The Idea of a Political Party

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Much commentary on contemporary democratic politics focuses on dissatisfaction with political parties. Parties are decried as out of touch with voters, polarized sources of gridlock, increasingly controlled by money and special interests, incapable of containing populist demagogues, and otherwise unable to govern in the public interest. This dissatisfaction is reflected in low turnout in many elections, splintering parties in multiparty systems, and increasing support for anti-system parties and candidates. Calls for reform are endemic and sometimes acted upon, but typically they are reactive. Hillary Clinton's loss to Donald Trump in 2016 while winning the popular vote by some 2.9 million fueled demands to abolish the Electoral College in the United States. But strengthening the president's independent legitimacy would likely mean reducing that of the congressional parties, making the American system more like many Latin American ones. Would that be a good thing? Such questions cannot be addressed without considering a prior question: what are political parties, and what role should they play in democratic politics? These are my subjects here.

I begin by considering the two main contending views of parties since the eighteenth century: as organizations that protect and advance the interests of some subset of a country's population or as instruments to foster democratic government in the public interest. On the first view, good government results when contending parties are forced to compromise, either by forming coalitions, as in multiparty systems, or by legislating across the aisle in two-party systems which, like the American one, have been designed to make unilateral government by one party difficult. On the second view, good government is fostered by competition between two parties, both with incentives to run on programs that will best serve the electorate as a whole, implement those programs as governments if they win, and then be held to account for the results

at the next election. On this view, traditionally associated with Westminster (albeit honored there more in the breach than the observance in recent years), parties must design programs to appeal to most voters as conditions for winning and retaining office.

After arguing that the programmatic competition induced by the second view is preferable to the bargaining-based compromises required of the first, I turn to debates about party governance and how it affects the goals that parties pursue. There I contend that strong parties that operate as teams are better placed to deliver on programmatic agendas than weak ones that are too easily controlled by unrepresentative voters and factional interests. This is an unfortunate conclusion in view of the reality that Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018) have documented: that the trend across much of the democratic world over the past several decades has been to weaken parties in the name of greater grass roots democracy. Far from empowering voters, enhancing internal party democracy produces governments that are less able to serve their interests. The misplaced faith in intraparty democracy is bolstered by insufficient attention to what political parties are and what role they play in effective democratic governance. It also trades on a principal-agent view of the relations between voters and politicians which, while superficially appealing, does not withstand sustained analysis.

One prefatory point. Some might object that political parties are so varied and have developed in such disparate contexts that developing a theory of them is akin to seeking a theory of holes. South Africa's African National Congress, Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Institucional, and India's Congress Party began as liberation movements fighting for emancipation from colonial rule or local oppression, then evolved into the founding agents of nascent democratic regimes after which they became dominant parties in the new regimes. In Europe after 1989, by contrast, some parties were reconstituted from defunct communist orders,

some were institutional manifestations of resistance groups like *Solidarność* in Poland, and some were ersatz creatures created overnight by new elites (Gryzmala-Busse 2002; Rose and Munro 2003). In the United Kingdom, the modern Conservative party was organized in Parliament well before the major expansions of the franchise in 1832, 1867, and 1884, and developed a social base later through such civic associations as the Primrose League, whereas Labour emerged as the political wing of a militant union movement dedicated to a parliamentary road to socialism (Bogdanor 2017; 2018). Do such different species really comprise a genus about which we can usefully theorize?

If they are to endure in competitive democracies, yes. Whatever their path-dependent origins, parties must adapt to the electoral constraints within which they contend for power. They must also develop systems of internal governance that facilitate effective competition with adversaries and the ability to deliver policies, when in government, that serve the interests of significant numbers of voters. If not, they will lose elections and eventually disappear. Sometimes parties can change the rules, creating new incentives to which all must then adapt, and all parties make choices about governance that empower some groups at the expense of others and influence their ability to govern as we will see. How leaders, backbenchers, members, and voters conceive of their party and its purposes shape choices they make and the goals they pursue. That is what I seek to illuminate here.

Ossified factions v. partisans of the public interest

The American founders were famously hostile to political parties. George Washington (1796) decried them as "potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people." For the young James Madison (1787), parties

were the political expression of factions, groups "united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adversed to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community." The causes of factions, he thought, were ineradicable and they could be outlawed only with an unacceptable loss of human freedom, but their influence should be mitigated—not magnified, ossified, and embedded in the political system by parties.

No less famously, Madison soon changed his mind. Confronted with Alexander Hamilton's centralizing national agenda to which he was trenchantly opposed, Madison and Thomas Jefferson formed the Democratic Republican Party to fight it. But by then they were saddled with a system in which it is hard for parties to be effective. The unusually large number of veto players in the American system weakens them, rendering them vulnerable to demands from those whose support is vital to enacting legislation. The system also typically requires bipartisan support to enact most legislation, forcing majority parties to bargain with the minority parties over which parts of their agendas they will be able to enact (Curry and Lee 2020).

Edmund Burke (1770, 150) propounded a different account, defining a party as "a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed." Burke's view shares with Madison's the notion that parties embody specific points of view, but it differs in eschewing Madison's clientelist assumption that parties pursue the interests of their members at the expense of the public good. Burke's view of parties, as resting on partisan conceptions of the public interest, implies that parties aspire to do what is good for the nation as a whole—not just some faction.

Politicians seeking election usually at least pay lip-service to the Burkean view. When Mitt Romney was surreptitiously recorded confiding to a group of millionaire donors in 2012

that he lacked both the aspiration and the ability to represent the forty-seven percent of American voters who are "dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, … who pay no income tax," and who would vote for Obama "no matter what," it was a major political howler (Corn 2012). Parties are indeed widely assumed to represent different interests, but office seeking politicians routinely insist that "The American people want…!" and that "The American people believe …" whatever it is that they are proposing. Partisan as they might be, they claim nonetheless to be committed to the public interest—and worthy of support for that reason.

