

A Comparative Political Parties: Systems and Organizations

***Dr. Kamal Kishor Saini**

A political party is commonly understood as a group that seeks to secure governmental office under a specific party label. Party systems, on the other hand, are characterized by the number of parties within a country during a given period, along with their internal structures, ideologies, respective sizes, and types of opposition. Elections serve as the arenas where competition for government office takes place, leading to changes in the policies advocated by parties, the seats held by political parties, and the composition of the government.

It is crucial to recognize that political parties do not operate in isolation but rather respond to and anticipate changes made by other political parties within the system. This interactive dynamic between political parties forms the party system, which can vary significantly across different polities.

This paper aims to examine political party systems in a comparative context, considering the differences in the number, type, and ideology of political parties. These variations are closely intertwined with the political development of a given polity. While there may be similarities in the ideologies of political parties across different systems, their behaviour and actions can differ due to the unique dynamics within their respective party systems.

Party Organization

Party organizations can vary based on three key factors: competition, institutionalization, and resources. These factors influence the structure and functioning of political parties.

- **Competition:** Political parties differ in terms of their ideologies and the manner in which they were formed. Ideological differences can lead to variations in party organization, as parties may prioritize different policy agendas and strategies. The competitive environment in which parties operate also influences their organization, as they may need to adapt and differentiate themselves to attract supporters and win elections.
- **Institutionalization:** This factor pertains to power relations both between parties and within parties. Parties with a long history and established structures tend to have higher levels of institutionalization. Institutionalization can manifest in various ways, such as the presence of clear internal rules and procedures, stable leadership structures, and established channels for decision-making. Highly institutionalized parties often have more cohesive and disciplined organizations.
- **Resources:** The availability and management of resources play a significant role in shaping party organizations. Resources can include financial assets, human capital, organizational networks, and technological capabilities. Parties that have access to greater resources may have better organizational infrastructure, stronger campaign machinery, and more extensive

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grassroots networks. Resource factors also influence a party's ability to attract and retain members, carry out effective recruitment strategies, and engage in policy formulation and planning.

Richard Katz and Peter Mair (1993) identify three distinct responsibilities or focuses of political parties' organizational efforts: the party on the ground, the party in central office, and the party in public office.

- The party on the ground refers to the party as it is perceived by the electorate. This involves how the party is represented, communicates its message, and mobilizes support among voters.
- The party in central office pertains to the internal membership aspect of the party. It involves the party's organizational structure, recruitment of members, policy development, and campaign planning.
- The party in public office encompasses the elected representatives who are members of the political party. These individuals serve as the public face of the party, implementing party policies and representing the party's interests in government.

These three dimensions highlight the different aspects of a party's organizational functioning and the roles played by various party members.

The earliest political parties, known as cadre or elite parties, emerged before the advent of mass suffrage. These elite parties were relatively small and primarily represented the interests of the elite classes. Since suffrage was limited, the political representation was also restricted to a narrow constituency group. These parties were often locally based and had a clear correspondence between voters and representatives. Local interests were well represented by the elected representatives in national legislative bodies.

The extension of mass suffrage, occurring mainly in the middle of the 19th century, coincided with the emergence of political ideologies representing the interests of the working classes. This development led to the formation of mass parties. Mass parties focus on national issues rather than solely seeking national representation. Unlike elite parties, mass parties depend on maintaining a high level of party membership.

The need to attract votes, gain political representation, and acquire resources, particularly financial support, drives mass parties to appeal to a large number of newly enfranchised working-class voters. As a result, mass parties rely on membership dues to remain financially solvent. Consequently, the organization of mass parties is much more complex than that of elite parties.

As the franchise was extended in democratic societies, elite parties representing a narrow constituency gradually lost their relevance. According to Otto Kirchheimer (1966), even mass parties themselves began to lose some of their significance after World War II. This decline can be attributed to societal cleavages that weakened or evolved over time.

The political and economic development of modern states led to a diminishing significance of divisions based on social class or domination. Alongside these changes in society, political parties themselves underwent transformations. There was an increasing emphasis on winning elections and gaining seats in national legislatures. To succeed in electoral contests, parties needed to broaden their appeal beyond the narrow client base of elite parties or the specific class-focused approach of mass parties.

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Some parties adopted a "catch-all" approach, aiming to attract voters from all categories rather than specific constituencies based on societal cleavages. Catch-all parties sought to appeal to the median voter in society, rather than targeting a particular segment of the electorate. These parties prioritized the recruitment of party leaders who could appeal to a wide range of voters.

For the first time, the party in public office and the party in central office became the most crucial faces of the party, as opposed to the party in the electorate. Mass parties recognized that winning elections required a centralized approach. The central office was entrusted with the responsibility of running election campaigns and selecting the most suitable candidates for representation.

