of issues that have not explicitly been removed from the realm of partisan debate, cartel parties limit the degree to which they attempt to “out-bid” one another: many issues are simply avoided by the mainstream parties as demagogic or populist, and the range of proposals offered for those issues that remain is often limited in the name of “realism” or “responsibility.”

The second aspect involves attempting to solve the problem that internally generated funds prove inadequate to the exigencies of modern politics, and to mitigate the risks of electoral misfortune by reducing the disparity of resources available to those in and out of government at any particular moment, in both respects by turning to the coffers of the state. In the first respect, state subventions become significant—in some cases helping to fill the gap between traditional sources of party income and perceived needs—and in others largely replacing private contributions. In the second respect, a system in which the parties of the ruling coalition enjoyed the resources of the state—the power to appoint to office (and perhaps to “tax” the appointees), the research capacities of the civil service, etc.—while the other parties were left to their own devices is supplanted by arrangements that allow all of the cartel parties to share in the bounty, and thus to reduce the pecuniary difference between being in office and out of office.

Cartels face two potential threats. One, as Herbert Kitschelt has pointed out, is defection.³⁸ The other is challenge from new entrants. Thus an additional aspect of the cartel is the structuring of institutions such as the financial subvention regime, ballot access requirements, and media access in ways that disadvantage challengers from outside.³⁹ Moreover, because parties are not unitary actors, the leaders of the party in public office (from whose perspective this model has been developed) face not only the threat of defection or challenge by new party entrants, but also pressures or threats from within their own party. It is in responding to these challenges that parties tend to become cartel parties with respect to their internal structures. One aspect of this has already been mentioned: by turning to state subventions, parties (which is to say their leaders) become less dependent on members and other contributors. A second aspect is the disempowering of the activists in the party on the ground, who are the ones most likely to make policy demands inconsistent with the “restraint of trade” in policy that is implied by the cartel model. Although the objective is a kind of party oligarchy, the means ironically (or not, depending on one’s reading of Robert Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy”⁴⁰) may be the apparent democratization of the party through the introduction of such devices as postal ballots or mass membership meetings at which large numbers of marginally committed members or supporters—with their silence, their lack of capacity for prior independent (of the leadership) organization, and their tendency to be oriented more toward particular leaders rather than to underlying policies—can be expected to drown out the activists. A third aspect is the centralization and professionalization (in particular, emphasizing the cash nexus of an employment contract instead of partisan loyalty or ideology as the basis for commitment), or ultimately even the outsourcing, of campaigning and of the other functions of the party central office and the traditional party on the ground, again with the result of freeing the leadership from constraints from below.⁴¹

The cartel party model also further cements the relationship between parties and the state. With significant policy competition largely precluded, whether as part of cartelization, or because of domestic fiscal and political constraints, or because of the ever more powerful international constraints, party spokesmen tend to become apologists for and defenders of policies that have become more generically policies of the state than they are policies of any particular party or coalition. Moreover, as part of the price for state funding, parties have also accepted a growing body of regulations limiting both their activities and their structures, regulations which they themselves then devise. In this way, parties move beyond the public utility model of regulation discussed by van Biezen to become, in effect, full-grown institutions of the state.⁴²

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the cartel party remains an ideal type, which may be approximated or approached but which will not be fully realized—just as

there never were any parties that fully met the ideal type definitions of the mass party or the catch-all party. Even with that said, however, two forces restraining the cartelization of parties must be recognized. The first is that although the process of cartelization is undemocratic, parties, even in the cartel model—or perhaps particularly in the cartel model—justify their own existence and their claim on state resources on the basis of their contribution to democracy, and it is in this respect that they are often open to challenge. On the one hand, cartelization has clearly contributed to the rise of populist anti-party-system parties that appeal directly to public perceptions that the mainstream parties are indifferent to the desires of ordinary citizens. Such parties have grown substantially in both prominence and support in the last decade,⁴³ and serve to underline the dangers to cartel parties of excessive, or excessively overt, cartelization. On the other hand, cartel parties also have to be attentive to the potential backlash of being perceived to have excessively violated norms of democratic fairness. While one would expect a certain level of disingenuous rhetoric attempting to justify regulations that are in the parties’ interest as actually being in the public interest, particularly with an aggressive free press there will be real limits to the degree to which parties can construct institutional biases in their favor without incurring even greater political costs.

