



Citation: Bull, M. J. (2025). Party crisis, what party crisis? *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio elettorale – Italian Journal of Electoral Studies* 88(2): 67-71. doi: 10.36253/qoe-19316

Received: November 28, 2025

Accepted: December 3, 2025

Published: December 12, 2025

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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.

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Party crisis, what party crisis?

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Abstract. This paper explores Piero Ignazi's thesis that today there is a crisis of political parties rooted in a disjuncture between what parties do today (how they behave) and public expectations, which are rooted in nostalgia for a past 'golden era'. Exploring the two actors essential to this thesis (voters and parties) reveals weaknesses in the argument. Regarding voters, the thesis is insufficiently sustained empirically, with further work needed both on a generational issue and the core issue of the nature of the public dissatisfaction with parties. Regarding parties, the thesis largely overlooks a particular party family (populist parties) which, it could be argued, has done and is doing precisely what Ignazi has said is needed. In that respect, Ignazi's thesis seems to be directed not at parties per se but at one specific set of parties: mainstream parties. Yet, the final paradox is that the mainstream parties of yesteryear, to a large extent, no longer exist, so Ignazi is looking in the wrong direction.

Keywords: political parties, crisis of parties, mainstream parties, populist parties, retropia.

PARTY BETRAYAL

Piero Ignazi (2025) adds a putatively original idea to the explanation for what he postulates is a crisis of political parties: nostalgia for the past. Ignazi traces the roots of discontent with parties to a combination of factors, which are ontological (concerning the party's very existence) and structural/behavioural (what parties do – badly - or don't do). While interrelated, Ignazi argues that the first is not, ultimately, the driver of dissatisfaction with parties. People, he argues, do not write off parties as such: "Although parties are held in low esteem and consideration, still there is no other game in town." Indeed, parties still display a degree of resilience. 'Party government' is still the universal model, people continue to join parties and form new parties, and not all parties are seen as bad by all voters.

This leads him to the second aspect (structural/behavioural) where he argues that the focus of dissatisfaction is rooted less in their performance (in terms of policy outputs) but in their practices: not what they do but how they do it. To argue this, he establishes a dichotomy of 'popular democracy' and (Schumpeterian) 'electoral democracy', arguing that "parties have taken a path that makes them diverge from their original imprint" as a "participatory

collective organization” dedicated to achieving collective goals into other organizational models based on individual, office-seeking goals. In this, parties “abandoned the traditional functions of representation and channeling, on which rested their *input role* to decision-makers, and instead favoured an *output role* in terms of efficient problem-solver, public agency.” They became “agents of the state devoted to running elections”, where the need for responsiveness to citizens was minimal. In short, the crisis of parties is rooted not in parties per se, but in the current offer (offer of what parties stand for). “The demand for good parties and good politicians remains.”

So far so good, and there are few who would contest this articulation or re-articulation of an argument first expounded by authors such as Mair (2013). Ignazi, however, takes the argument further by attempting to answer the question which is a corollary of this argument: if the demand for good parties remains, what, for the public, makes up a ‘good party’?

On this he is clear: it is precisely the ‘popular democracy’ which parties abandoned for which the public has a longing: “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 betrayal by parties of what they should have been (transparent, representative, democratic, accountable, honest and listening) is at the root of public anger and frustration: “The consequence is that a ‘good party’ is what there was in the golden age of political parties. A party therefore needs to display those pristine features in order to be well received today.”

It is a novel argument, but does it hold water? We can approach this question by looking at the two main players in this scenario: the voters on the one hand and the political parties on the other.

VOTERS AND NOSTALGIA FOR THE PAST

Ignazi’s theoretical tenet on which his argument rests is that voters’ perceptions of parties are relative not absolute, that irrespective of how much they might or might not aspire to a rational judgement or independent evaluation in absolute terms, voters are influenced by their expectations of what parties should be and should do. And that influence, he argues, is primarily channelled through ‘nostalgia for the past’, which is a strong motivator for public feeling today.

He briefly references, but doesn’t explore, Zygmund Bauman’s concept of ‘retrotopia’, which is a sociocultural

phenomenon characterised by a longing for the past (a perceived ‘golden era’) alongside a disillusionment with the future. Bauman (2017) argues that in the 21st century people have lost faith in forward-looking ideas of progress and reform because of the level of uncertainties, insecurities and threats. They therefore tend to look backwards to the past for security and guidance. In short, Utopian thinking which used to predominate in political reflection (in other words, a quest for ‘progress’...) has been replaced by retrotopian thinking. This phenomenon can emerge in different political, social and cultural settings. Populist politics (for example, ‘Brexit’, ‘Make America Great Again’) is commonly identified with nostalgia for a nationalistic past, free from the problems brought by immigration, globalisation and economic insecurity. (e.g. Elçi, 2022, Hatherley 2016, Kenny 2017).