But what is the public interest? At least since Schumpeter's (1943, 250-69) attack on Rousseau's discussion of the general will and the common good, it has been standard to shift the burden of persuasion to those who invoke this idea. Theorists sometimes start from the economist's conception of public goods, and some, such as Nozick (1974) and Riker (1988), eschew more expansive conceptions. But candidates and parties routinely promise to provide many goods that are neither non-rivalrous nor non-excludable: utilities, education, unemployment insurance, medical and retirement benefits, support for research and the performing arts, and many things besides. And even when strictly defined public goods are at stake, parties compete over how best to provide them—as recent debates about infrastructure and environmental protection in the U.S. underscore. When a policy would manifestly deliver benefits or harms to particular groups, as with adopting or abolishing environmental regulations, the proponents invariably claim to be doing this in the public interest. They sense that voters discern a difference between shelling out clientelist payouts to sectional interests and governing so as to benefit the country as a whole, and that they expect politicians to do the latter—however discursive and underspecified their platforms might be.

Why parties are affected by their number

What determines the likelihood that parties will in fact hew to this latter course? Here America's founders partly stumbled onto the right answer by opting for single member districts with plurality rule that, under the conditions that prevail in the United States, produces two large parties.[1] Two party systems have the unique feature that they produce winner-take-all, and therefore loser-lose-all, contests. These contests create powerful incentives for parties to embrace platforms that can appeal to as many voters as possible, because that last vote your party fails to win might be the difference between winning and losing everything. This is not true in multiparty systems, where even small parties that appeal to narrow interests might be needed to form a government. This is frequently the case with the religious parties in Israel.

Some will wonder whether there is less to this distinction than meets the eye. After all, the large catchall parties in two-party systems are themselves coalitions of groups that would constitute distinct parties in multiparty systems. In one case the coalition is formed before the election and in the other it is formed afterwards, but perhaps it doesn't much matter. After all, the alternation between left-of-center social democratic policies and right-of-center pro-market policies has not obviously been that different in a multiparty system like Germany when compared with the United Kingdom's two-party system over the decades since World War Two. They have comparable welfare states, universal systems of health insurance, and environmental regulation. Indeed, if there is a difference, there is scholarship suggesting that multiparty systems

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[1] This follows from Duverger's (1964) law, which holds that the number of parties is determined by district magnitude (the number of candidates elected per district) plus one. This will be true provided the districts are large and similarly diverse. If there is considerable regional variation, as in India, then there will be partly proliferation even with single member plurality districts.

are more responsive to median voters, and therefore more redistributive, than are two-party systems (Atkinson, Rainwater, and Smeeding 1995; Powell 2000, 159-232).

There are good reasons to suspect, however, that this greater relative responsiveness of PR systems to median voters was an artifact of features of their economies that no longer hold: large industrial workforces, comprising the bulk of the working population, whose interests were well-represented by large left-of-center social democratic parties. The decline of industrial jobs and unionized workforces, accompanied by the splintering of traditional left parties, has led to a new reality in which diminished social democratic parties are protecting a shrinking industrial workforce less effectively than in the past, and other workers even less well—if at all (Salas, Rosenbluth, and Shapiro 2020).

The winner-take-all dynamic in two-party competition creates more powerful incentives for governments to pursue programmatic policies that will appeal to as broad as possible a swath of voters than do the post-election dynamics in multiparty systems. One reason is that those who create the big-tent parties in two-party systems have an interest in internalizing the costs of the deals that they make, whereas in multiparty systems the incentive is to externalize those costs when forming a coalition. If a pro-business party that values industrial peace joins with a pro-worker party that values protecting their members' wages, the incentive might be to externalize the costs on the general public in the form of higher prices or on the long-term unemployed in the form of fewer jobs.[2] Likewise, if an agrarian party joins a coalition, the deal will likely include agricultural subsidies for which taxpayers must pay, and higher food prices for

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[2] When left parties are in government, unemployment increases by 1 percent (Salas, Rosenbluth, and Shapiro 2020).

consumers. Had Angela Merkel succeeded in putting together the coalition with the Greens and the Free Democrats that she tried to do for many months after the 2017 election, there would likely have been fewer protections for workers than the SPD eventually secured by rejoining a grand coalition in return for control of six ministries, including the Ministry of Finance.

In two-party systems, by contrast, angering taxpayers, workers, or consumers might be the difference between winning and losing the election. Both parties therefore face incentives to avoid alienating them any more than necessary. That concern must be at the backs of their minds when party strategists negotiate compromises among traditional supporters and interest groups, lest they turn out to be decisive in losing the election. Parties in two-party systems will seek to internalize the costs of the deals they must do as much as possible so as to minimize that risk.

Some will claim this exaggerates the difference, because parties in multiparty systems must worry about alienating potential supporters in future elections. In fact, factoring in considerations about the future accentuates rather than mitigates the difference. In two party systems, both parties expect to be campaigning and governing as the same parties into the indefinite future. They build and expect to preserve their identities as parties, anticipating that activists and voters will identify with and support them going forward. Parties in two-party systems do sometimes disintegrate, as happened with the Whigs in the U.S. during the 1850s and Britain's Liberal Party that was displaced by Labour as the second major party in the early twentieth century. This is neither typical nor expected, however. Marriages sometimes end in divorce, but people do not generally marry expecting to divorce. Likewise, parties in two party systems expect to stay together and try to plan for it. They are composed of what Bawn and Rosenbluth describe as "long coalitions," committed to sustaining their policy brands over time, as distinct from the "short coalitions" that we see in multiparty systems—where uncertainty

about who their future partners will be makes this more difficult (Bawn and Rosenbluth 2006, 251-65; see also Persson et al. 2007; Cailland and Tirole 2002, 1452-91). Merkel would have been bound to support different policies had the alliance with the Greens and Free Democrats been successful than the ones she instead pursued in her Grand Coalition with the SPD. Multiparty governments are more like hookups than marriages. Gratifying as they might be in the present, all bets are off for the future.