The second restraining factor is that although parties through their parliamentary majorities make the rules that govern their own behavior and structures, govern entry to the political marketplace, and allocate state resources, they do not do so with complete autonomy. Most obviously, and only exacerbated by the increased role of courts, they are bound by constitutional restrictions. Thus, although the basic logic of a cartel might lead one to expect the ruling parties to restrict access to public finance to themselves (as for all intents and purposes they have done in American presidential elections), German parties were forced by the *Bundesverfassungsgericht* not just to provide public funding to parties that clear the 5 percent threshold for representation in the Bundestag, but to all parties that achieve one-tenth of that result. Similarly, in *Figueroa v. Canada (Attorney General)* the Supreme Court of Canada overturned the provision of the Canada Elections Act that required a party to have candidates in at least 50 ridings in order to reap the benefits of party registration, a requirement that would either have denied those benefits to most small parties or forced them to bear the burden of nominating candidates in many ridings that they did not intend seriously to contest.

Implications and Research Questions

In the dozen or so years subsequent to the publication of the original paper, the trends to which we originally drew attention have become more easily seen, and serve to

bolster rather than weaken the overall argument. This is particularly so when we look at the behavior of the established parties, which seems to come closer and closer to the pattern we sketched, both in terms of party organizational styles and patterns of competition. Moreover, regardless of whether one accepts the cartel thesis in its entirety, it is evident that the growing incorporation of parties within the state, their increasingly shared purpose and identity, and the ever more visible gap that separates them from the wider society, have contributed to provoking a degree of popular mistrust and disaffection that is without precedent in the postwar experiences of the long-established democracies.⁴⁴ One may dispute the interpretation of cartelization, but what is beyond dispute is the popularity of what is now often identified as a populist, anti-cartel rhetoric.

One question that remains is where this leaves the concepts of party and of party government—concepts that have been at the core of the understanding of European democracy in particular. As suggested earlier, there are restraining factors that may limit the degree to which parties follow the path we have identified. At the same time, however, it seems unlikely that the parties would—or could—reverse their drift towards the state, or that they could somehow reinvigorate their organizational presence on the ground. For the foreseeable future, this option seems unavailable—at least across the European democracies. The mass party is dead.

It also seems unlikely that the parties—at least within the mainstream—will discover some great issue divide or a new basis for policy polarization—and when one remembers the bloodshed frequently associated with polarizing questions of class or religion, it is not clear that it would be desirable if they did. The liberal economic consensus is now well established, and on many of the issues that might offer the basis for polarization in left-right terms, the room for manoeuvre is either limited or the capacity to decide has been delegated elsewhere. Beyond the economy and welfare, and beyond the heavily constrained options available in fiscal and monetary policy, there lie other issue dimensions that might serve to organize opposition and that cut across the traditional class-based left-right divide. The environment offers one set of issues, immigration offers another, the international order offers a third. But whether meaningful choices might be meaningfully politicized in any of these issue areas, or whether, even if politicized, they might offer the basis for widespread popular re-engagement in the electoral process, is very much open to question. Moreover, even if such issues were politicized and proved capable of stimulating popular re-engagement with electoral politics, it is virtually unthinkable in modern societies that they would be rooted in the kind of social cleavages that were a necessary condition for the mass party model.⁴⁵ For example, although Kriesi and his colleagues are very emphatic in claiming to identify a new

cleavage in European politics shaped by the division between the winners and losers of globalization,⁴⁶ it is not at all clear that this conflict has found a consistent party political expression or that it can endure in the form of a stable alignment.

For now, it seems, we remain with a reality that is defined by a set of mainstream parties that are largely indistinguishable from one another in terms of their main policy proposals, and that are closer to one another in terms of their styles, location, and organizational culture than any one of them is to the voters in the wider society. Elsewhere,⁴⁷ this new configuration of party politics has been discussed in terms of the erosion of the parties' representative roles and the retention of their procedural roles, and it has also been argued that in the absence of a capacity to combine both roles, parties risk losing their legitimacy. That is, unless parties can represent as well as govern, it may turn out to be more and more difficult for them to legitimize their command of governmental institutions and appropriation of public resources.

