Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale
QOE
IJES
Italian Journal of Electoral Studies

Firenze University Press
www.fupress.com/qoe



**Citation:** Raniolo, F. (2025). Legitimation (of the parties) and partisan ambivalences. *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale – Italian Journal of Electoral Studies* 88(2): 61-66. doi: 10.36253/qoe-18135

**Received:** June 28, 2025

**Accepted:** July 12, 2025

**Published:** December 4, 2025



**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

**ORCID:**
FR: 0000-0001-7734-8767

# Legitimation (of the parties) and partisan ambivalences

Francesco Raniolo

*Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Calabria, Italy*
E-mail: francesco.raniolo@unical.it

**Abstract**. This short note is inspired by Piero Ignazi's article in this issue of IJES-QOE. The basic idea is that the legitimacy of political parties is the outcome of an ongoing, contingent, tension-laden and ambivalent process (legitimization). This ambivalence is not merely circumstantial but embedded in the very logic of partisan action. Which we can characterize as a set of conceptual oppositions between ideals and practices, normative expectations and organizational realities, what parties are and what they do. The article discusses four partisan ambivalences (or dichotomies): part vs. whole, conflict vs. integration, society vs. state, and representation vs. government. In times of democratic regression these ambivalences become disruptive, undermining the credibility of parties as legitimate actors. The crisis of party legitimacy, then is a symptom of a broader transformation in the role of political parties in the 21st century. Transformations that redefine the very function and identity of political parties.

**Keywords:** partisan ambivalence, legitimization, integration, conflict, intermediation, representation.

The article by Piero Ignazi (2025) published in this issue of *IJES - QOE* prompts numerous reflections – as expected, given that Ignazi is one of the undisputed masters of party analysis, not only in Italy but internationally. What follows is an attempt to develop some of these reflections.

While the study of political parties has long been central to political science, it has received comparatively less attention from the standpoint of the history of ideas and political thought. Foundational contributions – without claiming to be exhaustive – include the classic works of S. Cotta (1959) and G. Sartori (1976), along with those by Daalder (1992), Pomper (1992), and Stokes (1999). More recent analyses from a political science perspective include those by P. Ignazi (2017) and D. Palano (2013). These works have largely focused on the uncertain evolution of the democratic legitimacy of political parties. In this context, the legal perspective also offers a useful comparison (see, for instance, Vecchio 2016).

It is well established that institutions and organizations – including political parties – can be assessed both in terms of their effectiveness in carrying out instrumental tasks and functions, and in terms of their legitimacy, understood as their ability to garner social recognition. This dichotomy was already central to Seymour M. Lipset's reflections in the 1950s and has recently re-emerged in neo-institutionalist thought (e.g., Offe 1995) and in

organizational analysis through the distinction between problem-solving capacity (effectiveness) and sense-making capacity (legitimacy).

In the process of constructing collective actors, there is a constant interaction – and indeed tension – between "identity" and "image." Organizational identity refers to the features that define an organization in the hearts and minds of those who engage with it. Yet it is also defined by what it represents, including its purpose and values (Hatch 2018, p. 386). From this, a number of macro- and micro-level consequences follow. At the macro level, we observe the tension between what parties claim to be and what they actually do – often described as organizational hypocrisy. At the micro level, this gap helps explain the disillusionment – and thus the exit – of supporters and voters (Hirschman 1982), as well as the "nostalgia" Ignazi refers to: a yearning for a mythologized golden age that reinforces today's decline in trust and, consequently, the legitimacy of political parties (Mair 1997; Ignazi 2017).

Moreover, legitimacy is an outcome, while legitimation is a process – often a highly uncertain one, as Ignazi notes. In what follows, I propose to interpret this process as one shaped by a series of ambivalent tensions. Specifically, I draw on a number of broad, oppositional conceptual pairs that can help illuminate the logic of party action. These "partisan dilemmas" are derived from the literature on political parties (Panebianco 1982; Schlesinger 1984; see also Raniolo 2013 for an initial presentation). In particular, I refer to the following dichotomies: part vs. whole, conflict vs. integration, society vs. state, and representation vs. government. As we will see, the latter two dichotomies contain within them further tensions: competition vs. identity, and responsibility vs. responsiveness, respectively.

## BETWEEN PART AND WHOLE

The word "party" derives from the Latin *partire*, meaning "to divide" – from which comes the notion of partition. In its etymological sense, a party is therefore a part – something distinct from the whole, a fraction of a greater entity (Palano 2013). Politics begins with the elementary act of drawing divisions, and this has far-reaching implications.

