Defending Democracy: Parties as the Agents of Resilience and Adaptation Against Delegitimization

Jacob Hougie

Since the development of representative democracy, parties have been a near-universal feature. Yet at the same time, they have been consistently critiqued. Today, they face challenges to their legitimacy as insurgent anti-system parties rise, leading to a return of these old critiques. This article builds on work by Rosenblum and Mouffe, among others, in exploring the political philosophy behind parties and differing perspectives on the purpose of politics. Doing so in tandem with the empirical literature on the contemporary challenges of political parties in Israel and Germany, this article builds a concrete normative and practical justification for the centrality of parties in contemporary politics. The article argues that political parties in partisan conflict are the best tool for creating agonistic politics out of antagonistic conflict; they achieve this by managing conflict rather than ignoring it or letting it remain antagonistic. Further, the article argues that parties are the only practical tool available for governing modern states democratically. Finally, this article challenges contemporary pessimism surrounding political parties by focusing on the historical power of party systems to adapt to changing conditions to win votes and to become more representative and agonistic. Indeed, the rise of new parties, ordinarily considered a sign of decay, should be taken as a sign of the adaptability of party systems.

INTRODUCTION

Political parties have long been the subject of philosophical attacks. Rosenblum (2010) identified three main categories of attack. First, there is the view that parties are divisive, whereby the nation is viewed as a whole, whilst parties are seen as contrary to that. Second, parties are seen as 'corrupt and corrupting' because they are either not seeking the true good, are seeking their personal interests or those of 'special interests'. Third, there is the idea that other means of doing politics are superior because they are more participatory. Today, many of these same concerns have been raised due to a legitimacy crisis of mainstream parties and the associated rise of anti-system parties.

In contrast to these attacks, I will argue for a normative and practical justification of parties and seek to show that the political party cannot be replaced as the organising institution of modern democracy. While parties could be supplemented by or exist alongside other institutions, including direct democracy or deliberative democracy, they should not be replaced. Creating a system without political parties would not properly fulfil the most important role of political parties: managing conflict. Moreover, it cannot and would not be replaced for practical reasons as governing would be too difficult and campaigning too inefficient.

Managing conflict is the most important function of parties because it is a necessary consequence of the plural societies in which we live. As identified by thinkers from Aristotle, Hobbes, and Locke to contemporaries such as Isaiah Berlin, in a plural society of any kind, there are interests and identities that can come into conflict with each other (Aristotle 2016; Crick 2013; Hobbes 2002; Locke 1980; Mouffe 2005). Aristotle successfully articulates the problem when he argues against Plato that it is painful to attain unity in the state because of the natural plurality that exists within states:

> since the nature of a state is to be a plurality... we ought not to attain this greatest unity even if we could, for it would be the destruction of the state. (Aristotle 2016, 24)

In a situation of competing interests and identities there are only three options: ignoring conflict by either asserting that there can be consensus around the national interest or allowing a single group or individual to dominate; leaving conflict and risk it escalating into violent antagonism; or, managing conflict. This can be achieved by allowing every group a share of power, and thus creating agonism through system legitimacy, which makes conflict safe because of respect for the system (Crick 2013; Mouffe 2005; Rosenblum 2010). Agonism and antagonism exist on a spectrum between complete opposition to political systems and complete support for the structural status quo, but I refer to them because these terms nevertheless act as useful base points for understanding conflict.

In the first section of this article, I seek to develop a normative justification for parties, arguing against Rosenblum's first and second categories of critiques of parties. As Lipset and Rokkan (1967) theorise, parties help to make conflict more agonistic by representing differing interests and identities, which manifest in the 'cleavages' that parties represent. However, parties also establish norms that manage conflict and keep it agonistic. I progress to give a practical justification for them as the best means for practically doing politics.

In the second section, I argue against the third category of attacks on parties, by showing that parties are the sole effective means of governing democracies. I highlight how neither direct nor deliberative democracy could function normatively or practically without parties or the creation of party-like systems.

In the third section, I consider contemporary problems for parties. Parties do not inherently manage conflict and create norms; one-party states are a key example of this. However, when a democratic system is organised around parties, such parties are strongly incentivised to manage conflict agonistically. Therefore, I will argue that despite fears about a current crisis of representation, parties will adjust to changes in the social context they now face. Thus, they will again become more effective instruments of representation.

Examples from Israel and Germany evidence this. They both act as interesting case studies of the management of conflict when considering new political cleavages. Importantly, I will not use examples from the United States or United Kingdom. This is because the institutional design of the United States changes the nature of its parties compared to those in many other systems (Rosenblum 2019), while in the United Kingdom no significant anti-system party has gained nationwide representation, unlike Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and Israeli anti-system parties.

