POLITICAL PARTIES AND DEMOCRACY:
WHAT SORT OF FUTURE?

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Introduction

That political parties are in crisis, and potentially on the verge of serious decline, is now more or less accepted wisdom among commentators throughout the established democracies. Once regarded as a necessary component in the maintenance of representative government, and as an essential element in the stabilization and continued functioning of modern mass democracy, political parties are now often seen to be archaic and outmoded. Moreover, being dominated by what is sometimes perceived as a self-interested political class, or being criticized for serving as little more than the vehicles for that class, political parties are now often cited as organizations that stand in the way of democratic renewal rather than as one of the means by which democracy itself might still be sustained. Little more than thirty years ago it would have been reasonable to question whether meaningful political life existed outside the world of parties. Nowadays, it seems more appropriate to ask whether political life still exists inside that world.

But although there is much truth, and, indeed, much hard evidence, underlying the contemporary thesis of party decline, the argument is also in one crucial sense misleading. For while party *organizations* may well be failing, parties as such are certainly not. This is one of the key themes which I wish to develop in this paper, in that the distinction between party organizations, on the one hand, and parties as such, on the other, is one that is usually blurred in the contemporary discussions. At the same time, as I suggest here, without some sense of this distinction, we can easily be blinded as to the real nature of the crisis currently facing parties, and thus we can also fail to appreciate the sort of future that might still be open to them. In fact, this distinction offers a useful key to understanding precisely what the crisis of parties entails, in that the persistence and sometimes even the strengthening of the role of parties as such is being accompanied by an erosion of their organizational bases, so undermining a key source of political legitimacy.

I will deal with three things in this brief paper. First, I will discuss the changes that are currently affecting parties themselves, in which I will look at the organizational level, at the functions which parties were traditionally supposed to perform, and at the processes through which traditional partisan identities appear to

become eroded. Second, I will briefly identify two of the more important consequences which have followed from these changes. Third, given these changes and their consequences, I will try to sketch some ideas about the future that might still be open to parties in general, and to parties of the left in particular. I will also look at how existing parties might best direct their future efforts in order to ensure their continued legitimacy and effectiveness.

My overall argument may be summarized as follows. For a variety of reasons, including changes in the character of democracy as well as changes in both the parties themselves and in the wider society, parties find themselves less and less able to function as representative agencies. The age of the mass party has passed, and, at least in any foreseeable future, it is unlikely to be recoverable. At the same time, however, parties do play an important, and perhaps even increasingly important, role in the management of democracy. Hence, while their representative role may be declining, their procedural role remains as essential as ever. One way in which parties might therefore assure themselves of a future can be by facing up to and accepting their changed circumstances, and by seeking to emphasize their legitimacy as guarantors of a form of democracy which is inclusive, transparent, and accountable.

I.   How parties have changed

From society to the state

The first and perhaps most telling piece of evidence that may be cited to illustrate the decline of parties as organizations concerns their membership levels, and in particular the recent dramatic eclipse of parties as membership organizations. Although there is a general awareness of this development, the specifics are worth recalling. The most recent data show the following (Mair & van Biezen, 2001): among 13 long-established democracies in western Europe, party membership as a percentage of the national electorate has fallen from an average of 9.8 per cent in 1980 to just 5.7 per cent at the end of the 1990s. In other words, party membership as a percentage of the electorate now averages not much more than half the levels recorded just two decades ago. Moreover, in what is perhaps an even more

significant pattern, this decline is characteristic of *each* of these 13 long-established democracies, although the precise scale of the fall does inevitably vary from polity to polity. Thus in western Europe as a whole, the only three countries that record a growth in party membership levels with respect to 1980 are Greece, Portugal and Spain, each of which democratized in the mid-1970s, and in each of which the parties and the party system then began their organizational mobilization more or less from scratch.

What also must be emphasized here is that this decline in membership levels across all of the long-established European democracies is not simply a function of the expansion of electorates, such that, as was the case in the 1970s and 1980s, falling membership ratios might be attributed to the failure of the party organizations to keep pace with the growing numbers of enfranchised voters. On the contrary: in each of the long-established democracies there has also been a fall in the absolute number of party members being recorded, a fall which is sometimes very substantial. In France, for example, membership levels have now fallen by more than 1 million, equivalent to almost two-thirds of the numbers recorded in 1980. In both Italy and the United Kingdom, raw numbers have fallen by more than 50 per cent, and in Norway by more than 45 per cent. Indeed, with the exception of Germany, where the parties now count a host of new members within the former East German länder, each long-established democracy in western Europe has seen raw membership levels decline by at least 25 per cent with respect to the levels claimed in 1980. The evidence of organizational decline in this respect is unequivocal.