In summary, the extension of the franchise and the changing societal landscape led to the decline of elite parties and a transformation of mass parties. Parties shifted their focus to winning elections, adopting catch-all approaches and centralizing their campaign strategies under the guidance of the party's central office. The party in public office and the party in central office became more influential, as they played pivotal roles in election campaigns and candidate selection.

In response to changes in society and politics, modern political parties have undergone significant transformations. Winning elections has gained increased importance, while the significance of party membership has declined. Parties have adopted a catch-all strategy, aiming to appeal to a broad spectrum of voters in order to secure electoral victories. However, voters themselves have become less likely to strongly identify with a particular party, often shifting their allegiances from election to election. This shift in voter behavior, with a larger proportion of the electorate comprising shifting voters, has made parties less reliant on voter resources.

Richard Katz and Peter Mair (1995) have proposed a new type of party that has emerged to adapt to these realities: the cartel party. Cartel parties are characterized by being composed of professionals whose main source of support comes from the state and public financing. While political parties may compete against each other for votes and seats, they implicitly understand that their survival hinges on maintaining access to political office, rather than engaging in ideological battles.

This transformation reflects a shift in the priorities and strategies of political parties in response to changing political landscapes. Winning elections and maintaining political power have become crucial, often superseding ideological considerations. The cartel party model highlights the professionalization and reliance on state and public resources that have become integral to the functioning of contemporary political parties.

Party Systems

Party systems consist of a set of parties that compete and cooperate with the goal of gaining power and controlling the government. The nature of party systems can differ based on several factors, including the types of parties present (both in terms of ideology and organization), the number of parties within the system, and the inclusion criteria for considering a party part of the system.

According to Giovanni Sartori (1976), party inclusion in a party system is determined by concepts like collision potential and blackmail potential. Collision potential refers to a party's potential to be part of a governing coalition, regardless of whether it is currently in government. Blackmail potential refers to a party's ability to influence the tactics of party competition, particularly for parties with coalition potential.

Maurice Duverger (1954) argued that the number of parties within a party system is largely influenced by the specific election rules of the political system. Election rules determine factors like representation thresholds or the percentage of votes a party must secure to be represented in the

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national legislative body.

Two major types of systems discussed by Duverger are proportional representation systems and majoritarian systems. In proportional representation systems, the number of political parties tends to be greater because parties are allocated seats in the national legislature based on the percentage of the popular vote they receive. In majoritarian systems, such as the first-past-the-post system, parties must secure more than 50% of the popular vote to gain representation. This type of system tends to limit the number of parties competing, as parties need to appeal to a wider range of voters.

Duverger suggested that majoritarian systems tend to result in two-party systems, with the parties themselves adopting more moderate political ideologies to appeal to a broader voter base. On the other hand, proportional representation systems often have a greater number of political parties since parties can win seats based on their share of the popular vote.

Additionally, there are variations within party systems, such as the "two and a half party system." In this system, three parties exist, with one party being smaller than the other two. Australia and Canada are examples of two and a half party systems. In systems with one dominant party and several smaller parties, the larger party tends to remain in power for long periods, with coalitions formed among the remaining parties to challenge the dominant party. Norway and Sweden exemplify this type of system.

Furthermore, multi-party systems encompass a broad category of systems that can range from cooperation between parties to polarized and volatile party systems. The number of parties alone is not sufficient to describe the nature of the party system; the nature of party competition is also a crucial component in classifying party systems.

Therefore, party systems are shaped by various factors, including the types of parties, the number of parties, and the criteria for party inclusion. Election rules, such as proportional representation or majoritarian systems, influence the number of parties in a system. The nature of party competition further defines the characteristics and dynamics of a party system.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of democratic systems has witnessed a multitude of political party types and organizational forms over extended periods. Parties have demonstrated adaptability in response to ideological shifts, changes in organization, and the competitive landscape. Transitioning from mass parties to catch-all parties exemplifies how parties have adjusted to technological advancements and social transformations.

Ideological shifts have played a significant role in shaping party identities. Parties that were once categorized as liberal may undergo transformations, aligning themselves with the new right or adopting different ideological orientations. However, political parties continue to be essential components of the democratic framework, necessitating adjustments to engage with a politically sophisticated electorate that exhibits lower levels of party affiliation but higher levels of political awareness.

The changes observed in party organizations can indicate shifts in ideology, the inclusion of new parties in the party system, or the formation of entirely new political parties. The birth and evolution of parties and party systems reflect the political conditions prevailing at their founding, while subsequent transformations respond to the evolving political landscape.

Overall, political parties are dynamic entities that evolve in response to changing political conditions,

ideological realignments, and the demands of the electorate. The organizational forms and interactions within the party system embody the complexity and ever-evolving nature of democratic politics.

***Department of Political Science
Govt. Maharaj Acharya Sanskrit College
Jaipur (Raj.)**

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