Using the examples of Germany and Israel, I will show that parties are normatively superior in how they treat conflict and practically necessary for organising government and politics. Moreover, I will present how direct and deliberative democracy are ineffective in these regards and are not viable alternatives to parties.

The Theoretical Basis for Parties

The following section, discusses the first two categorises of attack on parties described by Rosenblum (2010) and offers a positive justification for parties. These attacks are, first, that parties are divisive, and, second, that they are corrupt and corrupting because they represent particular interests. This section will offer a normative defence of parties. I analyse parties as having two positive roles. Their first role, as notably theorised by Rosenblum and Mouffe, is to manage conflict between sections of society in an agonistic way. This creates a sense of legitimacy of the political system amongst the public. Their second role is the practical act of making government effective, primarily by packaging policies into a coherent whole and through long-term organisation.

My normative argument deals with the attacks on parties. The first category of attack described by Rosenblum (2010) is based on the idea of the polity as a unified whole and sees parties as a source of division. This has manifested in many ways, especially one-party rule, populist majoritarianism and theories of mixed government that seek to avoid conflict between parties. The second category of attack is based on the idea that parties represent particular interests that do not serve the national interest. In contrast, my argument offers a pluralistic account of societies and argues that parties are an essential means of managing pluralism.

Thus, this article argues that parties' representation of particular interests is a positive feature.

MANAGING CONFLICT

The most important role of parties is to manage conflict. This is done by harnessing competing interests and identities from human society to produce political, rather than violent, conflict. Mouffe (2005) describes this as agonistic, rather than antagonistic, conflict. In agonistic conflict, groups agree on the political method by which conflict takes place, meaning they exist within it. In other terms, parties grant legitimacy to the system. They play a crucial role in ensuring this legitimacy is granted, while also allowing conflict to play out safely. Most importantly, it is in the long-term interests of a party to accept the democratic political system they exist within. If they refuse to grant loser's consent or refuse to accept checks on their power in government, they risk the opposition doing the same at a later date; this poses a threat to their own power (Rosenblum 2010). Additionally, it is in their interests to have a reasonably broad range of groups voting for them to increase their support. To achieve this, the conflict they represent must be moderated somewhat to appeal to a great diversity of people, which means they are less likely to enact or incite violence. In this way, they help to establish norms of coexistence rather than to delegitimise systems.

Parties have a greater incentive to do this under a first-past-the-post system since it is necessary to get a greater proportion of votes to win any representation. However, even under proportional systems, gaining meaningful power relies on having breadth of support (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). Nonetheless, in no democratic system are parties able to get universal support. This is due to parties managing, rather than removing, conflict. To gain support, they still must put forward policy proposals in ways that positively differentiates them from their opposition (Rosenblum 2010). This means that conflict plays out in elections. Nevertheless, in any system with an elected legislature, parties can continue that conflict within the legislature itself. Crucially this also means voters continue to have some of their opinions represented in politics, encouraging them to grant legitimacy to the system because it can feel fairer (Mouffe 2005).

MAKING POLITICS PRACTICAL

A further crucial role of parties in modern democracy is to make politics practical by facilitating effective government. Parties achieve this in two main ways, namely by packaging policies and through long-term organisation.

Parties package policies together into a platform, in a manifesto or in their rhetoric. This is a fundamental element of party politics. Rather than directly voting on individual policy decisions, voters vote for parties and their leaders, which have policies on many different issues. The significance of this is that, once elected, a government ought to have coherence in its policies. When a party formulates policies, they must consider that they will be judged on the consequences of those policies, so they have to consider how their policies will cohere (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). This facilitates effective governance as it forces parties to balance different competing interests against each other to find an effective policy that works within their framework of policies. Therefore, parties make politics a practical affair because they have strong incentives to package policies together in a coherent way, thus allowing politics to be effective.

The other way that parties make politics practical is through their long-term organisation, which is very effective for political campaigning and electoral participation. As Weber argues, parties are necessary for organising modern politics because they offer a permanent organising capacity for campaigning. Once parties come into existence, it is very difficult to find an alternative within representative democracy because parties are the most effective way to organise political actors to achieve election victories (Sellinger 2019; Weber 1994). Parties therefore perform the significant practical role of organising campaigns through their institutions. However, this also happens through identity; strong partisan identity motivates partisans to participate and vote (Rosenblum 2010). Consequently, parties are not only important as institutions for organising campaigns, but their basis in identity helps to

increase participation in the representative system.

Therefore, there is evidently a strong normative and practical argument for parties as a means of democratic organisation. In contrast to the attacks on parties, this article has shown that in a plural society, parties are a crucial tool for the management of conflict. Moreover, parties have crucial utility as a practical tool of government.

