

# Cartels and Competition

## *An Introduction*

Herbert Kitschelt

This Introduction is an opportunity to highlight key themes at the core of the debate about cartelisation and party system change in post-industrial democracies that is taken up in this book, as applied to the Swedish case. But it will also contribute a few considerations that pertain to the cartelisation debate more broadly. The cartelisation debate quickly gained prominence after the publication of Katz and Mair's original 1995 article. By the time of writing, this article had attracted more than 2,800 Google Scholar citations; the 2009 follow-up by the same authors already has more than 350. Yet the subject has given rise to relatively little close, systematic empirical examination, in spite of its prominence in political science literature. Neither cross-national analyses nor longitudinal investigations within individual polities have been particularly numerous. For this reason, we should be particularly grateful to the organisers of the present book on Sweden, which investigates the validity of the cartelisation argument by examining dynamic change over time in a single polity.

The motivating intuition underlying the cartelisation debate goes at least as far back as Otto Kirchheimer's (1966) claim that parties transform themselves from being representatives of socio-economic constituencies with distinct class or group interests, to 'catch-all' parties venturing to scoop up a diverse, incoherent mass of voters around vague and malleable political appeals. He foresaw that principled opposition to structural social injustices would decay along the way and be sidelined by a centripetal competitive dynamic in which all parties essentially affirm slight modifications of the existing order. Tracing the historical lineage of this argument, one could go back at least as far as Robert Michels's study of political parties, published in German in 1911 under the title *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie*. Under the umbrella of a general theory of political

organisation that attributes agency and strategic capacity only to small cores of elites, the historical claim here is that early-twentieth-century leaders of socialist parties and labour unions refused to sustain the revolutionary zeal of their constituencies. Instead, political leaders prioritised their own political survival in office and therefore preferred assimilation into the national political elite, embracing the existing social order by committing to incremental reform within the broad parameters of the status quo, rather than advancing their followers' yearning for revolution.

The current cartelisation debate triggered by Katz and Mair is theoretically complicated, if not muddled, by the presence and interaction of multiple arguments. Michels and Kirchheimer, however, anticipated two of the three major strands that have become staples of a critique of current Western democracies from the left (and at times from the perspective of a populist extreme right as well). As a first analytical strand, there is Michels's claim of a fundamental rift between a party's principals, its electoral constituencies and the active membership, and its agents, the leaders in party office and elected legislatures (and cabinet representatives, if the party participates in the executive). The former want policy; the latter cherish office and sacrifice policy. Michels tacitly assumes cartelisation or monopolisation, with parties rendered as 'closed' systems: the idea that dissidents could exit and form their own new and 'pure' party, if they were dissatisfied with the 'accommodationist' tactics adopted by leaders of their original political vehicle, is not seriously considered. Ironically, in historical reality, such an exit and organisational division happened just a handful of years after the original publication of Michels's book, when, on the outbreak of World War I, German socialist legislators divided over the German empire's plan to finance the war effort against the French–English–Russian coalition. Both party elite and electorate split right through the middle: contrary to Michels's hypothesis, however, the divide was not so much an elite–mass division but one between different factions, currents and even regions.

With the second analytical strand, Kirchheimer moves the debate from the individual party level to the systemic level but, once again, has a propensity to brush aside the significance of competition as a mechanism for establishing elite accountability to principals. In fact, in the spirit of Downs's (1957) median voter theorem, Kirchheimer asserts that office-seeking political leaders aim to appeal not to 'core' partisan constituencies but to 'swing' voters close to the median in the policy-preference distribution; alternatively, they attempt to cobble together a heterogeneous, precarious coalition of voters with superficially held, disjointed preferences. Overall, party strategists favour a 'catch-all' approach to heterogeneous voter-groups that eliminate a 'principled opposition' to the status quo and leaves many core constituencies dissatisfied and without representation.