More immediately, however, these developments also raise the issue of future models of party organization. To adopt Katz's terms, the current situation is characterized by an enhancement of the partyness of government—as reflected in enhanced levels of recruitment, nominations and office-holding—but a dissolution of the partyness of society.⁴⁸ Within the institutions of government, party organizations often dominate; within the wider society, the party presence has been transformed into a professional electoral campaigning machine. The party as campaigner attempts to reach out to as wide a range of voters as possible, but the links that it establishes to these voters are at best contingent, instrumental, and short-term. They are also very direct, in the sense that the waning of the party on the ground has left little or nothing in between the competing sets of leaders, on the one hand, and the available and often indifferent body of voters, on the other. In this version of post-party democracy, there is little or no mediation, and hence little or no role for traditional party organizations. What lies between the elector and the elected is all but disappearing, rejected by the disengaged voters, on the one hand, and by campaigning politicians, on the other.

These developments then raise three important questions, or research agendas, for scholars of political parties. The *first agenda* is to address more directly and fully the range of empirical questions that have been raised with regard to the cartel thesis itself. This requires that we specify the empirical indicators that we believe to be appropriate more fully than we have to date. Given the two-pronged nature of the cartel party argument—that is, a cartelized party system and individual cartel parties within that system—these also are of two types.

On the one hand, there are indicators of the cartelization of the party system. One set of these indicators

concerns institutions: Do we see regulatory regimes concerning parties moving away from those imposed on all associations in civil society and toward those normally deemed appropriate for state entities? Do we see the balance of state resources going to parties currently in government versus those going to potentially but not currently governing parties shifting toward greater equality? Do we see policies regarding such policies as state subventions and ballot access that tend to favor parties in a cartel over those outside it?

For example, with regard to ballot access, Bowler et al. have found that, as the cartel thesis would lead one to expect, “it is more difficult today for new parties to gain access to the ballot than it was in the 1960s.”⁴⁹ Subventions, however, have become more widely available, not just for parties that would plausibly be regarded as cartel members, but for their challengers as well. While this often has been imposed on the ruling parties by constitutional courts as the price of keeping subventions for themselves (e.g., in Canada and Germany), ought this to count as evidence against cartel-like behavior? While in part this must remain a matter of subjective interpretation, in larger part it hinges on two empirical questions: Have the subsidies given to small parties simply been eaten up by the increased costs of ballot access? And, is the extension of subsidies to challenger parties “levelling the playing field” (anti-cartel behavior), or are we seeing “nest-feathering . . . to the benefit of all parties, but disproportionately more so for the established parties” (cartel-like behavior)?⁵⁰

A second set of indicators of cartelization relates to the hypothesized constriction of the competitive policy space: Do we see policy convergence, particularly convergence as documented by Riccardo Pelizzo, in which public opinion has apparently moved in one direction while the positions of all mainstream parties have moved in the other?⁵¹ To what degree do the mainstream parties succeed in keeping issues that would threaten their positions off the political agenda (a question that involves the counter-factual: can evidence be found, for example in the form of efforts by interest groups, of issues that “should have” found a place on the political agenda, but did not)? And can this be attributed to a preference by party leaders for longer-term stability over short-term electoral advantage?⁵²

Perhaps most crucially with regard to cartelization is the question of collusion, or its functional equivalent. While there is ample evidence of decisions that are consistent with the cartel hypothesis (for example, aside from those already mentioned above, the reduction in the material difference between being in government and being in opposition achieved through a virtual explosion in Canada in the number of non-government-party MPs receiving special salaries and allowances), can evidence be found of coordination analogous to the coordination of economic cartels? While the smoking gun of covert conspiracy would be hard to find (although in an era of tell-all memoirs it

might not be impossible), careful content analysis of public statements could look for patterns analogous to the signalling of price changes typical of the airline industry.

On the other hand, trends in several indicators of the cartel party as a type also deserve further research. Several of these—a weakening of the party on the ground, a shift in the balance of resources in favor of the party in public office, increased reliance on the state as a font of material resources—have already been mentioned. Stratarchy would be an additional important indicator of the existence of a cartel party. This was one of the adaptive strategies that we suggested might be pursued by national party leaders seeking to maintain local organizations, both for their utility in campaigns and to avoid the public perception of decay, but at the same time to free themselves of constraints imposed by those local organizations. While Karin Bottom has made a preliminary analysis in one country, the question of how the idea of stratarchy, developed as it was in the institutional setting of American federalism and presidentialism,⁵³ should be understood in the very different circumstances of Europe remains to be adequately worked out.

