

Removing the intermediaries?
Patterns of intra-party organizational change in Europe (1970-2010)

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to place the recent debate on the concept of *disintermediation* – intended as the process of change in political representation towards more direct forms of political mediation – within the broader literature on party change, to assess its actual usefulness in the field. We maintain that the potential of this concept applied to party organization is mainly heuristic, as it describes a number of intertwined changes observable in parties' resources, representative strategies and structures. Our expectation is that contemporary parties have progressively adopted disintermediated organizational profiles, by weakening the intermediate organs while favouring both the parliamentarization of the leadership and the opening of their membership. These assumptions are empirically verified through a diachronic analysis of the party changes registered in nine European democracies, from the beginning of the 1970s to 2010. All in all, we argue that parties' internal disintermediation has increased in most countries, in the passing from the 1990s to the New Millennium.

Keywords

Disintermediation, Party Organization, Party Change, Dimensional Approach

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Introduction

In recent years political scientists have been paying increasing attention to the concept of *disintermediation*. This was originally developed in the literature on finance and marketing theory, but it has been widely used also in the most recent works dedicated to the Internet economy. In general, the concept of disintermediation may be briefly illustrated as the removal or bypassing of intermediaries in the relationship between consumers and producers and, more broadly, in any supply chain or transaction. In political science, it has mainly been used by scholars engaged with the study of Internet politics (Chadwick 2007; Chadwick and Howard 2009), while its application to the study of political parties is less developed – with the partial exception of the literature dedicated to the impacts of Information and Communication Technologies on party politics (Ward 2008; Ward and Gibson 2009).

The aim of this article is to place the recent debate on the concept of disintermediation – here indicating the changes in the mechanisms of political representation towards direct forms of mediation (Biancalana 2018) – within the broader literature on party change, to assess its potential in the field. If the promotion of yet another party model (the *disintermediated party*) should be scrupulously avoided, the use of the concept of disintermediation in party studies may be relevant for several reasons. First, it may help to refine a broader theoretical assessment of parties' external role, by questioning both the (often taken for granted) nature of parties as unitary actors (Katz, Mair 1993) as well as their role of intermediaries (Katz 2014). Secondly, it has the merit to catch parsimoniously a number of organizational changes by focusing on the vertical dimension of parties' strategies (Ignazi, Pizzimenti 2014; Ignazi 2018), without calling into question normative concerns about intra-party democracy. Overall, the concept of disintermediation – if adequately intended as a heuristic tool – addresses crucial aspects of the actual functioning of political parties, by enriching a common descriptive vocabulary of party change (Webb et al. 2017).

The paper is structured as it follows. In the first section we provide an introduction to the concept of disintermediation; in the second section we problematize the concept of mediation applied to political parties, by outlining the limits of the external disintermediation argument. In the third section we present the opportunities related to the use of the concept of internal disintermediation in the study of party organizational change. In the fourth section we introduce our theoretical assumptions and methodology, heavily based on the dimensional approach underpinning the Political Party Database Project (Scarrow et al. 2017). To test the assumptions, we will focus on

parties in nine European democracies (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom), from the beginning of the 1970s to 2010. The presentation of the empirical observations, in the fifth section, will allow us to identify the possible patterns of organizational converge/divergence and their determinants. Our main finding is that parties – almost regardless of their ideological affiliation and age – have actually adopted more disintermediated organizational profiles, in most of the analysed countries.

1. The concept of disintermediation

The definition of *disintermediation* is neither clear nor unambiguous. As Samson and Fawcett put it (2001: 4) «Discussions of disintermediation in academic literature are rare, and attempts to categorize and differentiate among various forms of disintermediation are even rarer». This concept was originally employed in the vast body of literature on finance, where it indicated the process of elimination of financial intermediaries between the suppliers of funds (savers/investors) and the users of funds (borrowers/investees)ⁱ. Also in the analyses of organizational change in Industry disintermediation refers to those traditional processes, or structures, which have been reshaped to the aim of reducing or eliminating the role of the intermediaries (Hamel and Prahalad 1994).

In time, the term has been more and more associated to a direct relationship between consumers and producers. According to the definition provided by the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the concept of disintermediation indicates «the process of removing intermediaries from a supply chain, a transaction, or, more broadly, any set of social, economic, or political relations»ⁱⁱ. During the 1990s, in parallel with the digital revolution, scholars have increasingly resorted to disintermediation to depict the role of the Internet as the virtual *locus* where sellers and buyers meet directly, thus weakening or cutting out the middlemen (agents, brokers, or resellers), that is all those «third-party middlemen in the distribution chain that provide additional value in the transaction between producer and consumer»ⁱⁱⁱ.

In political science, the concept of disintermediation has been mainly employed in the literature devoted to political governance (Chadwick 2007), to describe the eventual consequences of e-government and e-democracy on the established institutional, political and social intermediaries. More recently, it has been used also in the analyses of the impact of ICTs on political organizations (Ward 2008; Ward and Gibson 2009). According to one of the few attempts to apply it in the analysis of political parties, disintermediation can be defined as the «process of change in political representation towards (at least apparently) more direct and immediate forms of intermediation» (Biancalana 2018: 12, our translation). In this vein, while at a systemic level the role of political parties as gatekeepers of the political system has supposedly changed towards different mechanisms of political mediation (*external disintermediation*), at organizational level parties would have turned into more leadership-driven, open and less stratified organizations (*internal disintermediation*). The *disintermediated party*, thus, constitutes an alleged new party model, which has emerged in parallel to the changes experienced by established liberal-democracies towards new forms of representation (Urbinati 2013; Tormey 2015).

The literature review of the (very limited) works dedicated to disintermediation allows us to outline both weaknesses and opportunities of the arguments underpinning the disintermediated party. In fact, while any reference to umpteenth party models does not seem particularly promising (Scarrow et al 2017), the concept of *internal disintermediation* shows a valuable potential in the analysis of political parties. In fact, it represents an effective heuristic tool to frame jointly changes in party organizations, which are consistent with the (often fragmented) specialised literature. However, since the theoretical reflections on the role of political parties as intermediaries between the civil society and the State look rather controversial, in the next section we will illustrate the main shortcomings of the concept of *external disintermediation*, by providing reasoned arguments to discard it.

