How Political Parties Respond
Interest aggregation revisited

Edited by Kay Lawson and Thomas Poguntke
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How Political Parties Respond focuses specifically on the question of interest aggregation: do parties today perform that function? If so, how, and if not, in what different ways do they seek to show themselves responsive to the electorate?

Until now, such changes have been more widely studied in the United States than in other democracies; this fascinating book studies the question with reference to the following democracies: Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Canada. A chapter on Russia demonstrates how newly powerful private interest groups and modern techniques of persuasion can work together to prevent effective party response to popular interests in systems where the authoritarian tradition remains strong. Introductory and concluding chapters by the editors explore the broader implications of the changes.

This book will be of great interest to students and researchers of politics, and party politics in particular; comparative politics and democratic theory.

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1 Do parties respond?
Challenges to political parties and their consequences

*Thomas Poguntke*

Political scientists have debated for some twenty years whether parties are in decline, losing their social anchorage, their hold on the electorate, their capacity to influence policy. Empirical evidence is manifold, pointing at, among other factors, declining party membership across modern democracies, increasing volatility and questionable policy impact (see, for example, Cotter and Bibby 1980; Daalder 1992; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Reiter 1989). Others have maintained that even though parties’ erosion of social anchorage is hardly questionable, this does not amount to party decline across the board because, by and large, parties have been able to compensate for this loss by turning to the state (Katz and Mair 1995). Parties have, however, not responded to these challenges merely by looking for alternative sources of organizational strength, namely state resources. They have also responded to their changing social environment in a number of ways which will be discussed in the present volume. Rather than considering themselves merely as objects of wider social change, parties – better: party elites – have retaken the initiative and have attempted to change the patterns of interaction with their own membership organizations and their wider social environment in ways more compatible with the social realities at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In a nutshell, their reactions to these challenges have significantly transformed the way parties respond to their voters. Trying to adapt to an increasingly fragmented social environment and deprived of formerly stable anchorage in society, parties may have changed from aggregating interests to merely ‘collecting’ them, thereby relying ever more on modern communication and market research techniques. Before we turn to discussing exactly how parties have changed their modes of responding to their electorates, however, let us briefly reflect on the nature of the challenges that have confronted parties over the past decades.

**The challenges**

Most of them are related to the dramatically increased social complexity of modern societies. Otto Kirchheimer argued (1966) that the success of
the welfare state and the concomitant blurring of class boundaries would induce parties to seek some autonomy from their core constituencies, which, at the same time, were beginning to lose their previous homogeneity. By the 1980s and 1990s, social mobility and social differentiation had fundamentally transformed Western societies. Large, clearly identifiable clusters of interests had given way to an increasingly bewildering web of often contradictory preferences, interests and needs which cross-pressured individuals and hence made them, as voters, increasingly available to different parties. For the same reasons, interest organizations began to experience internal pluralization and declining membership (Streeck 1987). As a result, their ability to select and aggregate interests and strike binding deals with political parties began to erode (Poguntke 2002: 59). In other words, interest aggregation was eroded across the board because both political parties themselves and their collateral organizations had to deal with increasingly heterogeneous social constituencies.

At the same time, parties lost most of their previously substantial control over political communication. While there could be no full substitute for the party press once the age of publicly owned electronic communication had dawned, parties were quite successful in obtaining significant control over it. In other words, while party elites had been writing the headlines of the party press themselves, they could in many cases at least prevent the most damaging news being broadcast by public radio and TV stations. To be sure, there was considerable variation between countries as regards the immediacy of political control of publicly owned electronic media (the exception being the USA, where broadcasting has been overwhelmingly private from the outset) (Humphreys 1990: 299–301; Semetko 1996: 258–9; Schmitt-Beck 2000: 193–5, 241–56). It is safe to say, however, that while party elites lost their substantial control over communication as the party press declined virtually everywhere, they found themselves reasonably compensated by having leverage over the arguably more powerful electronic media. In other words, even though they lost direct control over a considerable portion of a nation's printed media, they may have regained that lost ground by exercising control over the publicly owned electronic media. In addition, parties gained access to free air time during election campaigns in many nations, a decision which was, of course, mainly instigated by political parties themselves (Farrell and Bowler 1992; LeDuc et al. 1996: 45–8).

