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THE PARAMETERS OF PARTY SYSTEMS

Luciano Bardi and Peter Mair

ABSTRACT

Despite the scepticism that increasingly surrounds their role and standing in contemporary democracies, scholarly interest in political parties continues unabated. But this interest is also proving uneven, with relatively little attention now being given to the study of party systems. More specifically, the level of theoretical interest in party systems remains limited, with almost no substantial innovations being made since the publication of Sartori's classic work of 1976. In this article, we seek to redress some of this neglect by identifying the relevant parameters that can be used in the definition of party systems and, possibly, in the explanation of party system change. We then go on to look at the minimum defining characteristics of a system of parties (as opposed to a set of parties) before finally arguing that party systems are best understood as multidimensional phenomena in which we identify and discuss the implications of three types of division – vertical, horizontal and functional.

KEY WORDS ■ electoral arena ■ governmental arena ■ parliamentary arena ■ party systems

Introduction

This article addresses the problem of variation in party systems. We seek to identify the relevant parameters that can be used in the definition of a party system and in the explanation of party system change. We argue that party systems are best understood as multidimensional phenomena, and we identify and discuss the implications of three types of division – vertical, horizontal and functional.

It is evident from the literature that despite the increasing scepticism that surrounds their role and standing in contemporary democracies, political parties continue to attract substantial scholarly attention. This is true at the theoretical level, where a number of substantial contributions have been published in the past (e.g. Gunther et al., 2002; Luther and Müller-Rommel,

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2002), as well as at the empirical and analytic level (e.g. Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Diamond and Gunther, 2001; Webb et al., 2002). The last decade or so has also seen the publication of a number of important specialized studies in the field of parties; for example, on party membership (Scarrow, 1996), on party finance (Casas-Zamora, 2005), on party policies (Budge et al., 2001), on the growing importance of parties in the European arena (Marks and Steenbergen, 2004), as well as on the state of the art in party studies more generally (Katz and Crotty, 2006). Scholarly interest has also been bolstered through establishment of the successful journal *Party Politics*, first published in 1995.

But although *Party Politics*, as well as a number of the more recent theoretical studies, also deals with the question of party *systems*, it is quite remarkable to note how little progress has been made in our understanding of the systemic element in the past 20 or 30 years. Indeed, despite numerous studies focused mainly on party system change, theoretical interest in party systems has proved limited, with almost no substantial innovation since the publication of Sartori's classic work of 1976 (Wolinetz, 2006). On the empirical side, of course, there has been considerable expansion in interest, not least as a result of three particular processes that have had a major impact on parties and party systems in several regions of the world. The first of these is the process of *alignment* that has followed the wave of late twentieth-century democratic transitions and consolidations in recent and new democracies, whether in southern Europe (Morlino, 1998), post-communist Europe (Grzymala-Busse, 2002), Latin America (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995), Asia (Sachsenröder and Frings, 1998) or Africa (Salih, 2003). The second is the process of *dealignment* in the established democracies, often marked by changing levels of electoral volatility and turnout, as well as by the erosion of commitment to and engagement in conventional political parties (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). The third is the more limited experience of possible *realignment* in established democracies, often following particular institutional discontinuities (as in the cases of Belgium, Israel, Italy, Japan and New Zealand, for example).

While the enormous body of literature flowing from these complex processes offers ample testimony to the renewed attention to parties and, at least at the empirical level, to party systems, it is puzzling that theoretical reflection on party systems has remained so limited. This, together with the new wealth of often unsystematic observation, has served to highlight three major problems in the literature. In the first place, it is increasingly evident that many more different types of parties are being observed than in the past, and, even more importantly, that the recent scholarly interest has been focused to an unprecedented extent on party formation, consolidation and change. This implies a need for reconsideration of the concepts that define a party and its attributes, as well as those that define its relationships with other parties. If there are different types of party, then there are also likely to be different types of relations between parties. Second, the fact

that so much scholarly interest is focused on emerging or transforming democracies serves as a useful reminder of Harry Eckstein's (1968) emphasis on the importance of understanding party systems in order to have a good understanding of parties – and not only the other way round. This is not just because, as he argued, party systems are 'in no sense . . . merely sums of their parts', but also because the factors which shape these party systems (such as electoral laws in new democracies) sometimes exist before the parties themselves become consolidated as organizations. The third problem is that the changes in party systems that we now observe often prove difficult to explain or analyse within Sartori's familiar framework. That is, while we know how to classify party systems, we do not always know how to explain and in some cases even to identify instances of party system change (Mair, 2006). One of the problems here is that the descriptions of party system change that we see are often limited to discussions of changes in the individual party components of those systems, while the explanations of change often rely on a discussion of rules and competition patterns in the electoral arena, without offering adequate consideration to the complexity deriving from other arenas (Luther, 1989).

