

Excerpt from:

After the Mass Party: Continuity and Change in Political Parties and Representation in Norway

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Lexington Books, 2015.

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<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781498516549/After-the-Mass-Party-Continuity-and-Change-in-Political-Parties-and-Representation-in-Norway>

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Political Parties and Representative Democracy

In most established parliamentary democracies, parties have lost members, and they increasingly rely on state subventions to finance their activities. Their ties to civil society are weaker than those of the “mass parties” operating after WWII. The message in much recent research, particularly on European parties, is that these changes threaten party-based democracy: today, parties rule more than they represent (e.g., Katz and Mair 1995; 2009; van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012; Mair 2006; 2013). In this book, we test this argument by examining the extent to which parties’ representative capacity has in fact declined in the wake of their decay as membership organizations. Has parties’ ability to channel voter interests into political institutions weakened since the heyday of mass parties?

We question both the theoretical and empirical foundations of the decline thesis. First, we argue that one needs to better specify what party-based representation through membership organizations means, and that we must examine the conditions under which fewer members and more state financing is likely to result in a decline in party representation. Second, we contend that there has not been enough empirical research to substantiate claims of decline, partly due to a lack of appropriate data.

Accordingly, this book has a dual purpose. First, we aim to critically discuss *why* one should expect a decline in parties’ membership organization to weaken party representation. We argue that this brings up an essential question in modern democracies: whether the organizational party channel is significant or irrelevant, given the representative capacity parties generate through the electoral channel. The distinction is also familiar in the US–European divide in evaluating the role of parties in democracy (e.g., Ranney 1951; Wright 1971). Second, on this basis, we make two empirical enquiries by looking at the viability of members’ intra-party activities and the degree to which voters’ social backgrounds and political attitudes match the social profile and policy views of the party members, party organizational elites, and

parliamentary representatives. First, we examine relevant empirical studies both of voters and party organizations (members and activists), and of voters and parliamentary groups (members of parliaments, MPs) to summarize what we already know. Second, we present an in-depth case study of Norwegian voters and parties, based on a number of longitudinal surveys conducted between 1990 and 2010.

Finally, in the last chapter, we summarize our main findings. We conclude that the comparative, empirical literature is scarce and indecisive, whereas the Norwegian parties still seem to represent voters fairly well, both socially and on important policy issues, despite the waning of mass parties. We argue that the high policy congruence between voters and parties (members of parliament) in Norway, which has remained stable, might be related to the fact that party members and mid-level activists still resemble voters on important social and political variables to a large degree.

At the same time, the party competition for votes still is relatively efficient, and there appears to be some interaction in terms of what happens within party organizations and the stimuli offered by competing parties. We conclude by discussing what might explain the patterns of stability and change revealed in the study, and we offer some ideas for future work on party change and its impact in contemporary representative democracies. We argue that similar patterns might be expected to appear beyond Norway as well, while noting that persistence of the mass parties' formal representative structures, and Norway's closed candidate selection processes, perhaps make Norwegian parties somewhat more resistant to shifting toward a widening gap between voters and parties.

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE MASS PARTY

The "mass party" model first referred to the socialist membership parties that emerged outside the national assemblies, based on trade union movements, cooperatives, and friendly societies (Duverger [1954] 1972, 17, 24–27, 75ff.). Party organization was a tool for a rising working class that lacked political rights, financial resources, and actual influence. Its fundamental unit was the branch and its members (*ibid.*, 25, 63). Catholic parties and agrarian parties adopted similar structures when organizing religious groups and farmers (Duverger [1954] 1972, 6). The bourgeois parties, in contrast, primarily represented the upper classes, and normally began with sufficient financial resources and easy access to public office. However, in systems with universal suffrage, these cadre parties had to follow the example of the mass parties if they were to retain their influence over time (Duverger [1954] 1972, xxvii). In the early 1950s, when Duverger published the first edition of his book, non-left parties were trying to incorporate their supporters into formal organizations (Scarrow 2002; 2015). He predicted that liberal and conservative parties alike would adapt to the mass party model to maintain electoral support.