This difference becomes more pronounced as the number of parties in multiparty systems increases. The greater the number of parties, the less predictable will be future alliances. They might be among ideologically adjacent parties, as in Israel in 2015, but they might be coalitions of strange bedfellows, as happened in Greece in the same year when the radical left-wing SYRIZA allied to form a government with the far-right ANEL (see Cox 1990, 903-35; Cox 1997, 99-122). Parties in such coalitions are unlikely to identify with others in what Nancy Rosenblum describes as a common project of "regulated rivalry" geared to governing in the public interest (Rosenblum 2008, 362-3; see also Muirhead 2014, 80-145).

The effects of increasing fragmentation are hard to predict. A larger number of small parties might have to compete with one another to be part of the governing coalition—reducing the leverage of each in bargaining with the large parties (Browne and Franklin 1973, 453-69; Warwick and Druckman 2001, 627-49). Moreover, small parties are often single-issue parties with limited capacity to bargain, lest they undermine their raison d'être. Angela Merkel's tortured effort to create a coalition among the CDU/CSU, the Greens, and the Free Democrats failed because the Greens want enhanced environmental regulation and the libertarian Free Democrats want to cut all regulation. Even when the Arab parties in Israel—*Balad*, *Hadash*, *Ta'al* and *Ra'am*—run together on a joint list, as they did in 2015, winning 82 percent of the

Arab vote that made them the third largest faction in the Knesset, there was no prospect of their joining a governing coalition. If, per impossible, leaders of the left-of-center Zionist Union had sought to bargain with them, (which would in any case only have netted a combined total of 37 out of 120 Knesset seats in 2015), many voters in both blocs would have vetoed they idea.[3] Even without that divisive prospect, the joint Arab list fell apart in acrimony in the run-up to the April 2019 election. It was partly reassembled for the second election later that year, and although the leaders expressed support for the idea that Benny Gantz, leader of *Hosen L'Yisrael* and the Blue and White centrist coalition, should form a government so as to oust Benjamin Netanyahu who was widely despised among Arab voters, there was no question of their joining it (Halbfinger, and Kershner 2019). In the event, no party could form a government, forcing an unprecedent third election in less than a year. We should expect such inconclusive elections to become more common in PR systems, as increased party fragmentation means that it will take more parties to form governments.[4]

An analogy from the world of industrial arbitration helps underscore the different incentives facing parties in two-party versus multiparty systems. When management and unions cannot negotiate contracts, they sometimes agree to turn the question over to an arbitrator who listens to both sides, does independent fact-finding, and then determines an outcome that will be binding on both sides. Expecting that the eventual outcome will likely be a compromise, both sides have incentives to exaggerate their demands so that what they end up giving up leaves them

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[3] Numbers taken from "Final results of the 20th Knesset elections," Central Electoral Commission for the 20th Knesset, March 17, 2018. https://web.archive.org/web/20150318200737/http://www.votes20.gov.il/ [10-05-2019].

[4] The average number of parties represented in the legislatures of 26 OECD countries grew steadily from 5.5 to 8.5 from 1960 to 2018. The effective number of parties grew from 3 to 4.25 over the same period (Salas, Rosenbluth, and Shapiro 2020).

better off than they would otherwise be—like a store that puts up prices in anticipation of a sale. But a different kind of "last-best-offer" arbitration changes the incentives: instead of designing a compromise, the arbitrator must pick the final offer of one side. This dispels the incentive to take extreme positions, lest they seem unreasonable and drive the arbitrator to opt for the other offer. Unsurprisingly, last-best-offer arbitration produces less tactical posturing and more realistic offers by both sides (see Notz and Starke 1977; Farber and Bazerman 1986; Adams 1987, 239-44).

Two-party competition is analogous to last-best-offer arbitration. Everyone knows that the party that most voters pick will become the government. Accordingly, their incentive is to run on platforms that aim at the political middle. In multiparty systems, by contrast, everyone knows that the election will be followed by a negotiation among parties that ultimately will form the government. The ex-ante incentive is therefore to create a surplus that can be bargained away during subsequent negotiations. This incentive becomes more powerful with identity-based or other single-issue parties that have few, if any, prospects for expanding their electoral support, so that the election is mainly about turning out their supporters. For them, every election is like a base election in the U.S., or, put differently, the bulk of supporters are more like primary voters in the divers catch-all parties in two-party systems. This is one reason why it is unsurprising that Merkel was unable to negotiate a coalition with both the Greens and the Free Democrats.[5]

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[5] This is not to say that when parties converge in two-party systems they always converge on the median voter. Expectations of low turnout by younger and poorer voters can lead both parties to ignore their interests in favor of those of older and wealthier voters who turn out in higher numbers and contribute more money to parties. These are among the reasons why, even as the U.S. parties have become more polarized in recent years, both parties have moved to the right (McCarty et al. 2008).

Another distinctive feature of two-party competition is that in assembling platforms to run on, leaders face powerful incentives to discount everything they propose by everything else they propose, an incentive that is weaker in multiparty competition—if it is present at all. To see why, consider this: if Americans are asked whether they support abolishing the estate tax—paid only by the wealthiest two percent of taxpayers and more than half of it paid by the wealthiest half of one percent with estates in excess of $20 million—substantial majorities say yes. However, when asked if they favor getting rid of the tax if this also means getting rid of prescription drug benefits for seniors, then majorities say no (Birney, Shapiro, and Graetz 2008, 298-340). In the latter case, they are discounting their preference for the tax cut by their preference for retaining the prescription drug benefits.