Although this brief article touches on all three of these concerns, our main interest lies in focusing on the last problem, and in identifying the relevant parameters that can be used in the definition of party systems and, possibly, in the explanation of party system change. We do this first by addressing the problem of the definition and parameters of a party system, taking Sartori's (1976) approach as our starting point, then by discussing the minimum defining characteristics of a system of parties (as opposed to a set of parties). Finally, we argue that party systems are best understood as multidimensional phenomena, and go on to identify and discuss the implications of three types of party system division – the vertical, the horizontal and the functional.

Defining Party Systems

'By now', observed Sartori (1976: 119) in his classic study, 'classifications and typologies of party systems are a plethora, and "confusion and profusion of terms seems to be the rule"'. Sartori, citing Macridis (1967), substantiates his observation about the 'plethora', as well as his earlier observation that 'almost every writer comes up with his own scheme', by referring to Macridis's own classification (1967: 22) as well as those of Blondel (1968), LaPalombara and Weiner (1966: 34, 36) and Jupp (1968: Ch. 1). To these could be added the still familiar classifications of Duverger (1954), Rokkan (1968) and, albeit indirectly, Dahl (1966). Sartori himself (1976: 119–216), of course, who went on to develop his own typology of party systems, must also be added to this list, particularly given that his approach remains the most comprehensive as well as the most persuasive attempt to make sense of comparing party systems.

Sartori's work in this regard stands out in two important respects. In the first place, it appears to have brought an end to the plethora, which, given the authority with which he developed his approach, is perhaps not surprising. What is striking, however, at least in retrospect, is that most of this flurry of attention to the classification of party systems appears to have been largely a feature of the 1960s. Indeed, apart from Sartori's own work, which built on a framework that he proposed initially in the 1960s (Sartori, 1966, 1970), and from a somewhat half-hearted proposal for a new typology by Smith (1979), as well as a later approach based on differential patterns of alternation in government (Mair, 1996), there has really been nothing of substance that has been added to this particular strand in the literature for almost 40 years (see the assessment by Wolinetz, 2006). In other words, although 'a confusion and profusion of terms' still prevails, it is seen either as not to matter or as offering an excuse to evade entirely the thorny issue of how to classify.

In the second place, despite its ambition, and despite the comprehensive manner in which he incorporates a variety of different cases and examples into his analysis, Sartori's work stands out in that remarkably little attention is devoted to discussing the notion of a party system as such. In fact, Sartori's valuable and much-cited brief definition (see below) is passed over almost casually in his book, being embedded rather uneasily within a lengthier discussion of parties as actors ('the party as whole' [1976: 39–55] and 'the party-state system' [1976: 42–7]). In other words, Sartori is less interested in exploring how we specify the properties of a party system as such, and hence the properties that would be shared by *all* party systems, and rather more with explaining how different party systems may be distinguished from one another, a theme that dominates most of his book (1976: 119–323).

In part, of course, Sartori's particular concerns also reflected the tenor of the times. Indeed, if one returns to read his lengthy discussion of 'the party as whole', and if one also goes back to an insightful early discussion by Smith (1966), then it is striking to observe the sheer amount of attention which both authors devote to the need to distinguish one-party 'systems' from competitive or pluralistic party systems, and the stress that both lay on the importance of applying different analytic terms of reference to each of these separate variants. In other words, neither Smith nor Sartori were particularly concerned about dealing with the question of how and when a plurality of parties may be defined as a 'party system' as such, which is the main question addressed in this article. Rather, and in keeping with the problems identified by the literature of the time, they were concerned about challenging the notion that one-party states could also be treated as having what might be called 'party systems'. In retrospect, of course, this may seem an obvious challenge to make. Within the context of the literature of the late 1960s, however, which was increasingly flooded by the conceptual language of structural-functionalism and by the search for equivalency

across a wide variety of different polities, it was a point that needed to be made, and at some length.

The problem with this approach, however, was that in emphasizing the need for a sharper boundary between one-party polities, on the one hand, and polities with a plurality of parties, on the other, or between non-democracies and democracies, there has been a tendency to underestimate the importance of crucial contrasts within the latter category. Let us be careful here, because at one level this is obviously not true. Indeed, as noted above, it is precisely the literature of the 1960s which was most sensitized to the need to distinguish one class or type of party system from another. At another level, however, and it is here that we come to the main starting point for this present article, this literature was generally characterized by one important assumption, which is that the existence of a plurality of parties necessarily implies that there are interactions between (at least some of) these parties and hence that there exists a party *system* as such. An absence of interactions, on the other hand, or what Sartori perhaps more accurately speaks of as an absence of competition (1976: 217–43), can therefore only be associated with the effective absence of party plurality, that is, with the case of single-party or hegemonic-party states. The notion that a genuine plurality of parties might also be associated with an absence of patterned interactions between the parties, and with the absence of a party system as such, was never adequately considered.

