

## The Role of Political Parties in Making Democracy Work



### KEY FINDINGS:

- *Strong, stable political parties are critical pillars of democracy when they function well*
- *Strong party systems promote legitimacy and satisfaction with democracy – and keep the military in the barracks*
- *Strong, stable parties improve governing ability and provide incentives for politicians to pursue responsible economic policy and invest in public goods*

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**Modern democracy cannot work without political parties (or their functional equivalent), and it does not work well if those parties are weak. This is the strong consensus from more fifty years of scholarly literature on political parties and democracy. This policy brief first summarizes why parties are necessary, highlighting the problems they help solve for legislators, candidates, and citizens. It then discusses the ways in which parties and party systems may vary before turning how strong parties can be a deterrent to democratic backsliding. Finally, the ways in which the party system shapes policymaking and government performance are examined.**

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When they work well, political parties are the workhorses of democracy. They emerged and evolved as institutions that helped legislators, candidates, and voters overcome a variety of challenges associated with democracy. Within legislatures political parties enable legislators to manage the policymaking agenda and strike credible bargains with each other. During election season political parties help lower the cost of the

mobilization for candidates through at least two mechanisms. First, party-based campaigning by one party candidate produces positive externalities or spill-overs for other members of the same party ticket. Second, party affiliation helps candidates establish a reputation in the eyes of voters and provides candidates with a base of likely supporters. When parties serve as useful information shortcuts or heuristic devices they can help voters make very

complex decisions with a minimal amount of information (Aldrich 1995).

Parties also function as democracy's transmission belt—connecting voters to their government in two distinct ways. First, parties aggregate and represent the interests of large groups of individual voters, thereby enabling those interests to have a voice in the policymaking process alongside the interests of powerful economic or political actors (e.g. corporations). Second, political parties are virtually the only tool voters have to hold policymakers collectively accountable for their performance. Without strong, effective political parties, citizens are more likely to feel disconnected from and disaffected with their democracy.

Yet, democratic party systems can vary in a number of ways, from the ideological placement of parties, to the nature of party organizations. This brief focuses on three distinct dimensions, each of which has implications of the stability of democracy and/or quality of democratic governance.

1. The number of parties is one of the most common dimensions along which researchers compare party systems. How we measure or count the number of parties varies, but for questions of democratic stability and quality the important number is the number of parties in government, and, to a lesser extent, the number of parties in the legislature. The number of parties has a direct bearing on the tradeoff between representation and accountability that exists within democracies.

More parties translate into more points of view being represented, but as the number of parties in government grows, it becomes difficult to identify who is responsible for a given policy, and harder to vote poor-performers out of office.

2. Institutionalization of party systems occurs when there are political parties with relatively stable patterns of inter-party competition. Parties in institutionalized systems have strong, stable bases of support, robust organizations, and labels that are distinct and valuable to both voters and candidates (Mainwaring 2018). By contrast, parties in weakly institutionalized systems are often ephemeral, with poorly articulated platforms, weak organization, and lacking stable bases of support (Bernhard et al. 2019).

3. Party system nationalization refers to the extent to which the major political parties are competitive across a country's districts and regions. A regionalized or localized party system is one where the major parties run competitively in only a select few electoral regions or districts.

With these three dimensions in mind we can consider the ways in which these aspects of the party system shape the durability of democracy quality of democratic governance.

Political parties lie at the core of almost every democracy. Apart from individual politicians, parties are the actor that citizens interact with the most. Where party systems work well – there are enough to represent the population preferences yet not too many to diminish accountability; are

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institutionalized in a stable pattern; and most parties operate on a national level – voters are more likely to be satisfied with democracy. If the party system does not fulfil any of these criteria, then the legitimacy of democracy itself can be a casualty. Political parties are also the major alternative to the military in many new democracies—where

***Strong party systems promote legitimacy and satisfaction with democracy – and keep the military in the barracks.***

parties are robust and effective the military is more likely to remain in the barracks.

