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## The nostalgia of the mass party

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**Abstract.** Why are political parties on the defendant's bench? What do people want from parties today? Is there any chance of recapturing citizens' hearts and minds? This paper addresses questions linked to the crisis of confidence in parties in western European countries. After surveying some hypotheses on the origin of the discontent, the paper suggests that parties are trapped by an untenable pledge derived from their original connotation. The pledge concerns intra-party workings more than party activity in the political system. The paper sustains that although extensive criticism of parties is justified, they show some resilience. People still expect party profile and behaviour to be as they were in the post-war golden age, though recent transformations have downplayed many features that characterized the popular model of democracy. Nostalgia for past party politics clashes with present party reality and further depresses public esteem of political parties.

**Keywords:** mass party, nostalgia, disaffection, retrotopia.

### INTRODUCTION

The 'golden age' that political parties enjoyed in the post-war years (Katz and Mair, 1995, 2018) had waned by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a collapse in confidence and trust. This paper addresses a series of questions linked to this situation: Why are parties so poorly considered? What aspects of party profile have changed? What is missing that people still expect from parties? A path of investigation not followed by most studies suggests that people expect the "impossible" of parties. Public opinion at large requires and even longs for an (idealized) party whose crucial features recall the mass party: a party with a collective imprint used to achieve collective goods through collective means of action. This is the profile of the mass party of the golden post-war age. In western European democracies people feel nostalgia for certain past party politics and features. Nostalgia is a sentiment evoking something which has waned, but is regarded with emotion and affection. The conundrum facing parties today lies in the contrast between what people would like from them on one hand, and what parties are nowadays, on the other hand.

## THE ROOTS OF DISCONTENT

The negative reception of parties today has many sources. Some are *ontological*, linked to the party itself, its essence; others spring from the party's behaviour. The first strand of antiparty sentiment reveals the persistence of that thread of hostility and disdain that has accompanied the idea of division and partition – and thus of *party* – throughout the centuries (Rosenblum, 2008; Ignazi, 2017; Skjösberg, 2021). Today, however, rejection of the party *per se* does not emerge in a direct open way. Public invocation of a non-party system is very limited. Even the populist parties, which have recently been stoking anti-politics and anti-party sentiment, in the end follow the lines of party politics (Müller, 2017).

The second strand of anti-party sentiment, rather than dismissing the party as such, takes the form of profound, all-encompassing contempt, derived from supposed misconduct by parties. At the core of this sentiment is the idea that parties do not live up to people's expectations: namely, fair representation of their demands, effective capacity to produce the expected outputs, and open, bottom-up, democratic internal party procedures by dedicated, decent, honest politicians. These two sources of disaffection (ontological and structural/behavioural) are often intertwined, and reinforce each other. Although the first source is underlying, rather than having broad and open support, it provides the basis for the development of the much more vocal second source.

An attempt to delve into the present negative reception of political parties could start from the rationale for party formation. Beyond the motivations and expectations advanced by political entrepreneurs, the requests to parties by the people when they entered the political arena<sup>1</sup> had at their core the promise of perfect, absolute, flawless democracy (Janse and te Velde, 2017). Since their inception political parties present an ideal of free and equal participation both internally, regarding intra-party dynamics, and externally, regarding the political system. The centrality of democratic procedures and behaviour was such that the first meetings of historical mass parties (the German Sdap, the Dutch Arp and the

British Liberal Federation) ranged for most of the time discussing, together with the means for opening up the political system to the religiously and socially marginalized constituencies, the most equal and democratic internal *modus operandi* (Heyer, 2022). In sum, a close relationship between party and democracy has existed since the beginning (Corduwener, 2021; Ignazi, 2017; Mair, 2003; Webb et al., 2022).

Political parties have not responded with the same efficacy and satisfaction to aspirations for freedom and equality at system level and at intra-party level. At system level, parties may show a positive record. As they were the indispensable tools for setting up a representative democratic system, they delivered what was demanded of them. Indeed, they exerted continuous pressure on established elites to broaden civil and political rights (Daalder, 1966). More than that, at its 1891 congress, the Spd explicitly embodied the aim of '*universal, harmonious perfection*' through the emancipation of workers (Byrne, 2021; emphasis added).