In the beginning, the role of mass parties in democracy was hotly debated. Scholars like Mosei Ostrogorski (1902) generally feared that well-organized parties would

destroy democracy by introducing a regimentation of opinions that would curb free deliberation among “the best men.” Robert Michels (1911) saw mass parties as emerging oligarchies with no potential to provide democracy. Gradually, however, parties with a large membership and intra-party democracy became a normative ideal among Europe-oriented party scholars (Duverger 1954; Assarson 1993; Katz and Mair 1995). It was argued that such parties opened up the possibility of grassroots participation, educating the mass electorate in responsible citizenship and, consequently, strengthening the linkage between voters and representatives in public office (Heidar 2006; Allern and Pedersen 2007).

What happens, then, when these parties start to decline as membership organizations, and the state takes over as their financial provider? It has long been argued that social, technological, cultural, and political developments have made the mass party model outdated (Kirchheimer 1966). As early as in 1954, Otto Kirchheimer introduced the concept of the *catch-all party*. In his view, major West German parties no longer fitted the mass party model in terms of presenting a clear and overarching class- or group-based policy to their voters. Instead, they emphasized a “brokerage role” by seeking support from among numerous segments. The personalities and qualities of party leaders dominated media appeals, and a more “catch-all” approach to electoral campaigning indicated weakening ties to specific social classes (Kirchheimer 1966, 186). Parties were changing from mass-based into elite-dominated, professional parties.

Some thirty years later, Katz and Mair (1995) argued that “the sheer size and commitment of party memberships have generally failed to keep pace with the growth in electorates, on the one hand, and with the rapid escalating costs of party activity, on the other” (15). Parties had to look elsewhere for resources. Members were less useful to party leaders due to new means of communication (21). Parties became more elite-driven, dominated by parliamentary groups. They expected the transformation of catch-all parties into yet another organizational form: the *cartel party* (Katz and Mair 1995; 2009).

Another systemic trend supported these changes: party competition took on the characteristics of an oligopolistic market more strongly. State subventions became a major financial resource for established parties and created barriers to emergent ones (Katz and Mair 1995, 15). Given the absence of great policy battles in recent decades, winning or losing made less of a difference in parties’ political objectives. Hence, the conditions had become ideal for the formation of a cartel. The result was—in effect—interparty collusion (Katz and Mair 1995, 22; Pelizzo 2003, 40), as Kirchheimer had already foreseen in the early 1960s. Within a cartelized party system, parties developed professional organizations that were weakly rooted in civil society and characterized by closeness to the state (Katz and Mair 1995, 23). Thus, with the advent of “cartel parties,” not only was the era of party membership organizations over, but party competition for votes had also become more limited. The declining need for party members and their services, combined with decreasing party competition in the electoral markets, seems, therefore, to be the central force behind the rise of the cartel party.

The extent to which “catch-all parties,” “cartel parties,” and, not least, “cartelized” party systems actually exist is disputed (Katz and Mair 2009). It is, however, widely agreed that the era of the mass membership party is over. Undoubtedly, over the past three decades, party membership in most countries has declined significantly (van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012; Scarrow 2015). Party elites have become more powerful at the expense of ordinary party members. Parties have become increasingly centralized due to external changes, like the “medialization of politics,” the personalization of political communication, and state financing (Katz 2013, 63). At the same time, there is also a trend of granting participatory rights to registered supporters and non-members. Scarrow (2015) shows that parties now offer members better opportunities to participate in party decisions. They also offer new, lower-cost modes of party affiliation by means of new information technology. These changes may promote party legitimacy among the broader public. Some argue, however, that granting more formal rights to rank-and-file members weakens the party stratum that might actually exert influence and keep party leadership accountable: mid-level activists (Katz and Mair 1995).

There are also clear indications of a loosening of the old strong, stable ties between the former mass parties and their electorates. Parties’ grip on voters is waning. Decreasing party identification and increasing electoral volatility are well documented (Dalton 2000; Dalton, McAllister, and Wattenberg 2000). In recent decades, the public has increasingly turned to various types of interest groups and ad-hoc protests—including more individualistic modes of action, like signing petitions—to make its voice heard (Dalton 2006). The major campaign arena is not found at conventions, rallies, or caucuses, but rather in newspapers, on the national radio, on TV, and on the Internet (Farrell and Webb 2000).