With the advent of private electronic media, however, party elites’ control over political communication was substantially undermined. Again, there is variation between countries but, by and large, all Western democracies have experienced a substantial proliferation of private TV and radio channels during the last decade of the twentieth century (Semetko 1996).

While the decline of interest aggregation through party organizations and their organizational allies in the intermediary sector has confronted
party elites with a structural growth of contradictory demands, their capacity to limit the impact of this onslaught by at least influencing the flow of political communication has been seriously undermined. After all, in modern media democracy, it is not just the mere existence of contradictory demands and requests which creates problems for political elites. Arguably, it is equally important whether or not these demands reach the realm of public debate. No doubt, there are interests which do not need the limelight because powerful organizations can protect their interests vis-à-vis the state machinery. Many others, however, gain considerable additional weight by being discussed in public.

In addition to these challenges emanating from social changes, parties have been forced to cope with an erosion of their role as central policymakers. Globalization and, for many (West) European parties, Europeanization, have increasingly moved decision-making powers from the nation state to international or supranational decision-making bodies (Bulmer 1983; Held 1995; Ladrech 2002). This has substantially strengthened governments vis-à-vis parliaments and parties because the latter will frequently be asked to approve of deals which have been accomplished after painstaking international or supranational negotiations and which cannot possibly be renegotiated. While the strengthening of the executive would simply represent a shift of power between different party arenas, the very fact that their enhanced domestic power tends to be based on international or supranational power sharing clearly means that national parties have lost control over national policy.

How parties respond

Communication

Parties have responded to these problems and challenges in several ways. First, they have attempted to regain ground by building up alternative means of communication. Faced with the decline of their own membership organization as a channel of communication to their own rank and file, party elites have enhanced their capability of communicating directly with their rank and file by expanding the use of membership ballots (Scarrow 1999). Since the overall decline of party membership has led to organizational sclerosis, that is, to a substantial shortage of party members willing to become actively involved within their party, membership ballots are seen as a strategy of getting those who would otherwise choose to remain entirely inactive involved in internal decision-making. To be sure, this represents a fundamental shift in the mode of internal communication as it bypasses the traditional layers of intra-organizational decision-making and allows party elites to manipulate agendas to their advantage. At the same time, however, it makes them more vulnerable as the mass media may play a considerable role in the debate over any given membership
ballot. In other words, membership ballots open up the party to the influence of largely uncontrollable mass communication.

The decline of membership organizations has also undermined the ability of party elites to communicate with the electorate at large. After all, even inactive party members are communicators of their party’s message within their immediate social environment (Bille and Pedersen 2002; Niedermayer 1989: 35f.). Parties have responded to this weakening of their interpersonal communication by expanding their use of modern communication techniques. Even though direct mailing is mainly aimed at fund raising, it may nevertheless represent a partial and weak substitute to the hitherto direct contact party sympathizers would have to a party by talking to local party activists (Römmele 1997). Similarly, the Internet offers direct and – at least potentially – two-way communication between party members or sympathizers and party elites (Gibson et al. 2003). While it seems that responses to the invitation to ‘get in touch’ with the party via Internet-based e-mail by far exceeds the organizational capacity of party leaderships actually to process these mails and respond to their senders, the Internet nevertheless represents a powerful tool which at least symbolizes communication.

**Interest aggregation**

The erosion of party membership organizations has not only weakened the capacity of party elites to communicate with their own rank and file through (reasonably controllable) processes of intra-party debate and decision-making. Arguably, even more detrimental has been the substantial weakening of a powerful linkage to the core of the party faithful which once served as a strong tool of interest aggregation (Almond and Powell Jr 2001; Poguntke 2000; Poguntke 2002). By identifying relevant grievances and discussing related policy proposals at different levels of the membership organization, initially incoherent or even contradictory policy proposals become aggregated into manageable and reasonably coherent packages which can eventually form the basis of national political action. As the size of membership organizations has declined over the past decades, many parties simply lack sufficient numbers of active members willing to invest time and effort in this process – not least because all those prepared to get actively involved inside their party are being absorbed into party offices and political mandates at the different levels of the political systems.

