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# POLITICAL PARTIES AND DEMOCRACY

**Contemporary Western Europe and Asia**

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## Introduction: Political Parties and Democracy in Western Europe and East and Southeast Asia

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The present volume is a selective exploration of how similar and how different are the parties of ten Western European and East and Southeast Asian countries in the early years of the twenty-first century with regard to their society, structure, goals, and leadership types. The countries of these two regions should be broadly considered to hold free elections and practice democratic representation. However, they have differed widely in the history of their political institutions and in the introduction of a liberal democratic or at least pluralistic form of government. All the countries of Western Europe became liberal democracies in the 1970s, but liberal democracy prevails in only about half the countries of the Pacific rim.

In addition to limiting the scope of the exploration to ten countries, two conditions had to be met: (1) the selected countries should be representative of the different types of parties and party systems in these two areas; and (2) these countries should be sufficient enough to provide an opportunity to examine in depth the sociocultural background within which these parties emerged and came to operate. Hence, the analysis is limited to five countries from each region. The countries are Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands for Western Europe; Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand for East and Southeast Asia.

To reduce the difficulty of collecting material and to reflect the somewhat recent transition of some countries to a pluralistic political system, the study covers exclusively the period 1990–2010. The study

analyzes only those parties that obtained 10 percent of the votes in one of the elections of the period at least, and/or elected, again during at least one legislature, 10 percent of the members of that legislature: these rules are applied with some flexibility, however. The hope is that based on this “exploration,” it will be possible to classify the “relevant” parties and throw new light on the links of these organizations with their society, their structure, their goals, and type of leadership.

Such a study has not been seriously undertaken before: the only “theory” about political party development was exclusively Western European in origin. Lipset and Rokkan developed a theory in 1967.<sup>1</sup> The theory was realistic for its time, and its almost universal adoption was proof of its validity.

Yet the theory was based exclusively on Western European experience. The main finding was that the links between political parties and their society were based on a number of social cleavages existing in the countries concerned. Four of these social cleavages, race, religion, class and gender were regarded as crucial, though their prominence varied. The authors showed that new cleavages emerged over time in the societies analyzed: class cleavage was the most recent and probably the most crucial of the cleavages in Western Europe. It was assumed that such a cleavage resulted from the industrialization process of the nineteenth century.

## Problems with the “Classical” Theory of Parties

The theory of social cleavages remained unchallenged for a substantial period as it appeared to explain the characteristics of Western European parties. Yet two sets of developments that occurred in the last decades of the twentieth century raised questions about the validity of the theory.<sup>2</sup>

As large numbers of pluralistic parties came to be found increasingly outside Western Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, the question arose as to whether these pluralistic parties emerged from the kinds of social cleavages that had prevailed in the West. A concentration of the analysis on Western Europe seemed permissible at the time of the study, but became difficult to justify as the number of non-Western countries with pluralistic parties started to multiply.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, social cleavages as the basis of the link between parties and society were no longer as powerful as they had appeared in the previous decades. Indeed, a reexamination of the earlier Western European experience suggested that the

impact of social cleavages was perhaps less universal and less deep across the whole of Western Europe than had been assumed in the theory. Different types of links were emerging that were not based on the existence of an automatic relationship between the social characteristics of the society and the way people associated with parties.<sup>3</sup> The structure of parties, their goals, and their leadership seemed to be affected in the process.

### “Modern” versus “Traditional” Parties

An important question of the difference between what have tended to be called “premodern” and “modern” parties needs to be raised. What Duverger did in his seminal work in the 1950s on political parties was to provide the first “dispassionate” presentation of the structure, and, to an extent, the links with society (perhaps in a somewhat idealized manner) of what could be described as modern parties, in opposition to what had been regarded as the characteristics of premodern parties.<sup>4</sup> The result was an oversimplified dichotomy between traditional parties (“parties of notables”) and modern parties (“mass” parties).<sup>5</sup> The drawback of that dichotomy was that it placed all pre-mass parties in a single category: it did not differentiate between elite-based versus grassroots-based parties or between parties focusing on national versus local issues.