Katz and Mair's cartelisation theory is the logical continuation of the trail Michels and Kirchheimer had previously blazed. At the individual party level, leaders find ways to silence opponents of the status quo by disempowering them through organisational rules and by public party finance that removes the political leverage card-carrying, dues-paying members and amateur activists might wield, if they held the power of the purse. At the systemic level, cartelisation emerges out of co-operation between leaders across established parties in finding ways and means to prevent new competitors challenging the centripetal dynamic of party competition stipulated by the 'catch-all' thesis.

In an revision of their cartelisation thesis, Katz and Mair (2009) add a third analytical strand with a political-economic claim about democratic disempowerment not quite anticipated by Michels and Kirchheimer: contemporary democracy cannot deliver on popular demands, because, at the national level of political democracy, politicians' 'room to manoeuvre' is constrained by the effects of the globalisation of trade and finance as well as by the abdication of national sovereignty to the supranational governance, without democratic accountability, of bodies such as the key institutions of the European Union.

Before considering some arguments of the cartel party theory more closely, however, let us build on the political economy theme and highlight the exogenous triggers that increased the salience of these arguments in each of the respective historical periods in which each of the three analytical strands became prominent.

- In the early twentieth century, Michels wrote his treatise in the midst of a spectacular run of economic growth and globalisation in the Western hemisphere, as real industrial wages noticeably increased for the first time since the Industrial Revolution and the living conditions of the working class improved. These developments enabled 'reformists' to become more vocal in European Marxist and socialist labour movements, but this substitution of reform for revolution was fiercely opposed, especially by party intellectuals. Nevertheless, an increasing number of socialists embraced the idea of a piecemeal, incremental shift from capitalism to socialism, through policy innovation, rather than an outright rupture with capitalism and its replacement by a socialist Dictatorship of the Proletariat. The Russian Revolution cemented this split in the labour movement irreversibly. Radicals attributed the unwillingness of Social Democrats to embrace the revolution to their fear of loss of political office and its perks and privileges, rather than to changing economic realities.
- About fifty years later, Kirchheimer wrote his 'catch-all' argument during another spectacular run of economic recovery, after World War II (the 'Golden Age'), and in the context of the Cold War between communism and capitalism. Both developments stifled what was left of the popular appeal

of Marxian socialism in advanced capitalist democracies and turned European social-democracy towards a reformist strategy of improving rather than replacing capitalism. This strategic shift was epitomised by the post-World War II universalistic social-policy agenda of Scandinavian social-democracy, highlighted, for example, by the 1958 Swedish superannuation pension fund legislation as well as by the German Social Democrats' 1959 Bad Godesberg Congress, which approved a new, reformist programme, stripped of references to Marxism, that prompted fierce resistance from the party's left wing and ultimately helped to launch an 'extra-parliamentary opposition' in Germany in the 1960s. Similar New Left, non-communist, but militantly socialist movements sprang up across the Western hemisphere, where socialists had adopted social-democratic approaches to remedy the ills of capitalism, but these new dissidents remained marginal forces. Social Democrats, by contrast, succeeded in wooing critical segments of the white-collar salariat to their side and made their parties critical contenders, if not hegemonic forces, in national party competition almost everywhere in the advanced industrial world.

- Now, another fifty years later, in the early twenty-first century, the current cartelisation debate takes place during another fundamental political-economic and global shift. Communism has collapsed and national security questions focus on complicated cultural and identity divides across the globe. At the same time, occupational and technological change has precipitated the economic and political atrophy of the old blue-collar working class and simple low-skilled salariat, creating a broad mass of economic, social and cultural losers but also strong groups of winners, primarily among high-skilled managerial, technical and socio-cultural professionals, to say nothing about the top one per cent working primarily in finance and technological innovation. The now ongoing debate about political accountability is a symptom of the current political-economic situation but mischaracterises the politics of it as one between 'elite' and 'mass' rather than identifying the new political alignments it brings to the fore. But before I return to this subject, let us briefly preview why, as this book argues with Swedish evidence, the first two (Michels-and-Kirchheimer-grounded) claims of the cartelisation thesis are not borne out.