The Resilience of Parties

In the previous section, I outlined a normative defence of parties against Rosenblum's (2010) first and second categories of attacks on parties. This section targets the third critique, which states that alternatives to political parties are superior because they are more participatory. In detailing the arguments for other forms of democracy, this section will counter this critique, which posits that other means of politics should be used, such as direct democracy through referenda and deliberative democracy through citizens' assemblies. To some extent this already occurs; citizens' assemblies, referenda and other attempts to increase direct participation have all been employed recently within representative democracies (Runciman 2018). However, today, these merely coexist with the party, which remains the organising institution of these democracies since party competition continues and is involved in initiating and implementing many of these initiatives. To show the difficulty of other means of politics, and thus the irreplaceability of parties, I will highlight how these alternatives cannot work. This is because they neither manage conflict nor practically organise politics.

Direct Democracy through Referenda

The most obvious alternative to parties as an organising institution of modern democracy would be direct democracy. In this scenario, instead of parties and their members in office acting as a mediator between the government and the public, voters would collectively have direct control over government through national votes in referenda. The idea behind this, in the version posed by Matsusaka (2022), is that parties do not represent interests and identities because they are unable to do this. Therefore, the only way to ensure that people are properly represented is to enable them to directly influence politics without a mediating actor who might corrupt this process. Direct democracy offers one way of doing this and it appears to be an obvious way of resolving inadequate representation. However, I contend that this would involve treating the symptom rather than the illness. Whilst it is true that parties are still adapting to new cleavages and are working on improving representation, historical evidence suggests that parties can adapt. Therefore, the problem is not that parties are unable to represent people, but rather that they are in the process of doing so, as I will elaborate in the next section on parties in contemporary politics. Using direct democracy would undoubtedly increase the rate at which change happens. Instead of parties having to adapt to new cleavages over time, the change would occur every time there was a vote. However, replacing parties with referenda would cause both normative problems regarding the management of conflict and practical problems of governing.

Direct democracy could not ultimately replace the political party as the organising institution of modern democracy because it would fail, on a normative basis, to manage conflict. As much as it would represent conflict, it would not be as effective in transforming conflict from antagonism to agonism. While parties can generate legitimacy for a system by representing their voters, a referendum can only achieve this if there is alternation in which social groups have their interests represented in the binary outcomes of referenda (Kern and Marien 2018). However, there is a risk that some groups would never be represented, undermining any legitimacy they may grant the system, and thus allowing for antagonistic conflict. Equally, there is also less of an incentive for referendum campaigners to grant loser's consent as they will not have to fight further campaigns. Moreover, the possibility of a 'tyranny of the majority' is more likely under a direct democracy than a representative democracy. This is because rather than having to secure broad support across a range of groups, direct democracy can appeal to each individual (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). This carries a risk of potentially doing so in ways that can oppress minorities, as was visible in the Swiss vote to ban minarets

(Moeckli 2018). This is a long-standing concern that was raised by Benjamin Constant (1998), who argued that a focus on public power as a form of liberty could endanger others because that power can be exercised against minorities and restrict freedoms. He wrote, 'if this was what the ancients called liberty, they admitted [it] as compatible with…the complete subjection of the individual to the authority of the community,' in order to argue that collective forms of freedom reduce the individual's freedom (Constant 1998). This demonstrates how direct democracy would be a normatively bad replacement for representative democracy. Rather than managing conflict, it would simply leave it unrestrained. Unrestrained conflict could damage the legitimacy of the system or allow minorities to go unprotected from the majority. Therefore, direct democracy ought not replace parties because it would be a poor substitute.

Direct democracy not only *ought* not to replace party democracy, instead it is practically impossible for it to do so. Were an attempt made to replace party democracy, two main practical issues would arise: governing would be close to impossible, and campaigning would be inefficient. Both problems would likely lead to the creation of an equivalent to political parties, meaning that parties would not truly be replaced as the organising institution of democracy.

Governing through direct democracy would be incredibly difficult as there is no single authority to direct the bureaucracy on how to implement policy, and as there is no one responsible for the overall coherence of policy. As Weber (1994) argues, responsible individuals are needed to give clear direction to the bureaucracy. Thus, ministers are needed to run departments. A referendum could not easily give specific instructions without recurring referenda or division among supporters on details, which could prevent a referendum ever succeeding (Bellamy, 2018). Moreover, without an organisation to consider the coherence of policies, especially on tax and spend, referenda could lead to legislation with long-term inconsistencies in policy. In contrast, parties have to consider these issues in advance to avoid being held responsible for their failings in future elections and in the media (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018; Weber 1994). Consequently, if parties were replaced with referenda, this would have negative practical implications as actual governance would be difficult. The key problems for governance would be the lack of direction for bureaucracies and issues with producing coherent change.