2. The flaws of the 'external disintermediation' argument

Any approach to party change based on the concept of *disintermediation* entails an implicit comparison between the current features of party politics and a hypothetical past situation, when political *intermediation* was presumably higher (Biancalana 2018). According to the disintermediated party thesis, political parties have progressively lost their role of *mediators* between the civil society and the State, which had supposedly characterized their activities at least until the last few decades of the 20th Century. Here the main conceptual shortcoming of the externally disintermediated party argument emerges. In fact, while arguing that parties acted as *intermediaries*, the proponents of the disintermediated party actually identify the role of parties with that of the *agents* of the civil society towards the State. The supposed crisis of representation (Tormey 2015) underpinning the whole argument is based on the idea that, in the heydays of representative politics, parties identified with, and acted on behalf of specific social pillars, whose interests and demands were promoted at the institutional level. However: 1) the role of the intermediary does not coincide with that of the agent; 2) the ideal-typical picture that had characterized the normative theory of democratic party government – based on the primacy of parties' representative functions – has been questioned by a number of scholars, since the 1960s; 3) whether we consider political parties as intermediaries between different principals, or as agents of a single principal, their implicit 'unitary' nature does not catch the actual complexity of both the internal and external coordination dilemmas they have to face (Katz 2014). Let us briefly consider each of these points.

First, the concept of intermediation implies the identification, from at least two different actors, of a third part (the intermediary) in charge of pooling together, regrouping and synthesize their interests, objectives and requests. The question of intermediation, then, inevitably carries with it a reflection on coordination problems and the 'agency dilemma'. According to the Principal-Agent Theory, the agency dilemma occurs when multiple actors, including the intermediary, have different interests and are provided with asymmetric information. Things get further complicated when more than one actor can be considered 'the principal' (Voorn et 2019) and/or when the actors involved are collective entities: in all these situations, the interests and objectives at stake are numerous and contradictory, free-riding is always an opportunity and coordination becomes extremely difficult. This is clearly the case of the relationships between the civil society, political parties and the State. The externally disintermediated party argument, however, simply identifies the interests and goals of the parties with those of their represented social segment, thus implying a linear evolution in their relationships: once political parties are no longer considered reliable or appropriate agents by their principal, representative democracy enters into crisis. Within this picture, parties do not act also on behalf of the State, since their main principal is the specific social pillar they belong to. Rather, they are considered the mere 'gatekeepers' of the political system (Biancalana 2018), while no clear statements are made about parties' role as mediators of State's interests towards the civil society.

This oversimplified vision of the role political parties play in contemporary liberal-democracies has been questioned since the 1960s. As Katz and Mair (1995; 2009) maintain, the relationships between parties, civil society and the State have developed dialectically, in time, in a way that has increasingly challenged the supposed primacy of parties' representative functions, to the benefit of their procedural ones (Bartolini, Mair 2001). More in general, and consistently with our second criticism, political parties have rarely acted as exclusive agents of the civil society, since they can be considered as crucial *institutionalization agencies* (Pizzimenti 2020). In liberal-democracies, political parties represent the main actors competing to conquest and control State institutions (von Beyme 1987): parties' *raison d'être* consists in legitimately exercising political power over the polity, by making binding decisions that affect all the other institutional spheres. Accordingly, political parties perform a double function: they aggregate and represent the plurality of political demands arising from the civil society; and in parallel, in their vest of legitimated decision makers

they help creating and reproducing the institutional order. Arguing that parties simply act on behalf of the civil society by mediating with the State leads to underestimate their function of institutionalization agencies, which in fact subsumes all the other functions, whether representative or procedural.

Finally, even if we consider parties as intermediaries promoting their own interests while mediating between the civil society and the State, another crucial problem emerges. In fact, according to this perspective parties are expected to have unitary sets of preferences, which are calibrated along their representative and procedural functions. However, this interpretation is quite misleading. Political parties face both internal coordination problems and external network dilemmas (Sartori 2010)^v. Katz and Mair (1993) have called into question the alleged unity of party organizations, which on contrary can be internally subdivided into three different faces (the party on the ground, the party in central office, the party in public office), each of them performing different functions and pursuing different goals, both within and outside party boundaries^{vi}. Empirical research has shown how the modifications observed in party organizations, at least since the 1960s, were indicative of the ongoing changes in the intra-party balance of powers between the three faces (Katz, Mair 1994; Bardi et al 2017). Intra-party cohesion – and, consequently, the alleged unity of party preferences and interests – dramatically weakened as a consequence of the relevance gained by the party in public office. While the party on the ground had entered a phase of constant decline in quantitative terms (van Biezen et al 2011)^{vii}, the party in central office turned from a transmission belt into a battlefield where the increasing divergent interests of the other two faces clashed. Since the strengthening of their institutional presence turned to be parties' main goal, the party in public office became the autonomous intermediary of a number of different principals: first of what was left of the party on the ground and traditional voters; second, of a new and more heterogeneous electorate, in a constant search of new votes; and third (and most important) of the State, which could no longer be considered as completely separated from the parties^{viii}.

In conclusion, one fundamental pillar of the disintermediated party argument – namely: the supposedly dismissal of parties' role as mediators between the civil society and the State – proves rather inconsistent. Its underlying rationale tends to overestimate parties' representative functions, while ignoring their role as institutionalization agencies. Moreover, the identification of the parties as the intermediaries between the civil society and the State turns out to be approximate (Katz 1997): since political parties cannot be considered as unitary actors, their hypothetical role of mediators fails in capturing the complexity of the intra-organizational coordination and extra-organizational dilemmas they have to face.

3. The virtues of the 'internal disintermediation' argument

Up to this point we have clarified the weaknesses of the concept of disintermediation applied to parties' external role: now we turn to its potential as a heuristic tool in describing parties' organizational change. In what follows we will outline the strengths and opportunities associated with the concept of *internal disintermediation* by building on the premises of the cartel party thesis (Katz, Mair 2018), which bring together reflections on parties' historical development, functions and organizational change (Sartori 2010).