Nor is it only party membership that is falling, for in other respects also it is evident that party organizations are now increasingly failing to engage the attentions and affections of the mass public. One symptom of this change can be seen within the organizations themselves, with varying accounts of internal party life in different countries being almost unanimous in recording declining levels of activism even among those members who remain on the party books. The fewer party members who are around today are clearly willing to pay their annual subscriptions, but they seem increasingly reluctant to give of their time. Meetings are often sparsely attended, offices are sometimes left unfilled, and despite the efforts of parties

throughout Europe to confer greater participatory rights on their members, there is less and less evidence of any real sense of engagement. Beyond the formal party organization itself, sympathizers also prove thinner on the ground. In virtually all the established democracies, fewer and fewer voters claim to identify strongly with their party of preference, and even the weaker forms of identification and attachment appear to be waning. As Russell Dalton (1999) has recently reported, of the 19 advanced western democracies for which time series data on party identification are available, fully 17 record a decline in the percentage of the public claiming a sense of partisan attachment.

Finally, but perhaps most significantly of all, participation in elections is also now declining virtually throughout the advanced democratic world. To be sure, and particularly in western Europe, engagement in this sense remains high, particularly by comparison to the United States. But it is nevertheless striking to note that it is precisely in the 1990s that record 'lows' in the proportion of valid votes cast at national elections are being registered. The lowest post-war level of electoral participation in Austria was recorded in 1999; that in Finland in 1999; in Iceland in 1999; in Ireland in 1997; in Italy in 1996; in the Netherlands in 1998; in Norway in 1993; in Sweden in 1998; in Switzerland in 1995, and in the United Kingdom in 1997. Prior to the 1990s, average turnout in national elections in western Europe had remained remarkably stable, with a mean of 84.3 per cent in the 1950s, 84.9 in the 1960s, 83.9 in the 1970s, and 81.7 in the 1980s. In the 1990s, however, average turnout fell to just 77.6 percent, a figure that proved substantially lower than during any other postwar decade, and fully 4 per cent below that recorded during the 1980s (see Gallagher et al, 2000: 259-260).

Although much more could be said about these various and clearly correlating patterns, the limited scope of this present paper permits just one general – and very simple – conclusion: parties and their conventional activities no longer engage citizens as they once did and no longer enjoy a meaningful presence within the wider society. But that is also well-known. My point is simply to emphasize that this tendency is now almost universal among the established democracies and that it

is consistent across a variety of different indicators. Parties have become more remote from the citizenry. Their organizations have begun to wither.

At the same time, however, there is also a crucial *parallel* trend that is developing, in that parties have not just become more distant from the wider society, but they have also become more firmly and inextricably linked to the world of government and the state. This side of the party shift has already been substantially documented elsewhere, and need not be rehearsed again here (Katz & Mair, 1995). Suffice it to note three crucial developments which have marked most western democracies in the past three decades, and which look likely to become even more reinforced in future generations.

The first of these concerns money, and the fact that parties in many democracies, both old and new, are now increasingly reliant for their corporate survival on the public funding which they receive from the state. Indeed, in most countries today, and in almost all newly-established democracies, the preferred source of party funding has become the public purse, such that many parties are now quite dependent on state subventions in order to maintain their organizational life. In other words, without the aid of the public purse, and without the aid of the state, it is likely that many parties would find difficulty performing. Second, parties are now increasingly obliged to conform to new state laws and regulations, which sometimes even determine the way in which their internal organization may function. Many of these regulations and party laws have been either introduced or extended in the wake of the introduction of public funding, with the distribution of state subventions inevitably demanding the introduction of a more codified system of party registration and control. Controlling party access to the publicly owned broadcasting media has also required a new system of regulation, which again acts to codify the status of parties and their range of activities. From having been largely 'private' and voluntary associations which developed from within society, and which drew their primary legitimacy therein, parties have therefore now become increasingly subject to a regulatory framework which accords them a (quasi-) official status as part of the state.