Furthermore, it would be impossible to replace parties with referenda because attempting to do so would in all probability lead to the creation of party-like organisations for campaigning. Ultimately, parties an essential a role in campaigning. In a theoretical party-free direct democratic system, there would have to be regular referenda. In theory, it is possible that for each referendum a new campaign group would form on either side to encourage participation in the referendum and help voters decide how to vote. However, there is a high likelihood that permanent campaigning apparatuses would be established so that new organisations did not have to be repeatedly established and disbanded. There would be a strong incentive to do this as whomever did it first would have a campaigning advantage going forward (Weber 1994). Thus, party-like institutions would likely emerge, each having a general ideology guiding their position for each referenda. This might technically leave direct democracy as the organising institution since voters would still have direct influence on individual policies. However, in reality, the number and frequency of referenda would result in most voters behaving in the way they do today. Namely, they would support a party on the basis of broad ideological principles and then mostly follow that party in its positions. This is also evidenced by this party 'cuing' already happening in many referendum campaigns around the world (Boudreau and MacKenzie 2014).

Therefore, it is not possible to replace the political party with direct democracy as the organising institution of modern democracy. Direct democracy would be unable to manage conflict in the way that party democracy can, especially as attempting to do so would necessitate the creation of party-like institutions.

Deliberative Democracy

Another alternative means of organising modern democracy is deliberative democracy. This entails deliberation by representative samples of citizens with the input of experts (known

as 'deliberative assemblies'), who decide on policy ideas by deliberating among themselves. Through deliberation and the provision of accurate information, citizens would theoretically be able to find a consensus on solutions to problems (Rosenblum 2010). Thus, deliberative assemblies would produce better results than parties as they are better at finding consensus, as high-quality information would ensure this consensus is reflective of reality rather than of party politics, and as all viewpoints would be included in the process.

In theory, it appears excellent. In reality, it could be dangerous. In deliberative democracy, the goal is not to manage conflict, but to remove it. In seeking consensus, groups of people with shared interests and identities are no longer allowed to win at varying points. Instead, they must seek to find a consensus that transcends those divides. Consensus is not inherently problematic, but it can become a problem when situated in reality. We live in a pluralistic world where finding consensus means that pluralism is ignored in favour of a lowest-common denominator politics, which ultimately satisfies no one. When no one is satisfied, the system loses legitimacy and politics breaks down. This causes similar problems to party convergence: conflict is not adequately represented, people feel they lack choice and they turn to anti-system politics (Cohen 1997; Grant 2021). By embracing consensus rather than seeking to manage the conflict that exists regardless, deliberative democracy would pose a danger to system legitimacy. This poses the opposite problem to direct democracy, which allows too much conflict, but loses the balance between management and representation that parties can achieve.

Moreover, deliberative democracy would likely also necessitate the development of parties or party-like institutions, possibly anti-system ones. Here, the difficulty of communication with bureaucracy is less of a problem. A deliberative assembly has fewer participants than an entire referendum campaign, so its members might be able to instruct a bureaucracy effectively. Instead, deliberative democracy could create a problem with legitimacy. With only a small group of randomly selected representatives (regardless of how descriptively representative that group is), the assemblies would likely struggle to achieve the same level of legitimacy that party governments can achieve. This legitimacy problem is due to there being no clear source of legitimacy: no figure to act with charismatic authority; no long history to grant authority from tradition; and any rational legal authority would be obscured by the unrepresentative processes behind it (Scarrow 2002). Therefore, it might be necessary to use some other process to grant decisions legitimacy. The most obvious one is confirmatory referenda, such as those used in Ireland after citizens' assemblies on abortion and blasphemy. This may also be able to solve a problem with referenda; the consensus-finding nature of deliberative democracy could help to ensure that the policies put to referendum are coherent. However, as discussed earlier, the regular use of referenda would most likely necessitate the introduction of permanent campaigning organisations, which would resemble parties and which would likely act as a key organising institution of such a democracy. Moreover, the competing legitimacy of deliberative consensus and majoritarian referenda may also lead to conflict, potentially giving rise to anti-system groups that seek to resolve the conflict. Therefore, attempting to replace party democracy with deliberative democracy would be unsuccessful because parties would continue to manifest as part of the legitimation of the decisions from assemblies or as opposition to the existing system.

Therefore, deliberative democracy could not functionally or normatively replace parties as the organising institution of modern democracy because it would fail to adequately represent conflict and would ultimately necessitate the reintroduction of parties.

The Centrality and Adaptability of Parties Today

In the previous sections, this article has offered a normative justification for parties against the three main categories of attacks on parties. These critiques were that parties are divisive, that they are corrupt and corrupting because they represent particular interests, and that other means of politics are preferable because they are more participatory. However, this article has not yet demonstrated that this normative justification can be translated into practice. With growing dissatisfaction around mainstream parties and party leaders, anti-system parties

and politicians have been gaining popularity across the world. In the following section, this article analyses two such countries where anti-system parties have been growing, namely Israel and Germany.