Clearly, parties depend not exclusively on their own membership organization for interest selection and aggregation. Many rely on more or less exclusive ties to collateral organizations which provide linkage to relevant portions of their electorate. However, they have not remained unaffected by the above-mentioned social changes. Many of those organizations have also suffered from a parallel decline of their membership
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base, which has weakened the strength of the linkage they can provide. Others have undergone processes of internal pluralization which have called their formerly exclusive ties to a specific party into question (Poguntke 2000; Poguntke 2002). The attenuation of links between the trade union movement and the major parties on the left in Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom is a clear indication that formerly symbiotic relationships are beginning to turn into a mutual liability (Svasand 1994a: 315; Svasand 1994b: 305; Pierre and Widfeldt 1994: 337; Webb 1992: 33–9).

Party elites have responded to the weakening of organizational linkage through expanding the use of increasingly sophisticated techniques of market research. Even though this includes focus group research where discussions in carefully selected groups may serve as a surrogate for ‘real’ discussions, this signals a development whereby parties increasingly collect rather than aggregate relevant societal interests. Party strategists may identify relevant target groups within the electorate and attempt to satisfy their most immediate demands, but there is no adequate mechanism for weighing the overall relevance of such demands. As a result, policies are in danger of becoming increasingly contradictory or even erratic.

Control over policy

How parties respond to voters has also been influenced by the gradual shift of policy-making to international and supranational bodies, which has reduced the influence of national politics altogether. Faced with growing constraints on their ability to achieve desired policy outcomes, that is, to respond to their voters’ demands, political parties have tended to resort to symbolic politics and, above all, to personalization. The underlying rationale is compelling: given that much of national authority has been transferred to international or supranational policy arenas, the personality of national political leaders, who represent their countries in these decision-making bodies, assumes overriding importance. The personalization of politics in response to internationalization works like a virtuous (or vicious?) circle: the executive bias of modern policy-making strengthens national leaders vis-à-vis their parties and national parliaments, who can then, in turn, use their enhanced position to claim even more control and visibility in national politics (Poguntke and Webb 2005).

At first sight, some of these response strategies seem to resemble exercises in damage limitation rather than representing a forward-looking adaptation to the conditions of politics in the twenty-first century. This impression may, however, owe much to a tendency among party scholars (implicitly) to use past models, primarily those of the mass party, when assessing contemporary political parties. While they may no longer perform their ‘classic’ linkage functions as in the past, parties may have successfully invented new ways of responding to the wishes and aspirations of the people. Yet their continued ability to fight and win elections must
not be confused with their ability to effectively manage democratic politics. Furthermore, the increased vulnerability of party systems, particularly to the onslaught of different variants of right-wing populism, may indicate that traditional parties may indeed be weaker than they appear.

Case studies

So what about the evidence? How exactly have parties responded to the changes outlined above, and how well have they fared? This volume seeks to answer this question by looking at a number of case studies that are particularly relevant to the questions raised. It follows from our theoretical focus on modern democracies that we have restricted our selection of countries accordingly, with one significant exception, however: Susanna Pshizova argues that the way parties respond to their voters in post-Communist Russia may constitute the writing on the wall for Western democracies, which makes this case relevant to our volume.

