

A Review on Nomenclature of Party Systems

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Abstract

Political parties play a unique and crucial role in the political system of different countries. Political parties competing with each other for elective office and control of government form party system. Party systems can be grouped into distinct type based on a number of distinct features which arise from electoral competition and parties' relation to each other. Therefore an attempt has been made in this paper to present a review on the above mentioned aspects as found in the literature of party system and classification of party systems.

Key Words: Political Parties, Party System, Democracy, Institutionalization, Classification

Introduction

Democracies in the modern times have evolved around party systems in which two or more than two political parties compete for political power. However, the nature of party competition is not same in all countries. It depends on the number of parties competing for power, their ideological orientation and the extent to which parties are institutionalized¹ (Diego and Gonzalez, 2004:28).

While we see stable party systems in the developed Western democracies, we see great transformations in the party systems of the developing countries. This is often characterized by extensive shifts in voters support to political parties, the emergence of new political parties, the decay or demise of some parties, different degrees of ideological polarization² or convergence. So the question of party system change and stability acquires greater importance in developing democracies than in developed ones.

Party Systems and Party System Types

Political parties play a unique and crucial role in our democratic system of

government. A country's history, national character, culture, traditions, philosophy and economy influence the parties in the way they shape up and function. Also, the legal framework, the electoral system and the political environment influence the working of the parties (Suri, 2005:13).

Defining political parties is a task that at first glance appears to be relatively simple. But in reality it is not so. According to Joseph LaPalombara and Myron Weiner (1966), "political parties do not mean cliques, clubs and small groups of notables that can be identified as the antecedents of the modern political party in most Western Countries". Instead, for them, a political party has four aspects: (a) continuity in organization, that is, an organization whose expected life span is not dependent on the life span of current leaders; (b) manifest and presumably permanent organization at the local level, with regularized communications and other relationships between local and national units; (c) self continuous determination of leaders both at national and local levels to capture and to hold decision-making power alone or in coalition with others;

and (d) a concern on the part of the organization for seeking followers at the polls or in some manner striving for popular support (LaPalombara and Weiner, 1966: 5-6).

Giovanni Sartori (1976) says that “parties are the central intermediate and intermediary structure between society and government”. According to Leon Epstein (1980), a political party is “any group, however loosely organized, seeking to elect government officeholders under a given label”. When Joseph Schlesinger (1991) talks about political party, he means by it “a group organized to gain control of government in the name of the group by winning elections to public office”. John Aldrich (1995) says that “political parties can be seen as coalitions of elites to capture and use political office. But a political party is more than a coalition. A political party is an institutionalized coalition, one that has adopted rules, norms and procedures”.

Political parties competing with each other for elective office and control of government form a party system. Party systems have been a key factor in the study of political parties and more broadly in comparative analysis and research. Research on party systems fall into different streams. Party systems are closely linked to democratic control and government formation. Political scientists have sought not only to characterize them, but also to understand their causes and consequences, particularly their sources in electoral laws and cleavage structures and their effects on government formation and system stability, and more broadly, the quality of democracy (Wolinetz 2006: 51-61). One of the first ‘systemic’ uses of the term ‘party system’ can be found in

Duverger’s *Political Parties*. Duverger (1954:203) argues that: “with the exception of the single-party states, several parties co-exist in each country: the forms and modes of their coexistence define the “party system” of the particular country being considered”.

A party system consists of regular and recurring interactions among its component parties. The focus of party systems literature has changed over time. Initially, the emphasis was on continuity, more recently it has been on changes in party systems. In addition, transitions to democracy have sparked interest in how party systems become entrenched or institutionalized (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995:52-53). Duverger says that “a party system is defined by a particular relationship amongst all the characteristics like numbers, respective sizes, alliances, geographical localization, political distribution and so on” (Duverger, 1954:203). According to Sartori, “Parties make for a ‘system’ only when they are parts (in the plural); and a party system is precisely the system of interactions resulting from inter-party competition” (Sartori, 1976:44). Thus Duverger and Sartori stress upon the number of parties and the nature of party competition in analyzing the party system.

Party systems have a number of distinct features which arise from electoral competition and parties’ relation to each other. These include: (a) the number of parties contesting elections and winning legislative seats; (b) their relative size and strength; (c) the number of dimensions on which they compete; (d) the distance which separates them on key issues; and (e) their willingness to work with each other in government formation and the

process of governing. Because party systems can vary on any or all of these features, they are grouped into distinct types.