The key problem here is that the term ‘party system’ is used in different ways, the most common of which is as a very familiar expression that simply aims to designate the set of parties that exist in a given polity. In other words, when we speak of the party system, it is often simply shorthand for the plurality of parties. Inevitably, and as a familiar expression, it is also loosely employed, and it is not therefore seen to bear on the different elements that may structure the mutual relationships and interactions between the parties concerned. Nor is the expression often associated with the identification of those factors that may serve to constrain party behaviour, and that therefore may determine some general characteristics of party interactions within a polity, and which, in turn, may themselves be constrained or influenced by other (sub)systems.

In an ideal world, we should be able to think of a party system as something that is self-contained, and that has clearly identifiable boundaries, and only in such cases would we be in a position to identify those structural properties that pertain to the party system as such. In practice, however, and in almost all the conventional treatments of the subject, this does not occur. Indeed, the party system and other subsystems, including the political system as a whole, are often confused with one another in the literature, such that we sometimes find the overall political system defined on the basis of the party system’s dominant characteristics, and vice versa (see also Wiatr, 1990).¹

Consequently, if we want to identify the parameters of a party system more precisely, we need to pay attention to at least three separate lines of inquiry.

First, and most obviously, we must distinguish between those sets of parties which make up party systems as such, and those which might better be viewed as being more or less mutually autonomous actors that simply happen to share a common political setting. Second, we need to explore the extent to which any given polity may be associated with a single party system, on the one hand, or with the concurrent existence of a plurality of different party systems, on the other, be these defined by territorial boundaries, functional boundaries or whatever. Finally, and following from these inquiries, we need to determine what is part of the party system and what is not, and to explore where and under what conditions the party system becomes entwined with, or remains distinct from, other subsystems within the polity. This should also allow us to identify the sorts of questions that can be answered when analysing party systems, and which at the same time cannot be answered when analysing either the individual parties themselves or the systems of government more generally.

Sets of Parties and Systems of Parties

Since the very notion of a party system necessarily implies the existence of a plurality of parties (Sartori, 1976: 42–7; Smith, 1966), it follows that there are two distinct ways in which such systems may be approached (Eckstein, 1968). The one approach, which may also be linked to the traditional numerical classifications, sees party systems as little more than ‘sets of parties’ in which all of the individual parties jostle up against one another and may be juxtaposed to one another. To describe a party system in these terms therefore demands little more than a description of the individual component parts, with the interrelationship of these parts being deemed as irrelevant or secondary. It is, above all, the counting of parties that matters in this approach, such that if there are two parties, or primarily two parties, we can speak of a two-party system; if there are three parties we can speak of a three-party system, and so on, with the only qualification being that it has rarely been considered worthwhile to count beyond three or four, and thus such categories in practice have tended to be limited to the ‘two-party’ variant, on the one hand, and the ‘multi-[more than two-]party’ variant, on the other (Daalder, 1983).

The second approach owes more to the framework developed by Sartori (1976), and is less evidently concerned with the number of parties as such and more with their patterns of interaction. This is also the approach with which we find greater sympathy and which serves as our starting point. In fact, this is obviously, and deliberately, a much more *systemic* approach, building on a logic and understanding which clearly goes beyond simply the sum of the parties involved. As Sartori (1976: 43–4) has carefully emphasized:

The concept of system is meaningless – for purposes of scientific inquiry – unless (i) the system displays properties that do not belong to a

separate consideration of its component elements and (ii) the system results from, and consists of, the patterned interactions of its component parts, thereby implying that such interactions provide the boundaries, or at least the boundedness, of the system. . . . Parties make for a 'system', then, only when they are parts (in the plural); and a party system is precisely the *system of interactions* resulting from inter-party competition.