That is what political parties do on a larger scale. They bundle issues into platforms in which they discount everything they propose by everything else they propose in ways that they believe, or at least hope, will appeal to the broadest possible cross-section of voters. Deciding on issues one-at-a-time sounds like it involves greater in-depth exploration and enhanced democratic participation, but in reality it involves artificial framing of policy choices in ways that obscure tradeoffs just as ballot initiatives and referenda do. Former British Foreign Secretary David Miliband (2019) put the point succinctly when commenting on defenders of Jeremy Corbyn's far left manifesto who insisted that the policies were popular despite Labour's catastrophic defeat in December of 2019: "We were sold the category error of confusing opinion poll support for individual policies with support for the programme as a whole."

Brexit was a dramatic illustration. When British voters chose to leave the European Union in June 2016 by a vote of 52 to 48 percent, substantial majorities of both the parliamentary Tory and Labour parties were pro-Remain (BBC 2016). This outcome might suggest that both

parliamentary parties were out of step with the UK electorate, as anti-European activists like Nigel Farage insisted. But that claim is belied by the evidence: exactly a year after the referendum, that same electorate voted once again for predominantly pro-Remain Labour and Tory delegations to Parliament. Vernon Bogdanor (2019) notes that 16 out of the 23-member cabinet that Theresa May assembled in 2017 had, like her, been Remain advocates a year earlier, and he estimates that overall the Parliament elected in 2017 was more strongly pro-Remain than the Parliament elected in 2015. Even in December 2019, when Labour imploded and many Tories were traumatized by Boris Johnson's Brexiteers, 373 of the 608 or 61 percent of MPs for whom data was available had been pro-Remain in 2016 (Minasyan 2020).

The reason is not that British voters were schizophrenic or muddled about their preferences. More likely, it reflected the reality that when the MPs bundled their constituents' preference for autonomy from Europe with other things they knew are important to those constituents—employment security, access to European goods and services at reasonable prices, and economic growth—they calculated that on balance remaining in the EU is better for their constituents, and the voters apparently know it. Considering Brexit in isolation from these other issues is as artificial as offering California voters a tax cut—as was done with Proposition 13 that limited property taxes to one percent of assessed value and was adopted by an almost two thirds majority in 1978—without reference to the downstream effects on the quality of schools, the viability of local government services, and other undiscussed costs.

Some will object that it is not literally the same electorate that votes on ballot propositions and referendums as those who turn out in elections to legislatures. This is often true. Anti-tax activists were more heavily represented in the Yes vote for Proposition 13 and pro-Brexit voters turned out at disproportionately high levels in the 2016 Referendum. In effect they

are like members of a single-issue party who are empowered to impose externalities on the rest of the population. By unbundling issues, they create the illusion of greater voter control, but the effect of allowing serial single-issue votes undermines the possibility of programmatic policy. It's like letting a child eat as much candy as he wants without thinking about the stomach ache that is coming later or the complaining about it that others will have to put up with.

To this some will respond that there was nothing stopping opponents of Proposition 13 or Brexit from turning out in greater numbers. That is unrealistic. Single-issue activists invariably turn out in higher numbers for pet causes. And as the Proposition 13 example underscores, they might well also be better-resourced than their opponents. Proposition 13 was, after all, the start of the anti-tax crusade whose members were determined to "starve the beast" —cut the size of government by every possible means until it was small enough to be drowned in the bathtub, as Grover Norquist would subsequently put it. Norquist founded Americans for Tax Reform, the group that extracted pledges from Republican candidates for national office never to vote to raise taxes lest they face a primary challenge or the sorts of attacks that Newt Gingrich unleashed on George HW Bush for violating his 1988 "read my lips: no new taxes" pledge three years after he made it (Graetz and Shapiro 2005, 26-7). And of course, starve the beast does not work anyway: faced with the political costs of cutting programs like Social Security and Medicare that their constituents want and need, Republicans, like Democrats, balk—borrowing the money instead.

The way in which Brexit has played out also reflects the disproportionate leverage of activists for the cause. Tory MPs, most of whom opposed leaving Europe as I have noted, were ill-positioned to stop Brexit after the referendum because the activists on the fringe of the party who were overwhelmingly pro-Brexit were disproportionately represented among the members who participate in candidate selection. They could and did threaten to "deselect" MPs who tried

to stop Brexit (see McGuire 2018). No doubt this partly accounts for the fact that of the 129

Tories who had been pro-Remain in 2016 and were reelected in December 2019, all but five had

reversed themselves and were now pro-Leave (Minasyan 2020).[6] A comparable dynamic played

out in the Tory leadership election following Theresa May's resignation in June 2019. The

party's 160,000 members who make the final selection were well to the right of the median Tory

voter and strongly pro-Brexit, making it all but inevitable that only a staunch Brexiteer could win

the leadership contest. In the event, Johnson turned out to be fortunate that Labour was saddled

with one of its most unpopular leaders ever who was touting a program that, as Miliband says,

"came to be seen as more of a risk to the country than Brexit—even though every study shows

that it will cost the poorest communities the most" (Miliband 2019; see also Opinium 2019).

The Brexit shambles also underscores a different kind of incoherence that single-issue

unbundling can produce. A large part of the reason that in 2019 no majority in Parliament would

vote either for the leave proposal that Theresa May renegotiated with the Europeans or for any of

the proposed alternatives to it was that there was no agreement on what those who wanted to

leave Europe favored (Bienkov and Colson 2019). Hard-core Tory Brexiteers imagined a future

in which, unshackled from stifling bureaucratic tentacles emanating from Brussels, Britain would

reinvent itself as a hard-charging bastion of capitalism; a kind of Singapore on the Thames. On

the left of the Labour Party, by contrast, the aspiration was for a more robust state planning and

social spending than can be achieved within the EU; a latter-day version of Socialism in One

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[6] Decisive evidence on why MPs switched positions is elusive. Some declared "respect for the
Referendum result;" some responded to years of Brexit fatigue with Johnson's "Get Brexit
done;" and some prevaricated (Minasyan 2020). As with studying the effects of primaries on
position-taking by U.S. politicians, the possibility of deselection by "entryist" Brexiteers might
have been sufficient, making an actual challenge unnecessary. (Merrick and Kentish 2019).