Classification of Party Systems

The most obvious distinction is between two-party systems and multi-party systems. Two-party systems may be more or less polarized. Not all multi-party systems are necessarily the same: there is considerable difference between a party system with three or four parties and one with six or seven or eight. This depends on how parties are counted and what weights are assigned to different size of parties. Typically, classifications count major parties. As Sartori (1976) has pointed out clear rules are needed to determine which parties should be counted and which should be excluded. Once this is done, other questions remain: whether the number of parties is a sufficient criterion or whether relative sizes and strength of parties or direction of competition should be taken into account as well. Efforts to do so have given rise to distinct typologies as well as continuous measures, such as Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) Effective Number of Political Parties, which weights parties according to their size.

When one thinks of the features or has a look at it, the next step which follows is the classification. The classification of party systems makes distinctions on the basis of number. However, decisions have to be made about whether to consider all parties contesting election, only those winning seats in the legislature or only those involved in government formation. Suppose once a decision has been made to focus parties winning seats in the national parliament, further decisions are made

about which parties to count. Alan Ware (1996) excludes all parties with less than 3% of the vote. Sartori (1976) argues that relevance should be assessed according to coalition potential and blackmail potential of a party. Smaller parties are counted only if their seats in parliament are needed to form coalitions, or alternatively if they have sufficient seats to block the formation of coalitions. Therefore for example, if we follow Ware, we would call Britain a three-party system and if we follow Sartori, Britain remains a two-party system because, despite winning almost 20% in most elections since 1974, the Liberal Democrats have rarely been able to affect government formation.

Party systems can be also divided into two types: Non-competitive party systems and Competitive party systems. Non-competitive systems indicate non competitive situation which cannot be detected solely on grounds that a candidate wins unopposed. A system is non-competitive if it does not permit contested elections. The characteristics of a non-competitive structure is that only one option that is either option of voice (making himself heard) or of exit (of leaving one party for another) is permitted. Whereas in competitive party systems the focus is on two-party systems and the systems that follow a similar dualistic logic (moderate pluralism system) and extreme pluralism system. Competitive type of party system basically encompasses two or more than two relevant parties.

The two broad categories of party system can be further divided into the following types. The Non-competitive party system includes:

- A- One-party system
- B- Hegemonic party system
- C- Predominant party system

In One-party system a single party holds governmental power for an extended period of time. Empirically speaking, there are three types of these: (a) One Party Authoritarian: It is an authoritarian political system dominated by a single, monolithic, ideologically oriented but non-totalitarian party. Under this system members of the opposition are defined as traitors to revolutionary or nationalistic causes and as threats to security. The examples would be South Vietnam, Ghana and Guinea during 1950s and 60s; (b) One Party Pluralistic: It is a quasi-authoritarian system dominated by a single party which is pluralistic in organization, pragmatic rather than rigidly ideological in outlook and absorptive rather than ruthlessly destructive in its relationship to other groups. Examples: Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast during 1950s and 60s; and (c) One Party Totalitarian: In this political system the state itself is an instrument of a monolithic party which has as one ideological goal the total use of power for the restructuring of the society's social and economic system. Examples: Soviet Union, North Vietnam, Communist China (LaPalombara and Weiner, 1966:37-41).

The Hegemonic System is the second type of non-competitive type. This is one in which over an extended period of time the same party, or coalitions dominated by the same party, hold governmental power. Hegemonic systems involving one party in exclusive control of governmental machinery would include the United States during the years of New Deal and Indian politics dominated since independence by

the Congress party. However, it is also possible to speak of hegemonic systems in instances where the power holding situation involves a coalition. The two major examples of this configuration would be West Germany and Italy since the Second World War, where coalition governments have been clearly dominated by Christian Democratic parties (LaPalombara and Weiner, 1966:35). The hegemonic party is further divided into (a) ideological- hegemonic party and (b) pragmatic-hegemonic party.

The third type of non-competitive system is the Predominant Party System. It is actually more-than-one party system in which rotation does not occur in fact. It simply happens that the same party manages to win, over time, an absolute majority of seats (not necessarily of votes) in parliament. The minor parties are truly independent and antagonistic of the predominant party. A predominant party system is one in which the major party is consistently supported by winning majority (the absolute majority of seats) of the voters. This type of party system is a type, not a class. This is to recall that the criterion here is not the number of parties but a particular distribution of power among them. Sartori argues that a party becomes a predominant party if it wins absolute majorities in three consecutive elections, provided the electorate appears stabilized, the absolute majority threshold is clearly surpassed and the interval is wide. Thus a predominant party system can arise either from a two-party format or from a highly fragmented format. Examples: Sweden, Norway and Japan (Sartori, 1976:192-201).

