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What is This?
Commentary

Parties, interest groups and cartels: A comment

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Abstract
A recurring problem in comparative politics is determining the extent to which models derived in one setting can be transferred directly to other settings. The original cartel party thesis was meant to account for developments that were beginning to be observed in the established democracies of western Europe in the 1990s. Many of the contemporary conditions that appeared to be driving those developments are to be found in other places, but of course preceded by quite different historical trajectories. The articles on parties and interest groups that are published in this special issue of Party Politics provide an important window on the question of how much historical processes can be compressed, or indeed of whether institutions and practices like the cartel party can be adopted (or to what extent they can be adapted) to new settings, irrespective of historical differences.

Keywords
cartel parties, interest groups, party models, party organization

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As we have recently observed (Katz and Mair, 2009), the cartel party thesis emerged inductively from our research concerning the evolution of party organizations in established democracies with relatively stable party systems. The newer democracies of Portugal and Spain that are considered in this special issue were not included in our work,

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and while the EU party federations were included, they did not really fall within the ambit of the cartel party thesis. Moreover, while we were concerned with the relationships between parties and interest groups, and certainly made a number of suggestions about the ways in which those relationships had and would evolve, the original research focused only on the kinds of ancillary groups that were effectively incorporated within the wider mass party organizational network. It is, thus, extremely interesting for us to see how our work has been interpreted, adapted, extended and tested beyond the range of cases and concerns from which it was derived. And it is, of course, highly gratifying to be invited to comment on this illuminating set of articles.

In their conclusion, Allern and Bale (p. 100) say with regard to the cartel party thesis that they ‘do not seek to suggest, then, that the emperor has no clothes so much as to point out that not all of them seem to fit as well as they might’. We could not agree more. To continue with their sartorial analogy, the cartel party thesis, presented as summary of widely occurring trends, is like an off-the-rack, one-size-fits-all, suit; it will probably never fit a particular case perfectly, and it may be basically inappropriate for some cases altogether. Nevertheless, it probably serves the purpose of the wearer better than an off-the-rack kilt. Politics is a complicated phenomenon, and while focusing attention on one category of explanation (for example, structural change) may be heuristically useful, it will inevitably be incomplete. For example, a hypothesis of weakening connection between party and civil society should not be interpreted as a claim of uniform, or even completely monotonic, decline. Moreover, as in any claim of the form ‘Cartel parties are characterized by their interpenetration of party and state, and the relative weakness of links to civil society’ (Allern and Bale, p. 16), the first question has to be ‘relative to what?’ In the case of this claim, quite properly attributed to us, it was relative to the pre-existing patterns of connection that characterized the catch-all parties of the 1970s, and especially the mass parties of the 1950s. Thus, rather than seeing the analyses of evolving party–group relations in Spain (Verge, this issue) or Portugal (Jalali et al., this issue) as posing a challenge to the cartel party thesis, we see them as tests of the underlying principles in circumstances under which the same principles can lead to different expectations.

Parties, or at least the kind of parties that might be included in a cartel, face two demands. On the one hand, they have to compete with one another in order to win elections in order to occupy public offices, with both the personal rewards and the opportunities to exercise decision-making power that electoral success brings. Traditional understandings of the relationship between parties and interest groups have focused on this: parties need group ties in order to mobilize support, and in exchange they serve as ‘transmission belts’ to the state’ (Allern and Bale, p. 17) for these interests. Following directly from Kirchheimer, we suggest that a variety of social changes (among other things) have lessen the utility of this relationship for both sides. On the other hand, however, parties also have to govern, and in doing so they face a number of constraints, some of which (for example, the fiscal constraints resulting from demographic shifts) follow from the same social changes as have altered the balance of resources underlying the exchange relationship between parties and interest groups (Allern et al., 2007; Christiansen, this issue; Warner, 2003), but others of which follow directly from the parties’ dependence on those exchanges themselves. To the extent that
we make a structural argument, it is that a variety of social–structural changes have altered the relative significance of the resources and constraints following from party–interest group relations, and as a result the strategic choices of the parties have also changed – in our cases, in the direction of weakened connections with interest groups. But since, in detail, those social–structural changes have been occurring at different times and at different speeds, both within and across societies, one would also expect that, in detail, the pace and extent of weakening of ties would also vary across and within systems. Indeed, this point comes very clearly through in Christiansen’s article). The Danish parties’ starting points may have been comparable, if not identical, and their current endpoints also seem comparable, but the steps that have taken each individual party from one end to the other of this process vary considerably in scale and timing.