In the last decades, among the number of organizational reforms promoted by parties all over Western Europe, two general orientations have been outlined by the specialised literature: an increasing simplification of the intra-party decision-making chain, on the one hand; and the adoption of (at least) a 'rhetoric of democratization' (Gauja 2017: 5) in reshaping party structures and procedures, on the other. While the former tendency has received less attention, the latter has been extensively investigated by scholars. In this respect, according to the studies committed with intra-party democracy (IPD), contemporary parties face a number of organizational choices related to the ways in which they conceive inclusiveness, participation, centralization and accountability (Cross, Katz 2013; von dem Berge, Poguntke 2017). Despite its fortune, the concept of IPD raises a

number of concerns among party scholars, in particular for its normative implications to theories of democracy (Loxbo 2011; Borz, Janda 2018). Moreover, studies on IPD have only recently gave birth to large-N cross-sectional comparative analyses (Bolin et al. 2017), but there is still a lack of comparative longitudinal research.

TAB 1 ABOUT HERE

While a lot of attention has been paid to the inclusiveness of key decision-making procedures, less attention has been devoted to the vertical distribution of powers among party's different faces (Ignazi, Pizzimenti 2014). Yet, also this aspect is deeply intertwined with party change, both in functional and organizational terms. This is why it seems appropriate to recall Katz and Mair's (1995) analytical reconstruction of parties' evolution, which represents the basis of the cartel party argument. According to these authors, at least since the 1970s political parties have progressively weakened their representative functions, while privileging and refining their procedural ones as a consequence of the dialectic development of their relationships with the State and the civil society (Table 1). This functional shift was underpinned by the introduction of party regulation and public funding schemes, all over Western European countries (van Biezen, Kopecky 2014). The introduction of public funding regimes brought some inevitable consequences in the intra-party balance of power: in so far as parties have become more and more incorporated into the State, the relative weight of the party in public office within party organization increased (Katz, Mair 1993; Bardi et al. 2017).

In organizational terms, the progressive parliamentarization of the leadership and the autonomization of the party in public office were the main byproducts of party's penetration of the State (Katz, Mair 1995). The parliamentarization of the leadership turned into an increasing need to respond quickly and effectively to environmental pressures: this 'acceleration' in the timing of the intra-party decision making processes imposed to institutionally penetrated parties an overall rethinking of their organizational strategies. In this vein, parties (at least the established ones) have progressively increased the prerogatives and rights accorded to the party leader in the selection of political personnel and in the definition of party's strategic and policy choices (Cross, Katz 2013; Cross, Pilet 2015). Statutory reforms have also provided the representatives of the party in public office with increasing rights, in particular to be *ex officio* part of party's executive body. At the same time – and apparently in contrast with these trends – despite the indisputable numeric decline of the party on the ground, party top-level elites have devolved powers to party members, while favouring the extension of participatory rights also to unaffiliated supporters^{ix}. Katz and Mair have interpreted such processes as deliberate strategies pursued by the party leadership (the top party leaders and the party in public office) to increase its autonomy, by weakening the intermediate party structures and the middle level elites through the introduction of elements of plebiscitary democracy.

All these intertwined changes have supposedly brought to a dispossession (or even to a cutting out) of powers at the intermediate levels of party organization^x, whose role in the intra-party decision-making process has been restricted or totally by-passed (Mair 1994; Ignazi 2018). If this is the case, this process is reflective of a tendency towards *internal disintermediation*, as it entails a drastic reduction or a cut off of the intermediate articulations of the party and, more in general, of the traditional organs of political mediation, while making the relationships between party leadership and party members/supporters more 'immediate'. In organizational terms, the process of disintermediation resulted in a number of specific modifications, more specifically: 1) in the regulation of party membership, by making it easier for individuals to join the party and by relaxing the boundaries of party organizations, now opened also to 'friends' and/or 'sympathizers'; 2) in the relationship between the party and eventual ancillary/collateral organizations, through a progressive dismissal of their formal recognition; 3) in the number of party layers between the highest executive body and the party congress, as well as in the composition of the party highest executive organ – towards less stratified organizations dominated by the representatives of the public office; and 4) in

the expansion of the rights and functions assigned to the party leader.

Applied to political parties, then, the concept of internal disintermediation has the advantage to catch parsimoniously all these recurring organizational changes associated to parties's progressive penetration of the State, without calling into question their implications in terms of intra-party democracy, nor democracy at large (Borz, Janda 2018). In what follows we will verify whether and to what extent these changes have actually occurred in European parties, from the 1970s to present days.

4. Research design and methods

The main goal of this article is to contribute to the reflections on party change, by enriching the descriptive vocabulary and the analytical tools of the dimensional approach with the concept of internal disintermediation. The use of this concept is not finalized to provide alternative nor complementary explanations of party change: its potential is mainly heuristic (rather than theoretical or normative), as it describes a number of intertwined changes to be observed, in time, in parties' resources, representative strategies and structures (Scarrow et al 2017). To leverage this potential we elaborate an Internal Disintermediation Index (ID), in order to measure the vertical dimension of party organizational variance across countries and parties: patterns of disintermediation are associated to an organizational profile in which the party leader is provided with increased prerogatives; party executive organs are dominated by the representatives of the party in public office, while the complexity of party structural articulation (Janda 1980) decreases: at the same time, the procedures to join the party are simplified and the level of party openness increases, while the number of members sharply decline in parallel to the dismissal of collateral organizations.

The ID Index is built upon three clusters of variables, by following the rationale of the PPDB. Each cluster is made up of a number of variables, whose value range from 0 (a score that corresponds to low disintermediation) to 1 (high disintermediation). According to this logic, the cluster Party Resources is measured as the *inverse* of the ratio between Members and Voters – a standard indicator that provides a reliable snapshot of the attention paid by parties to enrol a mass membership, in time. Therefore, a higher value means that the party is more disintermediated since the share of members is lower. The other two clusters, Representative Strategies and Party Structures, consist of a number of dichotomous variables (13 and 9, respectively): the overall value reported by each cluster corresponds to the mean value of the scores registered by the associated variables. The variables used to analyse party Representative Strategies are centred on the regulation of party membership (to assess whether parties have relaxed their organizational boundaries) as well as on the recognition of collateral organizations (to verify parties' interest in maintaining closer relationships with these traditional mediation entities). Party Structures are analyzed through variables pertaining to the level of party layering, the parliamentarization of party organs and the empowerment of the party leader (for more details see the Appendix).