As we have already suggested, the increasing professionalization of party staff, not just in the sense of employing pollsters rather than ward-healers to keep abreast of public opinion, but particularly the increasing specialization of the party-political career path and its increasing separation from other occupational tracks (e.g., reduced movement between the central offices of social democratic parties and those of trade unions, or between the central offices of liberal parties and those of business associations) is one of the potential causes of systemic cartelization. In as much as this trend could, in principle, advance in some parties and not in others, however, it would also be an indicator of individual party approximation of the cartel party type.

Finally, the use of “plebiscitarian democracy” as a mode of internal party decision making would be a fourth indicator. More specifically, the question here is the conjunction of three characteristics of internal decision making: an erosion of the boundary between formal members and supporters, particularly through the spread of primary elections; use of direct votes—sometimes merely to ratify, other times to decide among alternatives determined by the party leadership; and by-passing of party congresses or meetings, in which communication and coordination among the members/supporters and from them to the center is facilitated, in favor of direct, unmediated, and one-way communication (e.g., via direct mailing or e-mail) from the center to the members/supporters.

The *second research agenda* concerns the problem of how and what we study about parties. If nothing much remains to mediate relations between the voter and the voted, should we continue to think of the party as an organization at all? Might it be more useful to think of the party as a

network? And if we do look at parties as networks, how should we go about studying their maintenance and survival? Relatedly, on the basis of what systemic logic might we best understand party in comparative terms? Following the cartel thesis, party strategies are much more likely to be conditioned by national contexts than by some more abstract or transnational purpose or ideology. This time paraphrasing Bertrand de Jouvenal, there is now likely to be less difference between two British parties, one of which is social democratic, than between two social democratic parties, one of which is British.⁵⁴ In other words, the cartel thesis implies that many of the characteristics and labels that we now use in comparative analyses to identify parties—family, identity, ideology, status, and so on—are becoming less meaningful. Does the concept of “left,” or “social democratic,” or “Christian democratic,” or even “far right” still carry much meaning? Does it tell us much about the party in question? Is the national or systemic context now much more determinant than it was—particularly as polities respond in more nationally consensual terms to the challenges of Europeanization and globalization?

The *third research agenda* addresses the questions of how democracy can be organized, legitimized, and maintained under these emerging conditions. If, as E. E. Schattschneider famously asserted, “modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties,” and if the parties are being fundamentally transformed, what happens to modern democracy?⁵⁵ In effect, this implies that the most important question to be faced by parties in the future is that of their legitimacy and standing. In 1979, Suzanne Berger offered an overview of the state of politics in western Europe, arguing that a critical issue then facing Europe was “the capacity of the principal agencies of political life—party, interest group, bureaucracy, legislature—to manage the problems of society and economy, and, beyond coping, to redefine and rediscover common purposes.”⁵⁶ Later in that same insightful essay she argued that the declining capacity of political institutions has helped “to produce a widespread reaction against the state, at the same time that [it helps to] promote high levels of participation in politics.”⁵⁷ Today, it is the other way around. The state, in its various forms, is more readily accepted, while participation levels in conventional politics have fallen to record lows. Today, the issue is less one of establishing management capacity and more one of legitimizing that capacity, particularly on the part of parties and elected politicians. Indeed, given the extreme distrust with which party politics is currently viewed by many voters,⁵⁸ the question is whether it makes sense for political leaders to present themselves as party leaders at all, or whether they would be better advised to avoid the image of partyness by locating themselves within loosely-defined electoral and governing “alliances.” In both Belgium and Italy, for example, where the anti-party revolt

appears to have been particularly pronounced, the large majority of the competing organizations have already abandoned the label “party” and now seek to present themselves as being either above or beyond partisanship. Is it possible to have non-party electoral campaigns for parliaments?⁵⁹ Or, if the change is only one of nomenclature, is there a limit to how—and for how long—the illusion that “alliances” are fundamentally different from parties can be maintained?

The reverse side of this question is whether it is possible to survive in government without partyness—how, for example, is it possible to maintain the sort of legislative and executive cohesion that is seemingly required in a parliamentary democracy while abandoning any sense of cohesion at the electoral level?⁶⁰ If parties break down organizational boundaries on the ground, how can they maintain these boundaries within the institutions of government? And even if this organizational problem were overcome, how would the democratic legitimacy of intra-parliamentary combinations that had no collective electoral sanction be maintained? This last question is particularly relevant, given that one response to the organizational power of parties within parliaments has been to call for a greater role for private members, and to equate this with greater democracy.⁶¹ But even if each private member faithfully represented the views and interests of his or her own constituents, there would be no one (either individually or collectively) who could be held accountable for legislative decisions, leading to the kinds of behaviors (e.g., “position taking” and “credit claiming”—but not the taking of responsibility) that David Mayhew described for the American Congress,⁶² and the resulting combination of disdain for the institutions of government even as the voters continue to love their individual representatives.⁶³

Accompanying the transformation of parties, there has also been a transformation in the character of democracy. If one approaches this transformation from the perspective of the classic model of party government,⁶⁴ then it is easy to conclude that modern democracy has somehow been hollowed out. The parties do not act as agents of the voters. But then the voters appear to have little interest in acting as principals of the parties.