The first two chapters look at one of the most conspicuous and successful examples of how a party can respond to a changing environment. By the early 1980s, the British Labour Party seemed doomed to eternal opposition. Firmly linked to the trade unions and wedded to socialist principles, the party appeared to be unable to respond to the challenge of neoliberalism and a radically changing class structure, which meant that the core vote of unionized blue-collar workers was no longer a sufficient basis for winning elections. James Cronin emphasizes the symbolic significance of Labour’s commitment to nationalization as a touchstone of Labour’s continuing pledge to defending working-class interests (set in stone in Clause IV of the party constitution). As such, its removal signalled the party’s fundamental reorientation towards acquiring autonomy from the trade union movement and reinventing itself in the guise of ‘New Labour’ as a pragmatic party of the centre-left. Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley show that this symbolic departure from Labour’s core identity was accompanied by a number of concrete changes in the party’s core policy positions on taxation, public expenditure, the welfare state, law and order, and education. Following a disastrous defeat in 1983, the party began to respond to its shrinking core vote by reaching out to the ‘aspirational working class’ and the lower sectors of the new middle class. It was only under Tony Blair, who was elected leader in 1994, that this programmatic reform was fully accomplished. Ideological moderation was facilitated and safeguarded by far-reaching organizational reform, which substantially weakened the influence of the trade unions and the party activists. The introduction of direct membership ballots on leadership and policy issues effectively bypasses the party activists and allows the party leadership to seek direct endorsement by the party’s rank and file.

The long and painstaking period of party reform was rewarded with a landslide victory in 1997. In government, ‘New Labour’ remained commit-
ted to its core election pledges and tried to avoid any reminiscences of its past as the party of big government and big spending. On the contrary, fiscal discipline took precedence over all other political objectives, and it is safe to conclude that the organizational reforms helped to protect the Labour government from unwanted interference by party activists. The authors argue that ‘Labour’s long march from the brink of electoral disaster is a fine example of party responsiveness to public hostility’, and they corroborate their argument with impressive survey evidence as to how much the public’s perceptions of the Labour Party have changed.

Having enjoyed a far stronger position in their respective party systems, the Scandinavian Social Democratic parties never found themselves in a position that required such drastic organizational and programmatic reform. Yet they too needed to respond to the changing class composition of modern societies and the inevitable pluralization of interests organized by the trade union movement. Responding to electoral decline, Social Democratic parties in Norway and Sweden have substantially reduced the intensity of their links to the trade union movement by abolishing collective membership which had allowed local trade union branches to affiliate collectively to the party. In Denmark, where collective membership, had not existed, further steps were taken to ‘underline the voluntary nature’ of the party’s relations with the trade union federation. Nick Aylott warns, however, that these organizational reforms have not left Scandinavian Social Democratic parties virtually unconstrained in their efforts to collect interests among a much wider range of social groups. After all, much of the ‘less formal, habitual, almost cultural ties between Social Democratic parties and the trade unions’ have remained intact and continue to limit their freedom of manoeuvre.

Seen from the perspective of party elites, a party’s own membership organization represents a specific organizational environment to which they need to respond in order to control ‘zones of uncertainty’ (Panebianco 1988: 33). Using the example of the Danish parties, Karina Pedersen discusses the extent to which wider changes in the way parties relate to state and society have left a mark on the patterns of interaction between party elites and their rank-and-file organizations. Referring to the cartel party model as an analytical framework and drawing on a wide range of empirical evidence, she concludes that there has been no blurring of the distinction between members and non-members (as was predicted by the model), but that membership rights have become markedly more individualized through the increased use of ballots, which potentially weakens a party’s capacity to aggregate interests. Looking at a range of indicators, she shows that Danish parties have not responded collectively to a changing environment by forming a cartel by making it harder for new parties to enter into electoral competition, but that they have – to a limited degree – modified their responsiveness to their own members according to the predictions of the cartel model.
Responsiveness to voters’ demands is at the heart of competitive party democracy, and the changing relationship between parties and their voters is likely to directly affect the way parties respond to the policy preferences of their voters. Eroding partisanship, declining party membership and weakening ties to collateral organizations have substantially undermined the capacity of political parties to identify relevant grievances of their core constituencies and to respond to them adequately. In many ways, political parties in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe may indicate the end-point of such trends in that they have not yet been able to build up strong membership organizations, loyal electorates and stable ties to collateral organizations, and it remains doubtful that they will ever manage to do so. Taking post-unification Berlin as a fascinating test case of the effect of parties’ societal linkage on their ability to respond to voters’ demands, Louise Davidson-Schmich finds that parties in the eastern part of Berlin lack coherent patterns of interaction with voters and interest groups. Correspondingly, their policies are indistinct, offering voters few clear choices, which undermines democratic accountability. The quasi-experimental situation in Berlin, where local governments in the eastern and western part of the formerly divided city operate under identical legal and financial constraints, provides clear evidence that a lack of information due to a lack of interest aggregation through organizational channels leaves political parties uncertain as to ‘who their voters are and what types of expenditures they prefer’. Trying to respond to what Davidson-Schmich calls ‘undefined constituencies’ clearly creates problems for political parties. While politicians in former West Berlin articulated clear spending priorities (and identified their goals in opposition to those of other parties), party politicians in the former East tended to promise ‘something to everyone’. She may have identified a vicious circle: responding to a volatile electorate and undifferentiated cues from interest organizations makes party programmes indistinct. Yet the lack of clearly identifiable alternatives may in turn feed volatility.