The ID Index is weighted for each cluster (Resources weigh 0.2; Representative Strategies 0.4; Structures 0.4) and normalized so that the final score of the index varies from 0 (meaning that the party is not disintermediated at all) to 1 (the maximum of party internal disintermediation). The formula is the following:

$$ID: [(1-RATIO_{M/V}) * 0.2 + (MEAN_{cluster2}) * 0.4 + (MEAN_{cluster3}) * 0.4]$$

Parties are grouped into two categories: low disintermediation and high disintermediation. The parties with ID scores below the median value of our sample are considered low internally disintermediated; conversely, parties placed above the median value are considered highly disintermediated. To assess whether parties' organizational change ran in parallel to parties' penetration of the State, in line with the cartel party thesis, we also resort to an Institutional

Penetration Index (IP). The IP index considers three weighted indicators: premiership (0.25); participation in national executives (0.25); and parliamentary seats (0.5).

$$IP: [(Premiership)*0.25 + (N^{\circ} Ministers/Tot Ministers)*0.25 + (N^{\circ} Seats/Tot Seats)*0.5]$$

The index varies from 0 (meaning that the party has not institutionally penetrated the State) to 1 (the maximum of party institutional penetration). Similarly to the ID, the threshold to consider a party of low or high institutional penetration is represented by the median value registered by the analysed parties.

The empirical analysis is based on a sample of nine European democracies (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom): we aim at registering changes and continuity in the levels of ID shown by the national parties, at the beginning of the 1970s (N = 42), of the 1990s (N = 48) and of the 2010s (N = 48). For this purpose, we combine the recent data provided by the Political Party Database Project (Scarow et al 2017) with those gathered by the Party Organizations Data Handbook (Katz, Mair 1992). The countries and parties included in the panel are those for which comparable data exist. The data refers, for each of the three selected decade markers (1970; 1990; 2010), to the closest year for which we have comparable data.

Since we aim at explaining changes in the level of party internal disintermediation, the ID Index is our dependent variable. We include in the analysis, as independent variables, a number of party-level and system-level variables that may help interpreting changes in parties' ID. Among the former, in addition to the above mentioned Institutional Penetration index (IP), the analytical framework includes dummy variables related classifying characteristics of party (party family^{xi}, party age^{xii}), which serve the purpose of directing our analysis across countries and across parties with the aim of identifying patterns and regularities (Bardi et al. 2017). A number of standard system-level variables integrate our regression model to catch possible patterns of co-evolution between organizational changes and systemic changes: in addition to the dummy variable 'country', we consider Electoral Fragmentation, the Effective Number of Electoral Parties, the Absolute Number of Parties in Parliament, the Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties and the Total Volatility (Siarof 2019).

5. Empirical analysis

The aggregated data, from 1970 to 2010, shows that a clear tendency emerges towards patterns of higher ID. As shown by Figure 1, there is a constant increase in values of ID across time, with a dramatic change between 1990 and 2010. The two outliers in 2010 – placed in the top right of the figure – are represented by two highly disintermediated parties, both Belgian: the Greens (AGA: 0.813) and the Democrat Humanist Centre (CDH: 0.794).

FIG. 1 ABOUT HERE

This trend becomes even clearer if we subdivide parties – as explained in the previous paragraph – between low disintermediated and high disintermediated profiles, by using the median value (0.542) as the cut-off point, as Figure 2 below shows. However, contrarily to our expectations, the evident tendency towards high disintermediation is not matched by a corresponding trend towards high institutional penetration as well. In fact, ID and IP show a negative, yet very weak correlation (-0.11).

FIG 2 ABOUT HERE

Party change varies among countries with some interesting cues deserving attention. In Austria,

both the SPÖ and the FPO show continuity, in time: the former keeping a low disintermediated profile, while the latter presenting patterns of high disintermediation since the 1970s. The other two parties, OVP and the Greens, show a rather clear tendency towards internal disintermediation: in particular, the Austrian People Party's ID considerably shifts from 0.458 in 1990 to 0.659 in 2010. At the beginning of the 1970s, most of the 6 analysed Belgian parties (but VU and PSB-BSP) could be already labelled as highly disintermediated: all in all, a clear trend towards higher disintermediation emerges in 2010, with the only exception of the Christian-Democrats and Flemish (CD-V). Patterns of increasing disintermediation appear also with respect to the Danish case, at least from 1970 to 1990, when the number of parties presenting low disintermediated organizations decreased from 3 to 2 (out of 5) and then remained stable in the following years. Stability characterized German parties until 1990, being the SPD and the CSU less disintermediated than the CDU and FDP: in 2010, however, all parties (included the Greens) were highly disintermediated. The Irish case is quite peculiar, since all the established parties (Fiánna Fail, Fine Gael, Labour Party) remained intermediated until the last observation point, when all of them changed their organization profiles towards more disintermediated templates (ID mean value: 0.616). This process had already taken place in the Netherlands, since the number of low disintermediated parties halved in 1990: in 2010 no Dutch party could be considered intermediated (since the ID mean value of the sample was 0.61). In Norway and Sweden, on contrary, the low disintermediated party template was still the most diffused organizational profile in 2010 (4 out of 7 and 3 out of 5, respectively): up until 1990, no patterns of disintermediation could be traced among Norwegian parties, while in Sweden the MP (ID = 0.589) was already highly disintermediated. Finally, among the 3 British parties considered (Conservatives, Labour Party and Liberal Democrats), the Labour Party maintains a low disintermediated profile, in time, even if a tendency towards disintermediation emerges comparing 1970 (ID = 0.49) and 2010 (ID = 0.541); on contrary, a slight reverse trend characterizes the Liberal Democrats from 1990 (0.666) to 2010 (0.636). Figure 3 below summarizes these findings, by showing the percentage of highly disintermediated parties by country and across time.