The first implication, from the perspective of the party or political unit being constituted, can be termed *integrative*: as Michael Walzer (1999) notes – citing Ignazio Silone – politics is about "choosing one's comrades," about selecting the group one will join, remain within, and struggle alongside for shared objectives. This integrative dimension relates to concepts such as cohesion, strength, and degree of party organization – concepts that are empirically vague and ambiguous.

The second implication involves a shift in scale and points to the dialectic between "part" and "whole." As Giovanni Sartori (1976, p. 25) observed, the rationality of modern political parties rests on three premises:

1. Parties are not factions.
2. A party is a part-of-a-whole.
3. Parties are channels of expression.

Implicit in this formulation is the idea, emerging at the end of the eighteenth century, that the political universe is inherently multicolored. When we affirm that dissent and diversity are healthy for the social body and for the political city, the underlying assumption is that this political city is, and ought to be, made up of parts. The parts we call parties historically gained recognition based on this very assumption (Sartori 1976, p. 22).

It took more than a century of bloody religious wars across Europe and the acute insights of thinkers like David Hume to open the way toward pluralism in modern societies (Pupo 2016). Yet history rarely progresses in straight lines. In fact, it is useful here to recall two potential perverse effects that can result from the part–whole dialectic. Drawing once again on Sartori (1976), we may speak of the excess of either centrifugal or centripetal tendencies.

A political system consumed by factionalism is one in which the parts have overwhelmed the whole. This results in a process of centrifugal fragmentation, marked by two sub-processes – polarization and radicalization – that Sartori considers overlapping, though in reality they are distinct (Dahl's position on this is closer to ours). Polarization entails the structuring of the political field – and today, increasingly, of society itself – into separate and distant blocs, which tend to reject moderate or tolerant interaction. In such a context, politics loses its regulatory and integrative capacity, and the way is opened to a Hobbesian state of nature. Dominating this landscape is Behemoth, the biblical monster symbolizing discord, sedition, and civil war. Civil life, as Guglielmo Ferrero (1942) put it, is swallowed by a system of fears. One need only consider the strategies of some parties – at times even traditional ones, though more commonly protest movements – that push voters toward extreme positions, fostering "pernicious polarization" (McCoy & Somer 2019), "divisive partisanship" (Sunstein 2019), "tribalism and factious partisanship" (Putnam 2020), and the broader development of radicalized democracies (Morlino e Raniolo 2022). These are all symptoms of a deep malaise within democracy – if not signs of its actual demise (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018).

On the other hand, we face a second risk: the erosion of pluralism and the part–whole dialectic by the gravitational pull of a totalitarian Leviathan – what Nobel laureates Acemoglu and Robinson (2019) call an "unleashed Leviathan." In this scenario, we are returned to a monistic world in which civil conflict disappears, but with it so does freedom. The pluralism of parties is replaced by monopartitism; the state of parties is transformed into the one-party state, or more precisely, into the party-state. Not all one-party systems are the same – they vary in their intensity of repression and ideological control – hence the distinction between single-party and hegemonic-party systems (Sartori 1976). Still, it is worth emphasizing that while factionalism and radicalization are clear signs (and proximate causes) of democratic crisis and potential collapse, monism is one of the possible outcomes of such a crisis: namely, the establishment of some form of authoritarian rule (Morlino 2011).

This issue has returned to the forefront as leading independent observers – such as Freedom House, the Varieties of Democracy project, and Polity IV – have documented nearly two decades of democratic backsliding. This regression has unfolded along three main trajectories: increasingly authoritarian regimes, unconsolidated new democracies, and the erosion of established democracies. The deeper causes lie in the digital revolution, rising inequality, the resurgence of nationalism and sovereignty discourses, and the return of power politics in international affairs.

Nonetheless, one of the internal factors – arguably the most significant – that accelerates democratic erosion is the transformation of existing parties or the emergence of new ones. These transformations are characterized by extreme personalization of leadership, particularly in electoral competition and media visibility; by centralization of internal party power; by a successful claim to active political powers once in office; and by the decline of accountability mechanisms (Poguntke & Webb 2005).

## BETWEEN CONFLICT AND INTEGRATION

Political parties, in their reciprocal relationships and in their interaction with the political system, act both as channels for integrating individuals and groups into the existing political order, and as instruments for modifying or replacing that order (Kirchheimer 1966, trans. 1979, p. 188). They function simultaneously as mechanisms of integration and disintegration, as agents of conflict and of its regulation.

This ambivalence is captured by Alessandro Pizzorno (1996, p. 983), who notes that, on the one hand, parties "organize participation" – which entails a continuous process of socialization and filtering of the amorphous demands emerging from below. On the other hand, through ideological elaboration, parties foster the construction of identities through which they seek recognition, and under which they engage in struggle for the attainment and preservation of power. In this way, they offer coherent bundles of responses (manifestos and programs) to social demands.