Country. It is scarcely surprising that MPs accountable to such divergent interests—not to mention the plethora of conflicting positions on the customs union, free movement of peoples, and the Irish backstop—could agree neither on Brexit nor on any alternative leave arrangement, and that there was also a blocking coalition against calling a second referendum.

The Brexit Referendum obscured these realities because voters did not have to confront what the alternative to remaining in Europe would be. Had they done so—had they in effect been forced to bundle their preference of staying or leaving with their other policy preferences— voters would likely have wound up closer to their MPs and elected to remain in the EU. Their dissatisfactions over Europe would have been handled like they had been in the past—as part and parcel of electoral competition. When Margaret Thatcher, who had campaigned in 1983 on a manifesto that had recognized the EU as "by far our most important export market" from which withdrawal "would be a catastrophe for this country," she nonetheless called for a renegotiation that would reduce Britain's contribution to the UK budget and "shift the Community's spending priorities away from agriculture and towards industrial, regional and other policies which help Britain more" (Conservative General Election Manifesto 1983). She did this the following year, negotiating an annual UK rebate as compensation for the common agricultural and fisheries policies that worked to Britain's disadvantage. [7] This did not give anti-Europeans everything they wanted, but it addressed some of their grievances in ways that were compatible with Conservative victories in the next two general elections. In a like spirit, in 1986 Thatcher secured qualified majority voting instead of unanimity rule on tariffs and other barriers to trade in negotiations over the Single European Act. This curtailed the veto power of countries like

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[7] The rebate agreement granted the UK 66% of the difference between its share of member states' VAT contributions and its share of EU spending in return (European Commission 2014).

France, Germany, and Italy that had locked in advantages for themselves before the UK joined (Von Bismarck 2016).

The one exception to this approach before 2016 had been the referendum called by Harold Wilson in 1975, the first national referendum in British history, following Edward Heath's taking the UK into the EU two years earlier. At that time the Tories were predominantly pro-European, whereas Labour was badly conflicted because the unions expected membership to diminish their power and limit the statist agenda favored by Labour left-wingers like Michael Foot and Tony Benn. Seeking to avoid conflict between them and Labour moderates like Roy Jenkins, Dennis Healy, and Shirley Williams, Wilson opted for a referendum to take the issue off the table. The result, a decisive two-to-one victory for Britain to remain in the EU, led Wilson subsequently to crow that "…it was a matter of some satisfaction that an issue which threatened several times over thirteen years to tear the Labour movement apart had been resolved fairly and finally … all that had divided us in that great controversy was put behind us" (Wilson 1979, 109).

But Wilson was wrong. Five years later, left-wingers like Benn disavowed their earlier acceptance of the referendum result and began pushing for Labour to commit to taking Britain out of the EU without another referendum—one of the main issues that triggered the departure of leading Labour moderates to start a new social democratic party that would subsequently ally and then merge with the Liberals to form the Liberal Democrats.[8] The better medium term course for Labour would have been to hammer out a compromise position on Europe, perhaps by

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[8] The Gang of Four who left were Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Shirley Williams, and Bill Rodgers. Had Tony Benn beaten moderate Dennis Healy for the deputy leadership when Michael Foot became leader in November of 1980, the defecting group would doubtless have been larger.

agreeing to campaign on negotiating stronger worker protections in the EU's Social Charter. This would have taken the battle to the Tories in what was then the mainstream of British political opinion. Instead, Foot led Labour to a catastrophic defeat in the 1983 general election (the Tories won a 188 seat majority) on a hard-left manifesto subsequently immortalized by Labour MP Gerald Kaufman as "the longest suicide note in history" (Mann 2003), a record that would stand for thirty-six years—until Jeremy Corbyn's even longer and more radical program produced an even more devasting Labour defeat (Riley 2019). In 1983 the party was harvesting the consequences rule changes adopted two years earlier, discussed more fully below, that strengthened the role of activists and unions in selecting its leaders at the expense of the Parliamentary Party, a change that came just as trade union membership began falling precipitously. This would render the party decreasingly representative of the British electorate, keeping Labour in the political wilderness until the party was fundamentally restructured a decade-and-a-half later.

Bogdanor (2014) defends Britain's 1975 referendum on the grounds that at the time all three major parties favored remaining in the EU, leaving voters who wanted to leave with no way to advance their cause through the electoral process. Yet he never considers the obvious prior question: why did all three parliamentary parties favor remaining? The reason should by now be plain. When bundling continued EU membership with the other issues that mattered to their constituents, most MPs and party leaders concluded that leaving would not be part of a viable electoral platform. Referendums empower intense single-issue activists to impose their preferences on the rest of society without confronting the costs.

A final difference between two-party and multiparty systems concerns accountability and the coherence and effectiveness of opposition. In two party systems, there is a "loyal" opposition