FIG 3 ABOUT HERE

By focusing on the relationship between party age and the analysed party changes (Table 2 below) it is possible to observe that in 1970, among the old parties, the most diffused organizational profile was the low disintermediated one ($n = 26$ out of 36). In 1990, the low disintermediated party profile was still the predominant party template among old parties, but there was already an increase in the number of highly disintermediated parties, which constituted the most numerous category in 2010 ($n = 23$ out of 35). During the same time span, the new parties show a tendency to adopt highly disintermediated organizational arrangements: in 2010, almost all the new parties were highly disintermediated profile ($n = 12$ out of 13), with the only exception of the Norwegian Progress Party (ALP/FRP). In parallel, also the majority of the old parties (23 out of 35) turned to be highly disintermediated.

TAB 2 ABOUT HERE

Interesting insights come also from the analysis of disintermediation across party families. Only three party families (Christian Democrats/Conservatives, Social Democrats and Liberals) present a significant number of observations for all the three periods covered by the analysis. Thus, for these families it is possible to assess appropriately how their organizations have changed, in time. In 1970, among the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats most of the parties ($n = 11$ out of 14 and $n = 9$ out of 9, respectively) presented a low disintermediated organizational profile; this was not the case for the Liberals that, on the opposite, already showed high levels of disintermediation ($n = 7$ out of 12). In 1990, data present a substantial continuity for all the three party families, even

if the number of Social Democratic parties showing high ID increases more markedly. Among the new party families that have become institutionally incorporated during this decade, the Greens are the most relevant units of our analysis: it is interesting to notice that also for the majority of the Green parties included in our sample (5 out of 7) the most diffused organizational template was the high disintermediated one. Isomorphic tendencies towards disintermediation cut parties transversely, regardless of the party family, in the passing between 1990 and 2010. In fact, among all party families the number of highly disintermediated parties increases dramatically: this is particularly stark for the Greens and the Regionalists (100%), but it holds true also for the Social Democrats (+61.6%), the Left (+33%) and the Christian Democrats (+28%). Figure 4 below presents a visual representation of the data, yet – once again – with a clear trend: over time, all parties have become indeed more disintermediated.

FIG 4 ABOUT HERE

Finally, in an attempt to shed some light on the possible determinants of disintermediation we run a number of OLS regressions, with the ID index as the dependent variables. Each observation corresponds to a party ($N = 138$); three separate models are considered. In the first, ‘parsimonious’ model, we include party-level variables (IP and a dichotomous variable identifying the new parties) as independent variables; system-level variables (the Electoral Fragmentation, the Effective Number of Electoral Parties, the Absolute Number of Parties in Parliament, the Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties and the Total Volatility) as well as dummy variables (the period considered) as control variables. Two additional models are run with dummy variables for countries (model 2) and for party families (model 3). All dummy variables consider as the baseline category the relevant case in which ID values are closer to the mean^{xiii}. Table 3 below shows the results of the OLS regression for these three models. Given the number of our observations, we do not limit ourselves to consider the default confidence intervals of 95%, 99% and 99.9%, but also take into account coefficients statistically significant at 90% confidence interval (identified in the tables below by the symbol †).

TAB 3 ABOUT HERE

As already confirmed by the basic descriptive statistics introduced at the beginning of this section, contrarily to our expectations IP has a negative coefficient but is not statistically significant in any of the three models. The other independent variable at party-level, party_new, is statistically significant and with a positive coefficient (albeit substantially low) in the first model (at 95% confidence interval), but it loses its significance in the other models. In any case, we can claim that new parties tend to be more disintermediated than the old ones. As expected, the 2010 dummy is statistically significant at 99.9% confidence interval across all models and with a positive coefficient. This confirms our initial finding according to which the ‘watershed’ moment of change between intermediation and disintermediation happens in the passing between the 1990s and the new Millennium. Interesting insights come from the coefficients of other system-level variables. Increases in the absolute number of parties that entered the parliament in the election closest to our observation points (Party_parliament) correspond to higher organizational disintermediation (positive coefficient, statistical significance at 90% in model 1; 95% in model 3), while ID and the Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (ENPP) are negatively correlated, even if this relation is not statistically significant. Also the Electoral Fragmentation (EF) is negatively correlated to ID (statistical significance at 99% confidence interval in models 1 and 3): this result is somewhat surprising if one considers the positive coefficients of the Effective Number of Electoral Parties (ENEP) – statistical significance at 90% in model 3 – since the trends registered in EF and ENEP are generally very similar. Model 2 shows that, among countries, Norway and Sweden are ‘less disintermediated’ (both their dummies have negative coefficients, with statistical significance). The

coefficients of the dummy variables in Model 3 show which are the party families for which we can claim that low disintermediation is statistically significant: Left parties and Christian democrats (95%), Social Democrats and Regionalist parties (99%).

Overall, even if a clear-cut determinant of party disintermediation cannot be identified, this analysis serves both the purposes of adding robustness to the descriptive statistics of the previous paragraphs and to address the (still puzzling) question of the interactions between certain features of the party systems *vis-à-vis* disintermediation.

6. Conclusive remarks

The aim of this article was to place the reflection on the concept of *political disintermediation* within the literature on party change, to improve its descriptive vocabulary with a new promising tool. By avoiding any temptation to promote yet another party model, we have highlighted the flaw and virtues of this concept when applied to party studies. As it should emerge from the discussion, while the theoretical implications of the concept prove rather weak, its heuristic potential looks more interesting. More specifically, the *internal disintermediation argument* not only condense a number of relevant organizational changes already raised by the specialized literature, but it also provides a different insight on the vertical dimension of party change. Without calling into question concerns about intra-party democracy and democratic theory at large, the added value of this concept relies on its capacity to keep together observations along the three main dimensions of party change (party resources, representative strategies and structures).

Differently from most of the recent studies, this investigation has adopted a longitudinal approach based on a large-N comparative analysis, by focusing on nine European democracies from the 1970s to 2010. As our results show, while no clear relations exists between internal disintermediation and institutional penetration, an evident tendency emerges towards more disintermediated party organizational templates, notwithstanding differences in country (with the partial exception of Norway and Sweden) nor party family: on contrary, new parties tend to be more disintermediated than old ones since the 1990s.

