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The Challenge to Party Government

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**EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE  
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## **Abstract**

At a time when the literature on political parties is brimming with health and vitality, the parties themselves seem to be experiencing potentially severe legitimacy problems and to be suffering from a quite massive withdrawal of popular support and affection. This paper addresses one key aspect of the problems facing contemporary parties in Europe, which is the challenge to party government. I begin by reviewing the changing pattern of party competition, in which I discuss the decline of partisanship in policy-making and the convergence of parties into a mainstream consensus. I then look again at the familiar 'parties-do-matter' thesis and at the evidence for declining partisanship within the electorate. In the third section of the paper I explore the various attempts to specify the conditions for party government, before going on in the final section to argue that these conditions have been undermined in such a way that it is now almost impossible to imagine party government in contemporary Europe either functioning effectively or sustaining complete legitimacy.

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Although the analysis of political parties and party systems has proved an enduring concern within European political science during the latter half of the twentieth-century, scholarly attention to the topic has tended to ebb and flow over the decades. Just over forty years ago, four path-breaking volumes were published that effectively defined the parameters of party studies thereafter: Dahl's *Political Oppositions*, LaPalombara and Weiner's *Political Parties and Political Development*, Lipset and Rokkan's *Party Systems and Voter Alignments* and Epstein's *Political Parties in Western Democracies* (Dahl 1966; LaPalombara and Weiner 1966; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Epstein 1967). These volumes represented a true explosion of capacity in the field, and effectively brought comparative party studies into the modern age. A decade later, this new wave of party literature reached the apogee marked by the publication of Sartori's *Parties and Party Systems* (Sartori 1976), perhaps the most important single contribution to the field. Thereafter, despite occasional high points (e.g., Janda 1980; Panebianco 1982 [1988]), attention faded, such that within the European political science literature of the 1980s, political parties were sometimes deemed passé. This was partly because of the priority then being accorded to other related themes, most notably the study of corporatism, on the one hand, and the new social movements, on the other, with both phenomena being seen as more interesting or more important modes of interest intermediation than parties. It was also partly because the interest in parties in government had become absorbed into the burgeoning literature on coalition formation (Katz and Mair 1992: 1).

Since the end of the 1980s, party studies have experienced a revival, such that by now even the highlights within the literature are too numerous to be specified (see Montero and Gunther 2002). There is now a successful and widely cited journal dedicated exclusively to the study of parties, *Party Politics*, and, for the first time in the modern history of party studies, there is also a substantial empirical as well as theoretical literature on party organizations. All of this is to the good, of course, both for comparative politics scholars in general, and for students of party politics in particular. But there may also be an irony here, for at a time when the literature on parties in Europe is brimming with health and vitality, the parties themselves seem to be experiencing potentially severe legitimacy problems and to be suffering from a quite massive withdrawal of popular support and affection. In this paper, I intend to address

one key aspect of the problems facing contemporary parties in Europe, which is the challenge to party government.<sup>1</sup> I begin by reviewing the changing pattern of party competition, in which I discuss the decline of partisanship in policy-making and the convergence of parties into a mainstream consensus. I then look again at the familiar ‘parties-do-matter’ thesis and at the evidence for declining partisanship within the electorate. In the third section of the paper I explore the various attempts to specify the conditions for party government, before going on in the final section to argue that these conditions have been undermined in such a way that it is now almost impossible to imagine party government in contemporary Europe either functioning effectively or sustaining complete legitimacy.

### **The convergence of parties**

For a variety of inter-related reasons, the conflicts that divide political parties in the older democracies of Western Europe have attenuated substantially in the past thirty years. This has occurred at two different levels. In the first place, there has been a reduction in levels of ideological polarisation, in that formerly ‘anti-system’ parties – that is, parties that challenge the fundamental principles on which democratic regimes are founded, and that espouse a wholly alternative political settlement – have either moderated their demands and thus moved closer to the mainstream, or have experienced significant reductions in their electoral support. On the right, for example, the former anti-system alternative has now all but disappeared, being substituted instead by far right parties, or national populist parties, which, though often espousing very radical and anti-consensual policy positions, do not claim to challenge the democratic regime as such (Mudde 2007). Indeed, in recent years, it has often proved quite easy for mainstream parties of the centre right to incorporate such parties into government – whether as full-fledged coalition partners, as in the case of the Austrian Freedom Party, for example, the Italian National Alliance, or the Dutch Pim Fortuyn List; or as formal support parties for minority governments, as in the case of the Danish People’s Party. Anti-system parties of the left have also tended to moderate or to fade away. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, for example, Communist parties either gave up the ghost or transformed themselves into more widely acceptable social-democratic

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<sup>1</sup> I address the wider problems of party democracy in a separate paper – see Mair (2005). For an earlier discussion of the changing notions of party democracy, see Katz and Mair (1995).

alternatives, and those that have chosen the latter route have also enjoyed access to government office. Even Sinn Fein, the political wing of what had been until recently a very active and highly visible terrorist group, the IRA, now shares power within the devolved government of Northern Ireland. Green parties, for their part, also quickly abandoned their pretensions to operate outside the system and became easily incorporated in broad-based centre left coalitions. In a way that would have proved unthinkable in the 1950s and 1960s, therefore, more or less all West European parties have now entered the political mainstream and have become *salonfähig*. As far as electoral politics is concerned, it is only the democratic alternative that is now on offer.<sup>2</sup>