Third, many parties have also cemented their linkage to the state by increasingly prioritizing their role as public office holders. In the terms adopted by the analysts of coalition formation, parties have become more office-seeking, with the winning of a place in government being both a standard expectation and – increasingly – an end in itself. Added to this is the increasingly observable tendency for financial and staffing resources to be built around the party in parliament rather than around the party on the ground (e.g., Heidar & Koole, 1999). Finally, what we also see are parties which increasingly profile themselves in terms of their public office. In other words the party as such becomes more or less synonymous with the party in parliament or in government – beyond these public offices, party identity tends to evaporate. It is in this sense that the party becomes reduced to its leaders in public office, and that the party leaders become the greatest capital stock available to the party.

When we put these two parallel trends together, then what we witness is a gradual shift by parties from being part of society to being part of the state (Katz & Mair, 1995; Mair, 1997: 137-144). We see a shift in the party centre of gravity from the party on the ground to the party in public office. It is a shift which spells an end to the party organization as traditionally conceived, and hence also an end to the mass party as such. These are now different parties, with an ever weaker organizational embeddedness but with an ever stronger and more effectively resourced public face. Finally, as we shall now see, these are also parties that function differently.

From representative to procedural roles

Much of the literature on political parties that has flourished since the 1960s has laid particular stress on understanding the functions that parties can be expected to perform in democratic polities. Moreover, with some minor variation, there has been a remarkable consensus among party scholars on what precisely these functions are. Parties are seen to integrate and, if necessary, to mobilize the citizenry; to articulate and aggregate interests; to formulate public policy; and to recruit and promote political leaders. Without parties, it was commonly argued, these necessary functions might not be performed, thus undermining the both the effectiveness and

legitimacy of systems of representative government. In the main, however, the consensual picture presented by this approach to the understanding of political parties proved also a very static picture, being tied to an image of party which hinged on the model of the mass party as being both normatively and practically desirable. As parties have changed, on the other hand, and as the mass party model has begun to fade, the functions which parties can – or do – perform have also been rebalanced. Indeed, as I will argue here, the evidence here suggests a shift from representative functions to more procedural functions (see also Andeweg, 1998), a shift which both parallels and is commensurate with the movement of parties from civil society to he state.

The first function classically associated with political parties has been a largely representative function, and involves integrating and mobilizing the citizenry in the polity within which the party competes. This is, or was, a crucial function performed by parties in early 20th-century democracies, when distinctions based on gender and property ceased to serve as restrictions on the right to vote, and when the mass of citizens were first admitted to the political world. Nowadays, however, such a function might well be regarded as redundant, in that neither integration nor mobilization are still required – at least in the more advanced democracies. In other words, as Pizzorno (1981) has suggested, the functions of integration and mobilization were historically contingent, and need no longer be considered necessary, or even possible, in modern democracies. To the extent that parties still retain important functions, this particular task no longer forms an essential part of their repertoire.

The second function classically associated with parties has also been representative, and involves the articulation and aggregation of social and political interests present within the wider society. Increasingly, however, this is a function that is now shared with other non-party associations and movements, as well as with the media. Indeed, the function of interest articulation was never the exclusive preserve of parties, but what distinguishes the present situation from that which prevailed in the heyday of the mass party is that the alternative associations and movements that did then exist frequently operated under the aegis of party. In

contemporary democracies, on the other hand, the party and non-party channels of representation have become increasingly separate from one another. And although the aggregation of interests can still be considered important, in that conflicting demands still have to be reconciled at some political level, this latter is now usually effected through the formulation of public policy, rather than by means of organizational integration or representation as such. Indeed, the expression of popular interests and demands now often occurs outside the party world, with the parties increasingly contenting themselves with simply picking up signals that emanate elsewhere. In this sense, it does not seem necessary to have parties in order to effect processes of interest representation and intermediation.

The third function combines both representative and procedural aspects, and involves the formulation of public policy. In practice, however, it appears that parties are also proving less necessary here, in that there appears an increasing tendency to rely on the judgement of experts or of ostensibly non-political bodies in determining policy priorities. In other words, parties as such are less necessary in a context in which policy-making becomes increasingly depoliticized (see also below). Parties are obviously necessary, however, when decisions are based on political grounds, or when choices are framed primarily in normative or ideological terms, or when there are equally valid competing but potentially irreconcilable demands. In other words, and at the risk of tautology, parties are necessary to policy formation when partisan decisions are required. As government becomes less partisan, on the other hand, parties become less necessary.