All in all, this study helps strengthen the empirical basis of the theoretical assumptions related to the evolution of party organizations, framed in the light of the party “three faces” approach. Since the present vertical distribution of powers compresses the intermediate collective organs of party organizations – in favour of the party leader and the elected personnel, on the one hand; and of an enlarged party membership, on the other – the question “Does party in central office still matter?” arises. In particular, further research should address the theoretical problem connected to the role of the party leader: if the leader is still to be considered a component of the party in central office or if this position has acquired a different and autonomous status within party organization. Theory-driven studies carried out on larger samples could help improving knowledge on this aspect, by combining the consolidated assumptions and vocabulary with the insights provided by new conceptualisations, such as internal disintermediation.

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i More precisely, the original meaning of the term was ‘the diversion of savings from accounts with low fixed interest rates to direct investment in high-yielding instruments’ (Merriam-Webster 1967).

ii See: www.britannica.com/topic/disintermediation

iii See: www.jamieparfitt.com/blog/2014/5/4/disintermediation-reintermediation-and-cybermediation

iv The pluralist approach, for example, identified the role of parties with that of financial brokers, i.e. professionalised actors paid to deliver services to more than one principal (Katz 1997).

v This is why, in general, the agency theory applied to political parties (Koeble 1996; Kitschelt 2000) proves rather ineffective (Katz 2014).

vi Put in the most simplified (and rather normative) version, the party in central office is expected to act as an agent of the party on the ground, by supervising the activities of the party in public office and providing party members with selective and collective incentives. The party in public office is considered the party's external agent: its main goals consist in promoting party's electoral program into the institutional agenda and in channelling State resources to the party on the ground, via the policy making process (Katz 2014).

vii A number of socio-economic, cultural, political as well as technological factors contributed to the weakening of the segmental solidarity towards parties and to the lowering of partisan identification and alignment, as well as party mobilization. See Dalton, Wattenberg 2000; Cain et al 2003.

viii The cartel party thesis has been criticized by several specialists because of its excessive emphasis on parties' departure from civil society (Koole 1996; Poguntke 2006).

ix This ‘unexpected generosity’ has been interpreted differently: as a by-product of party preferred model of democracy (Scarrow, Gezgor 2010), also in line with the democratic principles at the heart of their political systems (Caul Kittilson, Scarrow 2003); as a response to citizens' increasing participatory demand (Dalton et al. 2011); and/or to counterbalance the growing deficit of parties' legitimacy (Ignazi 2014; Borz, Janda 2018). Furthermore, since the half of the 1970s, in an increasing number of European Liberal-democracies the reform of party organizational templates has been formally regulated by the State (van Biezen, Piccio 2013), to the aim of enhancing the overall quality of the democratic society (Teorell 1999).

x See Rahat 2009; Rahat and Hazan 2010; Detterbeck 2012; Ignazi 2014.

xi We consider the following party families: Christian Democrats/Conservatives; Social Democrats; Liberals; Greens; Left Socialists; Right-wing (populists); Far right (extreme right); Regionalist; Not applicable.

xii We refer to T. Poguntke's analytical proposal to consider as new all those parties which were founded in 1951 or later.

xiii For the period dummy, the 1990s; for the country dummy, Netherlands; for the party family dummy, right-wing parties. These three dummies are excluded from the analysis and therefore constitute the baseline category.

Tables and figures

Table 1. Party change: functional and organizational features

<i>Time period</i>	1914-1945	1946-1975	1976-1990	1990-2010
<i>Characteristics</i>				
<i>Organizational strength</i>	Limited/ Expansionary trends	High/ Constantly expanding	Steady/ Decreasing trends	Low/ Constantly decreasing
<i>Representative/ Procedural functions</i>	Equilibrium/ Expanding Representative Functions	Equilibrium/ Expanding Procedural Functions	Primacy of the Procedural Functions	Primacy of the Procedural Functions

Figure 1. Boxplot, ID across time

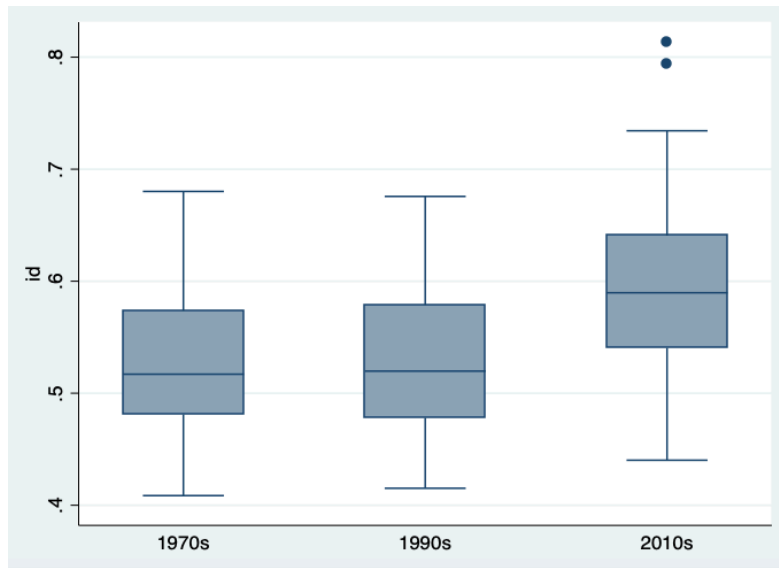


Figure 2. ID-IP trends (N° parties by period)

