On Parties, Party Systems and Democracy

Selected Writings of Peter Mair

Edited and Introduced by Ingrid van Biezen, with an Intellectual Portrait by Stefano Bartolini and Hans Daalder
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Preface and Acknowledgements

The project to publish a selection of the best writings of Peter Mair first emerged when Peter was still alive. Early in 2011, ECPR Press proposed to him the publication of a collection similar to the one of Hans Daalder’s writings, for which Peter had written the Preface. Unfortunately, it was not to be. After Peter’s untimely death, we asked Hans Daalder whether he could explore for us the possibility of putting together such a volume. We are grateful to him for approaching Karin Tilmans (Peter’s wife) and a selection of Peter’s colleagues in order to push the project through. Without his and Karin’s energetic support this volume would not have been possible. In any case, the scale of the enterprise required the enthusiastic collaboration of many other people whose contributions are here gratefully acknowledged:

- First of all, Ingrid van Biezen, for editing the selection and writing a comprehensive introduction;
- Stefano Bartolini and Hans Daalder, for the intellectual portrait of Peter Mair;
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- Marios Filis, for undertaking the Herculean task of reformatting the pieces to a uniform standard;
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Many other friends and colleagues of Peter’s, too numerous to list here, were also involved in this project to provide an enduring testimony to a lifetime of scholarship.

Dario Castiglione and Peter Kennealy
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Throughout the book, whenever the text ‘this volume’ or ‘this chapter’ appears, it refers to the original publication as detailed below [Ed.].


Introduction*

On Parties, Party Systems and Democracy

by Ingrid van Biezen

Perhaps fortunately, one is rarely given the responsibility to assemble a selection of writings to commemorate the untimely demise of their intellectual mentor and supervisor. Compiling this collection, which contains a selection of Peter Mair’s most significant and influential contributions to the scholarly literature, must have been one of the most challenging undertakings of my entire professional career. Intellectually rewarding as it may have been, this volume also serves as a reminder of how we were prematurely robbed of this inspiring model of scholarly excellence.

It is difficult to underestimate Mair’s contributions to political science, which were intellectually ambitious and far-reaching. His work is reflective of a particular style and tradition of academic scholarship, which, as he himself has lamented (Mair 2011a), has become increasingly absent from much of contemporary comparative political science. Much of his empirical work ultimately served to address the big and intrinsic questions that have an obvious normative importance for scholars of political parties and democracy, thus setting it apart from much of the more narrowly focused and increasingly specialized literature that characterises the discipline of comparative politics today. His ideas often struck a chord also because they have a clear bearing on, and implications for, the real world of politics and policy-making. The force of his arguments is, furthermore, enhanced by his sensitivity to conceptual analysis and his attention to the method of systematic comparative analysis, as well as his enviable capacity to convey his ideas in a delightfully accessible and engaging prose.

The chapters in this volume provide an overview of Mair’s most significant writings, ranging from methodological considerations on the relevance of concept formation for comparative politics and the study of party systems and party organizations, to reflections on the democratic legitimacy of the EU and the future of party democracy. The selection includes frequently cited papers alongside some of his lesser-known work, collectively attesting to the broad scope and depth of Mair’s insights in the field of comparative (party) politics.

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* Parts of this introduction draw on the inaugural Peter Mair memorial lecture, delivered at the Political Studies Association of Ireland annual conference, 20 October 2012, Derry/Londonderry (van Biezen 2014). I am grateful to Stefano Bartolini, Petr Kopecký, Cas Mudde and Frank de Zwart for their valuable comments on an earlier draft.