Although this new form of consensus might now be taken for granted, it represents quite a fundamental shift from the patterns that prevailed even as late as the 1970s. Consider the situation in Italy, for example, where the contrast can be most visibly marked. In the mid-1970s, the key dynamic in Italian politics was that associated with the so-called ‘historic compromise’, by which the powerful Italian Communist Party (PCI), then the strongest such party in western Europe, had begun to knock on the door of cabinet office. The issue of the communist participation in government had come to a head in January 1978, with the resignation of Giulio Andreotti’s minority Christian Democrat (DC) government. This was the 35th DC-led government since 1946, and was the most recent in a long row of unstable governments that had been constructed on the basis of excluding both the PCI on the left, and the small neo-fascist Social Movement (MSI) on the right. By early 1978, however, it seemed that it would be impossible to reconstitute such a government again, leaving the only remaining option that of formally incorporating the PCI into the majority. For many commentators, both inside and outside Italy, this was an extremely worrying prospect. So much so, indeed, that it prompted an exceptional public warning from the US State Department, which on 12 January 1978, midway through the one-term Presidency of Democrat Jimmy Carter, issued the following statement:

“Our position is clear: we do not favor [Communist participation in Western governments] and would like to see Communist influence in any Western European country reduced... The United States and Italy share profound democratic values and interests, and we do not believe that the Communists

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<sup>2</sup> For a number of recent evaluations and analyses of these processes in the pages of *West European Politics*, see Downs (2001); Heinisch (2003); Minkenberg (2001); van Spanje and van der Brug (2007)

share those values and interests. As the President [Carter] said in Paris last week: ‘It is precisely when democracy is up against difficult challenges that its leaders must show firmness in resisting the temptation of finding solutions in non-democratic forces.’”<sup>3</sup>

The same argument was echoed by the former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in a review of the electoral successes and potential successes of communist parties in Italy, France, Portugal and Spain. For Kissinger (1978: 184-5), “the accession to power of Communists in an allied country would represent a massive change in European politics; ... would have fundamental consequences for the structure of the postwar world as we have known it and for America’s relationship to its most important alliances; and... would alter the prospects for security and progress for all free nations.” At the height of the Cold War, in other words, the communist electoral alternative was simply unacceptable. The ideological gap was too wide, and the strategic intentions as well as the legitimacy of the party itself were too suspect.

In the event, of course, the PCI never did win admittance to government. Andreotti went on to form a new minority administration and he continued to carve a successful career in US-friendly politics until his party collapsed in a wave of corruption scandals, and he himself was brought before the courts on charges of complicity in Mafia-related crimes. Indeed, it was not until 1996 that the more moderate successors to the PCI, the Party of the Democratic Left (DS), finally entered government as the then leading party in a broadly-based centre-left coalition, under the leadership of Romano Prodi, later President of the European Commission. Three years later, this government again came into close contact with a US administration, this time led by Bill Clinton, the first Democrat to hold the Presidency since Carter. In November 1999, Clinton travelled to Florence in order to take part in an international gathering of various national political leaders. The idea of the meeting was to discuss their shared styles of politics, and its purpose was to sketch out a blueprint for a so-called “Progressive Governance for the 21st Century.” Among the other national leaders taking part in these ‘third way’ discussions were Fernando Cardoso from Brazil, Tony Blair from the UK, Lionel Jospin from France and Gerhard Schröder from Germany. More strikingly, the meeting itself was hosted and chaired by Massimo d’Alema, then

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Ranney (1978: 1).

leader of the DS – that is, the former Communist Party – and by then also head of the new Italian centre-left government. Since the end of the Cold War his party was obviously no longer seen – by the Americans or by others – as a threat to the prospects for progress of all free nations. Instead, it was now being heralded as a component part of the supposed blueprint for progress. For d’Alema himself, meanwhile, “the most ‘progressive’ undertaking we [the Italian centre-left] have accomplished has been to get the national accounts in order and take the lira into the European currency by cutting inflation, lowering interest rates.”<sup>4</sup> This was a far cry from having threatened the future of the free world.

While times have changed for parties trying to survive outside the mainstream, they have also changed for those inside the boundaries of conventional politics. This is the second level at which major changes can be highlighted. Just three years before Kissinger and the US State Department were warning Italy about stretching its government too far, for example, the noted political scientist, S.E. Finer (1975), was mounting a major assault on what he called Britain’s ‘adversary politics.’ Britain was then characterised by a highly competitive pattern of two-party politics. The Labour party had held government, with quite small majorities, from 1964 to 1970, and was then replaced the Conservatives, also with a narrow majority, who held office until March 1974. Labour then returned as a minority government, and following a second election in late 1974, managed to retain power with a small overall majority. The party remained in office until 1979, when it was displaced by Margaret Thatcher’s first Conservative government. From that point on, what had been a classic two-party system drifted towards what might better be seen as alternating predominant party systems, with the Conservatives holding power through three further elections, usually with massive majorities, and with Labour winning with its own overwhelming majority in 1997, and repeating this victory in 2001 and 2005.

In the mid-1970s, however, the pattern was obviously much more changeable, competitive and adversarial, and it was this which proved of particular concern to Finer. Not only did the politics of the time reflect a marked degree of polarisation and

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<sup>4</sup> The text of his contribution is reprinted in *Progressive Governance for the XXI Century: Conference Proceedings Florence, 20 and 21 November 1999*. Florence: European University Institute and New York University School of Law, 2000, p. 42.

conflict, but it also see-sawed dramatically in terms of policy, with each newly incumbent government seeking to undo the policies that had been promoted by its predecessor. For Finer, British politics had deteriorated into “a stand-up fight between two adversaries for the favour of the lookers-on...[and] what sharpens this contestation is that the stakes are extremely high.” Later, in that same book, he spoke disparagingly of “the discontinuities, the reversals, the extremisms of the existing system” (1975: 3, 32). A similar concern was voiced by Lord Hailsham, then a former Conservative cabinet member, who complained about the British system becoming “an elective dictatorship”, in which the opposition was powerless and in which government programmes were based on strongly partisan considerations.<sup>5</sup>

Since the last years of the Thatcher governments, however, and in sharp contrast to this earlier pattern, the parties in Britain have rushed to the centre, with the win-win politics of New Labour’s ‘Third Way’ in particular being promoted as a way of replacing the guiding role of ideology and partisanship in the process of policy-making. In place of the politics of party, and hence in place of the reversals and extremisms of the earlier system, there came what Burnham (1999, 2001) has identified as ‘the politics of depoliticisation’ – a governing strategy in which decision-making authority is passed over to ostensibly non-partisan bodies and in which binding rules are adopted which deny discretion to the government of the day. This was a politics that was couched in strictly non-party terms, and in the British case in particular it was presented as a new synthesis that rose above the traditional divisions of left and right and that therefore became non-contestable: the politics of ‘what works’. As Britain’s two-party system gave way to alternating periods of predominance, so too British adversary politics gave way to a new centrist consensus. The parties might still compete with one another for votes, sometimes even intensively, but they came to find themselves sharing the same broad commitments in government and being bound to the same ever-narrowing parameters of policy-making.