Using these examples, I posit that the rise of these parties is not a danger to democracy. Historically, these party systems have functioned well. There have been many challenges to governments in the Global North, which have caused problems for the legitimacy of governing parties in those countries. However, I argue that anti-system parties, once they gain power, will likely moderate and simply come to represent dissatisfied groups. This illustrates how the rise of anti-system parties is a testament to the adaptability of parties.

In doing so, I hope to present an empirical example of my argument against the attacks on parties by showing their capability in managing conflict in plural societies. Moreover, many of the supposed crises of parties today originate in the existing attacks on parties. The idea that anti-system parties represent narrow parts of society links to the second category of attacks on parties. Additionally, the critique that mainstream parties are insufficiently representative, in turn leading to anti-system parties, links to the third category of attacks on parties. By illustrating that these critiques of contemporary parties are limited, I present the power of party democracy to effectively represent and manage conflict.

Parties' ability to represent the various interests and identities helps to bring legitimacy to a system. Indeed, the general pattern of parties both representing and managing societal conflict has historically functioned well, as seen in post-war Germany. There, a functioning party system was able to transform a country that had only recently been governed by a fascist government, and which remained divided on several key issues, into a pluralistic democracy within ten years. There, parties represented a wide array of people and violent conflict was comparatively rare (Poguntke 2001). This shows that a well-functioning party system is an excellent way to manage conflict, while still representing the variety of interests and identities that exist in society.

Nevertheless, there are still significant concerns about the continued ability of parties to manage conflict in this way. The examples of Germany and Israel highlight some of the problems. In Germany, support for anti-system parties has been rising, with growing support for the 'Alternative for Germany' (AfD) acting as the most recent example. Rather than specific policies, the AfD's rhetoric is its primary problem, as they seek to delegitimise the political system by arguing that it is on the side of the elites rather than the people (Hansen and Olsen 2022). More concerning is contemporary Israel, where politics has shifted into racism, as ethnic cleavages have become more salient. These have led to the election and empowerment of former extremists (such as former Kach member, Itamar Ben-Gvir), who have sought to fundamentally modify the power of the judiciary as a check on legislative and executive power, as well as many other aspects of Israeli politics (The Economist 2022; Tal and Greene 2023). Once again, while there are fair critiques of the Israeli supreme court, the problem lies in the way in which these parties seek to delegitimise the political system and over 30 years of judicial decisions. These examples speak to two main problems, namely poor-quality representation by parties and a consequent loss of system legitimacy. These problems pose a risk to loser's consent as when courts or legislatures make decisions, they are increasingly unlikely to be accepted as legitimate due to such attacks by these parties. This shows the local manifestations of a global trend: the salient cleavages on which parties positioned themselves have been shifting and new ones have become more salient. Exactly what these changes are and why they have occurred is complicated and hard to disentangle. Broadly, cosmopolitan identity is becoming increasingly salient due to increased exposure to global diversity, especially at universities and in graduate industries that are typically more global and thus benefit more from globalisation. This has led to increased polarisation, and a 'Cultural Backlash,' from those who do not share such cosmopolitan identities (Gelepthis and Giani 2022; Gethin et al 2022; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Simon 2022; Weisskircher 2020). Existing parties have struggled to represent these new additional cleavages whilst remaining agonistic.

This has been exacerbated by external factors that have led to a convergence of the economic policies of governments. This limits the range of interests and identities represented

by parties even further (Grant 2021; Mouffe 2005). In Germany, especially from the 1990s onwards, there was a combination of competition from increasingly globalised markets driving economic stagnation, and significantly reduced fiscal potency compared to the Bretton Woods era of 'Embedded liberalism.' This meant that by the late-1990s and 2000s, there was ideological convergence on liberalisations of financial and labour markets, which in turn also increased corporate power to push for further liberalisations (Buggeln, Daunton and Nützenadel 2017; Huber, Petrova and Stephens 2022; Mosley 2003; Odendahl 2017; Zalewski and Whalen 2010). For slightly different reasons, in Israel, the Labour party also had to shift its economic policy, with the oil crisis of the 1970s forcing it to abandon its state socialist economy in favour of a more neoliberal economy in the 1980s. Moreover, the arrival of many Soviet Jewish refugees in the 1980s and 1990s meant that a large number of implacably anti-socialist citizens prevented any return to socialism (Rogachevsky 2020).