Elections themselves represent an "occasion" in which the citizen, through voting, expresses "solidarity with those who think like him" (Pizzorno 2012, p. 204). However, "no regime – least of all a democratic one, which allows for the articulation and organization of all political positions – is entirely devoid of some form of disloyal opposition" (Linz 1978, trans. 1981, p. 56), which challenges the very legitimacy of the authorities and institutions.

It is therefore essential to understand, in any given regime, the weight, configuration, and causes behind the presence of such anti-system forces. According to Hans Daalder (1966, p. 65), for a variety of historical and structural reasons, European political systems during their initial democratization phases experienced the emergence of anti-system parties and disloyal formations.

In general, such disloyal or anti-system oppositions tend to be minoritarian in consolidated democracies, becoming influential only during periods of crisis or dysfunction. The picture becomes more complex when we consider hybrid cases alongside loyal (pro-system) and disloyal (anti-system) oppositions – these hybrid formations, which we may call semi-loyal oppositions, are even harder to identify. Moreover, over time, the attitudes of groups and parties toward the political regime may shift significantly.

Parties that were once anti-system may evolve toward semi-acceptance, and eventually full integration, even reaching positions of power. Conversely, the opposite trajectory is also possible, where a party undergoes radicalization, pushing it toward greater systemic incompatibility. This is partly what is occurring today in many mature democracies, with the rise of populist parties and leaders, the new far-right wave (see Ignazi 2003), and the radicalization of many conservative parties – with the most striking case being that of the American Republicans.

Not coincidentally, Ignazi (2017), echoing Katz, recently reiterated the risk that anti-party and anti-system parties "could represent the next stage in party development" (2006).

## BETWEEN SOCIETY AND STATE

As Norberto Bobbio (1985, p. 26) observed, "Parties have one foot in civil society and one foot in the institutions [...] in fact, they do not entirely belong to either civil society or the State." One of the most common ways to define political parties is to show that they perform the function of selecting, aggregating, and ultimately transmitting demands originating from civil society, which are destined to become the subject of political decision-making.

It is no coincidence, as Bobbio reminds us by referring to Paolo Farneti (1973), that the notion of a "political society" was introduced precisely to enrich the classical liberal dichotomy between civil society and the State. Political parties are the most relevant actors within this intermediary realm.

More recently, Thomas Poguntke (2006, p. 106) has reaffirmed that "parties are intermediaries that link society and the institutions of democratic government," emphasizing – much like Bobbio – that in order to perform this bridging function, they must be anchored in both spheres: in state institutions (such as parliaments, governments, and bureaucracies) and in society (ibid.).

We might further add that this intermediary role is especially salient in the case of externally originated or socially rooted parties.

A different approach to exploring the mechanisms of political mediation and linkage – extending beyond the democratic context – was proposed by Kay Lawson (1980; see also Lawson and Merkl 1988; Römmele, Farrell, and Ignazi 2005; Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011). Lawson's starting point is the concept of linkage, which – while similar – is not entirely reducible to the notion of "mediation." Linkage refers to "a connection, typically implying some form of interaction" (Lawson and Merkl 1988, p. 14) between distinct territorial levels or units, among which there is mutual benefit in maintaining a relationship.

Parties therefore serve as linking agents, specialized in maintaining connections between society and the political system, or, alternatively, between citizens-voters and institutions. When such linkage is effective – meaning it operates bidirectionally – the political system is both stable and legitimate in its persistence. However, linkage can also become dysfunctional or unsatisfactory, or deteriorate over time. In such cases, alternative linking agents emerge – movements, interest groups, protest or anti-political formations, even bureaucracies or the judiciary – which attempt to take the place of parties.

In his recent work, repeatedly cited, Ignazi (2017, p. 224) notes that "the evaluation of political parties across Europe tends to be negative." There are many indicators of this trend: declining electoral turnout, waning party identification, eroding trust in parties and politicians, falling membership, and the ineffectiveness of collective, purposive, and emotional incentives – what Ignazi calls symbolic-collective resources.

Conversely, a substantial body of literature has pointed out that parties which are increasingly "minimal" in their relationship with society are becoming more "maximal" in their relationship with the state – benefiting from financial resources and distributing selective-material incentives (see also Kopecky and Mair 2006; Di Mascio 2012).

## BETWEEN REPRESENTATION AND GOVERNMENT

This pair of concepts, quite familiar in political discourse, is polysemic in nature. It denotes, simultaneously: distinct principles of political legitimacy (ascending vs. descending); specialized institutional structures ("theatre bodies" vs. executive apparatuses, in the words of Massimo Severo Giannini, 1986); and divergent operational and decision-making logics – the former expressing the need to give voice to diversity and pluralism, the latter oriented toward reducing complexity and emphasizing efficiency.