Much of the consideration and legitimacy parties gained in the early 20th century came from their purported struggle to acquire power for the 'inarticulate masses' (Rokkan, 1970). Isolated advocates of full political rights for everybody in the legislative assemblies, were coupled and supported by partisan mass mobilization in the society, to break the ceiling of parties' negative reception. In a way, "street politics and parliamentary politics came to depend on each other", as argued by Charles Tilly (2004: 44). And the instrument to fulfil liberalization and democratization of the system was the political party, sometimes in symbiosis with the trade union as in Great Britain and Scandinavia (Bartolini 2000). In addition to real politics came the theoretical legitimation, especially by Max Weber ([1919] 1994) and Hans Kelsen ([1929] 2013) which both rejected the last attempts by the liberal elites to dampen the party ascendancy – an attempt voiced particularly by Mosei Ostrogorski ([1902] 1970). At last, a collective body arisen from society rather than from parliament, got the right to inspire parliamentary activity and finally control government. Representation had moved from individual to collective, and the party had become the indispensable tool to grant representation.

Therefore, the famous Schattschneider's dictum, "democracy is unthinkable, save in terms of parties" (1942: 2), was – and still is – well grounded. In fact, beyond all the criticism addressed to parties in recent times, very minor constituencies would write off of parties as such. Rather, further elements for channelling the demands of citizens have emerged *in support, not instead*, of parties, ranging from direct democracy rep-

<sup>1</sup> Susan Stokes argues that in order to investigate on the origins of political parties, and especially 'the conditions under which either elite politics or popular mobilization will engender political parties, we need better, more social-scientifically informed historical research into the origins of parties' (1999: 246). We fully endorse this suggestion, but this is not the place for a detailed description of the development of European political parties. It suffices here to refer to the classics, from Stein Rokkan to Hans Daalder, or to some recent historic overview (see te Velde and Janse, 2017).

ertories to deliberative mechanisms. Although parties are held in low esteem and consideration, still there is no other game in town.

The most critical point therefore concerns not so much their role in the democratic system, as their internal features and working. The present dissatisfaction is grounded less on their performance in term of policy outputs, rather on their practices: not what they do, rather how they do it. Moreover, the criticism addressed to parties should be regarded with respect to people's expectations of parties and politicians' behaviour.

Therefore, is the party's early, primordial, self-image of an hyper-democratic organization still present in the public opinion today? Are the collective and participatory traits of the organization (through involvement of members, mobilization of activists and middle-level elites, and through total commitment of party elites), still the main reference for a large part of citizens when they think of parties? Or have people accepted and interiorized parties as a mere *locus* for individual competition devoted to the conquest of party-controlled assets, such as political careers, and of party-controlled resources in the labour market, the public administration, the state, the economy, and so on? Differently said, have people endorsed a Schumpeterian electoral democracy or a popular democracy model? We would argue that the resilience of a popular democracy is supported by the persistence of a positive image of the party in its golden age.

#### BETWEEN POPULAR AND ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY

As forecasted by Kirchheimer (1966) and later advanced by Katz and Mair (1995, 2018), since the late 20th century, parties have taken a path that makes them diverge from their original imprint, identified by Duverger's mass party model. Indeed, divergence from the mass party model did not alter their formal structure, save for some delegation procedures (Webb et al., 2017; Poguntke and Scarrow, 2020; Masi and Pizzimenti, 2022). The change involved discarding a series of connotating functions and departing from their original imprint as a participatory collective organization. Their leaning towards other organizational models (cartel, franchise, electoral-efficient, to quote the most common), implied a change in the party essence, because it emphasised individual, office seeking, and competitive features, whereas the party was originally conceived as a *collective enterprise* devoted to achieving *collective goals* through *collective activities* of various sorts.