The fourth function associated with parties is more procedural in form, and concerns the recruitment of political leaders and the staffing of public offices. If by this is implied the initial enrolment and socialization of potential political leaders, as well as the subsequent establishment of a career path through party channels, then even this party function may have become hollowed out, in that parties in both old and new democracies seem increasingly willing to look beyond their immediate organizational confines when searching for suitable candidates and nominees. Indeed, with the decline in party membership levels, parties are now often obliged to seek elsewhere. Taken at a more minimum level, however, in the sense that a

party affiliation or party endorsement, however acquired, is seen as a necessary requirement for the election or nomination of candidates to public office, this function obviously continues to be crucial. Moreover, it emerges as one of the key functions that parties still perform. Indeed, in certain political systems, where either patronage appointments have grown in importance, or where, as in the United Kingdom, for example, the number of elected offices has increased, it might be argued that this particular function has become even more important with time.

The fifth function that can be highlighted here is also primarily procedural, and involves the role accorded to parties in organizing parliament and government. In fact, this is potentially the most important function that parties are required to perform, and yet, perhaps because of an American bias in the relevant literature, it is often overlooked. In systems of parliamentary government, the necessity for parties is self-evident. Governments in such systems need to be formed in the first place, usually through coalition negotiations; responsibilities in government then need to be allocated across different departments or ministries; and, once formed, the maintenance of these governments in office requires more or less disciplined support within parliament. None of these is likely to prove possible without the authority and organizing capacities of political parties. Moreover, and even beyond conventional systems of parliamentary government, parties also appear necessary in practice for the organization of legislative procedures, for the functioning of legislative committees, and for day-to-day agreement on the legislative agenda. There is little to suggest that the importance of this function has declined over time, and it is only quite recently that party scholars have also begun to recognize its growing importance even within the distinctive American context (e.g., Cox & McCubbins, 1993).

The conclusion that is implied by this brief review of party functions is clear: the representative functions of parties are declining and have been at least partially taken over by other agencies, whereas their procedural functions have been maintained and have even acquired a greater relevance. In other words, just as parties have moved from society to the state, the functions that they perform and are expected to perform have changed from those of a primarily *representative* agency to

those of a primarily *governing* agency. This shift also highlights an important qualification regarding the supposed "decline of party": parties have not in fact declined as such, but they have changed, and they now find themselves more and more embedded within the institutions. On the other hand, it does seem increasingly evident that there has been a marked decline in party *organizations* – at least when gauged in terms of sheer size, societal penetration, and relevance.

The erosion of partisan identity

The third set of changes which matter here involve the gradual erosion of distinct partisan identities. What is involved here, in brief, is the sense that parties risk becoming increasingly confused with one another. Again, many factors are involved, and for the sake of simplicity, I will refer to only four features.

The first of these features derives in part from the erosion in the distinct electoral profiles which parties once enjoyed. As once distinct electoral constituencies have begun to dissipate, parties have begun to share voters with one another, and, with the decline in the strength of affective loyalties, they are now even more keen to direct their appeals into the once traditional heartlands of their opponents. The result is that the notion of politics as social conflict, in which the parties were seen to represent the political interests of opposing social forces, is now less and relevant within the polity as a whole. But not only are more or less all voters now potentially available to all parties, so also are more or less all parties available to all voters, in that the notion of politics as ideological conflict has now also ebbed away. In both social and ideological terms, therefore, there is now less substantive opposition being expressed through processes of party competition, and it is difficult to see how this process might be reversed in the foreseeable future. Of course, such arguments have been heard before, particularly in the positions adopted in the late 1960s by then influential "end of ideology" school. At the beginning of the new century, however, they may be stated with greater force and greater credence, in that they concern a period in which liberal capitalism has become triumphant, and in which, most crucially, the Cold War has been ended. As Perry Anderson (2000, 17) has noted, this makes for a context that is wholly novel:

"Ideologically, the novelty of the present situation stands out in historical view…
For the first time since the Reformation, there are no longer any significant
oppositions – that is, systematic rival outlooks – within the thought-world of the
West; and scarcely any on a world-scale either.…Whatever limitations persist to its
practice, neo-liberalism as a set of principles rules undivided across the globe: the
most successful ideology in world history." To speak of the end of 'ideology' as such
may well be misleading; to speak of the end of ideological conflict, on the other
hand, is to draw attention to something that is probably without precedent.