Moreover, if democracy also requires the active participation of the great majority of citizens in partisan electoral politics, then democracy surely is facing a crisis, not least because “partisan” has become a pejorative term for citizens and politicians alike. One result of this crisis has been the rise of alternative models of social regulation that rely on non-governmental organizations, networks, and the like rather than on governmental power as a means of managing conflicts and allocating values. Like the cartel party model of government, these privilege effective management over innovation, accommodation over conflict, consensus over majority rule, and participation by those

who are interested over mass participation. The irony is that while the emergence of a cartel party system is generally seen as a danger to democratic government, these non-political modes of governance are often presented as exemplary forms of democratic politics, even though it is less than clear that they promise any more civic engagement or accountability than political parties, however cartelized they may be.

Notes

- 1 Katz and Mair 1992, 1995.
- 2 An early application to the Canadian case was proposed by MacIvor 1996; more recent and geographically more wide-ranging applications can be found in Young et al. 2005, Bardi 2006, Marsh 2006, Aucante and Dézé 2008. See also Detterbeck 2005, Yishai 2001.
- 3 See especially Koole 1996, Kitschelt 2000, Wolinetz 2002, Scarrow 2006, Goot 2006.
- 4 As one of the anonymous reviewers observed, we have been somewhat inconsistent in our description of the cartel party idea as a hypothesis, or thesis, or model. To clarify: we have proposed two general hypotheses, one concerning the nature of inter-party competition or collusion, and the other concerning the nature of individual party organizations—each with a number of more specific sub-hypotheses. These two general hypotheses are derived from the same analysis of a syndrome of developments in modern democracies, and are understood to be mutually reinforcing, leading to a cartel party model of politics. Collectively, the empirical hypotheses, the postulated causal processes, and the interpretive rubric implicit in the cartel model of politics, constitute the overarching cartel party thesis.
- 5 Panebianco 1988.
- 6 The Rokkan phrase is as cited by Flora 1986, v.
- 7 For example, Pierre et al. 2000 and Scarrow 2006.
- 8 For a more extensive, albeit still underdeveloped, list of indicators that we believe might be employed to test the cartel hypotheses, see our discussion on the implications of the hypothesis.
- 9 Katz and Mair 1993.
- 10 Katz and Mair 1993, 1995.
- 11 See the observations on Schmitter's thesis in Bartolini and Mair 2001.
- 12 Manin 1997, 193–235.
- 13 Koole 1996; Kitschelt 2000.
- 14 See in particular Katz and Mair 1996, Blyth and Katz 2005. A more detailed confrontation with the criticisms and with alternative interpretations will be the subject of a number of papers currently in preparation.
- 15 Lijphart had used the Dutch term “kartel-democratie” as a translation of “depoliticized democracy” in the Dutch-language version of his classic 1968 text on Dutch politics; see Lijphart 1968.
- 16 See, for example, Krouwel 2003, 2006: 258–260.
- 17 Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; see also Mair 2006.
- 18 Mair and van Biezen 2001.
- 19 See Epstein 1967.
- 20 For a recent evaluation of the increasing impact of European-wide regulations on parties and their modes of organization and funding—a process that is defined as a form of “hidden Europeanization”—see Walecki 2007.
- 21 Note Klaus von Beyme's observation: “The new political class as a transfer class was privileged in two respects: by being the only elite sector which determines its own income, and by organizing state-support for the organizations which carried them to power, e.g., the parties”; Von Beyme 1996, 149.
- 22 Katz and Mair 1993.
- 23 Key 1964, 164.
- 24 The qualification is important here. As Ingrid van Biezen has shown, the internal balance of party power looked quite different in some of the more fragile parties that emerged in the post-communist democracies; Biezen 2003.
- 25 Katz and Mair 2002.
- 26 Skocpol 1992, 40.
- 27 Katz and Mair 1996.
- 28 Katz 2002, 2003.
- 29 Indeed, one of the hypothesized characteristics of a cartel system is to minimize the importance of the distinction between being in and being out of office at any particular time.
- 30 Kirchheimer 1966.
- 31 Ronald Inglehart 1990; and Russell Dalton 1984.
- 32 Of course, as Doering 1987 initially observed more than twenty years ago, and as retrenchments of welfare provision in many countries over the last decade attest, what is politically tenable is subject to change over time. But when such cuts become unavoidable, regardless of which parties are in office, then all parties have a shared incentive to make the previously untenable become acceptable.
- 33 Borchert 2000.
- 34 Jouvenel 1914, 17.
- 35 Pierre 2000.
- 36 Osborne and Gaebler 1992, Kettl 2000.
- 37 Majone 1994.
- 38 Kitschelt 2000. While Kitschelt is correct that cartels are always threatened by defection, he is wrong in identifying this problem with the prisoner's dilemma, at least as it relates to the cartel party argument. Rather, the problem is more akin to the tragedy of the commons, in which short-term maximization by each would foreseeably lead to ruin for