Additionally, a slow change has occurred from institutionally 'mass-parties' to 'catch-all' or even 'cartel' parties. This has replaced strong internal democracy with an emphasis on leadership, and appeals are made to all rather than just those with links to their internal democratic institutions. This shift is in part also due to changes in media consumption towards television and social media. This has facilitated such rising policy convergence because personalities can be different even when policy is not. In Israel, this can be seen in two ways. First, parties increasingly select their party lists without primaries (among mainstream parties, this is done by Yisrael Beitenu, Shas and Torah Judaism). Second, there has been an increased focus on party leaders, with party lists named after the leader rather than the parties involved (Galnoor and Blander 2018). In Germany, this has been compounded by the EU, which has forced governments to accept policies that they otherwise may not have and increased the power of the leadership over the party, due to the executive's role in EU appointments (Krisei 2014; Katz and Mair 2009; Katz and Mair 1995). This left the many who remained committed to alternative economic visions unrepresented, especially those in the former German Democratic Republic, where the socialists remained strong (Weisskircher 2020). This creates an overall picture where existing parties offer inadequate representation and there is general dissatisfaction with the party system as a whole for failing to be sufficiently representative (Studebaker 2022). In turn, this explains the rise of new parties, especially anti-system parties like the AfD, because they seek to use poor representation by the mainstream parties and the resulting voter' dissatisfaction to show voters that an alternative party, from outside the system, is needed (Grant 2021). This suggests that there is a problem with parties today, because they are struggling to respond to new cleavages, meaning that new anti-system parties emerge and call for significant reform of liberal democratic systems. Due to their anti-system nature, these new parties fail to adhere to Mouffe's standards of agonism as they do not grant legitimacy to the political process, and instead damage that legitimacy (Mouffe 2005).

Associated with this is the problem that parties are representing increasingly limited sections of society. This problem is visible in Israel, where parties have become increasingly polarised on the issue of using Jewish ethnicity as the basis of the state. Some parties call for Israel to be a state for all of its citizens, while others, such as the recently empowered Jewish Force party led by Itamar Ben-Gvir, see Israel as the national home exclusively for Jewish people. These less inclusive parties have become increasingly unrepresentative of the broader community, instead only representing certain social (not ideological) groups. They have become less 'catch-all,' in who they appeal to, albeit they have not returned to the structure of 'mass' parties (Galnoor and Blander 2018). This in turn could be explained again by changes to cleavages. Poor representation has led people to feel that politics does not work for them, but instead of turning to anti-system politics, they have become apathetic. This apathy explains the decline in voter turnout in Israel from c.78% until 1999 to c.70% since 2000. Similarly, German Federal turnout has declined from c.90% in the FRG in the 1970s to c.75% today.[1] Consequently, party membership has become increasingly representative of solely one set of cleavages, rather than including the multitude of cleavages that structure politics today, thus exaggerating poor representation (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). This in turn means that parties become dominated by an unrepresentative group. Since the salience of certain policy

[1] <https://v-dem.net/>

cleavages is associated with social cleavages, it follows that this also empowers specific social groups within parties over others (Lipset 2000). This overrepresentation of certain social groups is a logical explanation why parties, such as the AfD or Jewish Force, advocating for interests of singular social groups (especially majority ethnicity groups, White Europeans and European Jews respectively) over more universal ideological values. The mechanism is that a social group takes control on the basis of ideology, but then operates in its own interests (Rosenblum 2010). This prioritisation of one group over another can, when parties cease to grant legitimacy to the pluralist political process, diminish agonism in favour of antagonism because parties can be more extreme in their identity-based attacks on others.

These problems may suggest that parties are fundamentally failing the principal objectives of both representing and managing conflict. However, this is a temporary problem and the critiques laid out above are based on the false notions in Rosenblums' first and second categories of attacks on parties. Today, it appears that parties are struggling to adjust to new cleavages and to successfully represent broad parts of society. This crisis appears so grave that one might suggest that these cleavages cannot be represented agonistically, and instead are divisive and represent particular interests. However, historical evidence suggests that parties can deal with change and will eventually do so in an agonistic way. This is true even if there is the temporary appearance of a crisis. This is most visible in Germany, where there has been a long history of decrying the party system as being in a state of crisis, whether this is due to convergence, cartelisation, fragmentation or rising extremism. Nevertheless, postwar German history has shown that the system is responsive. Whether it be new parties, like the Greens, emerging to represent new interests, or older parties like the CDU adapting to a less salient religious cleavage, the German party system has been able to respond to changes in cleavages (Poguntke 2001; Scarrow 2002). Moreover, on this line of reasoning, it is reasonable to suggest that the rise of the AfD, and the shifts other parties have made in response, indicate that the party system is already adapting and working as expected. Evidence of crisis in the AfD stems from their more antagonistic approach to politics. History reflects how this need not be a problem. Anti-system parties like the Greens have successfully transitioned to a party of the system, in that they have become more willing to compromise on policies. This has allowed them to join 3 different coalitions after the 1998, 2002 and 2021 elections. In order to have real power, parties realise they need to be in government and to be in government, they need to moderate their message, broaden their support and legitimate the system (Scarrow 2002). However, this is not necessarily the case: parties may remain extreme, but there are strong incentives in party democracies to adapt because that is the only way to gain power. Such a process has already been ongoing in France, where the National Rally, under Marine Le Pen, has pushed a process of 'undemonisation' to broaden the party's support (Surel 2019). Therefore, the apparent crisis of party democracy is less of a crisis than it might initially seem.