   The second feature that is relevant here is that governments, and the parties
which both occupy them and try to oppose them, have now begun to experience
significantly more constraints on their capacity for policy maneuver. This is
something which is obviously being experienced by all governments in what is an
increasingly internationalized and globalized economy, but it is also something that
is particularly pronounced within the European Union system. Parties are
increasingly constrained to share programs and policies, and, when in government,
they share in their implementation. Rhetorical flourishes may well allow the voter to
distinguish the parties in any particular government from those in opposition, as
may the constant criticisms of the modes of governance – if not their outcomes; but it
now appears that substantial contrasts in the practice of policy are more and more
difficult to discern. It is increasingly that case that government proceeds by
regulation rather than by partisan policy-making.

   The third feature of relevance here is that contemporary political parties find
it more difficult to present themselves as being very different from one another, in
that one of the key features which once served to distinguish them, a set of distinct
organizational identities, has also become blurred. As parties fish in the same shared
pool of voters, they necessarily tend to adopt similar organizational and
campaigning techniques. Parties learn to imitate one another's successes. Modes of
communicating with potential voters have also become more professionalized and
hence standardized across parties. In most cases in contemporary Europe, the
individual parties have now abandoned an emphasis on maintaining their own
separate party presses, and they now compete with one another for space and for

attention in the shared national media and on the public broadcasting networks. For voters, it is now almost impossible to filter out the alternative messages or to listen exclusively to just one source of political cues. To pay attention to one party is to pay attention to all, since each will have its own spokesperson in the various studio discussions, or will have its own comments to offer for inclusion in the various newspaper reports. As parties abandon the notion of organization in depth, and as they increasingly channel their resources into professional campaigning organizations, they inevitably look more similar to one another. Certainly, the ways in which they appeal to voters become less and less party-specific.

The final feature to note here, but also one of the most significant, is the loss of a partisan strategic identity. Almost all parties in the western democracies are now governing parties, in the sense that each now maintains a realistic expectation of enjoying a least a limited period in office. Few if any important parties are now seen as being permanently excluded from participation in cabinets. In most cases, moreover, and not least as a result of the increased levels of fragmentation which have tended to mark European party systems over the past two decades, access to office usually requires the formation of coalitions, and hence the building of cross-party friendships and alliances. And what is most striking about these processes, especially as they have developed over the past ten years, is that they are characterized by increasing levels of political promiscuity: French socialists share office with French ecologists, as do German socialists with German ecologists; Dutch secular parties, and, indeed, Belgian secular parties, now share office without requiring the traditional bridging mechanisms provided by the religious mainstream; the Austrian People's Party has proved capable of forging an effective coalition with the extreme right Freedom Party; the British Labour Party has built an informal but path-breaking alliance with the Liberals; in Italy, the incorporation of the former fascist National Alliance into a right-wing coalition was succeeded by another novel government which included both former Communists and former Christian Democrats. In Ireland, the traditionally conservative Fine Gael last held office only by virtue of a coalition which included the former far left Workers' Party. In short, long established patterns of government formation are now being rapidly

broken, and parties which were once traditional enemies are now finding common governmental ground. In the parliamentary democracies of the early twenty-first century, it is now increasingly difficult to conceive of inter-party alliances that could be rules out in principle. The parties are promiscuous.

All of this suggests it is now less and less easy for voters to see meaningful ideological or purposive differences between parties, or to see these differences as being particularly relevant to their own needs and situation. In other words, because of the blurring identities of parties, as well as their changing functions and changes in the way they organize and present themselves, voters seem to find it less and less easy to see them as representatives as such.

II.   What are the consequences of these changes?

Although it is often difficult to specify the particular chain of cause and effect within these very generalized patterns of party and party system change, there are two important implications which merit particular attention, and which may already be seen in nuce.