A common first reaction to these developments was that parties’ general contribution to democracy’s well-being was at stake (e.g., Lawson and Merkl 1988). As the pool of active citizens became smaller, the consequence of party membership decline was weaker democracy, it was argued (van der Meer and van Ingen 2009; Whiteley 2009, 137). Even more scholars have reasoned that the *way* parties function within democracy has *changed*: they have declined as channels for popular demands and as facilitators of citizen control over MPs and other public representatives (Kirchheimer 1966; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Webb 2000; Strøm, Müller, and Bergman 2003; van Biezen 2004a; Voerman and van Schuur 2011; Whiteley 2011). Some claim that the parties have lost their legitimacy as representative organizations. Parties had withdrawn from civil society and turned into semi-state agencies, or “public utilities” (Katz and Mair 1995; van Biezen 2004b). Parties were “failing” as “citizens retreat[ed] into private life . . . while party leaderships retreat[ed] into institutions” (Mair 2006, 11). This signaled a “democracy that . . . [was] being steadily stripped of its popular component—democracy without a demos” (ibid., 1).

A less bold and more widespread claim is that a shift has taken place from the *combined* representative (“input”) and procedural (“output”) roles of parties to a more exclusively procedural function, in terms of recruitment, organization of gov-

ernment, and delivery of public policies (e.g., Bartolini and Mair 2001, 336). As the party in the public office still appears strong, the decay of parties as membership organizations primarily has weakened parties' ability to provide citizen mobilization and the aggregation or representation of voter preferences (Ignazi 1996; Strøm and Svåsand 1997; Allern and Pedersen 2007).

Consequently, according to van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke (2012), the parties' grassroot members today have more in common with the elite than with the electorate: "It might be reasonable to regard them not as constituting part of civil society—with which party membership has traditionally been associated—but rather as constituting the outer ring of an extended political class" (van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012, 39). With these words, they revisit Ostrogorski's old claim that party organizations were unrepresentative of voters in general ([1902] 1964). But while Ostrogorski argued that this trait was intrinsic to party organizations, contemporary party scholars tend to argue that the representative capacity of organized parties declined with the decline of the mass party. In short, the decline of the mass party is argued to have increased the overall social and political "distance" between voters and national party elites. The boldest version of this argument implies greater differences between voters and parties in general, not only between individual parties and their voters.

Overall, these arguments reflect the status of the mass party as the normative ideal in Europe, but as we will show in chapter 3, the jury is still out on the question of whether the representative capacity of parties has actually declined. Clearly, there is both insufficient and mixed empirical evidence. Moreover, it is necessary to specify the conditions under which weakened mass parties are likely to result in less representative party organizations and when less representative organizations will affect parties' representative capacity in the public office. A basic assumption seems to be that parties with declining membership will attract a different kind of party activist, one who will make it more likely that the party organization will select candidates and policies that alienate party supporters. If the pool of potential party candidates changes, the social and political profiles of candidates and, eventually, elected MPs may change as well. However, having fewer and less financially important members does not necessarily mean having disempowered, less representative members.

KEY RESEARCH QUESTION

All too often we are willing to accept claims that are frequently repeated, even before the facts are presented. The decline of parties' ability to channel the demands of voters to elected representatives is about to become one of these "facts." The present book makes a serious attempt to check whether this is actually true, or if it is more of a myth. Parties are not like they once were and changes in the way they work seem inevitable. Undoubtedly, they mobilize fewer citizens than before and they are increasingly financed by the state across countries. But does this weakened capacity

to *recruit and engage* really affect their ability to *represent* voters? In this book we address this question by concentrating on the party members, activists, and MPs. For the issue of representation the individuals entitled to shape party decisions are obviously relevant targets of analysis and the use of aggregated survey data enables direct comparison of voters' and parties' positions. Consequently, the formal structures of parties—an important part of former mass parties that has also significantly changed in some polities (Kirchheimer 1966; Katz and Mair 1995)—are seen as one of the factors that might impinge on the relationship.