This shift from collective to individual has been somehow inevitable. According to a political-sociological

approach akin to the 'environmentally induced change' approach of Harmel and Janda (1994), the recent changes that have invested political parties may be conceived as a by-product of the new social environment. Parties appeared on the political stage at a time when industrial society was burgeoning. From that setting they acquired many rational-bureaucratic elements, such as the vertical line of 'political production', differentiation and specialization of tasks, uniform standardized behaviour, and formalization of internal procedures. Indeed, the mass party was an "organizational invention" (Duverger 1951) in tune with the industrial era. Nothing of the kind had been known before, with the eventual exception of the Jacobin Clubs in revolutionary France (Kennedy, 1982, 1988, 2000).

The advent of the post-industrial and post-modern society brought about a change in such setting. In line with the new environment and its implicit *Weltanschauung*, parties abandoned the traditional functions of representation and channelling, on which rested their *input role* to decision-makers, and instead favoured an *output role* in terms of efficient, problem-solver, public agency. They pointed to manage citizens' demands and government outputs, by depoliticizing the political arena, and by relying on independent authorities, supranational organizations, technical expertise, and so on. As a consequence, recalling the well-known interpretation of Katz and Mair (1995), parties no longer cared about the bridge between society and the state that they had been cultivating since the dawn of the 20th century.

As argued by Peter Mair (2013) parties went on to consider themselves self-sufficient, operating as agents of the state devoted to running elections, and not much more: the fortunate image of 'parties as public utilities' (van Biezen, 2004) well captures this point. This activity enables parties to maintain a central role in the political system. Once in office, they have to concentrate on producing effective policies, more or less in line with the demands of the public; if in opposition, they have to offer palatable alternatives. A minimum of responsiveness is sufficient.

This evolution is congruent with performing the crucial function of 'structuring the vote', the ultimate and exclusive function of parties. In fact, if we accept the (Schumpeterian) vision of free and fair competition between elites as a minimum definition of democracy, parties could be confined to that role. However, the idea of parties mainly or even exclusively devoted to intra- and inter-party competition for the conquest of internal offices and seats in assemblies – electoral democracy – runs counter to the interpretation of the role of parties in the democratic system embraced by popular democracy (Mair, 2013; Urbinati, 2014).

On the one hand, the electoral conception of democracy ‘make[s] citizen participation during the period between elections superfluous, and in this sense make[s] democracy an accessory to representative government [...] [r]epresentative democracy is not a “consenting crowd of inorganic voters” [...] as it is a type of government that starts with elections but develops beyond them’ (Urbinati, 2011: 27). On the other hand, popular democracy entails active participation of citizens in the public sphere, mainly through political parties.

Popular democracy, more than electoral democracy, implies a central role of political parties. The conundrum is that this kind of democracy is threatened and enfeebled by the poor consideration of parties. The negative rate of parties is assessed by a large swathe of empirical analysis. However, it may be argued that the public in general maintains a certain reservoir of confidence in the parties. People do not seem to have given up the idea of a possible recovery. Residual confidence persists for one reason or another.

#### PARTY RESILIENCE

As already advanced, in the first post-war years, driven by comparison with the previous inter-war era of totalitarianism, parties received immense credit for accomplishing their essential promise: *to bring democracy to the party system through their own democratic organization*. In the long run, however, they were unable to do so, and this led to growing disillusionment. The general decline in identification with, and attachment to parties, validated by many case-studies and cross-national research (i.e., Dalton, 2011, 2018; Garzia et al., 2022; EES, 2022), provides a more convincing indicator of public disaffection than turnout or membership rate (Scarrow et al., 2017).

This sentiment does not stem from a rational evaluation by voters of party performance in delivering its policies and promises. As Russell Dalton (2020) asserted on the basis of recent psychological contributions, “Human action is guided not by a thoughtful, deliberative calculus of costs and benefits, but by intuitions and feelings developed from previous experience, emotions, moral values, and personal traits.” We can therefore argue that disaffection is not a question of party effectiveness or competence but rather is nurtured by more emotional factors (Achen and Bartels, 2016). In particular, it points to a lack of understanding of people’s demands, indifference to the concerns of normal citizens, the inaccessibility of politicians, and finally to their low moral rectitude and honesty (Clarke et al., 2018; Hay, 2007; Stoker,

2019). Anger and even fury against parties (and politicians) erupt *because of betrayed expectations*.