First, and most obviously, the politics involved in this process risks to become ever more depoliticized. More than 30 years ago, in fact, scholars such as Lijphart (1968) and Dahl (1966) were already predicting that this was likely to become the case, with the latter very presciently forecasting the development of a political world which would become "too remote and bureaucratized, too addicted to bargaining and compromise, [and] too much an instrument of political elites and technicians" (Dahl, 1966: 400). Depoliticization is also enhanced by other developments, including the transfer of some key policy responsibilities upwards to the European level; the transfer of other responsibilities sideways to independent regulatory agencies and so-called expert commissions; and the increasingly frequent resort to the use of judicial authorities and even popular referendums in order to evade the need for decision-making at the level of government itself.

Second, and as part of the same process, the citizens themselves risk becoming *indifferent* to politics. This, I believe, is potentially the most serious consequence of the changes which I have outlined above, since indifference to

conventional politics may also eventually translate into indifference to democracy itself. To some extent, this can be seen already in the scepticism with which many voters appear to view the political process, and in the negative judgements which they have about political leaders and the political class. It can also be seen, of course, in the evidence of popular disengagement. But it is also important to note here that this indifference to conventional politics is also visible at the *intellectual* level, and within the discourse of much of the modern literature on the problems of modern democracy. In brief, the argument which we now see more and more often within the more normative literature dealing with the problems of contemporary democracies is not one which emphasizes the renewal or revitalization of politics, as such, but one which increasingly seeks to *deny* politics.

We can see this in a variety of forms. One such, for example, is the tendency to associate so-called "good" democracy with elements within the civic culture alone rather than also within the state and political system more generally (e.g., Beck, 1992; Leadbeater, 1997). A second can be seen in the writings of a number of the new "Third Way" intellectuals, in which "real" politics is no longer seen to be about parties, parliaments, and the state – the traditional institutions, as it were, which are often effectively dismissed – but rather to be about what happens at the level of what is called "sub-politics", the politics of private society, where the engagement of active citizen can easily compensate for, and prove better than, the lack of engagement in the more conventional political world (e.g., Beck, 1992; Hirst & Khilnani, 1996). A third form can be seen in the calls for a greater emphasis on the need for government *for* the people as opposed to government *by* the people. In a complex political world, it is argued here, governments need to seek their legitimacy through outputs rather than through inputs, while political decision-making more generally is better seen as the prerogative of experts and bureaucrats rather than that of elected politicians (e.g., Blinder, 1997; Scharpf, 1999). What also follows here is the view that we therefore need not worry so much about the failings in conventional politics – the self-serving political class, the inadequate procedures, and so on. Nor need we worry so much about political decisions being passed to experts, about depoliticization, about democratic deficits in the EU, and so on. This is not where the

real politics is to be found anymore, and as long as the sub-political world remains alive, these other failings may not seem to matter that much. This is indifference in another sense.

III.   What sort of future?

From a party point of view, this indifference, both popular and intellectual, clearly poses a severe problem. So what can parties do? In other words, faced with increased popular disengagement and indifference, faced with a declining representative capacity, faced with a withering of their organizational presence, and, finally, faced also with the persuasive language of a new generation of democratic theorists who seek solutions within civil society rather than in the world of politics, can parties have a future? Are any opportunities open to them, even in the shorter-term?

We can obviously speculate endlessly on this, and we must also be aware that the circumstances, though currently unfavourable to parties as protagonists of representative democracy, may also change. But allowing for that, the following conclusions suggest themselves.

Let me begin by enumerating a number of things which parties will probably have to accept as given, at least for the foreseeable future. First, there seems little or no prospect of rebuilding strong party roots within the society. The era of the mass party has passed. The electorate, and the society as a whole, has inevitably become more remote and more individualized. Disengagement from traditional politics is a reality, and the capacity to maintain a distinct and powerful organizational identity is by now a thing of the past. The new politics of party is different. Second, there seems little or no prospect for parties to develop a partisan identity that is sufficiently strong to guarantee a legitimacy on its own. Whether because of internationalization more generally, or because of the influence of European constraints in particular, it is unlikely that the room for partisan policy maneuver will be significantly expanded in the near future. The age of strong ideological projects has also passed. Third, for these and other reasons it is increasingly difficult to see how parties can significantly enhance their now reduced representative role. If anything, this role seems likely to undergo even greater erosion in the foreseeable

future. This is perhaps the most important implication of the changes noted above, and is amply reinforced by assessments of the changes that are affecting not only of parties, but also of parliaments and voters (Andeweg, 1998).