One of the weaknesses of the Lipset-Rokkan theory is that it inherited that dichotomous standpoint: the authors incorporated traditional parties in their analysis by stating that some social cleavages had emerged earlier than others in Western societies. However, by suggesting that the links between parties and society were the result of social cleavages, even if there were different cleavages, Lipset and Rokkan did not provide clear means of distinguishing markedly the structure and goals of these older parties from those that had emerged more recently.

Another shortcoming of the theory was the institutional context Western European parties had to consider: that is, overcoming unpleasant historical legacies through safeguards designed to prevent the repetition of past mistakes. The notion that social cleavages could account almost exclusively for the development of parties assumed that parties were able to develop “naturally” and with very little hindrance. And yet institutional “engineering” was introduced in some countries: the adoption of “semipresidentialism” in France in the late 1950s is the most obvious example of such engineering.

## “Lateral” Extension of Party Analysis

Analysis of the “lateral” expansion of pluralistic parties since the second half of the twentieth century must assume that the way links, structure, goals, and leadership of parties have emerged and developed in non-Western European countries is different from those experienced in Western European countries. A different historical background in the two regions under study may have been the reason for certain features of parties, even those termed modern, being different from those that prevailed in Western Europe. Although class cleavage did play a part in Western European countries and in Japan, it did not have a similar role in the other East and Southeast Asian countries. “Political engineering” appears to have widely played a significant part. Thus one finds three presidential or semipresidential systems in the five East and Southeast Asian countries under examination, a proportion that is similar to the one found in non-Western pluralistic polities in general, while nearly all Western European countries have adopted and continued to adopt a parliamentary system of government, France being the main exception.<sup>6</sup> Differences from the “classical” Western European party framework need close monitoring as the development of a truly realistic worldwide theory of parties depends on these differences being considered.

The current study includes as many countries of Western Europe as countries of East and Southeast Asia: this makes it possible to see what consequences, if any, stem from the fact that pluralistic parties emerged from authoritarian rule during the last decades of the twentieth century.

## “Vertical” Exploration of Parties and Their Supporters in Western Europe

A “vertical” exploration has also to be undertaken with respect to what occurred during the same period to the links with society, the structure, the goals, and the leadership types among Western European parties. A strong alarm directed at the cleavage theory of parties was heard as a number of Western European parties, once successful, started to decline in recent decades. Works by economists on political parties cannot be overlooked.<sup>7</sup> How political parties try to get voter support on a Left-Right ideological continuum and how elites try to avert citizen-instigated disorder and rebellion through

creating democracy is critical knowledge. Influence of political parties loomed large in the mid-twentieth century, but today they have come down to being just a mediating social institution to link the state and citizens. Also, globalization is a new addition to the discussion on political party backgrounds. Several areas need investigation. First, the extent of traditional party decline is not entirely clear, but, if it has occurred, then new parties must have taken a share of the support of the traditional parties. Second, are these new parties broadly similar, in terms of their links with society, their structure, their goals, and their leadership to the traditional parties and whether some changes have occurred in these links? Third, is it the case that all the parties that were traditionally strong in Western Europe belonged to the same broad mass party mold? Were they based by and large on one social cleavage or are there important differences in this respect from party to party and from country to country?

To answer the first question about the extent of decline of traditional parties, a series of elections has to be monitored over. For instance, lower turnout, a drop in electoral support, increased volatility, a fall in membership could individually or collectively impact the decline. Overall size and extent of the decline can be assessed only after the various elements that make up this political snapshot are “disaggregated” and then are assembled to create a composite index.

Second, assuming that the decline is substantiated, we have to conclude that it could not have occurred unless a successful challenge had come from outside these parties: that is, new organizations must have emerged to attack the traditional parties. How far and how successful have these new organizations become and are there significant differences between countries?

Third, these new parties need to be examined to determine how “different” they are from the framework and linkages of traditional parties. It is often argued that these new parties have been successful because classic cleavages no longer provide *the* key link between parties and the society, and because these new parties have attracted electors on the basis of the characteristics of their leaders.<sup>8</sup> These views need examination as does the extent to which “older” parties have “retaliated” on the basis of a similar change in their approach and whether such changes have been relatively successful. It is thus primarily because of the emergence of the “new” parties that the question about the role of social cleavages in linking parties to society is on the agenda.