The ability of parties to respond to their voters’ demands may be severely impeded by overly broad political parties. Nicolas Sauger shows that the French UDF responded to ideological and strategic tensions over how to deal with the challenge from the extreme right National Front by splitting into the larger new UDF and the new splinter party Liberal Democracy (DL). The author treats the French example as a test of the general hypothesis that smaller parties need less interest aggregation, which will enable them to be more directly responsive to a clearly identifiable electoral clientele. The analysis of party programmes confirms this argument: the DL programme is far more specific than that of the New UDF, because the new splinter party could target a narrowly defined portion of the electorate. At the same time, the large party also seemed to benefit from the split. Freed from the constraints of a coherently organized internal opposition, the New UDF sought to improve the actual process of
 programme formulation, making more efforts to involve the membership organization and even individual members. The actual process, however, resembled more an exercise in ‘opinion collection’ than interest aggregation.

Comparing two Canadian Social Democratic parties, Brian Tanguay highlights the importance of a range of organizational and contextual factors in understanding why some parties are so much more successful than others when it comes to responding to a changing environment. The format of the party system is one of the most powerful constraints on a party’s ability to reposition itself in the electoral market. While the Parti Québécois (PQ) benefited from the strategic flexibility offered by a two-party system when it needed to respond to the crisis of the welfare state and the need for fiscal retrenchment, the Ontario National Democratic Party (ONDP) was prevented from adopting a more moderate strategy because the centre of the political spectrum was occupied by the Liberals. In addition, strong organizational links to the trade unions limited the party leadership’s strategic flexibility. Yet Tanguay’s study also shows that organizational features may sequentially account for party decline and recovery. While the crisis of the PQ in the 1980s may have been exacerbated by the party’s independence from the trade unions, its reliance on small financial contributions and its emphasis on intra-party democracy, the very same factors contributed to its recovery once the political context had changed. Furnished with considerable room for manoeuvre, the party modernized its programmatic positions and returned to power in 1994 while the ONDP seemed to be doomed to continuing electoral decline.

A close look at the party political developments in Italy reveals that parties may choose a radically different approach to responding to changes in their social environment. Faced with competitive pressures to embark on more capital-intensive political campaigning and an insufficient mass membership base, the parties of the centre-right attempted to solve the endemic problem of raising sufficient funds by inventing an elaborate system of ‘kickbacks’ which secured a continuous flow of money from private companies in exchange for public contracts. As a result they became increasingly unable to respond to the political demands of the electorate at large as they owed their organizational viability primarily to the continuous flow of bribes from private business. Clearly, there is always a certain degree of ambiguity as to where exactly the line of demarcation should be drawn between bribes and substantial donations to political parties, because both involve an element of exchange. In other words, it is reasonable to assume that substantial private donations to a political party tend to be linked to expectations about certain policy outcomes. No doubt this also limits the responsiveness of political parties to the grievances and aspirations of their voters.

In a way, Forza Italia represents an extreme version of a ‘donors’ party’ in that the owner of a large business firm created his own party in order to
Jonathan Hopkin argues that Silvio Berlusconi managed to stifle judicial investigations into his affairs by taking control of key political institutions by setting up a political party which is almost entirely dependent on the resources of Belusconi’s Fininvest. However, while the extent to which we should generalize from one extreme case is certainly open to debate, the example of Forza Italia highlights the degree to which political parties can become detached from their electorate. While Forza Italia may be dominated by the very personal interests of its founder-owner, it may not be able to ignore the need to respond to the interests of the electorate at large if it wants to win elections – unless we would want to argue that political responsiveness can be rendered entirely irrelevant by the manipulative power of modern media campaigns.