Empirical support for the above scenario comes from a recent international survey by Ipsos (2023). In almost all the European countries considered, a range between 60 and 65% of people agreed with the statement ‘traditional parties and politicians don’t care about people like me’; exceptions were Germany (49%), the Netherlands (45%) and Sweden (44%). This feeling of being disregarded and ignored by parties and their representatives, coupled with a feeling of solitude due to lax or severed organizational bonds, is what fuels disillusionment and creates distrust of parties.

This well-known picture should however be completed by mentioning some counterfactual evidences which nuance the asserted dark picture on party’s fate.

First, parties do not disappear from the stage: they are still at the centre of the process of delegation, and party governmentness still holds, except in a few cases, in particular Italy, which had a series of technical non-partisan cabinets.

Second, in some countries, people continue to join parties (van Haute and Ribeiro, 2022; Bale, Webb and Poletti, 2020) and even actively participate, as in Norway (Heidar and Jupskås, 2023) and to a different extent Great Britain (Poletti, Webb and Bale, 2019; Barnfield and Bale, 2022).

Third, the general sentiment of dislike may find some qualification. In her research on the British parties, Dommet (2020) has in fact shown that not all parties are despised to the same degree: when the interviewee is confronted with an evaluation of her/his preferred party, the general negative statement ‘all parties are bad’ shifts to ‘all parties but mine are bad’. This implies that rejection is selective. If all mass surveys offered this alternative, the overall rate of discontent would probably be different.

Fourth, and most important, new parties continue to emerge. Brand new parties, according to Chiaramonte and Emanuele (2017) and Emanuele and Sikk (2021) – who use the stringent criteria of Bartolini and Mair (1990) to identify new parties – increased to 30 parties in the 2010s, and 22.6% of them obtained more than 5% of the vote, a much higher percentage than in previous decades (Emanuele and Sikk, (2021).

Fifth, in addition to parties which got representation in the national assemblies, also the number of party lists and candidates which competed in recent elections increased.<sup>2</sup> In the United Kingdom, candidates have been constantly more than 3300 for 650 constituencies, although they are declining from the high of 4130 in

<sup>2</sup> Data was retrieved from the official websites of the Ministries of the Interior and National Parliaments of the different countries.



2010. In Germany, 47 parties were authorised to compete by the Ministry of the Interior. In the 2022 elections in France, the 40 lists fielded 6239 candidates, slightly less than in 2017, when the traditional party system broke down. In Italy the party lists authorised to compete numbered 101 in 2022 and 103 in 2018. If we also consider subnational level, we find a burgeoning of local lists in many countries (Reiser and Holtmann, 2008; Lefebvre, 2020; Tavares, Raudla and Silva, 2020); whether or not they are set up outside or even against national political parties, they nonetheless express a willingness to organize in order to compete in the political arena.

This evidence suggests that although harshly criticized, political parties are not by any means disappearing: first, they remain at the centre of the chain of delegation without any alternative, since any other possibility (such as referenda, deliberative polls, sortition, recall) is conceived as supplementary not substitutive of parties; and second, people still invest in them maybe because nothing else or better is available.

This resilience leads to think that people do not discard parties as such: rather they dislike the present offer – even if, as we have seen, they continue to join them to a certain extent. It could be argued that people would envision to recapture the party's original role as an instrument of involvement, participation and socialization. In this way the party could reinstate its ability to channel demands, represent interests and values, deliver adequate policies, and respond to the people in an empathic way. Whether or not these aspirations are realistic or merely idealized, if voters did not entertain them, no new parties would have emerged in recent years, and no populist surge advocating 'better politics' (Müller, 2017) would have occurred. The demand for good parties and good politicians remains (Clarke et al., 2018).