The increased sharing of commitments is also in evidence in other systems, and particular those in which there is a pronounced separation of powers, and/or those in which government is usually formed by a coalition of parties. In France, at least prior to the recent reform that shortens the presidential term, it had become quite common to see

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<sup>5</sup> Hailsham’s speech is reprinted in *The Listener* 21 October 1976. After the 1979 election, Hailsham went on to become a leading member of the strongly partisan governments of Margaret Thatcher.

a form of US-style ‘divided government,’ whereby left-wing presidents cohabited with right-wing parliaments and governments, or vice versa, and with both sides being more or less obliged to find agreement, or consensus, on what government did. Across the continental European parliamentary systems, the basis for consensus and the sharing of commitments has also become more marked. In the Netherlands, for example, precedent was broken when, for the first time in Dutch history, a new government coalition was formed in 1994 that brought together in one cabinet the Labour Party and the right-wing Liberal Party, the two parties that, up to that point, has constituted the main alternative poles within the system. In Ireland, the traditional bipolar pattern of competition was irrevocably broken when Labour, long the traditional ally of Fine Gael, crossed the traditional ‘civil war’ divide to form a government with Fianna Fáil in 1993. In Germany, a new coalition in the late 1990s brought the Greens and Social Democrats together in government, and, as a result of the institutional constraints that operate in the German Federal Republic, forced both to work together with the opposition Christian Democrats, the party that held sway in the powerful upper house of parliament. In contemporary politics, in other words, it has become less and less easy for any one party or bloc of parties to monopolise power, with the result that shared government has become more commonplace.<sup>6</sup> As more or less all parties become coalitionable, coalition-making has become more promiscuous. This, together with the need for balance across separated domestic and European institutions, has inevitably led policy-making to become less partisan.

### **Do parties matter?**

This last assertion is important and requires some justification. Since at least the late 1970s, a large number of political scientists from a variety of scholarly traditions have spent countless hours assessing, evaluating and debating research into the impact of parties on public policy, and discussing whether partisanship in government can be related to policy making, policy choices and policy outputs (for an early assessment, see Rose 1980; Castles 1983). Initially, the balance of the argument seemed to favour the relevance of partisanship – the ‘parties-do-matter’ school. The radical conservative governments led by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and the sudden shift

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<sup>6</sup> See also Laver and Shepsle (1991) who discuss this in the context of minority governments.

towards a neo-liberal consensus in the 1980s offered telling testimony in this regard, while over the course of the decades, a series of more or less sophisticated cross-national comparisons also emphasised the impact of parties, albeit in practice sometimes qualified by the role of other socio-structural, institutional or political determinants of outcomes (See Schmidt 1996; Keman 2002). In sum, the evidence suggested that partisan differences mattered.

This view also persisted even into the 1990s, despite the expectations that any residual partisan effects might have been undermined by the growing impact of globalization. In a much cited analysis that incorporated evidence up to the late 1980s, for example, Garrett argued that globalization had failed to erode either national autonomy (in the sense that it had not prevented nations forging their own policy solutions), or the capacity of left-wing or social democratic governments to pursue policies aimed at reducing market-generated inequalities. In other words, despite globalization, countries and their governments – and hence also the parties in these governments – retained a major capacity for political control, suggesting that “the impact of electoral politics has not been dwarfed by market dynamics” (Garrett 1998: 2). Garrett (1998: 10, 11) went on to advance two main reasons for conclusion. First, far from disempowering partisan constituencies, globalization had actually “generated new political constituencies for left-of-centre parties among the increasing ranks of the economically insecure that offset the shrinking of the manufacturing working class”; second, globalization offered new “political incentives for left-wing parties to pursue economic policies that redistribute wealth and risk in favour of those adversely affected in the short term by market dislocations.” Even in the changed circumstances of late twentieth-century politics, therefore, party differences and left-right oppositions still played a major role in the policy-making process.

But although another highly authoritative analysis of the impact of partisan politics on macroeconomic policies by Carles Boix (1998) came to similar conclusions, in this case the most recent evidence appeared to suggest a weakening of the relationship over time. When first faced with pressure to liberalise financial markets in the 1980s, for example, non-socialist governments tended to act quite quickly, whereas socialist governments delayed or even resist the process. By the end of the decade, however, these differences had evaporated, and “an autonomous monetary policy

became extremely hard to pursue” (Boix 1998: 70). Indeed, Garrett’s later figures were also beginning to tell a different story. Looking at data that stretched into the 1990s, and in contrast to his earlier conclusions, he now found there was much more support for the idea that globalization limited domestic autonomy and hence helped to force parties into common positions (Garrett: 2000, 36-7). This conclusion was echoed in other contemporaneous analyses of policy profiles and outcomes. Within the traditionally contentious area of welfare policy, for example, Huber and Stephens’ (2001: 321) exhaustive analysis showed ample evidence of the “reduction and then the disappearance of partisan effects,” while Caul and Gray’s (2000: 235) analysis of party manifesto data showed a strong process of convergence between left and right, such that already by the end of the 1980s, “political parties across advanced industrial democracies increasingly find it difficult to maintain distinct identities.”