In line with Hanna Pitkin (1967), in chapter 2, we define “representation” as “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (209). We discuss this core concept and potential measurements, and argue that a high degree of congruence between voters and the different party layers in terms of their social background and policy views indicates high representative capacity, while low congruence indicates low representative capacity. We also argue that for party affiliates outside parliament to matter, they need to be capable of influencing their parties. Accordingly, the primary general research question of this book is: *Have parties' representative capacity—in terms of member activity, communication and influence, and social and political representativeness across various party levels—weakened since the 1970s?*

Analytically, then, we look at both social and issue congruence between voters, on the one hand, and party members, congress delegates, and MPs, on the other. Empirically, we first review a wide body of relevant studies on voters, party members, and MPs along all these dimensions. Research on activities, decision-making processes, and congruence within the party organization is surveyed in light of the framework developed in chapter 2. Second, we examine new longitudinal data (1990–2010) from Norway, consisting of surveys that enable us to examine the developments in one country in detail. Most factors predicting the decline of mass parties were present in Norway during the period examined, including rising educational levels, increased social and geographical mobility, weakened political cleavages, a more individualistic culture, and professional media. Since the 1980s, party membership in Norway has more than halved, and public financial support to parties has increased substantially. All this makes Norway a suitable case for studying the representative capacity of parties “after the mass party.” Together, the “meta-study” and the single-country study will provide a basis for our final assessment of the assumed decline in the representative capacity of political parties. In conclusion, we also discuss what might explain the patterns of stability and the changes that we find over time and across parties.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

In chapter 2, we first summarize how parties came to be seen as an inherent part of modern representative democracy. Second, we discuss the concept of representation, identifying congruence in social backgrounds and, above all, policy views as

the essential indicators of representative party capacity. Moreover, we argue that the entire chain—from voters, via party members, to party congress delegates and parliamentarians—should be mapped to review party representativeness. Third, we critically discuss the theoretical foundations of the decline of party representation thesis and identify different ways in which political parties contribute to the representation of voters.

We argue that the debate is rooted in an old, partly normative dispute regarding the importance of party organizations versus party competition in parties' ability to provide representation in public office (e.g., Schattschneider 1942; Duverger [1954] 1972). Few contemporary studies, however, focus explicitly on the relative importance of and the relationship between these two mechanisms. Yet these two perspectives lead to different expectations when it comes to parties' representative capacity in public office today. Assuming both mechanisms might matter in the real world, we argue that the consequence of mass party decline for parties' representative roles is not that easy to predict.

Next, we develop an “analytical map” that allows us to study the development empirically in a more systematic and comprehensive way, with particular emphasis on the organizational channel. Activity, communication, and influence among party members are seen as necessary conditions. For the party organizations and activist members to actually matter, there should be internal party processes (activity, member influence) that sustain linkage inside the party organizations. Without such activity and communication, there is no reason to attribute any weight to the membership organization in the supplementation (or distortion) of party congruence between voters and representatives. Parties would, in that case, be merely professional organizations that help party candidates compete for public office.

In chapter 3, we undertake a “meta-study” of the empirical literature. We conclude that the claim that parties have declined as agencies of representation from the 1980s onward has been neither confirmed nor rejected by existing research. One obvious reason for this is the limited and not very reliable data available on party members; another is that longitudinal data are either non-existent or impressionistic.

The case study of Norway—conducted in the next four chapters—represents our original empirical contribution. In chapter 4, we discuss how much bearing the Norwegian political environment has on the analytical questions raised in the book. How strongly have Norwegian parties, as organizations, been stimulated to “move away” from voters? We also briefly discuss how Norway scores for a few other contextual factors that might directly influence the development of parties' representative capacity in its different guises. Finally, we present the data material to be used in the empirical analysis and discuss its assets and limitations.

In chapters 5–7, we present our main empirical research on Norwegian parties. Both differences between individual Norwegian parties and overall changes are central to the analyses. In chapter 5, we analyze the activity levels, patterns of communication, and influences inside the party organizations. What can party activity at different levels tell us about the abilities of the parties to operate as representative

channels? Is there any indication that the organizational layers still “speak” to each other through contacts, debates, and networking, or have the former Norwegian mass parties declined as channels of representation?

In chapters 6 and 7, the development of the representativeness—or “congruence”—of the different party strata and the voters is analyzed. In the former, we study representation as social representation: do MPs, party delegates, and party members differ from voters in terms of age, gender, education, occupation, and income? In the latter, the topic is policy representation: do issue preferences across party levels match, or are there deviations, exceptions, or outright mismatches between voters and members, delegates, and MPs? Moreover, how have the patterns changed over time?

Finally, in the last chapter, chapter 8, we conclude and discuss our findings more generally. If the parties’ representative capacity—as measured here—is more or less the same as it once was despite decline in membership, rise in state subsidies, and the huge contextual changes in the structure of political activities in Western democracies, why could that be?