Regarding the matter of making politics practice, there is also some debate as to how effective contemporary parties are. There is good reason to believe that parties, such as those in Germany, are effective in the practical aspects of governing. This has been visible in the way they have been able to navigate the difficulties of the federal system to still drive change and manage the economy (Scarrow 2002). However, the way in which parties use identity to drive participation in politics has become weaker. As outlined earlier, parties have been struggling to adapt to the rapid pace of social change recently, leading to a general perception that parties are unrepresentative. Combined with an individualistic notion of independent voters, which means that voters vote freely based on their personal opinions and thereby self-identify as 'Independent' voters, this has consequently resulted in a decline in party identity (Rosenblum 2010). Predictably, this has been associated with declining voter turnout in democracies like Germany (Liddiard 2019). However, as parties adjust to their new environment, they ought to be able to redevelop party identity among their voters. They should then seek to resuscitate turnout as the German parties did when they re-established themselves in the post-war era (Poguntke 2002). This would be beneficial, not least because parties are strongly incentivised to encourage their supporters to vote, as this increases their own support levels. Consequently, it is unconvincing to argue that parties are in a state of continuous decline. Instead, this article

argues that parties not only remain effective for governance but also that parties will be able to create strong party identities again.

Conclusion

This article has argued that parties cannot and should not be replaced as the organising institution of modern democracy. Historically, there have been critiques of parties as divisive and representing particular interests. Today, these critiques are especially applied to anti-system parties. Parties have also been criticised as inadequately representative, which has led to increasing support and use of alternative democratic methods.

However, this article has argued that parties have shown themselves to be the most effective means of ensuring that conflict is both represented and managed. Thus, they produce a safe political climate that facilitates agonism rather than antagonism and ensures its own continuity. Furthermore, I have argued that the rise of anti-system parties, in Germany and Israel especially, which is currently considered divisive, is actually a sign of the party system functioning. These anti-system parties are a form of self-correction within the party system, which are making party politics more representative. The nature of party politics means that these parties are likely to become increasingly mainstream over time, as the French National Front has done with its process of 'undemonisation'.

In addition, this article has shown that party democracy is the only practical system for both campaigning and governing, thus rendering it necessary within any other system. Therefore, it would not be possible to replace parties entirely. Both referenda and deliberative assemblies would be lacking in both of these functions and would therefore not constitute viable replacements. Consequently, this article has argued that parties are both normatively and practically irreplaceable.

This article should give readers hope for the long-term viability of party democracies. While I have focused on Israel and Germany, I hope that this argument will be equally applicable to many other advanced democracies. We should take comfort in the adaptability and resilience of our party systems.

Barnes, Jonathon (ed) (2016) *Aristotle's Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)

Bellamy, Richard (2018) 'Majority Rule, Compromise and the Democratic Legitimacy of Referendums', *Swiss Political Science Review*, 24:3, 312–319

Blander, Dana and Itzhak Galnoor (eds) (2018) 'Political Parties: Can We Get Along Without Them?' in *The Handbook of Israel's Political System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 315–351

Boudreau, Cheryl and Scott A MacKenzie (2014) 'Informing the Electorate? How Party Cues and Policy Information Affect Public Opinion about Initiatives', *American Journal of Political Science*, 58:1, 48–62

Buggeln, Marc (2017) 'Taxation in the 1980s: A Five-Country Comparison of Neo-Liberalism and Path Dependency' in Nützenadel, Alexander, Marc Buggeln, Martin Daunton (eds) *The Political Economy of Public Finance: Taxation, State Spending and Debt since the 1970s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 105–125

Chambers, Simone (2018) 'Making Referendums Safe for Democracy: A Call for More and Better Deliberation', *Swiss Political Science Review*, 24:3, 305–311

Cohen, Frank S (1997) 'Proportional Versus Majoritarian Ethnic Conflict Management in Democracies' *Comparative Political Studies*, 30:5, 607–630

Crick, Bernard (2013) *In Defence of Politics* (London: Bloomsbury)

Fontana, Biancamaria (ed) (1988) *Constant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Gelepithis, Margarita and Marco Giani (2022) 'Inclusion without Solidarity: Education, Economic Security, and Attitudes toward Redistribution', *Political Studies*, 70:2, 45–61

Gethin, Amory, Clara Martínez-Toledano and Thomas Piketty (2022) 'Brahmin Left Versus Merchant Right: Changing Political Cleavages in 21 Western Democracies, 1948–2020'' *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 137:1, 1–48

Grant, Zack P (2021) 'Crisis and Convergence: How the Combination of a Weak Economy and Mainstream Party Ideological De-Polarization Fuels Anti-System Support', *Comparative Political Studies*, 54:7, 1256–1291

