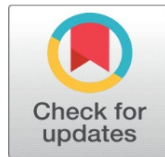


POLITICAL PARTIES: STRUCTURE, FUNCTIONS, AND DEMOCRATIC SIGNIFICANCE – AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

A political party is an organized group of individuals who share common ideologies, goals, and policies and seek to gain political power and influence governance. The political parties are fundamental institutions in modern democracies that serve as intermediaries between citizens and the state. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the structure, functions, and democratic significance of political parties. Drawing on classical and contemporary political theory, including works by Maurice Duverger and Giovanni Sartori, the study explores how parties organize political competition, mobilize participation, and contribute to governance. It also highlights contemporary challenges affecting their effectiveness.

Keywords: Political Parties, Democratic Institutions, Party Structure, Party Functions, Party System, Governance

1. INTRODUCTION

Political parties are crucial institutions in modern democracies. A political party is an organised group of people who have similar political opinions and aims that seek to influence public policy by getting electoral office. Political parties act as the soul of any representative democracy. Parties can be understood in the words of Wilhelm Hofmeister as a “permanent association of citizens that are based on free membership and a programme, and which are anxious to occupy through the path of elections, the politically decisive positions of the country with their team of leaders, in order to materialize suggestions for resolving outstanding problems.” The relationship between political parties and citizens holds significant importance,

as it encompasses participation in elections, membership and support, political education, the development of political opinions, and also creates a connection between the government and the people.

Political parties are central to the functioning of representative democracy. They facilitate electoral competition, organize political discourse, and offer citizens options in how they are governed. As stated by Edmund Burke, a political party is a group united to promote national interest based on shared principles. Over the years, political parties have transformed into intricate organizations that influence both political frameworks and public policy.

2. STRUCTURE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

The structure of political parties varies across political systems, but they mostly have common organizational features. A political party structure denotes the organization and hierarchy within a political party, encompassing its leadership, membership, and decision-making processes. Although the precise structure of a political party can differ significantly based on the country and the party's historical context and ideology, the majority of parties exhibit certain common characteristics.

2.1. LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

Political parties generally operate under a hierarchical leadership structure, including top leaders, executive committees, and regional representatives. The role of leadership is central in the processes of decision-making and strategy formulation.

2.2. MEMBERSHIP BASE

Parties are composed of members and supporters who play a role in campaigns, mobilization, and grassroots initiatives. Mass-based parties prioritize extensive participation, whereas cadre parties depend on a select elite membership [Duverger \(1954\)](#).

2.3. ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Political parties function through established institutions, including party offices, committees, and conventions. In countries like India, parties frequently possess national, state, and local branches to manage various political situations.

2.4. IDEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

Parties are typically structured around ideological frameworks—such as liberalism, conservatism, socialism, or nationalism, which guide their policies and political agendas.

The structure of a political party can significantly influence its capacity to mobilise support, formulate policies, and engage in electoral competition. Such structures differ considerably among various parties and political systems, reflecting diverse historical, cultural, and institutional backgrounds. The various political party structures and their decision-making processes could be explained as centralised structures, decentralized structures, federal structures, democratic structures, single-party structures, and multi-party structures. In centralized party structures, the decision-making authority is concentrated at the top, typically held

by party leaders or a central executive committee. Decentralized party structures allocate decision-making power across various levels of the party organization, such as national, regional, and local levels. Interestingly, in the decentralized party structures, the local or grassroots leadership has a significant say in the party affairs. The federal structures are based on the federalistic principle of governance, i.e., the decision-making authority is distributed between the central and regional levels of party structure. The Democratic Party structures primarily focus on internal democracy, transparency, and accountability in the decision-making process. Single-party structures monopolize the decision-making process, while multi-party structures characterize a political system with multiple parties striving for power and representation.