With regard to Michels's claim at the level of individual parties as closed systems, the study of Sweden in this book will show that some phenomena identified by the cartelisation argument are certainly empirically confirmed. There are fewer members and activists in political parties and, undoubtedly, those are socio-demographically more homogeneous in terms of their higher education and social status, when compared to members in the past or the general population. But these data are also consistent with a host of

rival arguments. Just consider that in a time before the automobile and the television, let alone the internet, social disposable time for interaction was much more concentrated in a small set of opportunities in one's close neighbourhood and its public spaces (gardens, pubs), and much of it revolved around political parties. Most people joined parties for social and cultural reasons rather than for political ones. The core cadre of political activists with policy and career aspirations was always small. Over the decades, the attractiveness of programmatic party activism to young people may have marginally shrunk as well, as political participation became differentiated across a myriad of social movements and interest groups focusing on specific purposes rather than generic, general-purpose partisan ideologies (see Kitschelt 2003). But the big loss of party membership and low-level diffuse social participation is among those social groups which, in previous generations, treated party membership as a source of social entertainment and cultural comfort.

The critical core hypothesis of the Michelsian face of the Katz-Mair cartelisation hypothesis, however, concerns the principal-agent question. Are leaders nowadays more detached, in terms of their preferences, from voters and from policy-oriented party activists than before? Have they managed to silence intra-party debates and established their supremacy over the wishes of their followers? There were always reasons to doubt that hypothesis, particularly in democracies with low barriers to the entry of new parties, enabling dissatisfied political entrepreneurs to create their own new venues of partisan claims-making. But the contributions to this book give an empirically grounded confirmation that, for Sweden, the cartelisation thesis is incorrect. Intra-party debates are alive and well, even though their substantive focus may have shifted.

Also, more general comparative studies of political representation yield disconfirming evidence with regard to the claim that voters and politicians have drifted apart (cf. Dalton et al. 2011; Kitschelt and Rehm 2015). This does not mean, however, that all is sweetness and light from the perspective of parties' democratic performance (as we will see later on). Moreover, rough representativeness of parties, viewed in a cross-sectional analysis, certainly is consistent with dynamic processes in which shocks cause disequilibria between public opinion and party positions that, in turn, can generate party system innovations. There will always be emerging issues in society that established parties have difficulty mapping on to their existing policy profiles and partisan constituencies (think of EU monetary integration or immigration recently). Established parties will then be forced to calculate how deeply incorporation of electorally advantageous positions on these novel issues will divide their existing constituencies and how many erstwhile supporters this will cause to defect.

When anticipating that adoption of a position on the new issue (dimension) will lead to a grave loss of votes among existing supporters, as the position cross-cuts an existing inter-party alignment, party strategists might well take a pass, hoping that (1) the new issue might fade away again or (2) that it will generate only a feeble political entrepreneurship that is unable to get a new party off the ground. In case of deep and persistent social divides, however, these hopes will be disappointed, as the rise of radical right-wing parties in Western Europe has proven most recently. *Ex ante*, party strategists may have a tendency to discount the net future cost of entry by new parties and therefore be slow to adjust to new issue priorities, generating a disparity between public opinion and party representation. If political entrepreneurs manage to address the resulting dissatisfaction through new party entry, established parties will incur heavy net loss of electoral support.<sup>1</sup> *Ex post*, the damage to an established party is clear, but even then it is questionable whether it would have been preferable, from a vote-seeking perspective, to make policy adjustments earlier.

The dynamics of partisan misrepresentation and re-equilibration I have sketched out involve a great deal of voter dissatisfaction. These dynamics are, however, far removed from what the cartelisation thesis claims. While I propose that dissatisfaction involves a transitional process of disequilibrium, the cartelisation argument postulates a static, persistent state of representational disparity between political parties and public opinion.