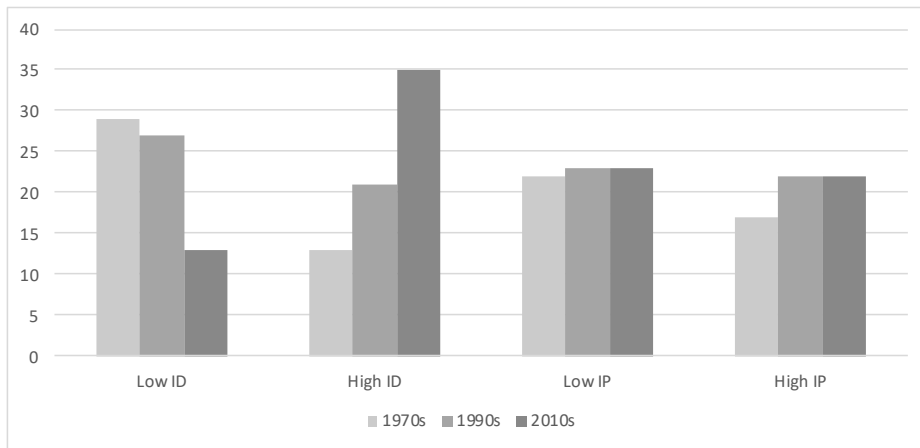


Figure 3. Highly Disintermediated Parties (% by country and across time)

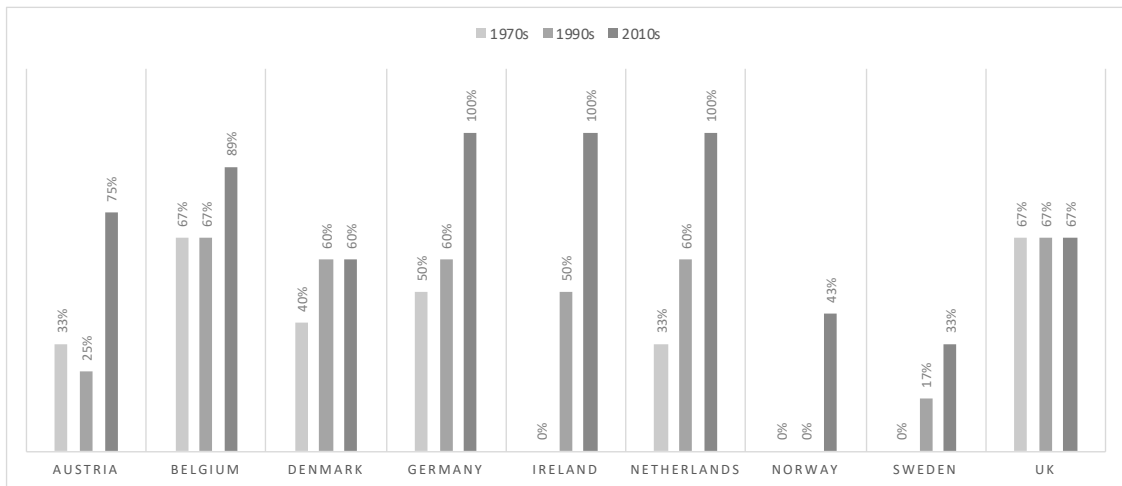


Table 2. Parties with low/high disintermediated profile (N° by party age and across time)

	1970		1990		2010	
	Old parties	New parties	Old parties	New parties	Old parties	New parties
Low ID	26	3	23	4	12	1
High ID	10	3	12	9	23	12
Total	36	6	35	13	35	13

Figure 4. Highly Disintermediated Parties (% by political family and across time)

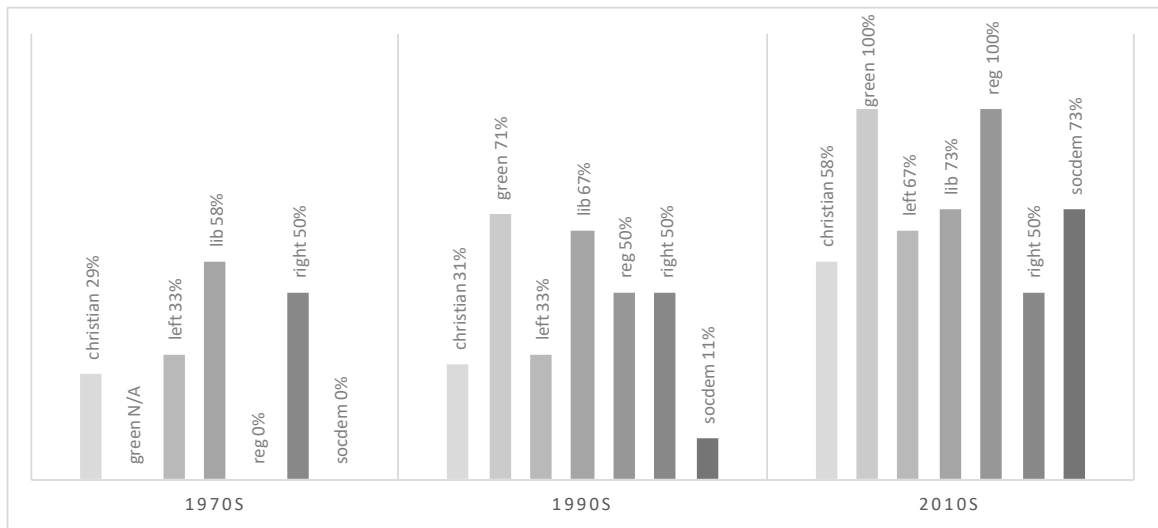


Table 3. OLS regression, three models (parsimonious; country dummies; party family dummies)

	Model -1	Model -2	Model -3
	DV: ID	DV: ID	DV: ID
IP	-0.0112 (0.0307)	-0.0295 (0.0291)	0.0231 (0.0313)
EF	-0.491** (0.188)	-0.216 (0.264)	-0.539** (0.181)
Party_new	0.0312* (0.0156)	0.0243 (0.0147)	0.0119 (0.0223)
ENEP	0.0294 (0.0182)	0.0203 (0.0311)	0.0328† (0.0174)
Party_parliament	0.00625† (0.00349)	0.00417 (0.00555)	0.00699* (0.00338)
ENPP	-0.0168 (0.0212)	-0.0361 (0.0419)	-0.0177 (0.0201)
Tot_vol	0.000701 (0.00142)	0.00179 (0.00192)	0.000796 (0.00135)
dummy_70	0.00305 (0.0157)	-0.00336 (0.0172)	0.00583 (0.0150)
dummy_10	0.0727*** (0.0154)	0.0785*** (0.0188)	0.0752*** (0.0146)
dummy_Austria		-0.0377 (0.0536)	
dummy_Belgium		0.0637 (0.0395)	
dummy_Denmark		-0.0125 (0.0347)	
dummy_Germany		-0.0314 (0.0592)	
dummy_Ireland		-0.0405 (0.0579)	
dummy_Norway		-0.0793† (0.0437)	
dummy_Sweden		-0.0859* (0.0390)	
dummy_UK		-0.0500 (0.0819)	
dummy_Christian			-0.0767* (0.0325)
dummy_Socdem			-0.110** (0.0337)
dummy_Liberal			-0.0458 (0.0313)
dummy_Green			-0.0435 (0.0343)
dummy_Left			-0.0789* (0.0354)
dummy_Reg			-0.109** (0.0389)
_cons	0.768*** (0.111)	0.725*** (0.208)	0.851*** (0.110)
r2	0.286	0.414	0.395
chi2			
F	5.691	4.984	5.317
N	138	138	138