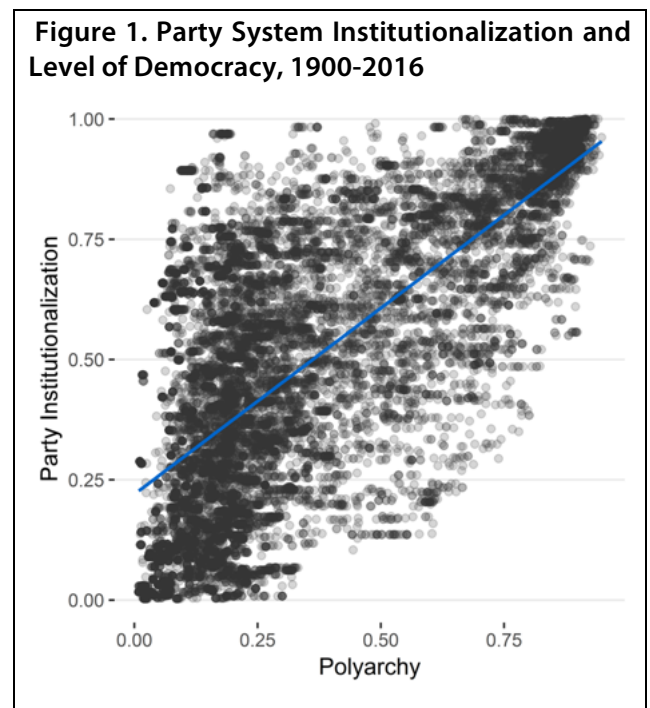
More generally, there is growing body of evidence suggesting that robust parties are associated with more durable democracies. For example, it appears that populists are less likely to emerge and be successful in countries where parties are strong, while weak party organisations and unattached electorates provide an open door for populists (Self and Hicken 2018). Another recent study found that democratic breakdowns are less likely to occur in countries with strong parties and a strong civil society (Bernhard et al. 2019). This is because strong, institutionalized parties raise the costs of democratic defection and reduce its chance of success. Specifically, compared to weak parties, institutionalized parties have two advantages.

First, with their greater stakes in the democratic status quo and longer time horizons they are more likely to oppose attempts by potential dictators to violate democratic norms and institutions. Second, with their reliable bases of support and robust organizational capacity, the

leaders of institutionalized parties can be expected to have the capacity to overcome collective action problems in response to attempts by their opponents to defect from the democratic bargain.

**Figure 1** illustrates the positive association between party institutionalization and democracy. On the x-axis is the level of democracy by country, measured using V-Dem’s Electoral Democracy Index (“Polyarchy”).

On the y-axis is an estimate of the level of party institutionalization, also from V-Dem. As the figure makes clear, the most democratic and stable countries tend to have stronger, more institutionalized parties.



Source: Bizzarro, Hicken, and Self 2017

The nature of party system also bears directly on the nature of the policy environment and the incentives and the capability of policymakers to produce needed national policies. To begin with, the party system has a direct impact on government decisiveness and credibility. A multi-party system or a system with weakly institutionalized political parties usually produce governments with a large number of decision makers (sometimes called veto players). Such governments tend to be indecisive (they have difficulty agreeing to new policies), but when they do decide those policies tend to be credible (e.g. Tsebelis 2002; Cox and McCubbins 2001, Hicken 2018).

Perhaps more fundamentally, the party system, specifically institutionalization and nationalization, help shape the incentives of policymakers to pursue and implement policies that are in the broad, public interest. To begin with, strong parties are more likely to hold their party leaders accountable, reducing the chance of predatory behavior. They are also better equipped to solve the broad array of coordination problems associated with policymaking (Bizzarro et al. 2018; Gerring and Thacker 2008; Stokes 1999). Strong, institutionalized parties also have longer time horizons than their under-institutionalized

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counterparts, incentivizing them to balance the short-term interests of individual politicians against the long-term interests of the party and country as a whole (Simmons 2016; Hicken 2018). Finally, where institutionalized and nationalized parties are the norm, policymakers have incentives to respond to broader constituencies than is the case in less-institutionalized, less-nationalized systems. Together, party system institutionalization and nationalization boost the likelihood that politicians will engage in responsible economic management and invest in needed public goods (Bizzarro et al. 2018; Lago-Peñas and Lago-Peñas).

In summary, political parties play a critical role in making democracy work. They are main institutions connecting voters to government. Where they function well they facilitate both representation of diverse interests and democratic accountability. Strong parties also serve as one of the primary bulwarks against democratic erosion and backsliding. Finally, the party system helps shape how successful democracies are at the tasks of governance. The party system helps set the level of decisiveness and credibility in the policymaking environment, and shapes the incentives of policymakers to provide policies that are in the broad, public interesting.

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