In the set of parties approach, the parties *are* the system, such that, for example, the existence and survival of the British two-party system is taken to mean more or less the same thing as the existence and survival of the two separate British parties, in the contemporary era the Conservatives and Labour. In the second and more systemic approach, by contrast, the system as such enjoys its own independent status, such that, again in the British case, it can even be argued that it is the sheer embeddedness of the British 'two-party system' which facilitates the long-term survival of two particular parties. Another way of putting this is to say that the systemic approach goes beyond the set of parties approach by allowing for the existence of *systemic constraints* or *opportunities*. For example, and following this logic, it would make little sense to try to explain the dynamics of what Sartori (1976: 131–45) defines as a system of polarized pluralism while seeking to remain at the level of the individual parties; on the contrary, it is also the individual parties – their positioning, their strategies and the constraints which they experience – that are explained by the system. In a set of parties, the individual parties involved are seen to be more or less free to move about as they wish, being limited only by the physical confines of the polity in which they operate. In the systemic approach, on the other hand, the parties are also constrained by their interactions with the other parties in the system, and in some cases, such as in the very 'strong' case of polarized pluralism, this may serve to limit severely their room for manoeuvre.

This distinction between a set of parties and a system of parties is not only analytic. It may also be real. That is, it is perfectly possible to conceive of a 'system' of parties that does not operate as a system as such, in that it lacks a systemic identity and hence also systemic constraints. In one version, the parties in this so-called system may be so fluid and volatile that there is no opportunity for a set of patterned interactions to emerge, and hence no real system develops. This is obviously most likely to be the case in many newly established democracies, for example, and particularly in some of the post-communist polities in Europe which effectively initiated multiparty politics from scratch, and where many of the emerging parties themselves, as well as the character of their competition, proved quite inchoate and weakly structured (see Mair, 1997: 175–98; Toole, 2000). This situation is also comparable to what Sartori (1976: 284) has specified as 'atomized pluralism', that is, 'a situation in which parties are "labels," loose coalitions of notables that often change at each election and tend to dissolve from one election to another. . . . [T]his pattern represents the phase of development of party systems that precedes its structural consolidation'.

In another version, and despite (or perhaps even because of) the existence of stable, strongly organized parties, there may well be no interaction at all, and hence no system, in the sense that each of the protagonists is closed off into its own separate and self-sufficient political community. Indeed, to allow for this possibility is a direct consequence of adopting the systemic approach, since, as Eckstein (1968: 436) has noted, 'defining party systems as competitive interaction patterns among parties implies that political systems could conceivably have parties without having party systems'. The absence of a party system in this latter sense is probably most likely to pertain in situations in which the individual parties themselves are particularly strong and deeply rooted, and hence in situations in which any competition is likely to be strictly defensive. Stein Rokkan's analysis of the variations in party development in the European democracies also reflects an awareness of this distinction. As he notes:

[I]n some countries elections have had the character of an effective choice among alternative teams of governors, in others they have simply served to express segmental loyalties and to ensure the right of each segment to *some* representation . . . in a coalition cabinet. (1970: 93)

In other words, in some polities there may exist pronounced electoral competition, largely based around competing claims to government office, and hence a more or less stable pattern of interactions, while in other countries elections are more likely to take the form of a census, in which the efforts of each of the protagonists are likely to be restricted to the defensive mobilization of its own adherents. In this latter situation, therefore, which is most obviously associated with the extremely segmented or pillarized electoral constituencies of the consociational democracies (Lijphart, 1968; Lorwin, 1971), one probably cannot easily speak of a party system as such – at least at the electoral level.² This latter qualification is very important, of course, since, as we suggest later, the coexistence of different functional arenas within a polity can mean that although a party system as such may not exist in the electoral arena, where the set of parties approach would offer a more accurate depiction, such a system may nevertheless exist in the parliamentary or governmental arenas, where identifying the pattern of interactions between the parties would prove an essential key to understanding.

One Polity, Different Party Systems

It follows from the above that it is also possible to conceive of situations in which both notions of the party system – the set of parties and the system of parties – might actually be applied at the same time, even within any given functional arena. Contemporary Belgium can be interpreted as lacking a polity-level system of parties, for example, in that the linguistic divisions that have fractured each of the traditional party protagonists have now

progressed to such an extent that, at least at the national level, there is now no electoral competition between the various Flemish and Walloon parties. With the possible exception of those living in the 'mixed' Brussels region, no Belgian voter is obliged, or even has the capacity, to choose between the opposing sides of this fundamental cleavage. There is, in short, no Flemish–Walloon electoral interaction, and hence no party system at the electoral level. If we are to speak of a Belgian party system, therefore, it can only be in the sense of a set of parties. Within each of the regions, on the other hand, and within each of the linguistic communities, strong competition prevails, with different Flemish parties challenging one another for the support of Dutch-speaking voters, and with different Walloon parties challenging one another for the support of French-speaking voters. Hence, while Belgium does not appear to maintain a national party system, at least at the level of the electorate, it does maintain two parallel sub-national party systems, one for Flemish voters and one for Walloon voters, and within each there regularly ensues quite intense electoral competition (e.g. Deschouwer, 2004).