It follow from this that the most significant role which may remain for parties in the foreseeable future, and certainly the most dominant role, will be procedural. For parties, therefore, it is the *democracy* side of representative democracy, rather than the *representative* side, which is likely to prove crucial, albeit not exclusively so. Moreover, it is precisely this role which is *not* now being challenged. When parties are criticized, it is for their representative failings; when they are challenged – by new social movements or by protagonists of an the alternative politics, or whatever – it is as organizations. By contrast, nobody, or at least no democrat, seeks to challenge or replace their procedural or governing role. This is the function for which parties are still believed to be necessary, even if, in some scenarios, this function is itself increasingly devalued.

Although the precise manner in which parties can and will adapt to their future role is, as yet, far from certain, it is nevertheless clear that the new parties will be marked off from their predecessors by virtue of their lack of any significant external organization, and hence by the absence of an autonomous presence on the ground. In place of this, parties will be likely to rely on listening to, and securing the contingent endorsement of, independent non-party organizations in civil society. In other words, the parties of the future will allow the burgeoning world of interest organizations and social movements to substitute for their own increasingly debilitated partisan organizations. Looked at simply in terms of communication, this could certainly serve these parties well. Indeed, such independent non-party organizations are likely to offer a much more effective source of feedback and ideas than any traditional party organization could hope to provide. Moreover, this would also prove a very efficient system from the party point of view, in that the parties themselves would no longer be required to nurture their own membership bodies and instead would be free to devote their resources to their campaign organizations, on the one hand, and to developing the necessary expertise to sustain the party in public office, on the other. In a sense, what we can see here, therefore, is a new

division of labour, in which interest organizations channel representation, whereas the now stripped-down parties busy themselves with governing.

But there is also a problem here, particularly for parties of the left. When parties organized their own channels of representation, and when they functioned as mass parties, their reach was potentially inclusive. When representation is channeled through organized interests, on the other hand, however loosely defined, then it is almost inevitable that while some interests will be organized into politics, others will be organized out. Corporate representation, even when writ very large, is in this sense very different from the sort of representation that is available through mass electoral democracy and that was previously channeled by the mass party. To be sure, votes, and hence mass electoral democracy itself, may count for less in an age when the very notion of political representation seems difficult to grasp and to operate, but participation in the electoral process nevertheless remains marked off from participation in other political arenas by virtue of the equality which it concedes as well as by virtue of the absence of resources that it demands. In other words, and as in the past, votes offer a voice to those who might otherwise find themselves excluded from organized civil society, a voice which was always recognized by the mass party, but which may now find itself neglected as those mass parties pass away.

This is not a new argument, of course. Indeed, some forty years ago, E.E. Schattschneider (1960) used precisely these terms when seeking to highlight the biases inherent in what he then referred to as the "pluralist heaven". In the new century, however, the argument emerges with even greater force and with a much wider application. Schattschneider's point of reference in 1960 was that of American politics, where the parties had never sought to build organizations on the European model, and where, even then, they were essentially the prisoners of organized interests. As a result, for Schattschneider, the ordinary citizens could at best be regarded as "semi-sovereign". Now, forty years on, as European parties move away from their old models, as representation becomes both more inchoate and less manageable, and as party organizations look likely to be substituted by organized interests within civil society, popular sovereignty also begins to slip away from this

more protected world.   There are some obvious respects in which adaptation to such a future is likely to pose a particular difficulty for the traditional parties of the left. While Duverger (1954) may have adopted too limited a perspective in treating the mass party as "a socialist invention", it is nevertheless clear that the model of the mass party that has now passed was especially well suited to the traditional socialist project. Socialist parties certainly found no difficulty in operating a politics that assumed distinct social constituencies that were bounded by clear collective interests, and that were represented through a more or less tight and hierarchical organizational network (see also Kirchheimer, 1966; Neumann, 1956). And although mass denominational parties often built on similar assumptions, it was clear that most other parties of the center and right often struggled to live up to the organizational and programmatic tenets associated with their rivals on the left. In this sense, adaptation on the right is now also likely to prove that much easier than on the left – there is simply that much less to discard.

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