The argument at a general level has been well-rehearsed and applied. The question here is whether this sort of thinking translates specifically into nostalgia for a golden era of parties and party government; that is, whether this apparent cultural predisposition to nostalgia for the past registers in relation to how political parties once were, with a longing for a return to the era of those parties. Do people look at parties today and use the parties of yesteryear as their benchmark or yardstick?

Ignazi uses some secondary literature around the question, but without really directly confronting it in empirical terms. He informs us that “About two thirds of the European electorate may be classified as nostalgic”, but this sort of statement and the single source he uses would really have to be unpacked to have any leverage. I like looking at old photographs of my home town posted to a Facebook Group called “Memories are Made of This”. That probably makes me nostalgic, but I’m not sure what else that is telling us (for example, I may like looking at the photographs but am not sure I would want to step back into that world..).

Some detailed empirical work would be needed to test this idea/hypothesis, and the findings may convey levels of complexity that might give rise to caution in going too far with Ignazi’s idea. As examples, we might draw attention to two issues.

Generational issue

The first is the generational issue, which is not explored by Ignazi. That is who exactly are the nostalgic two-thirds? Nostalgia is commonly defined as ‘a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past.’ A key question is whether it is possible for nostalgia to work with this sort of influence on people

who never directly experienced the period itself. Ignazi seems convinced it can: “[The] 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, the 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.” Yet, while a degree of agency in profiling an unexperienced past is feasible, it is surely true that nostalgia – if it does have an impact -- is likely to have a much more powerful effect on one if the ‘longing’ is rooted in a real, lived experience.

That point is reinforced in the specific case that Ignazi is using. Nostalgia can work in complex ways, but to be nostalgic for a ‘golden age’ of political parties’ would require one of two things: either a good memory of that era (meaning having been of voting age at the time and therefore today in their 60s – if the ‘golden age’ began to wane in the 1970s) or subject to very clear and attractive representations of that era by an agency or agencies. Is it feasible that young people today who never experienced the ‘golden age’ of parties have nostalgia for the specific type of parties that existed back then? Are they all looking at old photos of parties from a previous era they did not witness that are prompting feelings of nostalgia inside? Do we see in the popular consciousness, or in the press, or in social media, representations of political parties ‘in the good old days’ (or ‘back in the day’)? Common sense and observance suggests not, and if not, then something else other than nostalgia must be causing public dissatisfaction with parties.

The nature of the dissatisfaction: is it with what parties do or with parties per se?

That leads to the second point, which is Ignazi’s conviction that it is not parties per se with which the public has truck, it is the simply what parties get up to – if only they would behave as they used to do!

On the one hand, this tends to overlook the obvious, which is the lack of alternatives. If political scientists themselves cannot come up with a suitable alternative to ‘party government’, then how much significance can we read into claims that the public have *not* given up on parties? In short, it is difficult to envisage a democratic system without political parties and party government at its heart.

On the other hand, it also overlooks evidence (albeit complex and not singularly clear) that, despite the apparent inevitability of parties, people (and young people in

particular) may be falling out of love with traditional mechanisms of representation such as parties. This does not mean that they are disaffected with democracy itself (Grassi, Portos, Felicetti 2024), rather that the way they mobilise politically is shaped more by their values than any notion of party loyalty (which was of course fundamental to the ‘golden era’ of parties).

This likely downgrades the role and importance of parties, and can lead to preferences for more charismatic, decisive leaders than parties of the old school, something which the rise of social media has enhanced. Social media facilitates a focus on engaging with personalities rather than party platforms. This does not mean that young people are necessarily looking for authoritarian responses rather greater decisiveness and responsiveness than the traditional forms of representation can provide to rise to the extreme challenges of today (climate change, economic insecurity, wars, social justice). Moreover, because of this, young people appear to be far more issue-driven than ideologically-driven (the latter being another feature surely of the ‘golden age’ of parties), but it would be wrong to equate the former with somehow embodying less fervour or passion.

In short, it seems more likely that young people today are driven less by nostalgia for the past (or a representation of that past) than the idea of not being chained and governed by conventional ideas about the role of political parties which they see as potentially hindering the search for solutions to the big problems of the world.

POLITICAL PARTIES THEMSELVES

The second player in Ignazi’s scenario are the political parties themselves. His contention is clear: “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 what there was in the golden age of political parties. A party therefore needs to display those pristine features in order to be well received today.” The question, therefore, is whether political parties have cottoned on to this and are attempting to re-invent themselves through a return to the past.

On the one hand, we might say that, within the logic of Ignazi’s argument, of course they are not! The premise of Ignazi’s argument is precisely that the crisis of parties is rooted in their departure from the mass model of party of the ‘golden era’ and their failure to re-adopt it. And he re-emphasises the point that in order to be successful parties today have to confront a challenge: “The

challenge or trap is that they have to observe the standard modus operandi of the 20th-century mass party that no longer exists ...” And he goes on to argue that “Parties that diverge from these standard procedures are considered inadequate or even illegitimate” and that “political parties have inevitably failed to meet people’s expectations of predictable behaviour”.