A similar argument might be developed with application to the electoral arena of traditional Northern Irish party politics. Nationalist parties – principally, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and Sinn Féin – have long competed with one another, and might well be seen to have constituted a (sub-provincial) 'green' party system. Equally, the Unionist parties – principally, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party – might well be seen to have constituted a (sub-provincial) and highly competitive 'orange' party system. But given that neither side interacted directly with the other within the Northern Irish electoral arena as a whole – hence the famous observation that 'there is no floating vote on the constitutional issue'³ – they could not together constitute a single Northern Irish party system. In this case, however, and in contrast to the Belgian case, it is interesting to observe that there has existed a bridge of sorts between these two sub-provincial systems, such that *both* the various Unionist parties *and* the various Nationalist parties have necessarily competed with the smaller and more secular alternatives that have tried to straddle the sectarian divide – parties such as the liberal Alliance Party and the more recent Women's Coalition. In this sense, rather than seeing the Northern Irish parties as having inhabited two wholly separate universes, an image that is certainly appropriate in the Belgian case, they might better be seen in the form of a simple Venn diagram, with the small area in common being inhabited by the secular parties which compete across both electoral communities and which, as it were, reflect the interaction between two otherwise separate party systems (for an early indication of this pattern, see Laver, 1975).

More generally, the capacity of a given polity to maintain more than one party system, even of different types, may be related to three other important divisions within the polity itself. These are, first, vertical divisions, which are most easily associated with pillarized polities, as in Belgium, or with polities in which a sharp cleavage fully separates two distinct electoral constituencies,

as in Northern Ireland. Second, there are horizontal divisions, which may be associated with strongly decentralized political systems in which the lower units enjoy considerable autonomy in the exercise of their political prerogatives. And, third, there are functional divisions, in which the constraints on party behaviour, and hence the pattern of party interactions, vary considerably across different functional arenas. Let us now look at each of these factors.

Vertical divisions

Vertical divisions are perhaps the most visible of the three sets of divisions which impact on the party system, and are particularly evident in polities characterized by the pillarization and segmentation of electorates. In such contexts, only certain parties can compete for the vote of specific parts of the electorate. Party system differences are determined by the salience of a second dimension (e.g. language, religion, ethnicity) in addition to the more or less standardizing left–right divide. Indeed, the salience of the second dimension is so high as to split even groups of electors that hold identical positions on the left–right dimension. The Northern Irish and Belgian cases as cited above are particularly good examples of this process. But what these examples also underline is that vertical divisions are usually limited to the electoral arena alone.⁴ Following elections, legislative competition on all relevant dimensions develops further within one single parliamentary arena, and party interactions become absorbed within one (national) system. Even the Belgian case, however, may still be regarded as exceptional, in that while competition for government does absorb all parties within the national legislative arena, competition along the linguistic divide is deliberately evaded. Thus, whichever ideological family does take part in government, be it Liberal, Green, Christian Democratic or Socialist, it does so as a Flemish–Walloon coalition, with both linguistic wings of the particular incumbent party concerned holding office together (Lijphart, 1999: 35).

Horizontal Divisions

Horizontal divisions are determined by the existence of several levels of government (and of electoral competition). This can have negligible effects on the party system if one level of government, usually the national one, is overwhelmingly more important than the others. In this case, all actors (electors and parties) attribute a predominantly national significance to elections even at non-national levels. Such elections have been termed second-order elections to signify their relative lack of importance and subordination (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). In such situations, competition patterns at all levels are likely to be similar and parties have little incentive to diversify their strategies and/or organizations at the various levels. Consequently, the party system is structured at the dominant (national) one. Although marginal

party system differences can occur, and can be reflected in the presence of particularistic local or regional groups at sub-national levels, these are generally insignificant.

At the same time, however, the cleavage structure and the salience of particular issues can be very different at different government levels. This is especially true of federal systems or of systems with high levels of regional autonomy. Such systems are characterized by a clear definition of prerogatives and competencies at different levels of government and by the presence of, often highly diversified, sub-federal units. In such cases, elections, even if they are not all equally important, have their own specific significance at all levels. Regions or other sub-federal units can thus develop their own, different, party systems, and there are two particular ways in which these may depart greatly from the patterns at the national or federal level. First, and most obviously, there may be one or more party actors with a major presence at regional or state level that simply do not operate with the same significance at the national level, and hence the sheer configuration of the local party system may look quite different to that in the polity as a whole. Party competition in the Basque province in Spain is a very clear example of such a disjuncture, for example, as is competition in the Canadian province of Quebec. Second, even when the parties at local level are ostensibly the same as those at national level, their strategies may differ, such that alternative coalition alignments may be preferred, and hence alternative patterns of competition may prevail. Finally, it should be emphasized that horizontal divisions may also be maintained within divided legislative arenas, and attention to such party system divisions has grown particularly in recent years as a consequence of discussions about the possible development of a European Union party system and its interactions with those of the various member-states (Bardi, 2002; Deschouwer, 2003).