Standard errors in parentheses

† p<0.1, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Appendix

Main sources:

Katz, R. and P. Mair (1992) (eds), *Party Organizations: A Data Handbook*. London: Sage;
Political Party Database Project: <https://www.politicalpartydb.org/>
Parliaments and Governments database: <http://www.parlgov.org/>

List of variables

General Information

Party Name

Country

Code

Period (1970; 1990; 2010)

Internal Disintermediation Variables

Cluster 1 – Party Resources

1.1 MBRVOT: Number of Individual Members/Number of Voters
M/V

Cluster 2 – Representative Strategies

Membership

1.1 MBRRUL: Party statutes recognize party membership as a formal category, distinct from unaffiliated supporters.

0. Yes

1. No

-888. Not Provided

1.2 FRIEND Party statutes recognize a separate level of formal affiliation with reduced obligations and reduced rights (for instance, party “friend” or “registered sympathizer”). This does not include members with reduced dues but full rights, such as reduced fees for young people or unemployed.

0. No

1. Yes

-888. Not Provided

1.3 MBRJOIN Is it possible for an individual to join the national party directly?

0. No, no individual membership; No, individuals join affiliated organizations only; individuals join regional or state parties

1. Yes

-888. Not Provided

1.4 SPONSOR Membership must be sponsored by one or more current members.

0. Yes

1. No

-888. Not Provided

1.5 GROUPEM Must also belong to another related organization, if eligible (such as trade union membership or church membership).

0. Yes

1. No

-888. Not Provided

1.6 EXCLUSIVE May not belong to another national party.

0. Yes

1. No

-888. Not Provided

Collateral organizations

2.1 WOMENORG Sub-organization: Women.

0. Yes

1. No

-888. Not Provided

2.2 YOUTHORG Sub-organization: Youth.

0. Yes

1. No

-888. Not Provided

2.3 SENIORORG Sub-organization: Seniors.

0. Yes

1. No

-888. Not Provided

2.4 SMLBIZORG Sub-organization: Small business owners.

0. Yes

1. No

-888. Not Provided

2.5 FARMORG Sub-organization: Farmers.

0. Yes

1. No

-888. Not Provided

2.6 ETHNICORG Sub-organization: Ethnic/linguistic group.

0. Yes

1. No

-888. Not Provided

2.7 RELIGORG Sub-organization: Religious.

0. Yes

1. No

-888. Not Provided

Cluster 3 – Structures

Executive Organ

3.1 EXCLVL Number of layers between the party congress and the party's highest executive body.

If the highest executive reports directly to/is elected by the party congress, the answer is 2.

0. (+1)

1. (1)

-888. Not Provided

Which of the following sit as ex officio members with full voting rights on the party's highest executive body?

3.2 EXCSTATE Leaders of state/provincial or regional parties.

0. No

1. Yes

-888. Not Provided

3.3 EXCPM The prime minister or chancellor, when s/he is a member of this party.

0. No

1. Yes

-888. Not Provided

3.4 EXCPRES The president (in presidential or semi-presidential systems), when s/he is a member of this party.

0. No

1. Yes

-888. Not Provided

3.5 EXCMIN Government ministers, when they are members of this party.

0. No

1. Yes

-888. Not Provided

3.6 EXCPPG Leader of the party group in the lower house of the legislature.

0. No

1. Yes

-888. Not Provided

Party Leader

4.1 DEPUTY Party statutes give the party leader a say in the selection of the deputy party leader(s). A "say" might refer to veto powers, exclusive right to nominate, right to appoint directly, etc.

0. No

1. Yes

-888. Not Provided

4.2 LDRCON Party statutes give the party leader the right to attend the national party congress.

0. No

1. Yes

-888. Not Provided

4.3 LDRSUM2 Party statutes give the party leader the right to summon the party congress.

0. No

1. Yes

-888. Not Provided

4.4 LDRROLE1 Party statutes explicitly mention that the party leader represents the party externally.

0. No

1. Yes

-888. Not Provided

4.5 LDRROLE3 Party statutes explicitly mention that the national party can only enter coalition agreements with the consent of the party leader.

0. No

1. Yes

-888. Not Provided

Independent/Dummy Party-Level Variables

Institutional Penetration:

- Seats won by the party/Tot Seats

- The Prime Minister is a member of the party:

1. Yes

0. No

- Number of Ministers who are also members of the party/Tot Ministers

Party Age:

0. Old

1. New

Party Family:

1. Christian Democrats/Conservatives
 2. Social Democrats
 3. Liberals
 4. Greens
 5. Left Socialists
 6. Right-wing (populists)
 7. Far right (extreme right)
 8. Regionalist
- 999. Not applicable

Independent/Dummy System-Level Variables

Electoral Fragmentation:

- 1) EF= $1 - \sum_i p_i^2$ (Rae-Taylor Index)

Effective Number of Electoral Parties:

- 2) ENEP= $1/\sum_i p_i^2$ (Laakso-Taagepera Index, vote share)

Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties:

- 3) ENPP= $1/\sum_i p_i^2$ (Laakso-Taagepera Index, seat share)

Absolute Number of Parties in Parliaments:

- 4) N° of parties that win at least one seat (Closest election to: 1970; 1990; 2010)

Total Volatility: