

Can political parties evolve if the political system does not?

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Abstract Political parties within democratic systems are facing enormous challenges. The democratic system and political parties have changed relatively little in the course of modern history. However, today's societies and economies are experiencing major changes due to globalisation and the disruptive power of the Internet. Traditional party politics and party activities are no longer as appealing as in the past. Thus political parties need to change to regain their appeal with voters. However, such changes are only possible to a certain extent: despite the fact that political parties have new tools available to them to communicate and organise their supporters, the political system defines the environment and limits within which they operate. Political parties can only evolve to a limited extent in an unchanging political system. The renewal of the political and democratic process has to include both the evolution of the existing political structures and finding innovative new ways in which to enhance political communication and mobilisation.

Keywords Democracy · Politics · Political parties · Citizen participation · Political system · Social movements · Internet

Introduction

Many current societal trends seem to be working against party-based democracy. A major decline in the membership of political parties has long been observed (Van Biezen et al. 2012). Similarly, voter participation in elections, of all

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types, has fallen. As a result, the need for the renewal of political parties has become prominent in public discourse. Almost ironically, while democracy and the values it presents are still considered of high importance, public perception of political parties and institutions is rather negative (Dalton 2008). Party politics is seen by many as a necessary evil. Yet, political parties are an essential part of a well-functioning democratic system, as democracy is a universal value and the democratic system undoubtedly one of the greatest achievements of Western civilisation (Sen 1999).

Political parties and their structures evolved when society was fundamentally different—mostly in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century—and the origins of our current modern parliamentary systems can be dated to almost 350 years ago. In today's world, the environment in which political parties find themselves operating has fundamentally changed. Globalisation, through the digital communications revolution, has changed how society is structured, how individuals work and how they communicate. However, parliamentary democracy as a system remains largely unchanged, and the same is true of political parties.

To what extent can one expect political parties to renew themselves and to better respond to current societal challenges? Is such an adaptation even possible without the evolution of the political system which includes the democratic and state institutions? In order to answer these questions, one must understand the changes in the political environment, analyse the changing dynamics between different political actors, and understand the global trends affecting political parties on the national and local level.

A new environment for political parties: fragmentation, globalisation and changing societal dynamics

The traditional left–right divide in party politics was based on clear divisions in society which largely no longer exist. Large segments of society are fragmented and this means that the major political platforms of the past are now being challenged or are no longer functioning. Fragmentation is the new norm in politics and parliaments (Traynor 2014). In recent years supporters within parties have coalesced politically while moving ever further away from the supporters of other parties. This phenomenon is very visible in the US (Mooney 2012), but it is also present in Europe. The result is that party politics has become increasingly polarised on both sides of the Atlantic. This polarisation makes compromise, and thereby effective governance, more difficult. Voter volatility (Dassonneville and Hogghe 2011), decreasing credibility and the corrosion of party loyalties have become normal in European party politics.

Globalisation and technological developments have connected different views, different opinions and different communities that were previously highly dispersed. Individuals who are geographically isolated from others who share their political views can now easily find like-minded people through the Internet.

Local communities remain important, but global communities are rapidly gaining significance in the establishment of group political identities.

As social classes are breaking down in many countries, individuals are choosing to identify with various fragmented communities—some close to them geographically, others further away. As a result, individuals have less of a need to compromise their views or preferences in order to fit into the society in which they find themselves located. Within a geographic unit, such as a state, people's views and preferences are differing more than ever before. In elections and for political parties the result is the fragmentation of the political party system. Renewal and change in the party political landscape itself can be a positive and even necessary thing. Nevertheless, the mainstream catch-all parties with their longer histories have an important role to play in providing stability and continuity in the political system.

The Internet and social media—a revolution for political parties?

The Internet and social media have radically changed the way in which we communicate, including during political campaigns. US election campaigns, particularly the 2008 and 2012 Obama presidential campaigns, have pioneered a digital revolution in how political campaigns and parties communicate their messages effectively.

As a means of mass communication, the Internet appears to be the ideal tool for more effective, dynamic and efficient communication from political movements. But can the Internet replace traditional political party platforms? And can it really improve political decision-making? The key question seems to be how to effectively and democratically integrate large groups of people into national-level political decision-making. As an example of radical ideas for a new type of decision-making, advocates of 'open source democracy' claim that democratic systems need to open up their decision-making processes in the same way that 'open source' software is accessible for anybody to alter, change and develop.

There seem to be hopes and aspirations that a game changer will soon be developed. This 'Facebook of politics' would expand the possibilities for political communication and engagement. A new start-up, Brigade.com, which is due to be launched by the founders of Facebook and aims to restore 'the voter to the center of our democracy', is one example of a project which hopes to redefine politics in the Internet era (*Brigade.com* n.d.). Douglas Carswell, a British Member of Parliament, has suggested that political parties should resemble the commercial music streaming service Spotify (Martin 2014). Carswell believes that the Internet is a crucial tool in the process of reforming political parties to be more open, as it enables members to vote online to determine aspects of party policy, provides more space for single-issue movements and allows dissent from the party line.

