

doesn't apply in Europe, even though the center-left parties like to think it does.

It has almost become a truism by now: If center-left parties in Europe wish to win back broad support among the European public, they must address the real concerns and core interests of that public, not just the issues they think they are best qualified and equipped to address on the basis of their traditional ideological commitments. Otherwise, the will of the voters will continue to find other outlets, and stormy days ahead will continue to be in the forecast for Europe's center-left parties.



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## **Why Do We Still Need Catch-all Parties?**

What's wrong with the parties? They once played a starring role in democratic politics; have they now been demoted to the status of bit players? They once represented important societal interests; do they now represent less those interests than the functional imperatives of the political system? Do they make a show of presenting (pseudo-) alternatives in waging their campaigns without really being able to shape policy? One thing is obvious: The contexts in which we speak of parties today usually involve scenarios of crisis, decline, and downfall. They are said to be organizations suffering from cultural sclerosis. Critics like to point to significant shortfalls in everything from the number of their members and voters as well as to their shrinking reservoirs of trust and diminished representational capacities.

Three basic trends are responsible for the parties' difficulties. First, political processes have become more complex, which hampers problem-solving and blurs the lines of political accountability. Second, society has become more individualized and pluralistic, which renders it far more difficult for parties to make group-based appeals. Finally, de-nationalization and globalization pose challenges to the steering capacity of national policymaking. The end result of these trends is that it has become harder to articulate interests while participation via representation falls far short of what it should be in a »typical« democratic regime. Above all, the political sphere has struggled to control liberalized markets and achieve desirable outcomes for society. In this context, the parties have become attractive scapegoats for many things that are referred to under the rubric of »being badly governed« (Pierre Rosanvallon).

On the one hand – and in contrast to the Imperial Constitution of the Weimar Republic – Article 21 of Germany's Basic Law assigns the parties a positive role in shaping political processes. On the other hand, the executive, the expert-ocracy, and non-majoritarian institutions such as the Federal Constitutional Court dominate the political sphere. At the same time, the approval ratings of the parties have reached

new lows, exceeded only by the still lower ratings of career »politicians.« So are the parties really a moribund element of the political system, one that has outlived its historical mission and no longer can meet its constitutionally mandated obligations?

In reality, the situation is not quite as unambiguous as the doom-and-gloom discourses would make us believe. The party critics' outstanding virtue is their ability accurately to identify the weak points and dysfunctionalities of the status quo. Unfortunately, it usually proves difficult to deduce any clear directives for remedial action from their criticisms. Nevertheless, without calling into question the dominant system of representative parliamentary democracy, we will neither be able to understand its relevance and appropriateness, nor appreciate the need for reform processes in it. At any rate, the parties' position in respect to the challenges currently facing them is hardly cause for optimism. It is telling that the democratic parties in Germany have not been able to prevent the upsurge of right-wing populism, although they did manage to fend it off longer than their counterparts in other European countries. Still, it is not clear whether they failed to stymie the far right because they were unequal to the task or because they were unwilling to take it on. There is evidence in support of either interpretation. Furthermore, the impending integration of the AfD into the party system demonstrates that the latter is still able to respond to changes in the social landscape and to fill specific gaps in the spectrum of representation.

Where did the idea actually originate that parties could ever function as representative entities and establish trustworthy ties to the electorate? Belief in their ability to fulfill those roles can be traced back to the social and moral environment shaped by conflicts that arose in the wake of industrialization, the formation of national states, and the secularization of the state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From this environment emerged ties and social prospects in which the parties assumed a mediating role between segmented social milieus and the state, one that was built upon party-political competition among left-wing, Catholic-conservative, and liberal ideas. Those circumstances exist today only in a rudimentary form, in trace elements. At any rate the relationships that crystallized around them have not survived either in the form of stage-management or in genuine party competition that can be taken seriously as a means of representing civic interests. Even if it is incorrect to say that there are »no alternatives« to the parties or that they are »indestructible« (Ulrich von Alemann), their adaptability and transformational capabilities cannot be denied. The parties have undergone constant change in respect to their organizational form, programs, and functions. These shifts are evident, among other things, in the remarkable transformation of the party system itself, which (in ideal-typical form) has been described under various rubrics: parties of notables, parties of mass integration, catch-all parties, professionalized parties of parliamentary delegations (»fractions«), and voter parties. Thus, they have proven capable of modifying their own functions. Is that enough?