The dynamic disequilibrium argument also does not deny that resourceful members of society – in terms of capital or skill – have more leverage over the political process than those who are deprived. In Marxist language, inherent in a capitalist market economy is a structural asymmetry of political leverage that favours capital owners, by way of the latter using investment decisions to endorse or withhold approval from democratic majority preferences (Therborn 1978; Przeworski and Wallerstein 1988). Differential voter turnout, based on citizens' unequal resources and networks, further slants the political playing field, particularly when political elites face high costs for mobilising disadvantaged citizens (Anderson and Beramendi 2012). Nevertheless, while muted by economic asymmetries, shifts in public opinion, even among deprived electoral groups, tend to result in changes in political representation as well as in policy-making.<sup>2</sup>

Let us turn next to the Katz and Mair cartelisation arguments that build on Kirchheimer and extend the party system argument that established parties fail to represent citizens adequately. They claim that as cartelisation institutionalises mechanisms to make the entry of new competitors difficult, the established parties are wont to gravitate towards defence of the political status quo, expressed in vague, uninformative, centrist 'catch-all' appeals; competing merely on the valence grounds of competence and style. However, in

regard to this convergence thesis, readers of the current book will see that the balance of the evidence for this is negative. On many, though not all, policy issues there are continued and renewed inter-party disagreements even among the established political parties, particularly when it comes to gender issues and social policy. Within the bounds of what mass publics find plausible, parties still offer distinctive visions of the future and at least those voters who process a modicum of political information appear to line up with these partisan alternatives.

Have established parties managed to restrict the competitive political partisan space and thus prevented the entry of new competitors that break with the 'catch-all' convergence of the establishment, as the cartelisation thesis holds? And does public party finance help established parties to maintain their grip on their electoral shares? There is probably no aspect of the cartelisation argument that has failed more spectacularly in empirical terms and Sweden is a showpiece case for demonstrating this.

Particularly in countries with high levels of public party and campaign finance, the established parties have shed substantial shares of their voters over the past thirty years and had to tolerate the successful entry of new parties into increasingly complicated party systems. Sweden is a perfect exemplar of this dynamic. Its traditional five-party system – consisting of a left of Social Democrats and communists, a centre (formerly agrarian) party and an urban-liberal as well as a more rural-conservative party on the centre-right – has had to endure the addition of at least three new party formations, all of which look set to persist for some time to come. First, there was the appearance of a Christian Democratic party; then the rise of left-libertarian environmentalists, now possibly supplemented by a feminist libertarian party; and, finally, the recent advent of the right-wing 'populist' Sweden Democrats, whose take-off was fuelled by the immigration/multiculturalism controversy.

More recently (2009), Katz and Mair have claimed that the rise of radical right-wing parties is a consequence of cartelisation, expressing voter frustration with the established choices. But they cannot have it both ways. *Either* there is cartelisation and it cuts off the possibility of the rise of alternative parties *or* new partisan alternatives indeed respond to unmet voter demands, a process that clearly demonstrates the failure of cartelisation. What is then left to explain is why established parties do not jump on to the bandwagon of new issues. As I suggested above, this may well have to do with the complicated electoral trade-offs between retaining established voters and winning new ones that existing parties have to manage when considering strategic shifts. The 'issue yields' of adopting new policy positions may well be negative (De Sio and Weber 2014).

This leads me to introduce the third and most recent iteration of the cartelisation argument, that responsible partisan governments are left with

‘vanishing room to manoeuvre’ as international constraints of trade, capital flows and regional integration into the European Union remove partisan alternatives. Many policies that voters prefer have ceased to be part of the set of feasible choices that parties can credibly offer to voters. Hence, parties opt for policy convergence, abandoning voter preferences and generating disaffection and alienation from the polity among voters. In Katz and Mair’s 2009 article, this argument emerged as a fallback position, as their earlier claims – the Michels-based individual party principal–agent setup and the Kirchheimer-extending systemic claims about centripetal party competition and entry-prevention – had become less plausible. In contrast to the earlier cartelisation thesis, the convergence of parties was now no longer said to be generated by *endogenous* processes of partisan competition but by *exogenous* constraints (open economies, European integration), even though these might themselves result from conscious partisan government policies at earlier points in time intended to bind the hands of successors by eliminating options from the domestic democratic political choice set through globalisation and European integration.