Functional Divisions

Functional divisions stem from the existence, even at the same level of government, of different competitive arenas. We have already indicated that parties compete, and sometimes compete differently, in at least two different arenas: the electoral and the parliamentary. In some cases this may have very little real impact on the party system as such, and any distinctions to be drawn on this basis may at best have an analytic rather than a substantial justification. But in some polities different arenas can be characterized by quite different competition rules, such that, for example, the issues that are salient in the electoral arena may not be salient in the parliamentary arena, or vice versa. Moreover, institutional factors may also be responsible for creating different conditions of competition in the two arenas. In fragmented systems, for example, polarization may be much more pronounced in the electoral arena, where parties may take extreme positions in order to respond to the electorate's expectations, than in the parliamentary one, where

most if not all may converge towards the centre of the political spectrum and engage in consensus-seeking practices in order to partake in governmental responsibilities (and the spoils of office). Because of this, for example, the ostensibly alternative depictions of the system of the first Italian republic as reflecting the dynamics of either 'polarized' (Sartori, 1966) or 'bargained' (Hine, 1993) pluralism are not necessarily incompatible, in that while polarization may well have characterized the interactions in the electoral arena, those in the parliamentary arena bore many of the characteristics of a bargained system. Conversely, the Italian system during the 1990s proved much more polarized and fragmented in the parliamentary arena than in the electoral arena, in that the parties felt the need to regain the visibility they had lost through the centripetal electoral competition that had been induced by the new majoritarian electoral formula.

More generally, these contrasts are also apparent in many systems in which differences that can be observed between the range of electoral parties, or lists competing in elections, and the range of parliamentary parties that are formed after the elections (differences, that is, in the number and identity of the units making up the party system in the two arenas). The founding elections in post-communist Poland offered a very powerful example of this potential confusion (Szczerbiak, 2001). Diverging or even contrary directions of competition can in this sense create different party systems in the two arenas.

These differences may be defined as those between the electoral party system, on the one hand, and the legislative or parliamentary party system, on the other (Bardi, 1996; Laver, 1989). In the former, issue salience and party strategies will be determined by electoral goals, that is, by the pursuit of available votes (see also Bartolini, 2002). In the latter, considerations of coalition formation and maintenance will prevail. In the one, enmities may be at a premium; in the other, it may be friendships. This also suggests the existence of another type of difference: parties in different arenas are functionally different. In the electoral arena, all parties, like states in the international system (Waltz, 1979), have one identical function/goal: maximizing their ability to survive (differences between parties are determined by their different capacities). This feature makes the electoral party system a fairly closed one, at least from an analytic viewpoint, to the extent that its operation is usually fairly well insulated from other (sub)systems. There are some exceptions of course, in that, usually depending on the electoral law, considerations of coalition formation may creep into the development of electoral strategies (e.g. Green-Pedersen, 2001). But we can reasonably assert that it is only after the principal goal of survival is achieved that parties will begin to pursue the other objectives dictated by the different competitive logics (e.g. in the German system, favouring with second votes the survival of a weak potential coalition partner, or in the Irish system, urging a mutual transfer system for lower preference votes⁵). Moreover, even anti-system parties, as long as they compete, are part of the system in

the electoral arena, even though they may be excluded, or exclude themselves, within the parliamentary arena.

It is also important to note that functions in the parliamentary arena, besides being different from those in the electoral arena, are not the same for all parties, in that they will depend on whether the parties involved are part of a governmental coalition, or part of a more or less responsible opposition. This also makes the parliamentary system more open, of course. In some extreme situations, especially in systems which are not purely parliamentary, or which are characterized by the presence of highly factionalized parties, the governmental arena (which in most cases, and so far also in our analysis, is subsumed in the parliamentary one) can produce a third functional division and its own corresponding party system. In non-parliamentary systems in particular, the logics of coalition formation and survival can differ greatly between the legislative and the governmental arena, a pattern which is clearly visible in both the United States and France – even in periods of non-divided government or non-cohabitation. In polities characterized by very factionalized parties, these may behave as unitary actors as part of a governmental coalition; but it is also possible that some of the factions, particularly those under-represented in the cabinet or otherwise interested in the potential advantages of governmental crises, may act as separate units in parliament (see also Andeweg and Nijzink, 1995).