Furthermore, Hopkin’s analysis shows that even Forza Italia could not completely ignore the requirements of conventional party politics. While it started off as a creation of Berlusconi’s Fininvest corporation, without any real linkage to society at large – that is, without a genuine membership organization or connections to intermediate organizations – the party eventually decided to build up a mass membership base. It did this because it became evident that capital-intensive campaigns, though highly effective for national elections, are not suitable for regional and local elections to the same degree. In other words, the imperatives of party competition pushed Forza Italia somewhat towards a more conventional model of party organization even though there is still little scope for true membership participation.

Spain represents an interesting example of democratic party formation in an advanced industrial society. Confronted with the need to create democratic parties almost instantly when the process of democratic transition began, Spanish parties found it difficult to establish strong linkages to specific strata of society under the conditions of ongoing modernization and growing social mobility. At the same time, they enjoyed public funding almost from the outset, which made the creation of a mass membership base as a source of reliable income less imperative. Yet the ‘legitimizing myth’ (Katz and Mair 1995: 18) of the mass party model also moulded Spanish party organizations, and the three major parties initially adopted the organizational model of the mass party without investing much energy in membership recruitment. By and large, they have been fairly reluctant to expand the participatory opportunities for party members, because the costs in terms of party unity were regarded as outweighing the benefits of making party membership more attractive. Lacking the constraints of traditional mass parties, Spanish parties could adapt quickly to the campaign techniques of the modern age, creating purpose-specific campaign organizations and employing the entire repertory of modern media-based campaigning. Luis Ramiro and Laura Morales show that while Spanish parties have successfully responded to
those environmental changes, their record in terms of policy responsiveness is a mixed one. Looking at the development of popular preferences and party platforms, they conclude that Spanish parties have not only responded to the demands of their voters, but also to pressures from their competitors. There have also been cases where parties have shaped public opinion rather than simply followed it; but then this is certainly within the model of democratic party government.

The final case study is an analysis of party responsiveness in post-Communist Russia. Susanna Pshizova argues that Russia represents a unique case of party formation on a ‘blank field’, that is, without any prior tradition of free interest intermediation or interest aggregation. As a result of almost a century of totalitarian rule and concomitant efforts to create a classless society, post-Communist Russia lacks virtually any traits of meaningful cleavage structures which underpin the party systems in Western democracies and which could be revitalized (at least partially) in the democratizing nations of Central and Eastern Europe or Latin America. Unable and unwilling to connect to a society which lacks intermediary structures, political parties in Russia (with the exception of the Communists) are teams led by a single leader, whose organizational survival is inextricably linked to the political career of one person. Given that there is no differentiatied structure of political interests, election campaigns focus overwhelmingly on the personal qualities of political leaders running for office. Also, since Russian parties (again with the exceptions of the Communists) have no real party memberships, election campaigns are highly capital-intensive, conducted almost entirely via television and designed by political consultants without specific political allegiances who even control the process of candidate selection.

In the absence of established linkages between social interests and political parties (and corresponding political programmes), the image of candidates assumes paramount importance for the voting decision, which leaves those who are elected with an almost entirely free mandate. In other words: because they do not need to promise concrete policies in order to be elected, they are free to do whatever they like once they are in power.

In Pshizova’s view, Russia may indicate a possible end-point of party development that is becoming more visible in established democracies, where previously strong cleavage structures are becoming increasingly blurred and the modern mass media have largely replaced interpersonal political communication. Russian parties, she argues, ‘... look like more distinct, radical versions of the tendencies peculiar to the Western parties’. To be sure, this may represent an underestimation of the resilience and inertia of cleavage structures, but she is certainly right in highlighting the similarities, not least in the case of Italy. Where previous loyalties have been destroyed or where they have collapsed as a result of a disastrous performance of the political class, ‘... access to the means of manipulation decides almost everything’.