In itself, this drift towards declining partisanship is hardly surprising. Parties were always more likely to matter in the so-called ‘Golden Age’ of embedded liberalism, a period which lasted from the 1950s through to the early 1970s, and during which political parties were relatively unconstrained in shaping the policy outcomes that might matter to their electorates. As Scharpf (2000: 24; see also Ruggie 1982) has put it, national governments and the parties that formed them could then easily shelter behind “semi-permeable economic boundaries...[and] ignore the exit options of capital owners, tax payers and consumers.” By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, the domestic capacity to control the economic environment was already going into decline, with the end of this Golden Age being signalled by the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates and then by the first major oil-price crisis. By then, as Scharpf (2000: 27-9) goes on to point out, governments were not only losing their ability to shape the economy, but also their desire to do so, and it was this shift in attitude as much as circumstance that was later to provoke the widespread waves of deregulation, privatisation, and liberalisation. Ruggie (1997: 7) had come to similar conclusions, arguing in his reflections on the end of embedded liberalism that the expansion and integration of global capital markets in the 1990s had “eroded traditional instruments of economic policy while creating wholly new policy challenges that neither governments nor market players yet fully understand let alone can fully manage.”

But it is not just the *supply* of partisan policy-making that determines whether parties make a difference. It is also a matter of what is *demanded* at the electoral level. Manfred Schmidt (2002: 168) has usefully pointed out that the very logic of the ‘parties-matter’ thesis builds from two core propositions: first, that the ‘social constituencies of political parties in constitutional democracies have *distinctive preferences* and successfully feed the process of policy formation with these preferences’; and second, that the ‘policy orientations of political parties broadly *mirror* the preferences of their *social constituencies*’ (see also Keman 2002). It follows that in the absence of such constituencies there is little by way of collective preferences that can be mirrored, even if the parties could or wished to mirror them, and hence the whole logic of the partyness of policy-making becomes difficult to sustain.

### **Declining electoral cohesion**

It is beyond dispute that the once distinct electorates of the various mainstream political parties in Western Europe have become markedly less cohesive in the past two to three decades. To be sure, it can be shown that traditional cleavages remain relevant to voting behaviour. For all the changes that have been wrought in the economy and in the polity over the past decades, for example, workers are still more likely than the middle class to vote for left of centre parties, and active church attenders are still more likely than secular voters to support religious parties. This is undeniable (e.g., Elff 2007). But what is also clear is that the relative weight of these voting determinants has declined. Church attenders might still vote along religious lines, but there are markedly fewer such citizens within the European electorates than was the case thirty years ago, and hence their capacity to shape electoral politics has eroded (Broughton and ten Napel, 2000). The shifts in class voting are even more pronounced. The core working class constituencies have experienced pronounced demographic decline, while the homogeneity of political preferences within the remaining class cohorts has dissipated. In the most comprehensive and nuanced comparative study to date, Knutsen (2006) points to a substantial decline in both absolute and relative class voting in Western Europe since the mid-1970s, with the falls being most pronounced in precisely those polities where class had once been a very strong predictor of political preference (see also Knutsen 2007).

It is also beyond dispute that, in responding to, and sometimes even provoking, the changes in their electoral alignments, parties have become electorally more catch-all, easing their grip on once core social constituencies while extending their appeal ever more broadly across traditional class and religious lines. In part, of course, this is the inevitable result of social change. Since the core constituencies themselves have begun to decline or to fragment, there is less within the social structure for the parties to grip (see also Freire 2006). Voters, as Mark Franklin and his colleagues (1992) already showed some time ago, have become more ‘particularised’. But in coming to terms with this social change, the individual parties have also had to learn to be more attractive to those segments of the electorate which were once seen as beyond the pale – religious parties have had to learn to appeal to secular voters, socialist parties to middle-class voters, liberal parties to working-class voters, and farmers parties to urban voters. In other words, it is not only that the vote has become more free-floating and available, but so also have the parties themselves, with the result that political competition has become characterised by the contestation of socially inclusive appeals in search of support from socially amorphous electorates.

The tendency towards the decline of collective identities within western electorates that had resulted from more or less common socio-economic or socio-cultural processes, has therefore been further accentuated at the political level by the behaviour and strategies of the competing political parties, and one key consequence of this has been to undermine the key foundations of partisanship in policy-making and in government. Indeed, given the absence of coherent and relatively enduring social constituencies, there is little remaining on which parties can build or identify stable alignments. To be sure, the sort of ad hoc constituencies that are inevitably constructed in the process of electoral campaigning may also be marked by distinct sets of preferences, and such sets of preferences may be more or less sharply in competition with one another; but these are hardly likely to match the sort of enduring identities and interests that once characterised the traditional core constituencies of cleavage politics, and are therefore unlikely to be understood – or assumed – with the same degree of conviction by political leaders. It is in this sense that catch-allism, as well as the social conditions that foster it, proves anathema to partisan politics.

Table 1: Trends in Party Identification in Western Europe, 1960s-1990s

<b>Country</b>	<i>Per annum trend in:</i>	
	<i>% party identifiers</i>	<i>% strong party identifiers</i>
Austria	-0.916	-0.663
Belgium	+0.090	-0.285
Britain	-0.202	-0.882
Denmark	+0.001	-0.207
Finland	-0.293	-0.147
France	-0.712	-0.329
Iceland	-0.675	-0.250
Ireland	-1.510	-0.767
Italy	-0.979	-0.770
Luxembourg	-0.317	-0.316
Netherlands	-0.329	-0.129
Norway	-0.542	-0.450
Sweden	-0.733	-0.543

Source: Dalton (2004: 33), as derived from Eurobarometer and election study data.