- all. In this respect, devolution of responsibility to non-party agencies should be interpreted as the kind of external constraint that rational egoists would accept on themselves because it also credibly constrains other players (e.g., Olson 1965; Elster 2000). For more on why the prisoner's dilemma is an inapt analogy, see Blyth and Katz 2005.
- 39 Bischoff 2006.
- 40 Michels 1962 [1911].
- 41 One consequence of all this is that while it may be appropriate to attribute functions to parties, for example to provide a linkage between citizens or social groups and the state, within the context of a theory about how democratic governments *should* work it is not necessarily appropriate to assume that parties (or more accurately their leaders) give the performance of these functions the highest, or even high, priority over such other potential goals as personal power or economic/job security. Regarding party finance in particular, the claim is not that state subvention makes it *more difficult* for parties to provide this linkage (e.g., “extensive reliance on the state for funding contributes to an erosion of parties’ capacity to link society and the state”; Young et al. 2005), but rather that it reduces the parties’ *need or desire* to do so, and thus is likely to reduce the degree to which parties actually provide linkage, even if their hypothetical capacity to do so were increased by access to additional funds.
- 42 Biezen 2004; see also Epstein 1986.
- 43 Mudde 2007.
- 44 For more on this topic see Pharr and Putnam 2000.
- 45 One possible exception would be the so-called life style or cultural issues of abortion, gay rights, etc. in the United States. While these do have a social basis in religious organizations, however, the American parties (as opposed to some elements of their supporting coalitions) have generally sought to dampen rather than to exploit them.
- 46 Kriesi et al. 2008.
- 47 Mair 2006.
- 48 Katz 1986.
- 49 Bowler et al. 2001, 9.
- 50 Bowler, Carter, and Farrell 2001, 13; see also Katz 2006.
- 51 Pelizzo 2004.
- 52 For example, one might ask whether the issue of European integration and its long-term exclusion from domestic political debates in Europe—what van der Eijk and Franklin refer to as the “sleeping giant” of European politics—constitutes such an issue (van der Eijk and Franklin 2004, 47; Mair 2007)? As the outcomes of recent referenda on Europe (in France, the Netherlands, and Ireland) seem to indicate, this is certainly an issue on which all of the mainstream parties are at odds with a large majority of voters.
- 53 Bottom 2007; Eldersveld 1964, ch. 1.
- 54 Jouvenel 1914.
- 55 Schattschneider 1941, 1.
- 56 Berger 1979, 27.
- 57 Ibid, 30.
- 58 Dalton and Weldon 2005.
- 59 The possibility of non-party elections, or elections among “alliances” that are above or beyond party, was already advanced more than a century ago by Ostrogorski. For a summary of Ostrogorski’s ideas, and a perceptive criticism of them, see Ranney 1954.
- 60 See also Bolleyer 2009.
- 61 Thomas 2007.
- 62 Mayhew 1974. One of Woodrow Wilson’s principal complaints about American parties and democracy was precisely that because of the autonomy of individual members of Congress, electoral control was impossible. Under those conditions, he complained, “I vote for nobody I can depend upon to do anything—no, not if I were to vote for myself.” Wilson 1897.
- 63 See, for example, Fenno 1975.
- 64 Katz 1986.

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