that poses to the electorate as a government-in-waiting. As well as criticizing the government and holding it to account for failures, the opposition's incentive is to articulate and defend the alternative that voters will get if they vote the government out. In multiparty systems, by contrast, there is less accountability and no coherent alternative. There is less accountability because parties in government can deflect blame to others in the coalition, or to post-election compromises they were forced to make when forming a government, for failing to deliver on promises on which they campaigned. There is no coherent alternative because voters cannot know what the alternative to the government will be following the next election; it will depend on future coalition possibilities at that time. Merkel's grand coalitions with the Social Democrats faced criticism from *die Grünen* and *die Linke* on the left as well as the FDP and AfD on the right, but voters could not know which of them, and in what combination, would be part of a future governing coalition or what its policies might be.
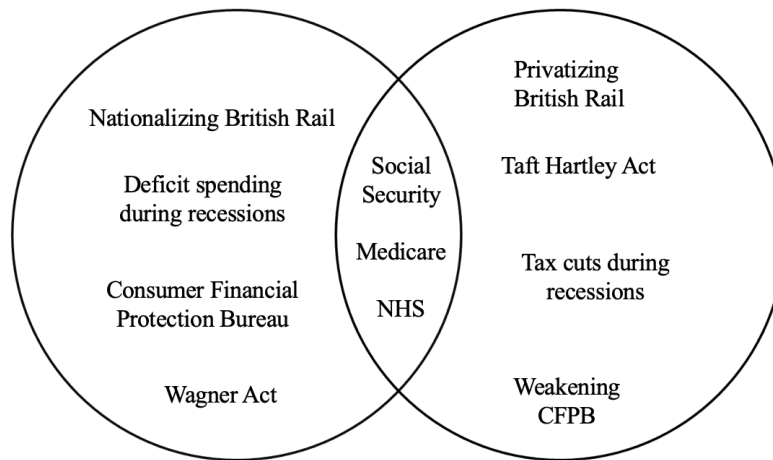
In short, two-party systems institutionalize programmatic competition over alternatives that governments, if elected, will try to implement and for which they can more easily be held accountable if they fail. "Parties that take clear stands in campaigns, and that muster the cohesion to enact those plans when they are in power," as Russel Muirhead (2014, 176) puts it, "give voters a clear and easy way to express or withhold their approval at the next election." Multiparty systems might be more representative at the electoral stage in that voters elect parties and candidates that are closer to their ideal preferences, but this comes at the price of accountable government. Parties in multiparty governments will more likely bargain for clientelist benefits for their supporters, externalize the costs onto voters not represented in the coalition, and let the future take care of itself.

Tweedledee and Tweedledum

Some who concede these advantages of two-party systems will maintain that they invite a different objection: Parties with strong incentives to aim at the electoral middle will offer the same policies, giving voters little meaningful choice. That might be true in principle, but in reality, partisan conceptions of the public interest operate differently. On some issues, both parties will indeed offer substantially similar policies. The National Health Service in the UK, enacted by Clement Attlee's postwar Labour government in 1946 and put into operation two years later, remains exceedingly popular with UK voters—topping the popularity of British institutions seven decades later (Katwala 2013). There are partisan disagreements over funding and coverage at the margins, but the institution is bulletproof politically. Even during the heyday of privatization during the Thatcher years, there was no question of abolishing the NHS.

But not everything is like that. British railways were nationalized in 1948, reprivatized in 1982, and might well be renationalized by a future Labour government. Likewise, in the U.S., Social Security, enacted as part of the New Deal in 1935, and Medicare, as part of the Great Society in 1965, are so popular with the median voter that neither party can scrap them, but the parties diverge sharply on other matters. Democrats created strong protections for trade unions in the Wagner Act of 1935 that were sharply curtailed by Republicans twelve years later in the Taft-Hartley Act, adopted over President Truman's veto. Democrats created the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau as part of the Dodd-Frank law in 2010, but Republicans and the Trump Administration subsequently eviscerated it. Left-of-center parties typically favor deficit spending to get out of recessions, whereas right-of-center parties propose tax cuts and fiscal discipline. Partisan conceptions of the public interest partly overlap in two-party systems on issues where there is widespread consensus, but they diverge on these and many other issues.

Figure 1: Partisan conceptions of the public interest

Nationalizing British Rail

Deficit spending
during recessions

Consumer Financial
Protection Bureau

Wagner Act

Social
Security

Medicare

NHS

Privatizing
British Rail

Taft Hartley Act

Tax cuts during
recessions

Weakening
CFPB

These differences are the stuff of electoral competition. They partly reflect politicians'

beliefs about how the costs and benefits will affect their supporters, they partly reflect divergent

ideological outlooks, and they partly reflect disagreement—and perhaps lack of knowledge—

about which policies are in fact most effective. Programmatic competition is competition over

these questions, in which both parties try to convince as many voters as possible that their

approach will be best. The cost of appealing to smaller groups of core supporters or sectional

interests will likely be defeat, loading the dice against clientelism. But the parties will be

Tweedledee and Tweedledum only when there is widespread agreement about what is best.

Two-party contests institutionalize the kind of competition over ideas that Mill (1859,

121-38) prized in *On Liberty* as vital to sustaining our critical capacities. Mill worried,

needlessly as it turned out, that the progress of science would eventually leave so little to

disagree about that those critical faculties would atrophy—turning people into the mindless

sheep. Despite periods of broad public policy consensus, as prevailed in many capitalist

democracies between the end of World War Two and the 1970s, and again between the end of

the Cold War and the 2008 financial crisis, partisan conceptions of the public interest have since

returned with enough vengeance to unnerve many commentators across the democratic world.

Whatever our challenges, they do not include a dearth of political disagreement.

Who owns political parties?

A version of the Tweedledee and Tweedledum objection is sometimes leveled at Joseph

Schumpeter's (1943, 269-73) analogy between parties and firms, where it takes the form of

objecting to the oligopolistic character of two-party political competition on the grounds that this

promotes collusion. This criticism misses the mark. Whereas both parties in two-party systems

have incentives to run on platforms that can win as many voters as possible, we have seen that it

is multiparty systems that generate incentives for coalition members to collude in ways that

create negative externalities for others. The winner-take-all character of two-party competition

militates against this, except in unusual circumstances like the National Governments led by

Ramsay MacDonald, Stanley Baldwin, and Neville Chamberlain in the UK during 1930s, and the

all-party governments there during both World Wars.

There is, however, a different difficulty with Schumpeter's analogy. This does not have

to do with analogizing of voters to consumers, policies to goods and services, votes to profits, or

political accountability to consumer sovereignty. These are all illuminating up to a point, even if

they grate on the sensibilities of participatory or deliberatively inclined democratic theorists.