Fourth, the characteristics of traditional parties (and perhaps some new parties as well) raise the general problem of the extent to which parties can be considered either premodern or modern and whether “traces” of premodernity exist among modern parties too. The characteristics that distinguish modern and premodern parties need to be determined, and that distinction is likely to affect the nature of the links between party and society, the structure, the goals, and of the type of leadership.

## Empirical Analysis for a Realistic Theory of Parties

How best to approach the study of political parties? Should one be primarily empirical or should one first solve theoretical problems? There are limitations to both avenues of inquiry, but in the context of a limited exploration such as the one presented here, it seems more realistic to investigate whether some characteristics of parties in the two studied regions provide a picture based on interesting connections. The best way to move toward a general theory of today’s pluralistic parties is to see whether the parties of the ten studied countries are linked in ways that were not anticipated but raise questions that may help to build gradually elements of a truly general theory.

## Nineteen Indicators and Party Characteristics

The current study aims at assessing how much parties resemble each other or differ from each other both within and between each of the two examined regions. Overall, 19 indicators describe parties, either singularly or in combination with the other parties that exist in a given country. These indicators are listed here and specific points about each of them are found in the appendix.

*Societal Links.* Eight of these indicators relate to the nature of party-societal links in the 1990–2010 period: (1) general election turnout; (2) nature of the national electoral system; (3) the parties that have either contested elections or disappeared; (4) newly emerged parties; (5) proportion of votes obtained by each party at the general elections; (6) level of volatility affecting the parties; (7) geographical coverage of these parties within the nation; and (8) social background of the electors of the parties.

*Party Structure.* Five indicators relate specifically to the party structure: (1) number of party members; (2) breakdown of party income; (3) extent to which members participate in the decision-making processes of the party; (4) extent to which members of the party in parliament or in congress participate in the decision-making process; and (5) mechanisms for party leadership and duration of appointment.

*Goals.* Four indicators relate specifically to party goals: (1) way in which the election program is adopted including the determination of those who decide on the program; (2) size of the party's election program and the breakdown of that program in terms of specific fields of government; (3) extent to which major changes in party programs have occurred; and (4) whether the party has (or has ceased to have) an ideology.

*Leadership.* Two indicators relate to the leadership: (1) degree of personalization of the leadership with respect to the electorate at large, the party membership, and the elaboration of party policies; (2) extent to which the leaders have adopted populist-type discourses.

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There has been too much emphasis on Western European parties. The present study attempts to penetrate the "texture" of parties in order to determine if general trends apply across regions—at least across the two targeted regions. The ten country-specific chapters provide insight into newly emerging findings. The concluding chapter answers whether the comparative aim of the analysis has been fulfilled.

## APPENDIX

### Indicators Relating to Party-Societal Links

1. *General Election Turnout.* There are three reasons for examining general election turnout. First, it is important to know the extent of decline in voter turnout and whether it has had any impact on the East and Southeast Asian countries.

Second, is the turnout country or region specific, or is it affected primarily by a country's given circumstances at a given time? Is it a



rule or certain cases only in which turnout is high in the first pluralistic election of a newly pluralist political system and then falls? Does turnout tend to be generally lower in newly pluralist systems than in more traditional liberal democracies?

Third, is turnout higher at presidential elections than at parliamentary elections in countries described as broadly presidential?

2. *The Electoral System.* The electoral system is well-known to impact patterns of voting and possibly turnout too. However, as the provisions of electoral systems have become appreciably more complex over the decades, the precise effect of each of these complicated systems is unclear.

3. *Parties That Contested the Election Throughout or Disappeared.* These parties need to be listed and the timing of, and reasons for, their disappearance need also to be noted.

4. *Newly Emerged Parties.* These parties need to have crossed one of the two thresholds (10 percent of the votes at least once and/or 10 percent of the seats at least once).

5. *Proportion of Votes Obtained by Each Party at the General Elections.* How many votes were captured by each party at general elections should be taken as the general strength of political parties.