The simple and direct response to the new exogenous cartelisation thesis is, of course, to identify the rather impressive range of partisan choices that national governments are still left with, even once common constraints and trends are taken into account. Thus, a number of economic and technological processes may have increased income inequality everywhere in advanced post-industrial capitalist democracies but the levels reached, extent of change and pace of this process varied substantially (cf. Huber and Stephens 2014). The extreme escalation of income and wealth inequality in the Anglo-Saxon countries, for example, cannot be accounted for without the explicit policies of ideological, programmatic, right-wing partisan governments (Huber, Huo and Stephens 2016). Similar arguments about the continuing vitality of partisan government have been made about key aspects of social-policy reform, whether they concern the retrenchment of welfare state generosity (Finseraas and Vernby 2011; Giger and Nelson 2010); the modalities of introducing competition and privatisation in health care (Gingrich 2011); or the trajectories of higher education reform (Ansell 2010). Overall, partisan differences on a whole range of socio-economic policies continue to be substantial and incorporate new divides, such as the conflict between an emphasis on a social-investment- or a social-consumption-oriented transformation of the welfare state (Beramendi et al. 2015). Even in many non-economic policy areas, such as law-and-order policy (see, for example, Wenzelburger 2014), partisan imprints on public policy are starkly contoured. Partisan effects, of course, are not without limit and occur within the boundaries of economic, fiscal and institutional constraints.

The cartelisation thesis interprets European integration, particularly within the single European currency area, as a force of discipline and convergence that blocks the degrees of freedom sought by domestic partisan governments. While this might have been the intended effect of the original regional agreements, the EU integration crisis since 2010 illustrates that, in fact, little convergence has been achieved within the European Union. Across countries, differences in the institutions ('varieties') of capitalism manifested by different eurozone countries stubbornly resist levelling, even though the economically dominant Northern Europeans have made mighty – but in many ways futile, if not self-deluding – efforts to make their 'model' of capitalism dominant over the whole euro currency zone, especially in the most recalcitrant Mediterranean Member-States (cf. Beramendi et al. 2015; Hall 2014; Iversen, Soskice and Hope 2016). Moreover, within individual countries, the stalemate of the EU integration process has fuelled unprecedented partisan polarisation that has often paralysed governments for extended periods of time. Add to this the refugee crisis since 2015 and its partisan politicisation of migration issues. In light of all these developments, it is obvious that cartelisation does not provide a meaningful theoretical frame to account for the dynamics of party competition in much of Western Europe.

But let us go beyond a simple and direct response to the cartelisation argument and make some concessions. There are, in fact, new long-term constraints imposed on partisan politics in contemporary capitalism that have asserted themselves mightily over the past few decades and are likely to intensify their hold on post-industrial economies in the future. Globalisation, however, is a comparatively feeble force in terms of imposing economic dislocation, uncertainty and hardship when compared to other developments: farmers in the twentieth century and blue-collar manufacturing workers over the past generation have not, for the most part, lost their jobs to workers in foreign countries but to technology, that is, machines and, more recently, to the unstoppable rise of 'IT code'. In the same vein, the supreme challenge in the next fifty years and beyond will be that most of the remaining technical-manufacturing jobs, as well as a large proportion of administrative-service jobs, will vanish due to IT advances (Frey and Osborne 2013). The only areas left for employment growth will be: first, low-skilled localised services of personal care and maintenance and, second and foremost, high-skilled non-routine occupations requiring a sophisticated, situation-specific capacity for judgement against a broad and deep professional background, based on both overt, teachable knowledge and tacit, experiential knowledge.

A second major challenge and impending further crisis is that in many Western democracies, demographic reproduction rates have fallen way below the levels needed for labour force replacement. These countries face intensifying imbalances between a shrinking working-age population and a

growing retiree population that requires upkeep and comprehensive medical care. Moreover, more immigration is not a costless and instant solution to this challenge, as immigrants, just like domestic offspring, have to go through a costly and time-consuming process of instruction before they become productive members of a complex post-industrial society.