In fact, the decline of partisan identities is one of the most telling changes in European mass politics in the last thirty years. Dalton (2004: 31-4) has documented this in some detail, and has shown unequivocally that partisanship within European electorates has become significantly eroded in the past decades. In all but two of the thirteen countries listed in the summary figures reported in Table 1 (Belgium and Denmark), the annual trend in levels of party identification has fallen quite substantially. In all countries, this time without exception, levels of strong party identification have also fallen. As Dalton (2004: 32) suggests: “If party attachments reflect citizen support for the system of party-based representative government, then the simultaneous decline in party attachments... offers a strong sign of the public’s affective disengagement from political authorities.” Other strong signs are also readily visible (see Mair 2005), including the recent growth to record high levels of aggregate electoral volatility, the recent decline to record low levels of electoral turnout, and the near

universal and very marked drop in levels of party membership. Voters might still tend to line up behind one or other of the competing parties or coalitions of parties at election time, but who these voters are, or for how long they might remain aligned, becomes less and less predictable. There is greater uncertainty about whether any individual citizen will go to the polls, and, even if she votes, there is greater uncertainty about the preference she might reveal. In this sense, voting patterns have become less structured, more random, and hence also increasingly unpredictable and inconsistent. Hence in France in 2007, for example, in the space of a brief eight-week period, there occurred a presidential election that registered a record high turnout of 84 per cent, and a legislative election that registered a record low turnout of 60 per cent (Sauger 2007).

Let me try to draw these strands together. In many different respects – including their patterns of incumbency, their policy commitments, and their electoral profiles – parties within the mainstream have become less easily distinguished from one another than was the case in the politics of the late 1970s. Despite the growing evidence of bipolar competition (see below), the parties now share government with one another more easily and more readily, with any lingering differences in policy-seeking goals appearing to matter less than the shared cross-party ambition for office. Policy discretion has become increasingly constrained by the imperatives of globalisation, and, within the much expanded EU and EFTA area, by the strictures imposed by the Growth and Stability pact and the financial discipline demanded by the European Central Bank. Even when parties are in government, in other words, the freedom for partisan manoeuvre is severely limited, and this too makes the task of differentiating between parties or between governments more difficult. Finally, a combination of increasing social homogenisation – the blurring of traditional identity boundaries – and increasing individualisation has cut across differences in partisan electoral profiles, leaving most of the mainstream protagonists chasing more or less the same bodies of voters with more or less the same persuasive campaigning techniques. Through the sharing of office, programmes and voters, albeit sometimes as competing coalitions, the parties have become markedly less distinct from one another, while partisan purpose is itself seen as less meaningful or even desirable.

### **The problem of party government**

This also serves to undermine the notion of party government. Party government is a somewhat elusive concept which only began to receive attention in the European literature in the late 1960s. By then, however, it was already a prominent theme within discussions of US politics, with the APSA 1950 Report *Towards a More Responsible Two-Party System* being at the centre of American debates on political and institutional reform. This much cited and later much criticized APSA report had been heavily influenced by the work of E.E. Schattschneider, a strong advocate of party government, who emphasised the need for effective choice and accountability in federal elections. As he argued in 1945: “The major party in a two-party system is typically and essentially a mobilizer of majorities for the purpose of taking control of the government; it is the most potent form of democratic political organization available for our use. The major party is the only political organization in American public life which is in a position to make a claim, upon any reasonable grounds whatsoever, that it can measure up to the requirements of modern public policy....It alone submits its claims to the nation in a general election in which the stakes are a mandate from the people to govern the country” (Schattschneider 1945: 1151). In US practice, however, these arguments tended to fall somewhat flat, with many of the early responses to the APSA report suggesting that it was oriented towards a British-style of cabinet government and majoritarian democracy, a system that was anathema to many American observers (see Kirkpatrick 1971). Nor did the arguments receive much support in Europe. In this case, it was again a British or perhaps Anglo-American two-party model that was seen to be favoured, and hence the arguments themselves were deemed largely irrelevant (see Daalder 1987).

The first substantial attempt to address the issue of party government in the European context was developed by Richard Rose (1969) and was also heavily biased towards the Anglo-American experience, although the analysis itself concluded with an attempt to draw more wide-ranging cross-national conclusions and to elaborate a series of hypotheses that could be tested in a wide variety of systems.<sup>7</sup> For Rose, party government is about the capacity of parties to “translate possession of the highest

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<sup>7</sup> Rose’s 1969 article was later reprinted in his *The Problem of Party Government* (Rose 1974), although the book as a whole, despite its title, goes no further in dealing with party government as such than did the original article.

formal offices of a regime into operational control of government” (1969: 413). And since this capacity varied from system to system, and also over time, his analysis sought to identify the more specific conditions that were required for parties to influence government. These are listed in Box 1, and may be summarised as requiring a winning party to have identifiable policies and to have the organizational and institutional capacity to carry these out through the people it appoints for that purpose. This is what constitutes operational control of government and hence what may be defined in these circumstances as the practice of party government. In the absence of these conditions, alternative forms of government may be identified, among which Rose lists government by charismatic leadership, traditional government, military government, government ‘by inertia’, and in particular ‘administrative government’, whereby “civil servants not only maintain routine services of government, but also try to formulate new policies” (1969: 418).