To anyone who has studied political parties of the ‘golden era’ there is surely little to dispute in the above contention that parties today are nothing like the mass parties of yesteryear. But the issue is not that, but rather why parties continue to fail in this regard, if it is a matter of returning to their roots. At this point, we should return to the quotation from Ignazi above because it is not actually complete. Completing the sentence is revealing for he writes: “The challenge or trap is that they have to observe the standard modus operandi of the 20th-century mass party that no longer exists - *although, parties such as the radical populist right are trying to revive it.*” (my emphasis). It is curious that populist parties do not, in fact, figure in Ignazi’s analysis beyond this fleeting reference and, over the page, one other, when he writes: “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 ... – people shun them and are angry and frustrated about this betrayal. *And populist parties are exploiting this situation.*” (my emphasis).

So, political parties are in crisis because they are not behaving as they used to do, (and what they used to do is what the voters apparently want)..., except that some parties *are*, in fact, doing so (populist parties). And, since we are fully aware that it is populist parties that have constituted the most successful party family of the past fifteen years, the implication we are meant to draw, one assumes, is that Ignazi’s thesis must be right.

Of course, one might want to discuss whether this is, in fact, what populist parties are trying to do, and that would require a more detailed empirical and theoretical analysis than his article provides. We might try to challenge Ignazi that his argument is not articulated strongly enough and that we do not believe that that is what populist parties are trying to do. Yet, Ignazi could and probably would defend his case by delving deeper into the sources he already cites and other empirical evidence to show that a sufficiently strong case could probably be made for populist parties attempting to revive politics in some form, and that some (maybe much) of that focuses on some kind of a glorious lost (nationalistic?) past (e.g. Betz and Johnson 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018), although, it has to be said, there might be

considerable variation in the exact nature of this retroopia (e.g. Martín, Paradés and Zagórski (2023). So, let us leave aside (or lose) that argument, *pace* Bull..

But if that is the case, we should then ask why Ignazi is, at the same time, advancing the idea of a crisis of parties? The thesis he expounds at the beginning of his article is that there is a crisis of parties rooted in nostalgia for the past, yet we find by the end of the article that this is not actually the case because we have a whole new family of parties which is doing precisely what he says parties should be doing, for surely it is the case that populist parties, if they are doing anything, are providing “a party politics bursting with passion, ideological fervour, commitment to the general interest, active members and supporters, and reliable politicians.” (even if some may question the final factor). Seen in this logic there is no crisis of parties and his argument falls on its head. So we might ask him, what is your problem?

The answer to this conundrum lies surely in something else, that this is not the sort or revitalisation of which Ignazi was thinking. Despite the principled composition of his points (“passion”, “ideological “fervour” etc.) he is thinking of how this need for revitalisation applies to so-called “mainstream” parties, not to new kids on the block. It is mainstream failure which has let in the new kids who seem to be doing precisely what the mainstream parties should have done and should be doing, but, for some reason, are not welcome to be included in his analysis.

But to that we may ask what “mainstream” parties?? Do “mainstream” parties exist anymore? One wonders how many mainstream parties from the ‘golden age’ are still with us today. If we take Ignazi’s own country (Italy), there is barely any resemblance between the political parties and party system of the ‘golden age’ and those of today. And if that is the case, how do we revitalise something that has already gone? We end up with a situation where the model of the mass party is extinct and the mainstream parties as vehicles that embodied it are to a large extent extinct. Small wonder that revitalisation (according to the principles embodied in the mass party model) are being pursued by new parties which are not being adequately recognised by Ignazi for their achievement in regard to the challenge he has articulated.

CONCLUSION: RETROPIA?

Ignazi starts his article arguing that there is a crisis of parties that is a crisis in terms of what they do not what they are, motivated by nostalgia for the past (retroopia) on the part of voters, and that what parties need to

do is go back to the principles of the past that governed their behaviour and all will be good.

There are some questions as to whether that is the case with voters, and certainly deeper empirical evidence would have to be explored to justify the assertion. Yet, even if true, when we apply the argument to parties, we find that Ignazi effectively undermines his own thesis by treading gingerly (but certainly not fully) onto the terrain of populist parties, which have done or are doing precisely what he says parties have not been doing. So where is the crisis?

This suggests that his concern or focus, despite the generality of the argument, is not with parties as such but with a particular set of parties that we might call “mainstream”: those parties that we remember as being associated with the ‘golden age’. To the extent that these parties still exist today, they are, in his eyes, shadows of their former selves and this explains their crisis. If so, then Ignazi’s thesis is not exploring a crisis of parties but rather the decline of one set of parties and the success of another, except he fails to explore fully the latter and whether and to what degree their success is owed to addressing the issues he has identified as being at the root of so-called mainstream party failure and decline. And possibly the cause of that is an element of *retropia* on his own part.

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