1. I am grateful in particular to Rudy Andeweg, Luciano Bardi, Stefano Bartolini, Ian Budge, Hans Daalder, Russell Dalton, Donatella della Porta, Zsolt Enyedi, David Farrell, Wojciech Gagatek, Michael Gallagher, Klaus Goetz, Hans Keman, Herbert Kitschelt, Ruud Koole, Petr Kopecký, Yves Mény, Cas Mudde, Wolfgang C. Müller, Michael Laver, Pippa Norris, Thomas Poguntke, Joost van Spanje, Jacques Thomassen, Alexander Trechsel, and Paul Webb, for their valuable suggestions in this regard.
On concept formation and comparative politics

Although Peter Mair is best known as a comparative political analyst, he also had a keen interest in the politics of individual countries, in particular those with which he had a personal or professional affinity. Most prolific and long-standing in that respect are his contributions on the politics of his home country, Ireland. From the mid 1970s onwards, he published numerous analyses on the development of Irish politics, the consequences of its distinctive electoral system, the dimensions of electoral competition, or the dynamics of the party system (e.g. Laver and Mair 1974; Laver et al. 1987; Mair 1978; 1979*; 1987; 1989b; 1990; 1992*; 1993b; 2011b). He also wrote regularly on the peculiarities of Dutch politics, in particular during his time in Leiden (e.g. Laver and Mair 1999; Mair 1994a; 2008b*), and published assorted writings on Italian politics, as well as on the politics of Britain and even Japan (e.g. Mair 1994b; 2006c; 2007b; 2009a; Mair and Sakano 1998).

Unlike many of his contemporaries educated and socialised in the Anglosaxon tradition, rather than a country specialist or even a ‘cross-nationalist’, Mair was a genuine comparativist. Drawing on a distinction he used to borrow from his mentor Hans Daalder, Mair maintained that cross-nationalists are scholars ‘who don’t begin with countries, but with data; who don’t look in depth, but more widely; who don’t generalise but specify; and who place greater emphasis on method than on understanding’ (Mair 2011a: x). Mair’s own affinities evidently lay with more substantive comparative research. Although comparative politics is not a discipline which can easily be identified ‘in terms of a single substantive field of study’ (Mair 1996a*: 309), its subject matter quite clearly lies in the study of political institutions, actors and processes, while by its method it seeks to arrive at generalisable explanations for differences and similarities between cases that transcend the idiosyncrasies of individual polities.

According to Mair, comparative politics can be best understood as a combination of substance and method, rather than a prioritisation of one approach over the other:

If comparative politics is distinctive, […] it is really only in terms of the combination of substance and method, and to separate these out from one another necessitates dissolving comparative politics either into political science as a whole or into the social sciences more generally (Mair 1996a*: 311).

Comparative political analysis thus lies at the interstices of the country-oriented approach and the methodological approach (see also Rose 1991; van Biezen and Caramani 2005). The first, which is oriented towards the study of single (foreign) countries, is often descriptive and tending towards thick description. While some of the work in this tradition may have certain comparative merits (cf. Lijphart 1971), in itself it is seldom comparative, as it frequently fails to use generic concepts that can also be applied in other contexts, thus providing essentially ideographic accounts and explanations. The second approach, by contrast, is primarily
Peter Mair: An Intellectual Portrait

by Stefano Bartolini and Hans Daalder

A few months after his 60th birthday, a heart attack on the 15th August 2011 abruptly ended the life of Peter Mair while on holiday with his family in Connemara in the North West of Ireland. In recent years, it had been his habit to take his family every summer to their second home on Rosses Point in Co. Sligo, close where his parents had settled after the war. His father Moray Mair, of Scottish origin, had reached the rank of major serving in India during World War II. His mother, Billy Mair (born Kenny) came from Longford in the centre of Ireland and she, too, served in the British army as a nurse. They met in North Africa towards the end of World War II and married in 1946. During their honeymoon they fell in love with Sligo which made them decide to settle definitely at Rosses Point. Peter was born there, as were his brother Johnny and his sister Jeannette.

Growing up, Peter attended the Rosses Point National School, and then went for six years to Castleknock College in Dublin. He studied history and political science at University College Dublin. Born in the periphery of Europe, he was to become a truly international citizen and scholar, living and working for long periods in Britain, Italy, and the Netherlands. Yet, Sligo remained ‘home’ to him, the safe summer refuge where his Irish roots were constantly renewed.