3. TYPOLOGY AND FUNCTIONS OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties are indispensable for the working of democracy. One cannot imagine a democratic government without the existence of political parties. There are several types of political parties but they fall under five broad categories. These categories are elite parties, mass-based parties, ethnicity-based parties, electoralist parties, and movement parties [Diamond and Gunther. \(2001\)](#)

Political parties perform many functions. The core functions of political parties are electoral: nominating candidates, waging campaigns, and mobilizing support. Other important functions could be pointed out as:

- Recruiting and nominating candidates for elective office.
- Mobilising electoral support for these candidates and stimulating electoral participation.
- Managing the choices among competing groups of candidates along different issue dimensions.
- Representing different social groups, either symbolically or in advancing different specific interests.
- Tactically propagating specific interests into broader electoral and governing coalitions.
- Forming and sustaining governments.
- Integrating citizens more broadly into the nation-state and its political process.

3.1. PRIMARY FUNCTIONS OF POLITICAL PARTIES

1) Contesting Elections

Contest elections are the most evident function of political parties. In most democratic systems, elections are contested primarily among candidates nominated by political parties. These parties employ different methods to select their candidates, including internal polling or decisions made by senior party officials.

2) Policy Formulation

Political parties present various policies and programs for voters to select from. Policy formulation is a process of developing plans, strategies, and decisions to resolve public problems and achieve government goals.

3) Formulating Legislation

Political parties are instrumental in making laws for a country. The laws are drafted and tabled in the legislature, with a debate and discussion, and are passed

in the legislature. The members of the legislature belong to a certain party, they usually follow the direction of their party leadership, often setting aside their individual opinions.

4) Forming and Running the Government

Political parties play a crucial role in the formation and operation of governments in modern democracies. Political parties recruit leaders; it is the responsibility of a political party to identify capable individuals within the party and train them for an administrative role and appoint them as ministers. The winning party appoints these leaders as ministers to run the government.

5) Shaping Public Opinion

Political parties shape public opinion by raising crucial issues. The political parties have thousands of members and activists all over the country. Numerous pressure groups serve as extensions of political parties, representing diverse sections of society. Occasionally, these parties initiate movements aimed at addressing the challenges encountered by the populace.

More or less all the parties fall into these five broad categories but political parties as institutions are in question. There is the question on the changing nature of parties; lack of attachment and involvement: emotionally and ideologically. As far as the membership in political parties is concerned they are declining day by day. Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen observe that there is a growing pattern either in developed or developing democracies that membership is declining in political parties. That shows the weakening bond of political parties and specific social groups, and it is decreasing consistently. As a result, political parties have lost their trust and commitment towards people. The credibility of political parties as institutions is declining fast, it seems the role of political parties which is played in modern democracies is weakening, and its actual functions are being played by other organisations as interest groups or social movements.

On the basis of these shortcomings, there is need to develop new typology of political parties. As we know the current typification available in the literature of party politics were born and derived from Western Democracies that are somehow inefficient to deliver its ethos in other parts of the world, especially in the third world countries where diversification has its strong roots. The existing typology has some sort of certain criteria and goals and all the parties are supposed to fall under these. In this context, Sigmund Neumann, differentiates parties into three types, "Parties of individual representation" express the demands of specific social groups. "Parties of social integration", have well-developed organizations and provide a wide variety of services to members, encapsulating them within a partisan community, in exchange for which they count on financial contributions and volunteered services of members during election campaigns. "Parties of total integration" have more ambitious goals of seizing power and radically transforming societies, demanding the full commitment and unquestioning obedience of members." In this category, Herbert Kitschelt is one of the proponents who differentiates parties on "logic of electoral competition" and gives more stress on "logic of constituency representation."

Other category of classification is organizational, here, it distinguished parties in two folds: that are loosely bounded and have strong networking with other organizations and developed infrastructures. Maurice Duverger, advocates a unique scheme of two and a half type where he differentiates parties on different criteria such as cadre, mass and Leninist devotee. A cadre based parties are those led by individuals, mass parties mobilise a large segment of the society and Leninist devotee is a category which is too vague to be found as a separate entity. Kitschelt

conceives a classification which has four different categories: "centralist clubs," "Leninist cadre" parties, "decentralized clubs," and "decentralized mass" parties. The organizational typology is further elaborated by Angelo Panebianco, and his articulation is "mass-bureaucratic" parties with "electorate professional" parties.