6. *Volatility Level Affecting the Parties.* The level needs to be calculated for each election and overall: if volatility increases regularly, it is an indication that traditional parties are declining regularly.

7. *Geographical Coverage of Parties.* Do some parties concentrate their strength in some areas and what are the reasons for such a concentration? Is there explicit or de facto regionalism?

8. *Social Breakdown of the Electors of the Parties.* The breakdown by gender, age, occupation, and religious belonging informs us about whether a close relationship between voting patterns and social structure exists.

## Party Structure

1. *Number of Party Members.* Does every party have a definite conception of what is a member? Are members considered the “backbone” of the party? Do published figures correspond to reality?

2. *Breakdown of Party Income.* This indicates the extent to which parties play a part in national life. Parties that received a large part of their income from state subsidies may lose their need to be involved in campaigning and may also form a “cartel” with other parties, in an effort to prevent the emergence of newcomer parties.<sup>9</sup>

3. *Membership Participation in Party Decision Making.* First, are members entitled to participate in general matters and in leadership selection? Do members participate in party activities? Some findings must be given regarding the level of this participation.

4. *Role of Members of Parliaments or of Congresses in Party Decision Making.* Are there formal rules and arrangements giving members of parliament or congress the right to participate in party decision making? Are there differences in this respect between parliamentary and presidential countries?

5. *Leadership Appointment.* Is there, first, a “leader” of the party or is there more than one leader, that is, alongside the formal leader of the party, is there another person in the government? Also, does the situation differ depending on whether the system is parliamentary or presidential?

Second, what is the period of leadership appointment and can he/she be reelected, indefinitely or not?

Third, was the party created by a leader who has remained continuously as the head of the party throughout the period?

Fourth, are there many cases in which only one person is a candidate for the leadership even when the electoral leadership process is relatively open?

Fifth, when there is leadership competition, what is the election system? Is the leader appointed by rank-and-file members? Or is the leader appointed by a relatively small group, and what part do members of parliament or congress play in this respect? How long is the period of leadership campaign?

## Goals of the Party

1. *Decision Taking on the Party Program.* Is the party program decided by the party conference or is it adopted by the executive of the party? What part does the leader play in this context: is it the case that the party leader effectively imposes a program designed by his/her entourage?

2. *Size and Aspects of the Party's Election Program.* Does the party programmed vary in size from one election to the next? What is the relative proportion devoted to various policy areas of the program?

3. *Changes in Party Programs.* Are there significant changes in the party program over time? What prompts a different program, and does it affect the fate of the party? Are specific individuals or a new leader responsible for such changes? Are there cases in which little change has occurred in the party program? What are the reasons for such program stability?

4. *Party Ideology.* Does the party have an ideology and, if so, what? Has it changed over time, including just a few years before the period of investigation began?

If the party has no ideology, has this always been the case? Is there a debate about the matter? What is the argument, if any, for not having an ideology?

## Leadership

1. *Personalized Leadership.* The extent of personalized leadership is expected to vary appreciably according to the type and age of party and according to the institutional arrangement. The relationship between personalization and type of ideology needs exploration. Do postauthoritarian countries have more personalized leaders than other parties?

2. *Leadership Discourse.* Leaders may adopt a populist discourse. How far is the populist discourse in the Right-Left continuum and is that type of discourse particularly adopted by the extreme Right? Are populist leaders likely to be drawn from among personalized leaders?

## Notes

1. S. M. Lipset and S. Rokkan, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments* (New York: Free Press, 1967).
2. M. Duverger, *Political Parties* (London: Methuen, 1954) (French ed., 1951).
3. See Jean Blondel and Jean-Louis Thiebault, *Political Leadership, Parties and Citizens: The Personalisation of Leadership* (London: Routledge, 2009).
4. Duverger, *Political Parties*.

5. Lord Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1891); A. L. Lowell, *Governments and Parties in Continental Europe*, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1896).
6. Some countries had adopted some type of presidential system in 2010.
7. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Addison Wesley, 1997 [1957]); Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
8. Blondel and Thiebault, *Political Leadership, Parties and Citizens*, 30–68.
9. R. S. Katz and P. Mair, “Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party,” *Party Politics*, 1 (1) (1995): 5–28.