### **What might replace catch-all parties?**

One thing is certain: old-fashioned catch-all parties are history. But what might replace them? Who is going to perform the necessary mediating work between soci-

ety and the state? When we think about alternatives to parties, we usually have in mind either civil society with its numerous initiatives, both old and new, or organizations. The former relieve the state of some of its burdens while acting as an early warning system for newly emergent conflicts, interests, and needs; thus, they are responsive in the best sense of the word. They are faster, more fluid, and less hierarchically organized than parties. They winnow out authentic responses from conflict-laden situations and are thus an expression of vital societal engagement. But does that put them in a position to replace party competition and play a permanent, constitutive role in politics? Aren't these forms of politics too intermittent, particularistic, socially selective, and thus non-political reliably to represent society as a whole and forge real bonds between citizens and the state? If one looks at who actually gets involved in the activities of civil society, it is remarkable that, in many cases, the participants are a cross-section of the academic middle classes. The concerns of the lower strata are often overlooked.

Another frequently cited alternative is interest groups, i.e., formal associations. Isn't it conceivable that they could replace the parties, given that they are powerful actors that formulate the primary interests of society? Historically, such considerations have played a role, for example, in the social teachings of the Catholic Church. The latter advocated a corporatist order in which committees from each profession would constitute the political process through their own organizations. Also, the corporatism theorist Philippe C. Schmitter occasionally lobs a theory of democracy-by-associations into the debate. What is wrong with that approach? Mostly it is the interest groups' diminished competence to act politically, which finds expression in their declining membership numbers, and lessened capacity to represent and make agreements binding upon their members. But they also suffer from a reduced integrative capacity; i.e., they seem more and more interested in lobbying in behalf of their own partial interests and less concerned with pursuing broader, integrative societal goals. In short, it is beginning to seem unrealistic to expect these associations to mediate between particular and universal interests.

Finally, the idea of an enhanced version of direct democracy plays an important role as a conceptual antipode to the mediating role of parties in representative democracy. Its significance has increased enormously in the past few years, and not only in public discourses. Particularly at the local government level, it already has enjoyed wide acclaim. Enthusiasm for taking the next step toward a more encompassing commitment to direct democracy has waned, primarily due to three trends. First, it has become clear that the instrument of direct democracy can as easily bring about social and democratic regression as it can spur progress (cf. educational policy in Hamburg). Second, its procedures are set up to favor majority rule; hence they are not very sensitive to minority concerns. In addition, participation in the procedures of direct democracy tends to be socially selective. People from lower social strata participate less often in such balloting than they do in general elections. Third, demands for more direct-democratic procedures are favored in right-wing populist policies, because advocates of the latter sense an opportunity to emotionalize their concerns and reduce the complexity behind political decisions. To sum up: plebi-

scitary, direct-democratic elements, especially deliberative procedures carried out at grass-roots levels, unquestionably can complement other kinds of opinion-formation and decision-making. However, because of their intermittent character and – above all – their socially selective dimension, they do not pose a true alternative to the parties and their ability to present more encompassing visions of the political and social order.

All of the alternatives noted above are pseudo-alternatives. If they were to become the measure of all things, that would radically alter and diminish democracy. They tend to reduce participation, emotionalize serious debates on complex problematics, and generate more social inequality. Nevertheless, the parties must make greater and more professional use of these actors and instruments in their own work, because the latter do have distinct advantages. Even though all of these pseudo-alternatives lack the ability to think of society as one grand totality and see how particular interests fit into it, given the proper embedding they can help enable the parties better to fulfill their universal ordering function. In this respect it is not so much a matter of replacing parties but of redefining their roles in a new, more precise and up-to-date manner. Part and parcel of this redefinition is the recognition that the parties' influence will be less than it was in their heyday. To acknowledge that fact honestly is to clear the way for new steps. And their operational capacities can be improved only if they attend to further reforms in order to reinforce the logic of interest-driven politics on their own terms. There are a number of changes that would contribute to that improvement, such as instituting direct primary elections, finding different ways of recruiting personnel, and seeking better methods of social embedding, etc. The latter would include initiating a dialogue with the most innovative social forces. Nor should actors be ignored who observe the political system with a critical eye, hoping to reshape the democratic rules of the game to make the latter serve the interests of society more effectively. When parties take greater account of society's interests and needs and enhance their function as sources of orientation, they have a chance to stay in the game. In this sense the procedures and actors mentioned already do not pose alternatives to the parties; however, parties can make use of certain aspects of those actors to reinforce their own vital linkages to their respective societies.



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