Divisions and Coherence

The presence of these various divisions could lead us to conclude that it is almost impossible to speak of any given polity being characterized by a single, or unique, party system. As against this, however, it is also clear that not all of these divisions are necessarily present in all polities. This is particularly true of vertical divisions, and even horizontal divisions, which are obviously relevant only to certain specific polities, with many others being characterized by a sufficient degree of homogeneity in both their cleavage structures and administrative organs to allow us to trace a more or less similar pattern of party interactions throughout the polity as a whole. Functional divisions, on the other hand, are potentially relevant to all systems, at least theoretically, and it is in this regard that an emphasis on the plurality of party interactions would seem most appropriate. Even here, however, we must also emphasize that the systems created by such functional divisions need not be wholly separated, in that the actual degree of disjuncture will largely depend on the relative openness of each arena-specific system.

Thus, for example, there is likely to be a much sharper separation between the electoral party system, on the one hand, and the parliamentary and governmental systems, on the other, than between the parliamentary and governmental systems themselves. Moreover, all three arena-specific systems can also be thought of as contributing to the constitution of a single,

albeit complex and multidimensional, polity-level party system (see also Deschouwer, 2003). In fact, although it is analytically useful to consider arena-specific systems as largely separated from one another, this may also imply a rather static view of the party system, and a more useful and dynamic perspective might well be derived by recognizing that the relative importance of each arena-specific party system varies sequentially with the various phases (elections, coalition formation, governing) of the political process. It is also evident that different 'faces' of the parties as organizations will prove more relevant in the different arena-specific party systems – for example, the party on the ground and its electoral organization are more relevant in the electoral party system, whereas the party in public office is more relevant within the legislative party system (Katz and Mair, 1993) – and if we consider these different faces of parties as separate units, then clearly each of the arena-specific party systems becomes more or less closed. Different sequences, and hence different arena-specific party systems, could therefore all be seen to contribute, with different degrees of importance, to the shaping of one overall polity-level party system.

In recent years, it is possible to see several illustrations of such interactions which also serve to underline the utility of our approach. In Flanders, for example, it is difficult to understand the maintenance of the *cordon sanitaire* that is organized against the Vlaams Belang (formerly Vlaams Blok) in Antwerp without paying attention to its implications for party competition in the Flemish region more generally. Parties on the centre-right in Antwerp might have many incentives to break the *cordon sanitaire* at the local level and to forge successful governing alliances with the Vlaams Belang, but in practice they cannot do so for fear of being punished by their potential partners in the other arenas in which they also have governing ambitions. In the German case, irrespective of the political strategies of the parties, *Länder*-level party system dynamics can have a decisive impact at the federal level, particularly when they take effect in the Upper House. Thus, for example, it was the loss of government in the *Länder*, and hence the loss of votes in the *Bundesrat*, that eventually contributed to the resignation of Chancellor Schroeder's Red-Green coalition in 2005 (Poguntke, 2006: 1110). In this case, then, it was the institutional linkages between the arenas that proved decisive. In Flanders, by contrast, the linkages are strictly political. Recent developments in France also offer an interesting example, in that they underline the importance of interactions of functionally different arenas at the same level of the polity. In this case, the familiar differences between the party systems in the presidential and legislative arenas were highlighted by the effect of the relative success of the Bayrou candidacy in the first round of the 2007 presidential elections and his subsequent presentation of candidates in the immediately following legislative elections. Although this may not be a lasting development, its short-term effect was certainly to disrupt the pattern of competition and negotiation in the legislative electoral arena.

Conclusions

The main purpose of this article has been to draw attention to what is entailed by the notion of a party system, and to show how different arenas within any given polity can be characterized by different sets of patterned interactions between parties, and hence by different party systems. Although the evidence for this would have to be carefully marshalled, we could also suggest that the incongruity between different party systems within any given polity is becoming more pronounced with time. Two factors can be hypothesized to be important in this regard. The first and most obvious reason for the likely increase in incongruity is the growing weight of multi-level governance, which has led to an increase in the number and type of differentiated arenas in which parties interact with one another. The decentralization of polities, particularly within Europe, and the enhanced democratization of decentralized institutions are relevant here, as is the emergence of a European level of electoral competition and (legislative) coalition formation. A second factor which is likely to contribute to incongruity is the changing character of the parties themselves, and the developing stratachic – or, at least, less hierarchic – modes of party organization. During the heyday of the mass party, when parties were tightly organized and centrally, if also democratically, controlled, party strategies tended to be directed from the top, with policies and interactions at the local level being expected to reflect and even exemplify the strategies and interactions chosen at the national level. In this sense, despite the existence of different arenas, the different party systems in any polity tended to resemble one another. As the mass party model has faded, however, and as local, regional and even supranational party bodies have begun to assert their autonomy from central head office control, uniformity is likely to have become both less desirable and less enforceable. Combining these two factors suggests the growth of a more differentiated polity in which parties within different arenas are now less constrained in choosing their strategies and in determining how they interact with the other parties in these arenas.