So far, the most serious and perhaps the most successful attempts to use the Internet not only as a communication tool but as the structural basis for a political party have been made by the pirate parties, which were most successful



in Germany. The pirate parties attempted to change party politics radically, aiming at full transparency through the use of the Internet for all party matters. However, after initial successes, it was clear that the pirate parties were not able to meet these expectations or offer an alternative model for mainstream parties. Political movements need to be able to respond to single issues. But at the same time, parties need a broad political agenda to be able to respond to the wide-ranging challenges faced by society. The pirate parties were unable to develop a wider political agenda and having 'no position' on a variety of issues undermined their credibility. One of the founders of the pirate movement, Peter Sunde, has stated that the movement is dead and has encouraged the members of the movement to join other parties (Sunde 2015).

The Internet and social media have changed the form, volume and frequency of political communication, but there is no evidence that the quality or content of the communication has changed to the same extent. Similarly, there is no evidence that, despite the massive increase in the availability of information, the quality of political decision-making has improved significantly. Social media has radically amplified the opportunities for citizens to connect around the planet at a very low cost. This increasingly applies not only to the Western world but also to people in developing countries. The Arab revolutions in 2011–12 in North Africa and the Middle East, which drew thousands of demonstrators into the street, are often mentioned as an example of the strength of modern social media as a tool of political mobilisation.

Sociologist Zeynep Tufekci (2014b), who has studied recent political movements and their relationship with online social changes, puts a damper on the enthusiasm surrounding the possibilities of the Internet. According to her research on the era of the Internet, social action is easy to organise but difficult to maintain. She argues that although political movements take less effort to organise online, this does not always mean that political goals are more easily achieved. Even though online activism is easy to grow, it often does not last.

Tufekci's conclusion is that many of the current fast-growing social and political movements are like business start-ups that quickly become very large and do not know what to do when this happens. While organising a demonstration 50 years ago might have been much more complicated and challenging, it was those very challenges whose resolution created the organisational capacity building and motivational commitment necessary to sustain political parties. In other words, current political movements are relatively easy to organise spontaneously but they can die out just as easily (Tufekci 2014a).

In Tufekci's view, political movements today need to move beyond mass participation and think about common policy proposals. For her, the answer is not just better online decision-making. Rather, in order to reinvent democracy one needs to innovate at every level, from the organisational to the political and social, and Tufekci believes that democracy needs to be developed in a wider context, which also takes into account the traditional societal elements, in order to be successful. Tufekci's study makes an important point by underlining the fact that the renewal of the political system cannot simply involve abandoning

the traditional political structures in favour of something totally new. The renewal of the political and democratic process has to include both the evolution of the existing political structures and innovative new ways to enhance political communication and mobilisation.

Politician versus citizen: should the roles be redefined?

Can political parties and the system be changed without redefining the role of the basic political actor—the politician? Many make the argument that we need professional politicians because gathering the information needed for political decision-making is a full-time job. The question is whether this is really true for all politicians. On a regional and community level the role of elected representative is often not full time; those elected execute their democratic mandate while having other jobs. Perhaps the political system should be enhanced by a class of part-time politicians, formally integrated into the political system using today's technological solutions. The advantage of this would be that more citizens could be integrated into the political decision-making process.

According to Manin (1997), the political system has developed into an 'audience' democracy in which the relationship between politicians and voters is similar to that between theatre actors and their audience. Manin's claim partly explains increasing voter volatility. If politics is seen only as a 'show', it is very easy to change the channel, and such a situation also allows the audience to abdicate responsibility for what happens on the stage.

Citizens often feel that they do not have anything political to say. But are citizens more interested in political participation if they are given easier access? There is no proof that citizens will always participate more in politics simply as a result of increasing the opportunities for political participation. The main argument for political non-participation is a classic case of moral hazard: people feel that for them personally it is more advantageous to concentrate on advancing their personal interests rather than advancing the collective interests of society.

In order to ensure voter participation, voting in national elections is obligatory in many European countries. However, focusing on voting alone is not enough. There is, though, a need to concentrate on citizens' participation in the decision-making process. Citizens have obligations and responsibilities in society. If a well-functioning political system is seen as essential for a well-functioning state, then perhaps we need to increase the responsibilities of the citizens beyond voting. In the future citizens may be asked not only to vote, but, at least temporarily, to participate significantly more actively in political life.

Broken government, broken politics or both?

There is a growing gap between expectations and delivery in the political system, which has contributed to yet further dissatisfaction. In their book,



Micklethwait and Wooldridge (2014) argue that the role of the state in the Western world is too large and has too many responsibilities, and that there is a need to rethink the very functioning and purpose of the modern state.

Especially since the onset of the global economic crisis in 2008, a line of thought has emerged that Western political systems have a major problem meeting the economic expectations of their citizens (Moyo 2012). This is contrasted with the rapid economic development of the new global powers, such as China and India. Not only are the economic choices and decisions of Western liberal democracies in question, but the very concept of Western democracy is under scrutiny.