#### NOSTALGIA FOR (AN IDEALIZED) MASS PARTY

One plausible answer leads back to the image of the political party held by public opinion. That image was highly positive for a long time because parties were considered inseparable from democracy. This windfall was derived from the role played by political parties at two critical moments in the process of democratization: in the 1920s when universal (male) suffrage was introduced all over Europe, and in the post-war period when parties were the cornerstone of democracy, particularly in France, Germany and Italy. Germany developed as a *Parteiinstaat* (Poguntke, 1994) and Konrad Adenauer asserted that 'all political activities should go through the parties' (Corduwener, 2020: 56). Italy somewhat

reinstated Fascist party interpenetration of the state and society by using the same approach in the new multiparty system (Morlino, 1998); pointedly, Palmiro Togliatti, leader of the Communist party, stated that parties 'are democracy that self-organizes'. France too re-installed parties at the centre of the Fourth Republic (Avril 1986) despite General De Gaulle's disdain for them (Berstein, 2001: 100, 1998: 820). The point is that the kind of party at centre stage in the years of the golden era was the mass party. *Public opinion came to identify parties with the features of the mass party.*

In addition, after WWII, 'the institutional entanglement between parties and the state' (Corduwener, 2020:59) was settled by the constitutional and legal regulation of parties. Limited in the first post-war years to countries which had experienced long (Italy), medium (Germany) and short (Austria) totalitarian experiences, this process later spread all over Europe, with very few exceptions (van Biezen and Borz, 2012). All these legal provisions at least implicitly require a *collective body* where decisions are taken by a formal bottom-up procedure that strengthens the image of the party as a *collective arena*. This aspect spills over to party activity: the party has to advance the claim to represent the 'common good' and 'general will', even when it pursues sectorial and micro interests. Any party, including single-issue party, fosters its proposals by referring to more general encompassing goals. The pressure for collective goals inherent to democratic representation (and to some extent responsibility) is coupled with the *associational nature* of the party (Dommet, 2020), which in turn implies a collective environment.

Political parties are therefore pressured from two sides to abide by their founding organizational imperative on collective arrangements. On one side, the formal-legal frame has recently become more and more stringent; on the other, the aura of post-war party politics, populated by massive organizations streaked with militancy and open-field mobilization, forged a strong image of what a party should be in the public opinion.

The 'logic of appropriateness' (March and Olsen, 2008)<sup>3</sup> of the political party is therefore largely derived from its post-war centrality and positive reception. In other terms, following also Bourdieu's (1997 spec 168-

<sup>3</sup> 'The logic of appropriateness is a perspective that sees human action as driven by rules of appropriate or exemplary behaviour, organized into institutions. [...] Rules are followed because they are seen as natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate. Actors seek to fulfil the obligations encapsulated in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices and expectations of its institutions. Embedded in a social collectivity, they do what they see as appropriate for themselves in a specific type of situation.' (March and Olsen, 2008).

169) reference to ‘habitus’ and ‘doxa’, *the idea of what a party should be received from a process of socialization of politics*, leads people to look for, or even require, the particular kind of party they were accustomed to consider appropriate. The consequence is that a ‘good party’ is the one of the golden age of political parties. A party therefore needs to display those pristine features in order to be well received today.

These considerations rest on the suggestion that the party is viewed through the filter of nostalgia, a present day tendency toward ‘retrotopia’, as argued by Zygmund Bauman (2017). According to the latest strands of psychoanalytical literature (Byom, 2001; Sedikides et al., 2008; Routledge et al., 2012) this sentiment reflects positive rather than negative affect. The past is seen as a positive way of ‘making sense’ of an imperfect present (Byom, 2007; Davis, 1979). Nostalgia could even be a ‘desired state’ in the face of the reality. In some occurrences, positive memories could be mingled with sadness for something lost: the Portuguese expression *saudade* and Marcel Proust’s madeleine in his *La recherche du temps perdu* provide fascinating explicit examples of the bitter-sweet flavour of nostalgia.

Indeed, nostalgia pervades contemporary politics and it evokes positive evaluations (Müller, 2002). About two thirds of the European electorate may be classified as nostalgic (De Vreis and Hoffmann, 2018). The party programs of 379 parties in 24 European countries are full of references to an inevitably idealized past (Müller and Proksch, 2024). This pervading sentiment influences the perception of parties.