*Box 1: Rose conditions for party government*

1. At least one party must exist and, after some form of contest, it must become dominant in the regime;
2. Nominees of the party then occupy important positions in the regime
3. The number of partisans nominated for office is large enough to permit partisans to participate in the making of a wide range of policies
4. The partisans in office must have the skills necessary to control large bureaucratic organizations
5. Partisans must formulate policy intentions for enactment once in office
6. Policy intentions must be stated in a ‘not unworkable’ form
7. Partisans in office must give high priority to carrying out party policies
8. The party policies that are promulgated must be put into practice by the personnel of the regime

Source: Rose (1969: 416-8)

A similar but more parsimonious list of conditions for party government was later elaborated by Katz (1986: 43-4) in a more abstract analysis that was intended for application to a wide variety of parliamentary and presidential systems. For Katz, party government required three conditions: First, all major governmental decisions were to

be taken by people chosen in electoral contests conducted along party lines, or at least by individuals appointed by and responsible to such people. Second, policy was to be decided within the governing party or by negotiations among parties in the case of coalition governments. In this sense policy was to be made on party lines “so that each party may be collectively accountable for ‘its’ position” (1986: 43). Third, the highest officials (ministers, prime ministers) were to be selected within parties and to be held responsible for their actions and policies through parties. Most importantly, this third condition implied that “positions in government must flow from support within the party rather than party positions flowing from electoral success” (1986: 43). In a slightly later publication, Katz (1987: 7) adapted and summarised these conditions into the five inter-related stipulations shown in Box 2. That is, party government is manifest when winning parties both decide and enact policies through officials who are recruited and held accountable by party. Katz also follows Rose (1969) in identifying a series of alternatives to party government, derived in this case from the concrete cases analyses developing from his model: corporatist or neo-corporatist government, in which policies are set through negotiations between interests that are directly affected by the policies; pluralist democracy, in which each individual candidate and elected official is responsible to his or her own constituency, and in which party as such doesn’t figure; and direct democracy, in which policies are determined by referendum and in which elections do not prove decisive for offering mandates or securing accountability (Katz 1987: 18-20).<sup>8</sup>

*Box 2: Katz conditions for party government*

1. Decisions are made by elected party officials or by those under their control;
- 2a. Policy is decided within parties which
- 2b. then act cohesively to enact it.
- 3a. Officials are recruited and
- 3b. held accountable through party.

Source: Katz (1987: 7)

<sup>8</sup> Laver and Shepsle (1994: 5-8) also briefly list a variety of alternatives to party government, including bureaucratic government, legislative government, Prime-ministerial government, cabinet government and ministerial government. See also Müller (1994)

The decisiveness of the electoral process and a strong foundation of electoral accountability are also central to a more recent version of the party government model that has been elaborated by Thomassen's (1994). In this case the emphasis is less on party government as such, and more on the role of elections as a mechanism of linkage and representation. Nevertheless, though differently oriented, the core conditions of Thomassen's party government model and, as he emphasises, of the 'responsible parties model', are quite similar to those of Rose and Katz (see Box 3) and are manifest when the will of the majority of the electorate is reflected in government policy.

*Box 3: Thomassen conditions for party government*

1. Voters have a choice, in the sense that they can choose between at least two parties with different policy proposals.
2. The parties are sufficiently cohesive or disciplined to enable them to implement their policy.
3. Voters vote according to their policy preferences, that is, they choose the party that represents their policy preferences best. This in turn requires that:
  - (a) Voters have policy preferences, and
  - (b) Voters are aware of the differences between the programmes of different political parties.
4. The party or coalition winning the elections takes control of government.
5. Both the policy programs of political parties and the policy preferences of voters are constrained by a single ideological dimension.

Source: Thomassen (1994)

All three sets of stipulations share much common ground, although the bias varies somewhat between an emphasis on policy making in the cases of Rose (1969), on recruitment in the case of Katz (1987), and on the electoral connection in the case of Thomassen (1994). If we try to synthesise the three, bringing all three emphases together, then a single set of core stipulations can be suggested. Party government *in democratic polities* will prevail when a party or parties wins control of the executive as

a result of competitive elections, when the political leaders in the polity are recruited by and through parties, when the (main) parties or alternatives in competition offer voters clear policy alternatives, when public policy is determined by the party or parties holding executive office, and when that executive is held accountable through parties. These stipulations are summarised in Box 4. Equally, party government will not prevail, or will certainly be severely weakened, should one or more of these conditions be absent.

Box 4: *Summary conditions for party government*

1. A party (parties) wins control of the executive as a result of competitive elections
2. Political leaders are recruited by and through parties
3. Parties offer voters clear policy alternatives
4. Public policy is determined by the party (parties) in the executive
5. The executive is held accountable through parties

It is the contention of this paper that, with time, these conditions are becoming more marked more by their absence than by their presence in contemporary European politics. In short, as a result of long-term shifts in the character of elections, parties and party competition, it is precisely this set of conditions that is being undermined.<sup>9</sup>

### **The waning of party government**

Within the limited scope of this essay, it is impossible to offer a full account of the changing conditions of party government – indeed, much of what is relevant here is amply covered in many of the other contributions to this volume, including those on the executive, governance, regulation, interests, and values.<sup>10</sup> What can be done, however,

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<sup>9</sup> For an earlier evaluation of these problems, see Smith (1986).

<sup>10</sup> For a different approach to the issue of party government, focusing more attention on the link between parties and the governing institutions, see Blondel and Cotta (2000). In this essay, I focus mainly on the question of the power that might or might not travel from party to government. In the wider discussion of the cartel party (e.g. Katz and Mair 1995; Katz and Mair 2002), there is also a treatment of power that travels from government to party, and particularly to the party in public office.

is to identify a series of key changes which effect a number of the conditions listed above, and which together point towards a major shift in modes of government in western Europe.

I will begin with the condition which has not faded, however, and which, if anything, has become even more evident with time: the condition by which a party or parties wins control of the executive as a result of competitive elections. This has obviously always been the case in two-party systems, in which elections are decisive and in which the winning party at the polls goes on to form the government. These are also responsive systems, with wholesale alternation in government being both a normal expectation and a relatively frequent occurrence. There are other systems, however, where the condition might seem less likely to be found, and these include in particular the more traditional 'continental' European systems, in which fragmented party groupings compete against one another in shifting multi-party coalitions, and in which a clear boundary between government and opposition has often proved difficult to identify. Wholesale alternation in these latter systems was also a relatively rare occurrence, at least traditionally, since one coalition usually overlapped with another, with the overall lines of responsibility and accountability being thereby often blurred.