Rather, the difficulty stems from the reality that there is no good political party analog of the

shareholders in a firm—no political equivalent of a residual claimant. This difference renders

parties unusual, though not unique, organizational forms. Nonprofits such as private universities

in the U.S. are similar in this regard. If Harvard sold all its assets and paid all its debts, there is

no answer to the question: who would be entitled to the residual assets? It is this fact that makes

governance of nonprofit private universities inherently controversial, with faculty, students,

administrators, trustees, alumni, and others all vying to shape their governance and often

objecting to what they see as the excessive influence of others.[9] The governance of parties is

inherently controversial for the same reason.

Some will maintain that party members are the logical analog of a firm's shareholders,

but that thinking—while superficially appealing—leads down an infelicitous path. To see what is

at stake here, consider the result of changes in leadership election rules for Britain's Labour

Party since 2015, when the recommendations of the Collins Report published the previous year

were first implemented. Under the previous system, an "Electoral College" had given one third

weight to the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) plus Labour members of the European

Parliament, one third to individual party members, and one third to trade unions and affiliated

societies. This system had in 1981 replaced the long-standing arrangement whereby the members

of the PLP selected their leader. The Collins reforms effectively destroyed any significant role

for the PLP in selecting its leader. In the new system, eligibility to stand required support from

only 15 percent Labour MPs (30 MPs in 2015), after which all members were eligible to vote.

The 306 Labour MPs plus 20 Labour members of the European Parliament were a drop in the

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[9] Governance of public universities is also controversial, as was dramatically underscored by the battle between the Regents of the University of California and the faculty over the inclusion of loyalty pledges in employment contracts during the McCarthy era (see Simon 2018, 66-76). But at the end of the day, faculties at public universities are public employees, and the analog of a firm's residual claimants are taxpayers.

bucket of the 550,000 Labour Members who were eligible electors in a contest that Jeremy

Corbyn won with 251,419 (59.5 percent) of the votes cast (Labour List 2015; BBC 2015).

Membership of the Labour Party was open to anyone willing to pay the £3 fee.

Unsurprisingly, membership is disproportionately attractive to activists who are well to the left,

ideologically, of typical Labour voters and even further to the left of typical British voters. The

result was that, notwithstanding efforts by Conservatives, Greens, and others who sought to join

solely for the purpose of influencing the outcome to Labour's disadvantage (members of other

parties were eventually banned from participating), the PLP had a leader, most of whose policies

they could not support while retaining any hope of re-election in their constituencies.

Unsurprisingly, a year later, following mass resignations from the shadow cabinet, the PLP

passed a no-confidence resolution in Corbyn by 172 to 40, prompting another leadership contest.

Labour's National Executive Committee raised the fee for voting eligibility to £25 in what turned

out to be a vain attempt limit disproportionate influence of the far-left activists. The great

majority of them were middle class voters for whom the increase was not a significant barrier

(see Bale, Poletti, and Webb, 2016). Corbyn was reelected in a landslide: 313,209, or 61.8

percent, of the votes cast (Pape 2016). The result underscored the reality that Labour had

completely abandoned Britain's long tradition of strong, disciplined parties. In effect, as with

the Tea Party's hostile takeover of the American Republicans via primaries and caucuses

following Barack Obama's election in 2008, Labour was now susceptible to control by activists

on its ideological fringes. The extent of the damage was partly obscured in the 2017 general

election because, even though it was Labour's third consecutive defeat, Theresa May blew a 20

point lead and her parliamentary majority—taking the spotlight off Labour's inability to craft a

winning program under Corbyn's leadership (Anderson 2017). Any doubt about that was

scotched eighteen months later when Corbyn led Labour to their worst defeat since 1935, while insisting—puzzlingly—that they had nonetheless "won the argument" (Corbyn 2019).

Party strength and party purpose

The governance of parties might endemically be contested, but that does not forestall critical evaluation of the possibilities. Rather, it highlights the fact that arguments about party governance depend in turn on prior commitments, often left implicit, about what the purposes of parties should be. If the goal is to offer voters contending partisan conceptions of the public interest, as I contend here that it should be, then strong parties are preferable to weak ones.

Fernando Bazzarro et al. (2018, 278) define strong parties as "…unified, centralized, stable, organizationally complex, and tied to long standing constituencies." More simply put, strong parties operate as teams on which everyone is pursuing the same goal: to come up with strategies that will win and retain widespread voter support over time. Backbenchers in strong parties delegate considerable authority, including the authority to discipline them, to leaders, but this is conditional on the leaders coming up with and implementing winning strategies. As with coaches and quarterbacks of football teams, they do not last long when they fail to do that. They have enough rope to hang themselves. One symptom of the disorder of American parties is that leaders can survive without delivering victories, as with the House Republicans for decades before 1994 and more recently when Nancy Pelosi led Democrats to four successive defeats in the 2010s without losing her leadership position. Ineffective leaders might displease back benchers, but the parties are so decentralized that coordinating to replace them is hard. In April 2018, Republican Speaker Paul Ryan decided not run for another term amidst sagging popularity and intense conflict with his own caucus that had dogged him since he had replaced the even

more unpopular John Boehner who had quit two-and-a-half years earlier (DeBonis 2015; Reinhart 2018). Yet even in that circumstance Ryan could not be dislodged, saddling the party with a lame duck leader for the seven-month runup to the 2018 midterms (Dick 2018).

Successful leaders should play major roles in selecting backbench candidates and in disciplining them to support a Party's national program. The reason: whereas candidates face powerful incentives to protect themselves in their districts, whether by delivering local private goods, bridges to nowhere, or by catering to intense activists or well-funded groups that might primary them, national party leaders need backbenchers who can both win in their districts and support a winning national platform that they know they need to deliver when in government. This gets increasingly difficult as the distance between the median voter in the district and party's median voter increases, and it will often involve hard judgment calls. But at the margin, it is better for the national leadership to predominate in making those calls, given this distribution of incentives.[10] Think of it as Ulysses-and-the-Sirens discipline. Backbenchers allow themselves to be disciplined to take difficult votes, but only in service of a cause that is in their longer-term interest.