Taking both challenges together, the first challenge – technological innovation through ‘code’ – calls for an intensification of human-capital investment, to enable young labour market entrants to practise occupations for which it is hard to substitute automation for human workers and also to increase their ability to learn and adapt to ever-changing technological conditions. As automation progresses, the second challenge of the impending demographic crisis, in contrast, raises the imperative to spend more resources on ‘consumption’ to maintain the standard of living of increasingly large cohorts of retirees and to boost their life expectancy with ever more sophisticated medical technologies. Between the millstones of social and political imperatives to invest more in the young and to spend more on the old, current party systems face contradictory demands for expenditure as well as new forms of political governance that are unprecedented and that are likely to grind up existing political-economic voter alignments. The emerging divides are only partially captured in terms of familiar class and sectoral distributive divides. Moreover, they have cultural implications that compel large segments of the population, even in advanced post-industrial polities and particularly among the less well educated and culturally more traditional groups, to reconceive their visions of the good life and the social appropriateness of conduct and aspirations.

No incumbent politician or outside political entrepreneur can currently seriously claim to have a convincing answer to resolve the dilemma of how to address rapidly growing demands for social investment while simultaneously both increasing social consumption and managing profound cultural transformation. If we revisit the situation encountered by citizens and politicians in the Great Depression, then the political-economic challenges of the day were pretty obvious: most clearly, the need to do something about high unemployment and low investment (Gourevitch 1986). But the answers to the question of how to do this were not. No politician – not Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States, Per Albin Hansson in Sweden or, for that matter, Adolf Hitler in Germany – could invoke well-considered, theoretically reasoned and empirically grounded policy plans to lead their countries out of their respective economic crises. Depending on regime and partisan configurations, different problem-solving strategies emerged incrementally out of the protracted interplay of conflicting political forces (cf. Luebbert 1991). The ultimate outcomes were not willed, intended or even anticipated by their protagonists.

Likewise, today, different constellations of interests advance rival problem-solving strategies to cope with the increasing demands for social investment and social consumption that threaten to tear apart post-industrial societies (cf. Beramendi et al. 2015). Politicians are compelled to pursue any of these strategies in trial-and-error fashion in a prospective horizon of profound uncertainty. Citizens have only vague preferences, if any, and politicians do not know the payoffs of alternative strategies. This situation is bound to generate tremendous anxiety and dissatisfaction, both at the mass and the elite level of politics.

By contrast, there is no place for policy and preference uncertainty in the cartelisation theory. Here, the counterfactual claim is that people, for the most part, subscribe to a popular social demand function  $X$ , with clear policy and institutional prescriptions, that would, with some certainty, address the new challenges of investment and consumption. For the cartelisation thesis, the critical claim is that politicians, generically conceived as a ‘class’ of electoral office-holders regardless of partisan stripes, do not want to implement these popular policy priorities. They systematically subvert the pursuit of such priorities, as ‘doing the right thing’ would undermine the chances of the political establishment surviving in political office.

Quite to the contrary, in fact, partisan democratic politicians are likely to feel electoral pressures very much as powerful incentives to identify successful solutions to the impending dilemmas of production and consumption, if for no other reason than to lock in their partisan hegemony for the future. This is essentially what leaders in ‘hard times’ delivered before: Roosevelt and Hansson were able to secure the hegemony of their respective political parties for generations beyond the Great Depression. *Ex ante*, however, it is the thick fog of uncertainty over viable solutions that disempowers politicians and that creates uncertainty and dissatisfaction among mass publics. This situation of profound ambiguity and indeterminacy, often yielding timid, incremental, trial-and-error muddling-through in policy-making or sometimes even paralysis of the entire policy process as veto-players create persistent stalemates, suffices to explain current public dissatisfaction with democratic politics, including intermittent yearnings for strong leaders who claim that they can cut through the complexity of our times and offer simple solutions. No conspiracy theories about selfish leaders organising political cartels in order to prevent equitable, efficient and appropriate government strategies are needed to account for the political anxiety of our time.