Table 2: Growing Bipolarism among the long-standing European democracies

	1950s-1960s N = 16	1990s-2000s N = 23
<u>Bipolar Competition is Present</u>	Denmark France Ireland Malta Norway Sweden UK  <b>43.8% (N = 7)</b>	Austria Denmark France Germany Ireland Italy Malta Norway Sweden UK  <b>62.5% (N = 10)</b>
<u>Bipolar Competition is Absent</u>	Austria Belgium Finland Germany Iceland Italy Luxembourg Netherlands Switzerland  <b>56.2% (N = 9)</b>	Belgium Finland Iceland Luxembourg Netherlands Switzerland  <b>37.5% (N = 6)</b>

Note: Table entries refer to countries that have experienced bipolar competition for government at either some elections or all elections in the given period.

Source: Mair (2008).

With time, however, the balance of the European polities has appeared to shift in favour of the bipolar mode. This marks quite a substantial change in the functioning of European party systems, and has happened in two ways (Bale 2003; Mair 2008). In the first place, bipolarity has become the norm in the new democracies in southern Europe, with what are effectively two-party systems emerging and consolidating in Greece, Portugal and Spain, as well as in Malta. Second, bipolar competition is now also increasingly characteristic of many of the older multi-party systems (Table 2). That is, even in those systems that are marked by quite pronounced party fragmentation, party competition is now more likely to mimic the two-party pattern through the creation of

competing pre-electoral coalitions which tend to divide voters into two contingent political camps. During the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the majority of European polities changed governments by means of shifting and overlapping centrist coalitions and rarely if ever offered voters a choice of alternative governments. During the 1990s, by contrast, almost two-thirds of these older polities had experienced at least some two-party or two-bloc competition, usually involving wholesale alternation in government. To these two sets of changes may also be added a third, albeit in a context of largely unstructured party systems, in that a number of the post-communist systems have also drifted towards more bipolar competition. In sum, if party government depends on electoral contests that can produce a clear distinction between winners and losers, then this condition was being met more frequently at the close of the twentieth-century than was ever the case in the early postwar decades.

The other conditions listed in Box 4 have proved much less robust, however. Although political leaders continue to be recruited by party, for example, they are less likely to be recruited *through* parties, in that the choice of leader is now less often determined by the strength of a candidate's support within the party and more often by the candidate's capacity to appeal to the media and thence to the wider electorate. The choice of Blair above Brown in the leadership contest in the British Labour Party offered a clear example of this shift, as was the preference for Schröder above Lafontaine in the near contemporary debate about who was to be the SPD Chancellor candidate.<sup>11</sup> This, combined with the clear evidence of the 'presidentialisation' of political leadership in parliamentary democracies (Poguntke and Webb 2005), suggests the emergence of a more direct linkage between political leaders and the electorate that is now less strongly mediated by political parties as organisations. Moreover, as suggested above, the parties are also less able – and perhaps less willing – to offer clear policy alternatives to the voter. Whether circumscribed by global and European constraints, or whether limited by the inability to identify any clear constituency within the electorate that is sufficiently large and cohesive to offer a mandate for action, parties

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<sup>11</sup> The version of the German story as told by a clearly peevisch Oskar Lafontaine (2000: 50-57) carries extraordinarily sharp echoes of the version of the British story that was reported by various allies of Gordon Brown to Andrew Rawnsley (2000). As Lafontaine puts it, having admitted that Schröder cut the better figure on television, "Is it permissible...for the media to have the decisive voice in a discussion over who shall lead a party into an election campaign? If the party were to answer this question in the affirmative, would it not be shedding too much of its own responsibility?" (2000: 52).

increasingly tend to echo one another and to blur what might otherwise be clear policy choices. To be sure, there is a choice between the competing teams of leaders, and given the growing evidence of bipolarity, that particular choice is becoming more sharply defined. But there is less and less choice in policy terms, suggesting that political competition is drifting towards an opposition of form rather than of content.

Competition in these circumstances can be intense and hard-fought, but it is often akin to the competition enjoyed in football matches or horse races: sharp, exciting, and even pleasing to the spectators, but ultimately, as noted above, lacking in substantive meaning. Some fifty years ago, it was precisely this situation that Kirchheimer (1957) associated with the ‘elimination’ of opposition – the situation that prevails when polities experience government by cartel, and when no meaningful differences divide protagonists who sometimes compete very vigorously (see also Krouwel 2003).

Nor is public policy so often decided by the party, or even under its direct control. Instead, with the rise of the regulatory state, decisions are increasingly passed over to non-partisan bodies that operate at arms length from party leaders – the so-called ‘non-majoritarian’ or ‘guardian’ institutions (Majone 1994). Faced with increasing environmental constraints, as well as with the growing complexity of legislation and policy-making in a transnational environment, there is inevitably a greater resort to delegation and depoliticization (Thatcher and Stone Sweet 2002). Moreover, the officials who work within these delegated bodies are less often recruited directly through the party organization,<sup>12</sup> and are increasingly held accountable by means of judicial and regulatory controls. And since this broad network of agencies forms an ever larger part of a dispersed and pluriform executive, operating both nationally and supranationally, the very notion of accountability being exercised through parties, or of the executive being held answerable to *voters* (as opposed to citizens or stakeholders) becomes problematic. Party, in this sense, loses much of its representative and purposive identity, and by the same token, citizens forfeit much of their capacity to control policy-makers through conventional electoral channels.