The competitive party system can be divided into four types:

- (A) Two-Party System
- (B) Moderate Pluralism
- (C) Extreme Pluralism
- (D) Atomized Pluralism

Among the competitive party systems, two-party system is considered to be an important one. The lenient conditions for a system that functions according to the rules of two partyism would thus be the following: (a) two parties are in a position to compete for the absolute majority of seats; (b) One of the two parties actually succeeds in winning a sufficient parliamentary majority; (c) the winning party is willing to govern alone; and (d) alteration or rotation in power remains a credible expectation. In two-party system, the third party does not affect, in the long run and at the national level, the alteration in power of the two major parties. The system is bipolar which means that the actual working of the party system pivots around two poles. The bipolar systems tend to converge toward the centre and are therefore centripetal. At any given point in time, however, it is clear that the smaller the spread of opinion, the smoother the functioning of two partyism. Conversely, the greater the ideological distance, the more a two-party format is dysfunctional. Examples: United States, Britain and New Zealand. Of late a number of writers have spoken about one-and-one-half party system (example: Japan); one-and-two-halves system (example: Australia); two-and-one-half system (example: Germany); two-and-two-halves system (example: Canada) (Sartori, 1976: 185-192; Lijphart, 1999: 62-89).

In party systems, where three or more than three parties are relevant, Sartori classifies

them as plural system. Plural systems are of three types:

- (A) Limited or Moderate pluralism
- (B) Extreme or Polarized pluralism
- (C) Atomized Pluralism

Moderate or limited pluralism is demarcated, at one boundary, by the two-party system and, at the other, by extreme and polarized pluralism. The class basically encompasses from three to five relevant parties. Because of this limited number of political parties it is called moderate or limited pluralism in contradistinction to extreme pluralism. The major distinguishing trait of moderate pluralism is coalition government. The structure remains bipolar. Instead of two parties, we generally find bipolar alignments of alternative coalitions. The competition remains centripetal. It lacks relevant and/or sizeable anti-system parties, it lacks bilateral oppositions, is non-polarized and there is relatively small ideological distance among its relevant parties. Examples: Belgium and Ireland (three-party format); Sweden and Iceland (four-party format); Switzerland and Norway (five-party Format) (Sartori, 1976:173-185).

Extreme and polarized pluralism resides in the presence of relevant anti-system parties. A party can be defined as being anti-system whenever it undermines or seeks to undermine the legitimacy of the regimes it opposes. In this type of party system there is maximal ideological distance. When one finds a large ideological space, it follows that the polity contains parties that disagree not only on policies but also, and more importantly, on principles and fundamentals. There is likely presence of the centrifugal drives

over the centripetal ones, presence of irresponsible oppositions and it displays politics of outbidding or of over promising, which is different from what is meaningfully called competitive politics. Examples: France (6 parties); Italy (6-7 parties); Chile (5-7 parties); India (6 parties) (Sartori, 1976:131-172).

The last type of competitive party system is Atomized Pluralism. This type of party system enters the classification as a residual class to indicate a point at which we no longer need an accurate counting,

that is, a threshold beyond which the number of parties: whether 10, 20 or more makes little difference. The atomized party systems can be defined in the same way as atomistic competition in economics, that is, as a situation where no firm has any noticeable effect on any other firm. Example: Malaysia (Sartori, 1976: 125-126).

Thus, based on Sartori's description, classification of party systems can be presented in the following way as in the Table 1:

Table 1
Classification of Different Party Systems

Party systems	Main characteristics
One-party system	Total monopoly
Hegemonic party	Hierarchy replaced monopoly
Predominant party	Unimodal concentration without alteration
Two party system	Even concentration with alteration
Moderate pluralism	Low fragmentation
Extreme pluralism	Polarization and high Fragmentation
Atomized pluralism	Dispersion

{Source: Sartori, 1976: 128}.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, we find that different types of party systems prevail in different countries. Several factors influence how party competition takes place in different countries. We also saw that party systems are not static, in other words one-type of party system that prevails in a country at a point of time may change into another type. So the classification of the party systems into two or plural party systems need not be treated in a frozen manner. Classification of party

system was usually done earlier on the basis of number of parties. However, in recent times, students of party systems have moved beyond numbers. They have attempted to construct typologies and classification of party systems which capture relationship and interactions.

Endnotes

1. An institutionalized party system implies stability in interparty competition, the existence of parties that have somewhat stable roots in

society, acceptance of parties and elections as the legitimate institutions that determine who governs, and party organizations with reasonably stable rules and structures. There would therefore be four characteristics to keep in mind in considering the degree of institutionalization of party systems: a certain stability of interparty competition, how well the parties are rooted in society, the legitimacy of the parties and the electoral process, and the organizational characteristics

of the parties. These criteria are widely accepted in the literature (Diego and Gonzalez, 2004:29).

2. In Sartori's sense: the polarization of a party system is the ideological distance that exists between the relevant parties that are located, respectively, farthest to the left of the system. Other authors employ definitions that generalize this concept, using data about ideological positions of all the parties in the system, not just those at the two extremes.

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