As an indirect empirical point of reference for the claim that it is the absence of programmatic solution concepts, and not the thwarting of ‘correct’ concepts by obstructionist elites motivated by the defence of the political status quo, that is at the heart of current voter malaise in post-industrial democracies, consider voting patterns since the financial crisis of 2008.

Starting with the European elections in 2009, and with the exception of a few recent elections in Mediterranean countries, the post-crisis conditions have, in most countries, not rewarded left and centre-left opposition parties. Instead, when electorates had a chance to reward an oppositional social-democratic or socialist party, and especially when there were quite radical social-democratic or socialist visions on offer, voters have, for the most part, stayed away from them or only fuelled a tepid recovery of left-wing parties' electoral fortunes.<sup>3</sup> Among several reasons for Social Democrats' disappointing electoral fortunes, I would nominate a scepticism shared widely within mass electorates that welfare state policy solutions that worked in the past can be crisis-coping strategies applicable to the present; rather, voters believe that pursuing more of the same policies delivered during the Golden Age of post-war capitalist economic recovery and democracies will be counterproductive for current political-economic performance.

Anxiety breeds status-quo orientation. Most Europeans strongly support their welfare states and public services but they are sceptical that further expansion will do more good than harm. Their appetite for supporting dissident parties that would change the status quo is limited. In fact, the new parties successfully establishing themselves in Western party systems are, for the most part, about fighting change and preserving the status quo, or even returning to an imagined better past. This applies most clearly to the new radical right in its fight against multiculturalism and immigration, but left-libertarian parties, inasmuch as they oppose what they see as harmful new technologies and threats to the environment, do much the same. None of these agendas really confront the new challenges of technological innovation and demographic transition.

If it is *not* anxiety about political-economic uncertainty that unsettles current party systems, but rather systematic elite subversion of popular demands, as implied by the cartelisation thesis, its advocates had better come clean and identify those political appeals that would crystallise better democratic representation, if not thwarted by cartelisation. The immediate response might be to claim that the current left-populist movements in Southern Europe – from Syriza in Greece to Podemos in Spain – are standard-bearers of a new democratic vision of political-economic reform. But it is telling that even in countries most profoundly ravaged by high youth unemployment and economic dislocation, the appeal of such parties is limited and their programmatic grasp of the political-economic landscape is feeble.

Even the proponents of the party (system) cartelisation thesis, therefore, may have a difficult time identifying political forces and programmatic strategies that would constitute the core of a new popular political platform able to overcome what they diagnose to be the poor representation of electorates by contemporary parties. This applies most clearly to Northern Europe, where

the only emerging alternatives are racist and xenophobic radical-right parties. But it also is plausible for Mediterranean Europe, where the crisis of politics is even deeper than in the North, since these countries are mired in rampant corruption, clientelism and bad governance. Even here, leftist protest parties have excelled at negative demands but offered few, if any, constructive policy proposals that look better than taking voters on a trip back to the past. It is anxiety about the absence of unambiguous policy solutions in the face of profound and evolving structural crises that creates scepticism towards democratic politics. And it will take different conceptual and theoretical means to analyse that situation from those offered by cartelisation theory.

## NOTES

1. This does not rule out that policy-issue leadership, when applied tenaciously over time, can enable established parties to change the minds of some of their voters on a new issue, convince them to adopt policy preferences consistent with whatever position the party adopts on the new issue and thus retain voters' continued allegiance to their traditional party preference.

2. To modify Schattschneider (1960), the heavenly choir of politics sings with an upper-class voice, but it varies its modulation depending on shifts in the upper class, and these tend to be correlated with shifts in general public opinion. Thus, as Erikson (2015) shows, the preferences of the disadvantaged leave some imprint on this dynamic process.

3. Even in Greece, when Syriza caved in to Northern European fiscal policy and reform demands in spring of 2015 and part of its core cadre founded a new party to pursue a promising alternative to the EU's structural-administrative-fiscal austerity programme, only a miniscule group of voters supported the new alternative.