It is our contention that a proper understanding of the parameters of party systems requires a more comprehensive assessment of the different arenas – distinguished vertically, horizontally and functionally – in which parties interact with one another. As parties themselves become less organizationally coherent, their relations with one another can prove quite different within different institutional and social settings. How parties compete with one another at one level of the polity may well be different from how they compete at another level, and relations in one particular region of the country need not reflect those in a neighbouring area. Above all, knowing how parties interact with one another in the electoral arena does not necessarily help our understanding of how they interact within parliament, while knowing how they relate in the legislature is also not necessarily the best guide for understanding behaviour in the governmental arena.

When looked at more generally, the literature on party systems as it has developed over the past half-century may be seen as reflecting a steady shift in the context or environment within which the object of study has been situated. Initially, the understanding of party systems was driven primarily by a conception of parties as social actors, with the interactions between the parties being seen to derive from the patterns within the wider society. As Lipset (1960: 220) famously put it, ‘in every modern democracy conflict among different groups is expressed through political parties which basically represent a “democratic translation of the class struggle”’. In a later generation of scholarship, reflected perhaps most clearly by Dahl (1966) and Sartori (1976), party systems were more likely to be evaluated through the prism of parliament, with the interactions within the legislature being seen as decisive for determining the character of the systems themselves. In more recent work, by contrast, and building also on the insights gained from the substantial literature on coalition formation, attention is often focused more explicitly on interactions within the governmental arena (Blondel and Cotta, 1996; Laver and Shepsle, 1996; Müller and Strøm, 2000), with these being seen as decisive not only for an understanding of the party system dynamics, but also for an understanding of the parties themselves. But while each of these approaches has added a great deal to the understanding of party systems, it is only by integrating all three environments into a more unified theory that a proper understanding of the parameters of party systems can be achieved.

Notes

This article has benefited from many discussions with many different colleagues, and, most recently, from the welcome comments of two anonymous referees of this journal. An old, and very first, version of the article was presented at a seminar in Nuffield College Oxford at the invitation of the late Vincent Wright – still missed.

- 1 A blurring of the boundaries between defining the party system and defining the political system can also sometimes be seen in two of the most pioneering attempts to classify political systems, those of Almond (1956) and Lijphart (1968). Lijphart is more explicit in this regard, in that one of the ‘typologies of democratic systems’ that he sets out to assess is identified simply as the ‘two-party versus multiparty [system]’ (1968: 6). And although Almond is careful to emphasize that ‘the commonly used distinctions between one-party, two-party and multi-party systems simply get nowhere in distinguishing the essential properties of the totalitarian, Anglo-American, and the Continental European political systems’ (1956: 397), his subsequent delineation of the differences between the Anglo-American and Continental European systems nevertheless owes much to the differences in the patterns of their party systems.
- 2 By which we mean that such parties are more or less self-contained communities which do not compete with one another, and which therefore do not interact – as

a system – at the electoral level. However, this is not to deny that the core identity of any individual party in such a polity is at least partly defined by the identity of the other parties in that polity. The parties are sufficiently different from one another to render competition meaningless, but the only way in which they can identify that which makes them different is by reference to the identity of their party counterparts.

- 3 J. L. McCracken, cited by Rose (1971: 218).
- 4 Note that as long as there was no local parliament in Northern Ireland, the electoral arena was the *only* arena which could exist.
- 5 These examples also suggest the relevance of external factors (such as the electoral law) in blurring or enhancing the distinctions between the different arenas.

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LUCIANO BARDI is Professor of Comparative Politics and International Relations at the University of Pisa and a member of the ECPR Executive Committee. He is currently engaged in research projects on party organization in Italy and on Euro-party development.

ADDRESS: Università di Pisa, Dipartimento di Scienze della Politica, Via Serafini 3, 56126 Pisa, Italy. [email: bardi@sp.unipi.it]

PETER MAIR is Professor of Comparative Politics at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy, and at Leiden University in The Netherlands. He is co-editor of *West European Politics* and is currently engaged in research on party patronage and party democracy.

ADDRESS: Department of Political and Social Sciences, European University Institute, 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy. [email: Peter.Mair@eui.eu]

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