Parties in new democracies are inevitably confronted with a different situation than those about which we were originally writing. This is true of the parties in the southern European democracies, and especially true of those in the post-communist democracies (van Biezen, 2003). They share with those in the old democracies the problems of social fragmentation, media influence, and so forth that militate against strong organizations, but they are often starting from nothing, and hence using, or creating, organizations in civil society can offer a short-cut to building party organizations and support and to finding candidates. Our argument (and Kirchheimer’s as well) was that parties want to free themselves from constraints imposed by close ties with external organizations. If the party can establish dominance over social organizations (e.g. Verge, this issue), however, or at least avoid being constrained by them, there may be no incentive to weaken the ties. As Poguntke’s (1998) comparison of external versus party-created collateral organizations suggests, this principle may well apply in the more established party systems as well. But does a party-created organization represent the same kind of connection as ties to an external group? This, clearly, is a question requiring further research.

Christiansen’s article raises several points that, because the article relates to one of our core cases, require special comment. First, in saying that we argue ‘public subsidies have made the parties independent of economic resources from interest groups’ (p. 29), Christiansen distorts our claim in two respects. On the one hand, it basically reverses the causal order. Our argument is that parties turn to the state primarily because of the inability or unwillingness of their traditional sources of finance to keep up with demand. On the other hand, relatively reduced dependence on economic resources from interest groups is not the same thing as independence: no party can ever be too well resourced. Second, Christiansen makes a valuable point in drawing attention to the specifics of the ‘Golden Age’ (e.g. p. 28), when parties were not so much linked to interest groups, but more that both parties and interest groups were part of the same cleavage network. In this sense, it is not so much that the parties themselves have changed since the ‘Golden Age’, or not only that they have changed; it is also that the world in which they operate has changed. This era and circumstance has passed, and in that sense – the decline of cleavages, the decline of segmentation, the fragmentation of collective identities and party bases, etc. – our argument is probably now even stronger than in the early 1990s. This is at root structural – even though there are also many contingent factors involved. For example, although the age of the mass party has passed, it is still possible to find individual parties, such as the Lega Nord in Italy, that seek to replicate its form and level
of social implantation. Third, since (in contrast to Kirchheimer) we see the catch-all phenomenon to have been initially an adaptation on the right, it is not entirely surprising to see the erosion of ties beginning there as well.

The cartel party was never posited as an endpoint, but rather as one step in an unfolding dialectic process. Hence it comes as no surprise that Yishai (2001: 670–1, cited in Allern and Bale, p. 16) finds post-cartel parties in Israel. Although we identified parties such as these as ‘anti-party-system-parties’, we also found much the same phenomenon in Europe. And as we have observed, in some of these cases, but by no means all, the parties are pursuing a strategy not unlike that of the earlier mass parties, with the attendant emphasis on social-rootedness. The Lega Nord, cited above, is one example of such post-cartel parties. But Geert Wilders’s Freedom Party in The Netherlands, which has only one member, Wilders himself, is another post-cartel party. Beyond this, we do not regard the cutting of ties to civil society organizations necessarily to be a winning strategy in the long run, but rather to have been driven primarily by immediate needs, and quite possibly thereby to reflect a fairly steep discounting of the future. In this regard, one interesting phenomenon observed by Jalali et al. (this issue) is that parties are not just using state resources to support their own organizations, but are also state resources to help politically compatible civil society organizations (CSOs) – itself a familiar practice. What we then see, following Jalali et al., is the parties acting as intermediaries (brokers) between the state and the CSOs, while the CSOs return the favour by acting as intermediaries between the parties and the citizens.

Beyond contributing to our store of information about the cases considered, the articles in this issue make an important contribution to identifying problems that call for future theorizing and research. Perhaps the most significant is the development of a more nuanced understanding of the nature of the relationships between parties and organizations in civil society, in particular to take account not only of the fact of interaction or organizational linkage, but also of the direction of flows of influence. Certainly party leaders will be much less anxious to sever ties with organizations they dominate than with organizations that seek to dominate them.

If one imagines a fully cartelized system, in which parties have become little beyond agents of the state, one would still expect them to interact with interest groups, although those interactions would be quite different from those developed in any of the literature cited in these articles – including our work. In the spirit of Saward’s (2008) ‘reflexive representation’ claim, the expectation that privileged and exclusive relations with interest groups, NGOs, etc., would weaken, could well be accompanied by an expectation that more open and contingent relations would become more commonplace. Parties would then serve as receivers – listeners – rather than transmitters, and would play a more passive role in the chain of representation than is normally associated with the more purposefully oriented mass parties. Although this change would not be readily captured in the organizational data, it is none the less important for that.

One of the recurring problems in comparative politics is determining the extent to which models derived in one setting can be transferred directly to other settings. The original cartel party thesis was meant to account for developments that were beginning to be observed in the established democracies of western Europe in the 1990s. Many of the contemporary conditions that appeared to be driving those developments are to be
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References


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