

Going inclusive: How parties face their challenges

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Abstract

Keywords

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Since the fourth quarter of the last century, political parties have experienced mixed fortunes. Unquestionably, they still dominate the representative institutions. Indeed, both independent legislators and technocratic governments are uncommon, while parties continue to coordinate parliamentary groups and select ministers. But the prevailing point of view is drastically different when parties' extra-legislative organisations are under investigation. In this case, 'crisis' is the most recurrent term.

When talking and writing about parties' crises, scholars focus on several, interrelated and non-exclusive aspects. In general, they all point to the existence of a feeling of wariness towards party-mediated politics, rising in old and new democracies while democracy is spreading and consolidating throughout the world. This goes hand in hand with an eroding party identification, in turn generating a growing level of vote change. At a systemic level, these attitudes bring about an impressive decline of party membership, a lamentable peak of electoral abstention, and the emergence of new parties, often sponsoring an anti-party programme; in the last decade, affected by uncomfortable economic conditions, most citizens preferred to participate in various types of social movements rather than rely on parties for the solutions to their problems.

All organisations threatened by environmental change react in order to maintain their power positions, or at least in order to survive. Political parties are no exception. Since the mid-1960s, they have practised several kinds of reform to improve their actual working. Being private or semi-public organisations largely unconstrained by any sort of legal limitations, political parties have been free to experiment with a number of different reactions. All of these may be summed up under a single label: inclusiveness. In practice, most parties have enhanced internal democracy, curbing the power of the elites and, in the meantime, empowering members and voters for key decisions.

What are these key decisions actually about? Intra-party democracy has, by and large, been used in three areas of the parties' organisational lives. First, many parties have asked members and sympathisers to define their positions on public policies, including participation in coalition governments. Second, members and sympathisers have been given the final say on the selection of candidates for representative offices by several parties. Third, many parties have involved members and sympathisers in the selection of the party leaders.

The consequences of these reorganisations of the parties' lives have been remarkable, and two deserve mention here. The democratisation of the selection of candidates and leaders entails the implementation of primary elections, perhaps the most noticeable trend in the field of intra-party democracy. And while primaries have been initially used outside the United States for selecting only legislative candidates, recently they have also been utilised to pick chief-executive candidates, both for presidential and for prime ministerial offices. Moreover, in becoming inclusive, parties have changed their approach to partisan mobilisation. Previously, the simple dichotomy between formally enrolled members and external citizens was sufficient to portray the relationship linking parties and their followers. Today this relationship is extremely blurred and entails more nuanced situations, from cyber-membership based on communication involvement to mere financial support. What should we think about the current revolution concerning the parties' internal lives? As often happens, the evidence is mixed and opinions somewhat contrasting. However, sceptical points of view seem to prevail. After all, parties have entered the actual state of stress because of long-term causes, such as the fading away of the traditional cleavages or the increasing similarity of their agenda, in turn due to spreading consensual politics and dominance of economic neo-liberalism. From this point of view, the causes of decline are extraneous to parties' organisation, and organisational changes will be therefore ineffective. In any case, the party elites and grassroots in many democracies have agreed to make use of primaries, and while the first wave of closed primaries have been criticised as a tool managed by the elites to easily manipulate party members, the current second wave based on the use of primaries open to all voters certainly escapes this disapproval.

The spreading of primaries to many democracies outside the United States has been followed by a mounting scholarly interest. Researchers have contributed in two ways. Several works, that are theoretically oriented, aim to define and classify the different varieties of primaries and investigate the impact created by inclusive selectorates on party organisations. Another strand of research is empirically oriented and examines single case studies or adopts a comparative perspective to shed light on the actual working of primaries. The contributions in this issue of the *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio Elettorale* are examples of the second approach as they focus on cases of recent primaries in three major European democracies. These cases have been selected in order to include the three broad areas concerned by the use of primary elections. Marino De Luca, for instance, compares the open primaries promoted in France by the *Parti Socialiste* and *Les Républicaines* approaching the 2017 presidential election, focusing on similarities, differences and effects of two selections for governmental offices. Fulvio Venturino and Antonella Seddone instead point to legislative primaries designed to select candidates for parliament. They examine four parties that made use of open and closed primaries when approaching the 2013 Italian parliamentary election and take advantage of this quasi-experimental circumstance to study the primaries' potential for renewal. Bruno Marino and Stefano Rombi focus on the selection of party leaders in the United Kingdom. They first explore the expansion of the selectorates that have occurred there since the mid-1960s, and then focus on the recent leadership races that elected Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May as leaders of the Labour and Conservative parties, respectively.

Adopting this strategy, we hope to contribute to the study of primary elections in all forms, but both the practice and the research on intra-party democracy are vast and expanding. We are fully aware that this contribution can only be partial and intermediate, but we also know that an initial step is necessary.

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