As has been noted above, political parties are becoming more unstable due to both internal and external factors, but is this only true of the parties or is there a more fundamental change taking place that is impacting all political institutions and actors? In his book, *The End of Power*, Moisés Naím (2014) argues that all powerful social actors, including the state, corporations and even religions, are being challenged more than ever before in this complex globalised world, while not yet having lost their power. The situation of mainstream political parties supports this argument as they are increasingly finding it difficult to defend their position.

Heimans and Timms (2014) formulate the dynamics related to political power as the concepts of 'old power' and 'new power' in the Internet era. For them, 'new power' is the deployment of mass participation and peer coordination to create change and shift outcomes. In their view, the challenge is how to use institutional power without becoming institutionalised. They see traditional actors as objects rather than subjects and, like Naím, see the current development as a challenge for existing institutions.

An increasing number of voices are asking what is wrong with democracy. This is an extremely difficult question for politicians in the Western world to answer, especially as democracy is not simply seen as a way to organise political decision-making but rather as a value in and of itself. Performance evaluations of democratic institutions are often viewed as a criticism of the principles of democracy itself.

It is very important to separate democratic values from their implementation. Democratic values are universal and not up for negotiation. But the mechanisms and institutions through which they are realised require constant scrutiny and examination. It is not a contradiction to be very convinced of the superiority of democratic ideals while criticising how they are implemented in the political system. For Western political elites to deny that there is room for improvement in the application of democracy would be a fatal mistake.

What do successful political parties do?

A major challenge for any organisation today, not only political parties, is building loyalty. People prefer low entry costs for engagement, allowing them to

disengage quickly. Unfortunately for political parties, party membership is often considered a commitment with a social cost.

Today more than in the past, people prefer to align themselves with values not ideologies. Voters want to engage with individual projects with limited commitment, not comprehensive party programmes. Complex belief structures are often considered old-fashioned and not applicable to modern life.

Consequently, individual policy issues and the values they represent seem to increasingly define voting behaviour. People can see themselves signing up for issue-based campaigns rather than permanent party membership. Successful parties are accepting this new reality and dealing with it. More and more political parties are organising issue-based campaigns which use separate branding without denying the campaigns' relationship with a political party. People are invited to campaign on the issues, rather than for the party itself.

A good example of this is the campaign team of the German Christian Democratic Union (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands), called 'teAM Deutschland', which consisted of more than 21,000 volunteers (including both party members and non-members) divided into local municipalities for the 2013 German general election. On its online platform, called 'teAMNETz', all members received information about the ongoing election campaign, including discussion papers and details of public events. Importantly, the platform offered the opportunity for members to contribute ideas and make statements on social and political topics. Thus, through this platform, non-members had the chance to contribute to defining the objectives of the Christian Democratic Union.

Another example of project-type campaigning was the concept of Café Niinistö that emerged during Finland's presidential election in 2012. The centre-right Kokoomus party launched meeting places around the country, called Café Niinistö after the party's candidate, which were managed by volunteers. These cafés aimed to make political discourse a normal aspect of everyday life for the duration of the campaign. All together 94 Cafés were established, more than initially planned. Café Niinistö became a key mobilising factor in the successful campaign, enhancing engagement with it and increasing visibility.

The dynamics of the German and Finnish examples are the same: both projects were clearly party-related spins-offs with a limited duration. The projects had their own separate branding and clear operational concepts, independent of the daily running of the political party and its traditional structures, and aimed for a broader approach that went beyond usual party politics.

Thus, while party membership seems to be too much of a commitment for today's citizens, successful political parties have launched issue-based campaigns which non-members can join. Membership is no longer a black-and-white choice between 'yes' and 'no', but rather a choice between many shades of grey.

The changed political environment has already underlined certain tactics and strategies which seem to be common to those political parties that are successfully adapting to modern political trends. Successful political parties need to reflect not only on their policy programme and their political agenda but also on their organisation, communication and activities in a similar way to businesses—actively questioning both the tasks and the function of the party.



Conclusion

Many political parties have successfully adapted to the new challenges and have developed new tactics which have helped their campaigns. However, the challenge political parties are facing is not for them alone but for the whole political system.

It had been hoped that the Internet and social media would boost citizens' engagement in political parties. Yet, despite the arrival of new social media and communication tools, which have had a substantial impact on political campaigning, there does not seem to be a quick fix or short-cut for political parties. The Internet alone cannot resolve the challenges of political participation, engagement and decision-making. The Internet and social media have changed the environment political parties are operating in and have created opportunities, but have also brought new challenges that require resolution.

As political parties are an integral part of the democratic system and states' political systems, the challenges facing political parties need to be seen in the wider context of the overall political system. Can political parties evolve if the political system does not? Yes, but only to a limited extent. At the end of the day, the existence of political parties is dependent on their capacity to mobilise people and win elections. Therefore, reflection needs to take place on both levels: at the grass-roots level to improve and evolve the political parties in their daily activities, but also on the systemic level—reflecting the political and democratic system as a whole. Democratic ideas and values have not lost their strength, but the tools used to deliver democracy clearly have.

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