Other typology is based on sociological orientation. According to this notion political parties are outcome of interest of various social groups. Samuel Eldersveld and Robert Michels belong to this school of thought. There are some scholars who mix all three criteria, among them Otto Kirchheimer is one of those scholars who suggest broadly four party models: "bourgeois parties of individual representation," "class-mass parties," "denominational-mass parties," and "catch-all people's parties." Accordingly Richard Gunther and Larry Diamond, all party models can be placed under one outline developed with the help of three different criteria. These criteria are, "the size of formal organisation of party and the extent of the functions they perform (ranging from thin, elite-based parties to extensive mass-based party organisations); whether the party is tolerant and pluralistic or proto-hegemonic in its objectives and behavioral style; and its distinguishing programmatic or ideological commitments."

There are other classifications present in the existing literature. The classification of political parties fall in various categories and also have different dimensions, these might be difference in electoral strategies, representation of social groups, parties' key objectives, and organisational capacity. Some parties are entirely based on a particular ethnic, caste, religion, socio-economic group. Some are exclusively based on ideologies. Some are issue based. Some have specific social objective and to fulfil that they are committed. There is further division under "pluralistic" versus "proto-hegemonic" parties or into further categorisation centred on their devotions to an ideology or programme.

Elite Parties are based upon reputed elites within explicit geographical range and in this case the role of organizational structures is minimal. In this kind of party, the local elites align and shape the party at the national level. Till mid-nineteenth century, the political affairs were limited to some spheres of society. Limited suffrage and holding offices were limited to males, property ownership, and the upper socioeconomic strata in most of the countries. Throughout the world, there are several examples of the elite parties, such as the British House of Commons in the first half of the 19th century, the French Conservative Parties in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, and several conservative parties in Brazil, and so on. The early phase of the Indian National Congress is an example of an elite party.

A clientelistic party is a type of elite party that resulted from industrialization and urbanization. The newly recipient groups of society posed a challenge to the traditional local notable party; as a result, the new party came into existence, which is known as a clientelistic party.

Mass-based Party has its origin in 19th and early 20th century in European history. In many European political systems, it emerged as a result of the working class's long struggle and political mobilisation. It is also called an externally created party. This is the largest genus of the party system in which a further division took place in the name of ideology and belief system of the party. On the one hand, they are socialism, nationalism, and religion. They can be further divided into pluralistic and proto-hegemonic. Pluralistic parties function within a democratic system and follow the rule of law. Proto-hegemonic parties come with a revolutionary idea and believe in the replacement of the existing pluralistic and democratic system.

Ethnicity-based parties are those that uphold the interests of a particular group based on ethnicity. There are several political parties based on ethnicity at present worldwide.¹

Electorist parties are in general organizationally thin. There are three parties which come under this broader category, for Otto Kirchheimer it is “catch-all”, for Angelo Panebianco, “electoral professional” and for Ruud Koole, “modern cadre.” As Kirchheimer and others noted that “many parties substantially soften their ideological commitments and loosen their ties to specific clienteles in pursuit of votes, thereby evolving into catch-all parties” (Diamond and Gunther, 2001). Electorist parties are well-known for not having rigid organization, no full commitment to a particular ideology but very committed to electoral orientations. The prime focus of Catch-all parties are to maximize votes, win elections and govern.

Programmatic party also comes under the category of thinly organized and electoral campaign is its main focus. Likewise electorist parties, their electoral campaign and appeal not based on any ideology but personal charisma of the leader, who is presented and glorified as all ‘problem solver’ and who takes away the country’s problem or crisis. There are several examples of programmatic parties from different countries of the world.² A recent classic example of this kind of party is the Thai Rak Thai Party which is founded by a Thailand business tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra and surprisingly the party secured absolute majority in the parliament in November 2000 election just after few months of its formation. On similar line the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) was formed as a regional party in the state of Andhra Pradesh by Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao popularly known as NTR, a film actor in 1982. The party came into power within nine months of its formation in 1983 Assembly elections. A very recent example is the Aam Admi Party (AAP) which was founded in November 2012 by Arvind Kejriwal resulting of the outcome of a movement, ‘India against Corruption’. The AAP contested in the 2013 Delhi Legislative Assembly election for the first time and secured second position in the assembly in terms of acquiring 28 seats out of 70. Thus, the AAP emerged as the second-largest party. It formed the government with support from the members of the Indian National Congress (INC) in the assembly.