Hansen, Michael A and Jonathan Olsen (2022) 'The Alternative for Germany (AfD) as Populist Issue Entrepreneur: Explaining the Party and its Voters in the 2021 German Federal Election', *German Politics*, 1–25

Hobbes, Thomas (2002) *Leviathan* (Project Gutenberg)

Huber, Evelyne, Bilyana Petrova and John Stephens (2022) 'Financialization, labor market institutions and inequality' *Review of International Political Economy*, 29:2, 425–452

Jewish Virtual Library (nd) 'Israeli Elections - Voter Turnout'. Available at: https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/israeli-central-elections-committee

Katz, Richard S and Peter Mair (2009) 'The Cartel Party Thesis: A Restatement', *Perspectives on Politics*, 7:4, 753–766

Katz, Richard S and Peter Mair (1995) 'Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party', *Party Politics*, 1:1, 5–28

Kriesi, Hanspeter (2014) 'The Populist Challenge', *West European Politics*, 37:2, 361–378

Lees, Charles (2018) 'The 'Alternative for Germany': The rise of right-wing populism at the heart of Europe', *Politics*, 38:3, 295-310

Liddiard, Patrick (2019) *What Can Be Done About the Problem of Political Parties?* (Washington: Wilson Centre)

Lipset, Seymour (2000) 'The Indispensability of Political Parties', *Journal of Democracy*, 11:1, 48–55

Lipset, Seymour and Stein Rokkan (1967) 'Cleavage Structure, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments: An Introduction', in *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-National Perspectives* (New York: The Free Press)

Locke, John (1980) 'Second Treatise', in *Two Treatises of Government* (Project Gutenburg)

De Luca, Stefano, and Arthur Goldhammer (2009) 'Benjamin Constant and the Terror', in Rosenblatt, Helena (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Constant, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 92–114

Marien, Sofie and Anna Kern (2018) 'The Winner Takes It All: Revisiting the Effect of Direct Democracy on Citizens Political Support', *Political Behavior*, 40:1, 857–882

Matsusaka, John G (2020) *Let the People Rule: How Direct Democracy Can Meet the Populist Challenge* (NJ: Princeton)

Mosley, Layna (2003) *Global Capital and National Governments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Mouffe, Chantal (2005) *On the Political* (London: Routledge)

Norris, Pippa and Ronald Inglehart (2019) 'The Cultural Backlash Theory', in *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 32–64

Odendahl, Christian (2017) *The Hartz Myth: A Closer Look at Germany's Labour Market Reforms* (Centre for European Reform)

Poguntke, Thomas (2001) 'The German Party System: Eternal Crisis?', *German Politics*, 10:2, 37–50

Rogachevsky, Neil (2020) 'The Not-So-Strange Death of Israel's Labor Party', *American Affairs Journal*, 4:2

Rosenblum, Nancy (2008) *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)

Rosenbluth, Frances and Ian Shapiro (2018) *Responsible Parties: Saving Democracy from Itself* (New Haven: Yale University Press)

Runciman, David (2018) *How Democracy Ends* (London: Profile)

Scarrow, Susan E (2002) 'Party Decline in the Parties State? The Changing Environment of German Politics', in Webb, Paul, David Farrell and Ian Holliday (eds) *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 77-106

Selinger, William (ed) (2019) 'Conclusion', in *Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 194-206

Simon, Elizabeth (2022) 'Explaining the educational divide in electoral behaviour: testing direct and indirect effects from British elections and referendums 2016–2019', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 32:4, 980–1000

Studebaker, Benjamin M (2023) 'Legitimacy crises in embedded democracies', *Contemporary Political Theory*, 22:1, 230–250

Surel, Yves (2019) 'How to stay populist? The Front National and the changing French party system', *West European Politics*, 42:6, 1230–1257

The Economist (2022) 'Swinging right; Israel's election', *The Economist*, 46

Tal, Hadas G, Richard A Greene and Amir Tal (2023) 'Israel passed a bill to limit the Supreme Court's power. Here's

what comes next', *CNN*, 24 July. Available at: https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/24/middleeast/israel-judicial-reforms-vote-explained-mime-intl/index.html

Webb, Paul (2002) 'Party Systems, Electoral Cleavages and Government Stability', in *Developments in West European Politics 2* (London: Palgrave Macmillan)

Weber, Max (1994) *Weber: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Weisskircher, Manès (2020) 'The Strength of Far-Right AfD in Eastern Germany: The East-West Divide and the Multiple Causes Behind 'Populism', *The Political Quarterly*, 91:3, 614–622

Zalewski, David A and Charles J Whalen (2010) 'Financialization and Income Inequality: A Post Keynesian Institutionalist Analysis', *Journal of Economic Issues*, 44:3, 757–777