Above all, it is here that we see the conditions for the maintenance of party government slipping away. This is also when the alternative forms of government identified by Rose (1969) begin to emerge with greater weight, including both

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<sup>12</sup> Although they may well be controlled by an autonomous political leadership, suggesting a ‘party as network’ notion that seems markedly different from the more traditional forms of party organization.,

government by inertia and ‘administrative government’. Indeed, it is precisely such a shift that is identified by Lindvall and Rothstein (2006: 61) in their analysis of the decline of the ‘strong state’ model in Sweden, whereby “the state...is no longer an instrument for the political parties that dominate the Riksdag to steer and change society. Instead, the administrative state is turning into another ideological battlefield, where sectoral interests seek power and influence...[and in which] the role of political parties as the main producers of policy-oriented ideology and ideas is challenged.”

There is also one other respect in which the conditions for the maintenance of party government are severely undermined, but which has received relatively scant attention in the literature. In Thomassen’s (1994) account, summarised above (Box 3), a key condition for party government and for the responsible parties model is that both the policy programmes of the parties and the policy preferences of the voters be constrained by a single ideological dimension. The reasoning behind this argument is straightforward. Should two or more dimensions come into play, it would be impossible for either the voters or the parties to establish a relationship based on representation and accountability, since it would never be clear precisely which positions on which dimension had favoured support for one particular alternative over another. In other words, since the demands of popular control that are included in the various sets of conditions established by the other authors (1, 5 and 6 in the case of the Rose set [Box 1]; 1 and 3b in the Katz set [Box 2]; 1, 3 and 5 in the summary set [Box 4]) require a shared recognition by both voters and parties of the policy choices that are on offer and of the commitment to implement these policies, they also require the sort of clarity which is intrinsically unavailable in a multi-dimensional space (Thomassen 1994: 252-7 and fn. 3). Moreover, as Thomassen goes on to suggest, and as is clear from the work of Sani and Sartori (1983) among others, the only possible single dimension that can meet this requirement is the Downsian left-right dimension. That is, the left-right dimension is the only dimension which is sufficiently elastic and pervasive to accommodate the various domains of voter identification, and which at the same time is sufficiently enduring to provide a stable reference point over time. In the absence of a left-right divide, however loosely defined, it is therefore difficult to imagine any other dimension that might offer the degree of coherence and clarity to the electorate and the parties taken as a whole. In the absence of a left-right dimension of competition, in other

words, the entire foundation of the party government/responsible parties model is undermined.

It is here that the challenge to party government may be most sharply defined. Briefly put, and building on a variety of different arguments, it may be argued that the left-right divide, even in its simplest Downsian form, is now finally losing coherence (Mair 2007). Voters in contemporary Europe may still be willing to locate themselves in left-right terms, and they may even be willing to locate the parties along a similar dimension, but the meanings associated with these distinctions are becoming increasingly diverse and confused. In part, this is due to the policy convergence between parties that has already been discussed above. In part it is due to the often contradictory signals emerging from post-communist Europe, whereby the traditional left position is often seen as the most conservative. In part it is also due to the new challenge of liberalism, and to the increasingly heterogeneous coalition that has begun to define leftness in primarily anti-imperial or anti-American terms, bringing together former communists, religious fundamentalists and critical social movements within a broad, loosely-defined camp. In this context, meanings are no longer shared and the implications of political stances on the left or on the right become almost unreadable.

This is also the essence of the argument developed by Hardin (2000) in an important essay on the problems of understanding political trust and distrust. Hardin argues that there have been two important changes in the way political issues have come to be understood and treated in contemporary democracies. The first is “the essential end, at least for the near term, of the focus on economic distribution and the management of the economy for production and distribution” (Hardin 2000: 41-2). In other words, echoing Scharpf’s and Ruggie’s observations on the end of embedded liberalism (see above), he suggests that governments are no longer capable of purposefully managing the economy with a view to redistributing resources or responding to collective needs, and that this failing capacity has fundamentally altered traditional political discourse. The issue of planning versus markets has been settled – for now – in favour of the markets (2000: 32), leaving much of conventional political debates at a loss. The second change is that problem-solving and decision-making in public policy has become substantially more complex, and hence is less amenable to popular understanding or control (for a similar argument, see Papadopoulos 2003).

Voters can no longer easily grasp the issues that are at stake, and find it difficult to evaluate the often quite technical alternatives that are presented to them. The result of both changes, claims Hardin (2000: 42), is to “preclude the organization of politics along a single left-right economic dimension”, leading to a situation in which the concerns of citizens become “a hotchpotch of unrelated issues that are not the obvious domain of any traditional political party.”

In short, the left-right divide loses its capacity to make overall sense of mainstream politics, and is not replaced any alternative overarching paradigm. Demands become particularised and fragmented, while party policy and voter preferences evidence a lack of internal constraint or cohesion. In these circumstances, it is almost impossible to imagine party government functioning effectively or even maintaining full legitimacy – that is, it is almost impossible to imagine parties as such ruling effectively or enjoying an unchallenged right to rule.

### **Conclusion**

Almost thirty years ago, in the anniversary issue of *Daedalus*, Suzanne Berger (1979: 30) argued that “the critical issue for Western Europe today is the capacity of the principal agencies of political life – party, interest group, bureaucracy, legislature – to manage the problems of society and economy, and, beyond coping, to redefine and rediscover common purposes.” Today, it is not so much the management capacity of the traditional institutions that is the problem – as a number of the others paper in the anniversary issue of *West European Politics* (vol. 31, no.’s 1-2, 2008) testify, that is now being solved through expertise, delegation, regulation, and transnational cooperation and adjustment – but their legitimacy and, as such, their right to govern (Dalton and Weldon 2005; Mair 2005). Parties, like the other traditional institutions of the European polities, might well be considered by citizens as necessary for the good functioning of politics and the state, but they are neither liked nor trusted. Indeed, as is clear from the comparative survey evidence, parties are the least trusted of any of the major political institutions in contemporary democracy. The argument of this paper is that we can better understand this change in perspective by recognizing that although the trappings of party government might persist, the conditions for the maintenance of this form of government are being subject to a severe challenge.

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