After obtaining his BA in 1972 and his MA in 1973 at University College, Dublin, he taught at the National Institute of Higher Education in Limerick for two years, and then moved on for another two years (1976–1978) to the Department of Government at the University of Strathclyde, by then already a lively centre of comparative political research under the direction of Richard Rose.

In 1978 he sought admission as an advanced PhD candidate to the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the recently opened European University Institute in Florence. He immediately impressed both the staff and his fellow research students with his grounding in political science, his methodological expertise, his warm personality and his ever-ready assistance to help researchers from many lands in improving their English-language manuscripts. He found the environment of the European University Institute particularly stimulating at the time of his stay between 1978 and 1984. Many of the PhD students enrolled in the programme from a variety European countries were brilliant, soon to become established scholars in the years to follow. They were enormously motivated and eager to learn from one another. There were as yet only a few full-time professors, but a special programme made it possible to invite leading and visiting professors, as did a number of Summer Schools on European Comparative Politics between 1979 and 1982, during which well-known scholars offered lectures and seminars on European countries and comparative themes to a select group of PhD candidates and junior lecturers from outside the Institute.
Within a few months of his arrival at the EUI, Peter met the fine fleur of specialists on parties and party systems who came to the Badia for a December 1978 colloquium organised within the context of an ECPR project on Recent Changes in European Party Systems, which Hans Daalder had brought with him to Florence, as Rudolf Wildenmann was to do later with a project on The Future of Party Government. Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair (both appointed not long after their arrival at the Badia as Assistants, and soon to be promoted to Assistant Professors) took a very active role in these projects. All this brought them into close contact with some of the best comparativists of the time: apart from Hans Daalder and Rudolf Wildenmann as successive department chairmen, Robert Dahl, Warren Miller, Mogens Pedersen, Samuel Finer, Gunnar Sjöblom, Giovanni Sartori, Juan Linz, Max Kaase, Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Gordon Smith, Vincent Wright, just to mention a few. Not least through Peter’s role in both the Recent Changes and Future of Party Government projects, having the vantage point of being a native English speaker with excellent editorial skills, he entered into early and lasting contacts with a large set of the leading comparativists of the time. One early result of the Recent Changes project was the volume, Western European Party Systems: Continuity and Change (Daalder and Mair 1983), which published the main papers of the December 1978 colloquium and important later research papers by EUI researchers. Peter wrote the concluding chapter in this book ‘Adaptation and Control: Towards an Understanding of Party and Party System Change’ (*Mair 1983), heralding a theme which was to preoccupy him throughout his life.

Moving on from Florence

In its earlier years, the European University Institute offered only three year contracts, once renewable, thus restricting the stay of members of the academic staff to a maximum term of six years. On leaving the Institute in 1984, Peter secured a job as lecturer in the stimulating Department of Government of the University of Manchester where he was to stay for six years, from 1984 to 1990, first as a lecturer but soon promoted to senior lecturer. In that period he presented a doctoral dissertation entitled The Changing Irish Party System (Mair 1987) at Leiden University. In 1988 he was given leave of absence to join a research group at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Study (NIAS) which brought together experts on party studies with specialists on voting research for a comparative analysis of the interaction of parties and voters. At NIAS Peter met his future wife, Karin Tilmans, a ‘postdoc’ like himself, a medievalist then from Groningen, learned in her field as he was in his. She was to become his wife and the mother of their closely knit family with two girls and one boy. His Leiden doctorate, his productive NIAS year, and meeting Karin Tilmans made him accept an offer from the Leiden Department of an Associate Professorship in 1990, the start of a fifteen year period in The Netherlands from 1990 until his return to the European University Institute in 2005. Near the retirement of Hans Daalder, he was appointed in 1992 to the Leiden Chair as Professor of Political Science and Comparative Politics. In the latter role he became the stimulating promoter of some 15 doctoral candidates, a
Chapter One

Comparative Politics: An Overview (1996)*

Introduction: The discipline of comparative politics

Ever since Aristotle set out to examine differences in the structures of states and constitutions and sought to develop a classification of regime types, the notion of comparing political systems has lain at the heart of political science.\(^1\) At the same time, however, while perennially concerned with such classic themes as the analysis of regimes, regime change, and democracy and its alternatives, comparative politics is not a discipline which can be defined strictly in terms of a single substantive field of study. Rather it is the emphasis on comparison itself, and on how and why political phenomena might be compared, which marks it out as a special area within political science. Indeed, precisely because there is no single substantive field of study in comparative politics, the relevance and value of treating it as a separate sub-discipline has often been disputed (see the discussion in Verba 1985; Dalton 1991; Keman 1993a).

The discipline of comparative politics is usually seen as being constituted by three related elements. The first, and most simple element is the study of foreign countries, often in isolation from one another. This is usually how comparative politics is defined for teaching purposes, especially in Anglo-American cultures, with different courses being offered on different countries, and with numerous textbooks being published about the individual countries which are incorporated in these courses. In practice, of course, however useful this approach may be in pedagogical terms, there is often little real comparison involved, except implicitly, with any research which might be included under this heading being directed primarily to the gathering of information about the individual country or countries concerned. Indeed, one of the problems associated with the distinctiveness, or lack of distinctiveness of comparative politics as a sub-discipline is that an American scholar working on, say, Italian politics is usually regarded by her national colleagues as a ‘comparativist’, whereas an Italian scholar working on Italian politics is regarded by her national colleagues as a ‘noncomparativist’. This, of course, makes nonsense of the definition.

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1. See Books II.b and IV.b of Aristotle’s *The Politics*. 
The second element, which is therefore more relevant, is the systematic comparison between countries, with the intention of identifying, and eventually explaining, the differences or similarities between them with respect to the particular phenomenon which is being analyzed. Rather than placing a premium on the information which may be derived about these countries, therefore, the emphasis here is often on theory-building and theory-testing, with the countries themselves acting as cases. Such an approach clearly constitutes a major component of political science research more generally, and, indeed, has been the source of some of the most important landmark texts in the discipline as a whole (e.g. Almond and Coleman 1960; Almond and Verba 1965; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Lijphart 1977).

The third element within comparative politics is focused on the method of research, and is concerned with developing rules and standards about how comparative research should be carried out, including the levels of analysis at which the comparative analysis operates, and the limits and possibilities of comparison itself. Precisely because the act of comparison is itself so instinctive to both scientific and popular cultures, this third element is sometimes assumed by researchers to be unproblematic and hence is neglected. And it is this neglect, in turn, which lies at the root of some of the most severe problems in the cumulation of research, on the one hand, and in theory-building and theory-testing, on the other hand.

Unusually, then, comparative politics is a discipline which is defined both by its substance (the study of foreign countries or a plurality of countries) and by its method (see Schmitter 1993: 171). At the same time, of course, this immediately undermines its distinctiveness as a field of study. In terms of its method, for example, comparative politics is hardly distinctive, in that the variety of approaches which have been developed are also applicable within all of the other social sciences. Indeed, some of the most important studies of the comparative method (e.g. Przeworski and Teune 1970; Smelser 1976; Ragin 1987) are directed to the social sciences as a whole rather than to political science per se. In terms of its substantive concerns, on the other hand, the fields of comparative politics seem hardly separable from those of political science tout court, in that any focus of inquiry can be approached either comparatively (using cross-national data) or not (using data from just one country). It is evident, for example, that many of the fields of study covered in the other chapters of this book are regularly subject to both comparative and non-comparative inquiries.2 If comparative politics is distinctive, therefore, then it is really only in terms of the combination of substance and method, and to separate these out from one another necessitates dissolving

2. It is thus interesting to note that when she was preparing the second edition of The State of the Discipline, published in 1993, Ada Finifter was advised that ‘not only do we need more comparative chapters than there were in the first edition, but all the chapters should be comparative’ (Finifter 1993: viii).
comparative politics either into political science as a whole or into the social sciences more generally.

Given the impossibility of reviewing the broad span of developments in political science as a whole, and, at the same time, the undesirability of focusing on methods of comparison alone, a topic which has already received quite a lot of attention in the recent literature (see for example, Collier 1991; Keman 1993b; Bartolini 1993; Sartori and Morlino 1991), this chapter will deal instead with three principal themes, focusing in particular on the contrast between the ambition and approach of the ‘new comparative politics’ of the late 1950s and 1960s, on the one hand, and that of the current generation of comparativists, on the other (for a valuable and more wide-ranging review, see Daalder 1993). The first of these three themes, which is discussed in Section II, concerns the scope of comparison, which is perhaps the principal source of difference between the earlier and later ‘schools’ of comparative politics. Although much tends to be made of the contrasting approach to institutions adopted by each of these two generations of scholars, and of the supposed neglect and then ‘rediscovery’ of institutions and the state as a major focus of inquiry, this can be misleading, in that the apparent absence of an institutional emphasis in the 1950s and 1960s owed more to the global ambitions (the scope of their inquiries) of that earlier generation, and hence to the very high level of abstraction at which they constructed their concepts, rather than to any theoretical downgrading of institutions per se. Concomitantly, the rediscovery of institutions in the 1980s and 1990s owes at least as much to the reduction in the scope of comparison, and hence to the adoption of a lower level of conceptual abstraction, as it does to any theoretical realignment in the discipline.

The second theme, which is discussed in Section III, concerns the actual topics and questions which are addressed in comparative political inquiries, and where quite a marked shift in focus can be discerned, with much more attention now being devoted to ‘outputs’ rather than to ‘inputs’, and to the outcomes of politics and the performance of government rather than to the determinants of politics and the demands on government (see also Rogowski 1993). This also relates to the changing scope of comparison, in that it clearly makes much more sense to ask whether politics matters – a question of outputs and outcomes – when the scope of comparison becomes restricted to just a small number of relatively similar cases. The third theme, which will be addressed here in Section IV, concerns some of the problems which are currently confronted in comparative research, with particular attention being devoted, on the one hand, to the role of countries as units of analysis, and, on the other, to the use and, indeed, virtual fetishization of indicators. The chapter will then conclude with a brief discussion in Section V of some present and future trends in comparative politics, focusing in particular on the renewed emphasis on context, as well as on in-depth case analysis.3

3. For an earlier version of some of this discussion, focusing in particular on the comparative method, see Mair 1995.
Introduction

In what must be one of the most quoted sentences in contemporary political science literature, as well indeed as in this volume, Lipset and Rokkan stated that ‘the party systems of the 1960s reflect, with few but significant exceptions, the cleavage structures of the 1920s’ (Lipset and Rokkan 1967a: 50). It seems hardly necessary here to go into the details of their path-breaking analysis; suffice it to record their major conclusion that the dominant electoral alternatives then prevalent in Western Europe were the outcome of a complex interaction between historically defined social cleavages and particular patterns of institutional development. Through socialization and the development of affective loyalties, as well as simply through the continued salience of the cleavages on which they were initially structured, European party systems acquired a virtually independent momentum, consolidating a set of political terms of reference which seems almost as immutable as the very languages in which they were expressed. The result was that in the late 1960s it could be noted that ‘the party alternatives, and in remarkably many cases the party organisations, are older than the majorities of the national electorates’ (Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 50).

What is almost equally widely referred to in the literature, and therefore need not again concern us at length here, is Rose and Urwin’s (1970) empirical underpinning of this ‘freezing’ hypothesis. Analysing election results across 19 nations between 1945 and 1969, and employing a variety of different indices, these authors effectively demonstrated that ‘the electoral strength of most parties in Western nations since the war has changed very little from election to election, from decade to decade, or within the lifespan of a generation’ (Rose and Urwin 1970: 295).

* ‘Adaptation and Control: Towards an Understanding of Party and Party System Change’, in Hans Daalder and Peter Mair (eds), Western European Party Systems. London: Sage (1983) 405–429. The volume referred to here is Daalder and Mair (1983), of which the article reproduced here was the concluding chapter. This explains why there are many references to other chapters of which the book was comprised. Throughout the text we have therefore inserted the appropriate references to the chapters quoted. But whenever the rest of the text refers to ‘this volume’ it has to be intended as the original one. The text also refers to tables in other chapters of the book, which are not here reproduced. These are marked according to the original number, but in square brackets and italics, to distinguish them from those included in the present collection [Ed.].
Since the publication of these two seminal studies, of course, a number of European party systems appear to have demonstrated their refusal to be taken for granted by political scientists. Pedersen’s analysis, for instance, shows that even if party systems may still reflect the traditional cleavage structure in the society, the significant exceptions that Rokkan and Lipset were talking about are no longer few, but constitute a larger and growing part of all European party systems (Pedersen 1983: 35).

Employing an index of party system volatility, Pedersen shows that the average volatility in the period 1970–77 in five countries (Denmark, Finland, The Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland) was more than double that in the period 1948–59; though it was equally significant that in three other systems (France, Germany and Ireland), the level of 1970–77 volatility had declined to some 50 per cent of that in 1948–59 [table 2.1]. More generally, the frequency of lowest-volatility elections (i.e. where $V_t < 5\%$) has decreased from some 29 per cent of elections in the period before 1965 to some 13 per cent in the period 1965–77 (calculated, roughly, from [figure 2.4]). And while there may be disagreement concerning the interpretation of these changes, there is at least consensus about the fact that they have taken place (e.g. Zuckerman and Lichbach 1977; Wolinetz 1979; Borre 1980).

The sense of party change is further strengthened by Maguire’s (1983) update of the crucial Rose and Urwin study. Her findings show that, while the patterns over the entire 1948–79 period do not vary significantly from those noted by Rose and Urwin for the 1945–69 period, if the 1960–79 period is treated separately a very different picture emerges, in that almost half the parties concerned show a significant trend in their support. More importantly, the changes in this period seem mainly to have affected older parties and social democratic parties, both groups registering substantial downward trends in their vote, a finding that reinforces the suggestions of Bartolini (1983a) that the traditional left parties are experiencing a major challenge to their future growth and development.

But what do we mean when we talk about contemporary changes in parties and party systems? By contrast to the overwhelming impression of stability since the 1920s, the evidence of change since the late 1960s seems on the face of it relatively superficial. There are also the obvious problems involved in using aggregate indices of voting behaviour to monitor individual-level change, a factor that is of course recognized in the various relevant studies, as well as the necessarily arbitrary nature of some of the indices. Indeed, it could be true that contemporary party systems are even experiencing a much greater degree of individual-level change than is in fact apparent, and it may be also true that the aggregate stability of the period before the 1960s may well have hidden a substantial degree of individual-level change.

We should also be aware of the importance of knowing where the change is taking place. The burden of this paper is concerned with electoral change, but we should at least note in passing that there are other relevant dimensions of change that we can consider and yet that might not be immediately evident at
the electoral level. The two Irish political systems afford a useful contrast in this respect. The contemporary party system in the Irish Republic survived a certain degree of post-war volatility before settling down in the 1960s and 1970s to a configuration very reminiscent of that which prevailed in the 1930s. Despite this apparent continuity, however, it is evident that there have been substantial changes in the pattern of party competition as well as in the role of parties in government (Mair 1978). In Northern Ireland, on the other hand, there has recently been an immense amount of (provincial) electoral volatility – 70 per cent from the 1969 Stormont election to the 1973 Assembly election, and 16 per cent from that to the 1975 Convention election (calculated from data in McAllister and Nelson 1979) – yet clearly there has been no substantial change in the age-old conflict of that troubled state. More generally, changes in, say, the role and strategy of parties, changes that themselves may be of immense significance to the party system, need not be reflected in aggregate electoral change. As Dittrich (1983) points out, for instance, there is no necessary link between the emergence of the catch-all party and aggregate electoral change. Daalder (1983) reminds us, and von Beyme (1983) convincingly demonstrates in his discussion of the power structures of parties, that we cannot assume the party to be a unitary actor; and therefore developments at the organizational level, or changes in the patterns of party membership (Bartolini 1983b), for example, as well as changes in the relationship between parties and other organized interests, should be seen to be at least as important to the understanding of recent developments in Western European party systems as is aggregate electoral change itself.

Both the ability of parties to respond to change, and the nature of that response are also partly dependent on where the change occurs. If the change is strictly non-electoral, such that, for example, the parties face new organizational demands in the legislative or governmental process, then the effective response of parties could be seen in the growing professionalization of legislatures, the development of party research services and think-tanks, and so on. This is the sort of response that we often imagine that parties make, but which we cannot properly assess until our research takes us systematically inside the various party organizations in a variety of different countries. Returning to electoral change, it is also true of course that such organizational revitalization is equally likely to result from electoral defeat, in so far as the party interprets its losses as the rejection of its policies or its representativeness. There are many cases in the literature of parties seeking to renew their organizational effectiveness in the wake of electoral defeat, to the extent that, as Walter Lippmann remarked of Tammany, ‘only defeat seems to give it new life’ (quoted in Lowi 1963: 570).

But even if we concern ourselves primarily with electoral change, there remain many problems in clarifying what such change involves. The remainder of this [final] chapter will therefore concern itself first with identifying various relevant parameters of change (section 2); will then discuss some of the problems involved in identifying factors that lead to change (section 3); will then treat of conditions in which change can occur in terms of the general hypothesis that parties and party systems are losing control of their agenda-setting role (section 4); and finally will look at the directions in which change might lead (section 5).
Chapter Nineteen

The Limited Impact of Europe on National Party Systems (2000)*

This study is intended to offer a brief assessment of the impact of Europeanisation on the national party systems of the member states of the European Union (EU). This implies quite serious limitations in the focus of the analysis. In the first place, the primary concern is with the impact of Europeanisation on the party systems of the member states, as opposed to its effects on the individual parties that constitute those systems. As such, virtually no attention is paid to the question of how Europe may have provoked fissures within parties, or to the extent to which it may have encouraged the formation of internal party factions that align themselves on either side of the European debate. Second, the discussion is primarily concerned with the impact of Europeanisation within the national political arena. Hence, little consideration is given to the effects that Europe may have wrought on forms of inter-party competition within the European political arena as such. In other words, those modifications to national party systems that emerge only within the context of competition that ensues during elections to the European Parliament are more or less consistently excluded from this analysis. This is not to deny the importance of either of these topics. Indeed, both merit more serious and systematic treatment than is currently the case even within the now expanding literature on the Europeanisation of party politics. To do these topics justice, however, would clearly require more than a single paper. There is a third limitation in that, for reasons of manageability, this study concentrates on evidence of the direct impact of Europe on national party systems. This is perhaps the gravest limitation of all, since the most telling impact may well be expressed indirectly, in the sense that Europe increasingly imposes severe constraints on the policy manoeuvrability of governments and on the parties that make up those governments. As such, Europe also constrains the capacity of these parties to engage in competition, and it thereby affects the workings of party systems in practice. But although this question is addressed briefly in the concluding section, it is largely excluded from the analysis below.


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The discussion begins with a brief assessment of the direct impact of European integration on the two defining features of national party systems: their format and mechanics. On the basis of a necessarily cursory assessment, it is suggested that there is very little evidence of any direct impact on these features of party systems. Indeed, of the many areas of domestic politics that may have experienced an impact from Europe, party systems have perhaps proved to be most impervious to change. The second section suggests that one possible explanation for this imperviousness is the absence of any major spillover effects from the European to the national electoral arena. Although the Europarties themselves might play an important representative role, the absence of a genuine European party system serves to inhibit any restructuring of domestic party competition that might result from competition at the European level. Moreover, as long as party competition at the European level remains undefined by competition for a European executive office, it is unlikely that a European-level party system will develop. And this, in turn, serves to protect national party systems from spillover effects. The third section explores another potential explanation for the capacity of national party systems to resist the impact of Europeanisation. In this case, the focus is on the misplaced division of competences associated with the national and European electoral arenas. In brief, it is argued that the national electoral arena is best suited to the contestation of key European issues, whereas the European arena is best suited to debate about more everyday policy questions. More often than not, however, the debates are actually pursued the other way around, with the result that elections in each arena fail to prove decisive. The voters have a voice, of course, but it tends to be on matters that sometimes cannot be decided in the particular arena in question. Two different arguments are advanced to account for this misplacement, the more sceptical of which holds that electoral disempowerment actually serves the interests of the parties in competition. It is also suggested that even if the key questions of European integration were to be debated within the national electoral arena, the mainstream consensus is such that voters would still find themselves unable to make any meaningful choices. Finally, the discussion concludes with a brief assessment of the potential indirect effects of Europe within a wider process of depoliticisation. The main point here is that decision-making at the European level constitutes a major area in which decisions are seen to be a matter for the governing politicians and their bureaucracies, rather than as something that necessarily requires the active engagement of, or consultation with, the electorate at large. In this sense, the European dimension enhances an already existing tendency within modern democracies to separate the world of politics from that of the wider society, and hence helps to accentuate the popular turning away from traditional politics.

Europe and national party systems: Format and mechanics

Any assessment of the impact of European integration on national party systems will almost inevitably begin with the contrast between the periods before and after the introduction of direct elections to the European Parliament. These first direct
elections opened up a wholly new electoral arena for the expression of political preferences in the member states, and they offered the first opportunity for parties to attempt to establish formal cross-national links as part of their direct efforts to appeal to voters. These elections also marked the first occasion on which parties could be seen to take public responsibility for the bonds that they had forged with other like-minded parties within the European Parliament, and on which they had to defend their record as part of a European parliamentary grouping to their own electorates. Although many of the parties that competed in these elections had been active on the European stage for many years, it was with direct elections that this first became a specifically electoral arena. Hence, it is likely to be from that point onwards that we might find the most important of the direct changes that Europeanisation could have occasioned. The stretch since the introduction of direct elections is also a relatively long one in the life of most political parties and party systems. Indeed, for the majority of the member states of the current EU, the European electoral arena has been now been functioning for more than two decades, that is, since 1979. Any comparison between the state of parties and party systems before and after the introduction of direct European elections is, therefore, almost certainly likely to reveal substantial change.

What remains to be seen, of course, is whether the change thus revealed might reasonably be associated with Europeanisation. If we restrict the focus to national party systems, which is the core concern of this analysis, then there are two obvious ways in which Europe might be seen to have had an impact. In the first place, Europeanisation might have affected the format of these systems, that is, the number of relevant parties in contention in national electoral arenas. In other words, as a direct consequence of Europeanisation, new parties might have been established that either add to, or substitute for, the number already in contention. Second, Europe might have influenced the mechanics of party systems, that is, the way in which parties interact with one another in the national electoral arenas, either by modifying the ideological distance separating the relevant parties, or by encouraging the emergence of wholly new European-centred dimensions of competition. Although there is much more to be said about party systems than can easily be encapsulated by these two features, format and mechanics nevertheless constitute the key defining elements of any party system (see Sartori 1976); accordingly, it is here that any direct impact of Europeanisation could and should first be seen. Europe might also have had an indirect impact on both of these features, of course, but since indirect effects are much more difficult to specify, it is perhaps best to begin with an assessment of the direct impact, if any.

1. This is true for the nine member states then in the EC. Thereafter, Greece held its first direct European elections in 1981, Portugal and Spain in 1987, Sweden in 1995, and Austria and Finland in 1996. All 15 member states participated in the most recent round of direct elections in June 1999.