Moreover, the democratization of industrial societies led to a structural differentiation in the command architecture of the state (Pizzorno 2012): one part dependent on elections (political representation), and the other recruited based on specific competences aligned with the functional demands of performance-based administration (i.e., executive government). This opened up spaces for experts, technocratic actors, and non-majoritarian institutions.

Parties are positioned at the core of this institutional field. They are simultaneously invested with the conflicting imperatives of amplifying pluralism and streamlining decision-making – of transmitting demands and exercising delegated authority (Pizzorno 1980). Naturally, parties vary in how they perform these functions, depending on:

1. their origin (internally vs. externally generated),
2. their social base (elite vs. mass parties),
3. their ideological orientation (conservative vs. progressive),
4. their role (government vs. opposition),
5. and their historical-geographical context (American vs. European parties; contemporary vs. traditional).

Typically, the first element in each pair is more strongly oriented toward governance, while the second leans toward representation.

However, these distinctions have largely faded since the end of the "Thirty Glorious Years", with the rise and global spread of neoliberalism – from Reagan's America and Thatcher's Britain – followed by socialist austerity and then the Third Way. The 2008 Great Recession further deepened a contradiction between demands for redistribution and the practical limits – if not the impossibility – of meeting those demands.

In this scenario, the original dilemma has morphed into a tension between responsiveness (the party's attentiveness and commitment to respond to its social base) and responsibility (its obligation to respect budgetary, international, neocorporate, and technocratic constraints). This has led scholars to describe the emergence of "semi-sovereign democracies" (Schmidt 1996) or "post-democracy" (Crouch 2003).

Richard Katz (2006) notes that parties adapt to this situation through two main strategies: the deflation of public expectations and the evasion of responsibility.

"The lowering of expectations is most evident in the rhetoric of the Third Way, in which even nominally leftist parties abandon public welfare provision in favor of market efficiency. By shifting control over monetary policy to an independent central bank, parties further distance themselves from responsibility – an effect magnified when this delegation is coupled with a stability pact that effectively relinquishes discretion over fiscal policy. By devolving political responsibility to others, parties in effect limit the range of policy choices and shrink the spectrum of issues over which they can plausibly compete. In this way, devolution [...] also reflects a transformation of parties from power-seeking to responsibility-avoiding entities."

These dynamics have produced deep internal tensions within both left-wing parties and protest parties (often referred to as neo-populist), especially upon entering government, as occurred across Southern Europe (Morlino and Raniolo 2022).

In reality, the representation–government ambivalence contains two further tensions. The first is foundational to democracy itself: the pair inclusion vs. exclusion – which, for Steven Lukes, lies at the heart of the left–right distinction. Norberto Bobbio likewise emphasized equality as the key democratic value (see both essays in Bosetti 1993). The democratic, representative, multi-class state is premised on the expectation of democratic deepening (Dahl 1971), emancipatory politics (Giddens 1994), and human empowerment across political, cultural, and economic dimensions (Welzel 2011).

Yet, despite democratic progress, even in mature democracies, freedom (civil and political) and equality tend to diverge. The result, as noted above, is a growing elitization of democracy, combining features of illiberal democracies (Zakaria 1997) – without rights – and exclusive democracies (Mastropaolo 2023) – without meaningful participation, or with domesticated forms of it.

## CONCLUSIONS

Essentially, the legitimacy of political parties cannot be regarded as a stable or consolidated attribute, but rather as the outcome of an ongoing, contingent, and tension-laden process – a process of legitimization. As Ignazi reminds us, this process is often uncertain, fragile, and ambivalent.

This ambivalence is not merely circumstantial but structural, embedded in the very logic of partisan action. It manifests in the internal dilemmas that parties must continuously navigate, organized here through a set of conceptual dichotomies

Each of these oppositions encapsulates a deeper tension between normative expectations and organizational realities, between ideals and practices, between what parties claim to be and what they are perceived to do.

In times of democratic expansion, parties have managed to balance these tensions by adapting institutional mechanisms and maintaining robust societal linkages. Yet in periods of democratic regression – as we witness today with the rise of populism, polarization, and technocratic insulation – these tensions become disruptive, undermining the credibility of parties as legitimate actors.

The crisis of party legitimacy, then, is not simply a decline in trust or membership, but a symptom of a broader transformation in the role of political parties within contemporary democracies: from mediators of pluralism to managers of constrained governance. In this new context, the challenge is not merely to restore legitimacy, but to reimagine the very function and identity of political parties in the 21st century.

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