As argued above, political parties produced a clear set of practices and norms of behaviour at the time of their initial development. These were reinforced at the height of their expansion, emphasising democratic qualities, equal participation of members, and benevolent attention towards their members and the *classe gardée*. These practices and norms have pervaded public opinion. People expect certain figures and institutions to behave in a predictable and appropriate way. Thus, parties are now *expected to observe the norms attributed to them by a ‘collective common conscience’*. Political parties have to show certain traits and abide by certain rules and norms.

Here lies the point of friction. The challenge or trap is that they have to follow the standard *modus operandi* of the 20th-century mass party *that no longer exists* – although, some parties such as the radical populist right are trying to revive it (see Albertazzi and van Kessel, 2021; De Jong, 2021; Sijstermans, 2021). *Parties that diverge from these standard procedures are considered inadequate or even illegitimate* (Katz and Mair, 2018: 8;

Dalton, Scarrow, and Cain, 2006: 250; Saward, 2008: 272; Wolkenstein, 2020: 147).

According to this reasoning, political parties have inevitably failed to meet people’s expectations of predictable behaviour, especially within the party itself. In intra-party life, the promise of working in tune with the ideal of a full egalitarian democracy clashes with the decline in the provision and attractiveness of collective incentives in front of the growing impact of selective incentives. The new neoliberal and individualist *Zeitgeist* of recent decades has led to the demise of collective instances within parties, in favour of individual participation. Emphasis on office- and vote-seeking behaviour (Strom, 1990) instead of intra-party democracy (Harmel and Janda, 1994) has favoured the spread of an image of parties populated by carrier-driven people rather than people devoted to the general interest without any concern for their own personal benefits. This drive away from the original imprint of parties has affected people’s consideration of parties but has not erased the image. Although a generation has been replaced, their positive memory of past party politics has taken hold and spread through direct socialization and through memories and historical accounts. Thus, the logic of the appropriateness of political parties has been reinstated by nostalgia for the past. The conundrum is that nostalgia collides with present-day reality. People demand what parties can no longer deliver in that form.

## CONCLUSION

Parties are trapped in the contradiction between expectations and fulfilment. Because they betray the perceived logic of appropriateness attributed to them – transparency, representativeness, democracy, accountability, honesty and listening (see Dommett, 2021; Volgarosson et al., 2021) – people shun them; and are angry and frustrated about this betrayal. And populist parties are exploiting this situation (Albertazzi and van Kessel, 2021).

The same negative feelings pertain to politicians. The ideal type of politician – the *doxa* embraced by most people, socialized to the myth of the golden age of parties – clashes with what is seen as uncaring, distant, self-seeking and privilege-driven behaviour, not to mention misconduct and wrongdoing. Although public expectation ‘is raised to unattainable levels [for] a good politician’ (Clarke, et al. 2018:2), the constant and unremittingly critical reviews of political and personal misdeeds by politicians further depress their image (Corbett, 2014; Flinders, 2012).

Parties of western countries are impeded by the nostalgia of the general public for a party politics bursting

with passion, ideological fervour, commitment to the general interest, active members and supporters, and reliable politicians. This retrotopia (Bauman, 2017) hails back to a golden past, fuelling dissatisfaction and rejection of parties as they are today. At the same time, this nostalgia sparks an opposite sentiment: the desire for parties' renewal, measured by their resilience in the public and electoral spheres, where they continue to arise in good numbers, in some cases even with revived and reformed internal structure and procedures.

Democracy remains inconceivable without parties, as long as we acknowledge the importance, centrality and legitimacy of regulated political conflict in representative systems. The inclusion of parties in the political arena by the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries had precisely that aim. Even in this period of mounting anti-party sentiment, political parties remain central to the process of delegation and even continue to emerge and attract people. The mobilization of people often clashes with the fact that the instrument of engagement is not what they expected. However, nostalgia for the past is also a powerful driver of that search.

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