All the parties existing in the current scenario broadly follow the framework explained above for the formation of parties. In fact, all ingredients would be there for the formation of a functional party. Earlier parties were founded on an ideological line, but presently, a particular ingredient is missing in some places. For instance, in India, we have several parties that are based on caste, ethnicity, language, region, and so on. They are founded for and by a particular section of society. Ideological orientations of political parties are somehow affected by vote bank politics. It is thus appropriate to have a section on the evolution of Indian Political Parties in the country.

¹ The Northern People’s Congress and Action Group of Nigeria’s first Republic (1960-66), South Africa’s Inkatha Freedom Party, Bulgaria’s Turkish Minority Party, Movement for Rights and Freedom, the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania and the (Sikh) Akali Religious Party in India’s Punjab state.

² The examples of programmatic parties are Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, the Congress-I rump which defeat from the rest of the Congress party in support of Indira Gandhi, and the Pakistan’s Peoples Party that Benazir Bhutto inherited from her father.

4. DEMOCRATIC SIGNIFICANCE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties play a crucial role in the functioning of a democracy. They act as essential intermediaries between the citizens and the government, consolidating individual preferences into unified platforms and policy proposals. This aggregation is essential for effective governance, as it allows elected officials to understand and respond to the diverse needs and desires of the electorate.

Political parties represent diverse social, economic, and cultural interests within society. They also encourage citizen involvement in political processes, including voting and activism. By configuring political competition, parties foster stability and prevent chaos. Political parties formulate and execute policies that cater to the needs of the public. Scholars like Giovanni Sartori argue that without political parties, democracy cannot function effectively.

Moreover, political parties serve as an important mechanism for ensuring accountability among elected officials. Through opposition and critique, they guarantee that those in authority remain transparent and responsive to the public's concerns. The competition among parties cultivates a robust political discourse, promoting debate and the expression of diverse perspectives.

In crux, political parties are instrumental in maintaining the health and stability of a democratic system by facilitating representation, enhancing accountability, and organizing political competition.

5. CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Political parties are indispensable components of democratic systems, and encounter several challenges in the contemporary era. A major issue is the decline in membership and engagement. Citizens, especially younger individuals, are becoming less inclined to associate with traditional parties, resulting in diminished grassroots support and financial constraints. This disengagement is often attributed to a perceived unresponsiveness from parties regarding citizens' issues and an increasing distrust in political institutions.

Another major challenge is the fragmentation of the political landscape. The emergence of social media and digital platforms has facilitated the rise of niche political movements and independent candidates, thereby weakening the influence of established parties. This fragmentation can result in political instability and complicate the formation of cohesive governing coalitions.

Moreover, political parties struggle with the necessity to adapt to rapidly evolving communication technologies and information environments. The dissemination of misinformation and disinformation via online channels presents a significant threat to informed public discourse and can erode trust in political parties. To address these challenges, parties must devise effective strategies that ensure their messages resonate with voters in an increasingly intricate media landscape.

In summary, political parties confront a complex set of challenges in the modern era. Tackling these issues necessitates that parties adapt to changing societal dynamics, adopt innovative communication strategies, and prioritize citizen engagement to sustain their relevance and effectiveness within democratic systems.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, political parties are essential foundations of contemporary democracies. Their organizational structure offers a framework for organizing political action, while their functions in aggregating interests, selecting candidates, and contesting elections are crucial for converting public sentiment into policy. The democratic importance of political parties is evident in their capacity to endorse accountability, representation, and active citizen engagement. Despite ongoing issues such as factionalism and decreasing membership, the continuous evolution and reform of political parties are vital for the robustness and dynamism of democratic systems globally.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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