Some will say that the candidates that parties select and the platforms they pursue should be predominantly shaped—if not determined—by party members, but that overlooks the problematic standing of members already discussed. This does not obviate the importance of securing grass roots support for selecting candidates and in crafting platforms. On the contrary, parties that do that poorly will do less well than parties that are better at it. This gives parties

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[10] National party leaders also have different incentives in this regard from local party leaders (see Broockman et. al 2019).

good reasons to pay substantial attention to finding out what voters need and what will motivate them to turn out for candidates and support a party platform. That is one role played by primaries, but they can easily morph into destructive instruments that undermine party strength.

Here it is worth noting that, until the 1970s, presidential primaries in the U.S. were information-generating exercises through which candidates sought to demonstrate their electoral viability. Presidential primaries did not achieve their almost sovereign authorizing status in a principal-agent relationship until the McGovern-Fraser Reforms restructured the Democratic Party in the early 1970s, creating a bottom-up model for selecting candidates and writing platforms that the Republicans would soon emulate. The changes sounded, and were believed by many to be, more democratic than proverbial smoke-filled rooms. In reality, the enhanced role for primaries greatly weakened both parties in unintended ways (see Gardbaum and Pildes 2018), rendering them vulnerable to hostile takeovers of the sort staged by Donald Trump in 2016.

In Congress, too, although primaries have been around since the Progressive era, the increased number of safe seats in recent decades has made them more consequential (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006; see also Wasserman and Finn 2017). This weakens the authority of party leaders over backbenchers, who will be more concerned about challenges in their districts than what the leadership needs. Hence the inability of House Republican leaders to craft a bill to repeal the Affordable Care Act that their members would support once they took control of the government in 2017, even though they had voted 70 times to repeal it when out of power (Riotta 2019). This outcome also cautions us against interpreting increasingly polarized roll call votes in Congress in recent years as indicative of increased party strength or discipline. As James Curry and Frances Lee (2019, 47-65) have documented, the great majority of legislation, including consequential legislation, requires bipartisan support in at least one

chamber to become law, and this has not changed since the 1970s. In principle, parties might be legislative cartels, as Gary Cox and Mathew McCubbins (1993) contend. In practice, they are too weak to govern that way in the United States Congress.

Conclusion

The distinctive job of political parties is to facilitate competition over the state's legitimate monopoly over the use of coercive force. This peculiar kind of competition is best served, I have argued, by two strongly disciplined parties that compete for voter support by offering programmatic policies that they expect will appeal to as wide as possible a swath of voters. Many will resist this view as insufficiently agent-centered, preferring to think of the voters as principals and the parties and politicians they elect as their agents. It is the apparent erosion, or outright collapse, of this principal-agent relationship that fuels the perception that democratic politics is broken, prompting demands to unbundle platforms and assert greater voter control over parties and politicians. But as Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018, 1-25, 229-50) have argued, the result is to diminish parties' capacity to govern effectively when in office— compounding voter alienation and prompting demands for self-defeating reforms.

Here I have sought to question this account of the principal-agent relationship itself. Schumpeter's market analogy is incomplete and partly misleading, but he was right that it is better to think of the relations between parties and voters as analogous to that between firms and consumers, rather than to firms and the interests of their shareholders. To the extent that they do the latter, they will deliver clientelist benefits to sectional interests, whether this turns out to be the wholesale clientelism that is extracted by single-issue parties in multiparty systems or the retail clientelism that operates in two-party systems when the parties are weak. If we want parties

to cleave instead toward governing in the public interest, it is better to give them incentives to pursue their partisan conceptions in ways that will appeal to as many voters as possible.

The principal-agent view is superficially appealing because it tacitly assumes that democracy is fundamentally about the people ruling themselves, a phrase that it is easier to affirm with table-thumping conviction than to turn into institutionally viable politics. But as John Locke noted more than three centuries ago, the people can rule themselves only as a single collective entity if they are to rule themselves at all, which in practice means living with majority rule unless they are willing to risk revolution—after which all bets are off (Locke 1681, 137-41; Shapiro 2011, 39-67). Democratic theory does better when it starts by recognizing that power is a natural monopoly and then gets to work on how best to manage it in the public interest, rather than by insisting that the people should rule themselves without coming to grips with what that means in practice—or indeed whether it can mean anything at all.

John Dewey (1927, 153-4) once observed that although voters are the best equipped to know how well policies serve them, this does not make them the best designers of those policies. "The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches," he argued, "even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied." The analogy is helpfully suggestive. It highlights the luddite—not to say antediluvian—quality of much of the handwringing about voter ignorance that animates the literatures on deliberative and epistemic democracy and calls for more direct democracy. Voters should be presumed to know most about their interests, and especially when they are being ill-served, but they are not deficient for failing to know much about policy. The analogy also supplies ballast for resisting principal-agent views: politicians are no more agents of voters than cobblers are agents of walkers. And although Dewey himself had little to say about parties or electoral dynamics, his analogy underscores the

importance of promoting systems in which designers of party platforms feel bound to learn as much as possible about what their supporters need, to address those needs better than do competitors, and to do it in ways that compromise their other interests, and the interests of other voters, as little as possible.

Eight decades ago, E.E. Schattschneider (1942: 1) contended that the condition of political parties "is the best possible evidence of the nature of any regime." Democratic regimes will be healthier when parties must aspire to govern in the public interest if they want to win or retain power than when they become the ossified factions that the American founders rightly feared, or vehicles for those with intense preferences to indulge themselves while others bear the costs. There are no guarantees in politics, but strong parties, provided there are two of them, will more likely nurture that health better than will the going alternatives. To paraphrase Churchill, they produce the worst kind of political competition except for the others that have been tried from time to time.[11]

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[11] "Many forms of Government have been tried and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time" (Churchill 1947, 574).

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