RESEARCH NOTE – FLUGA

Why do party systems tend to be so stable? A review of rationalists' contributions

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Abstract: The purpose of this research note is to demonstrate the usefulness of rational choice models in making party-system stability intelligible. First, the 'problem of collective action among potential party-entrepreneurs' makes it puzzling that new political parties emerge at all. Secondly, if the original collective-action problem is overcome somehow, the 'problem of voter coordination' makes it hard for new parties to attract voters. Finally, established competitors have incentives and resources to hold newcomers back. I conclude by maintaining that simple, well-known rational choice models explain the empirical observation by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) that party systems tend to be 'frozen'. Instead, the genuinely puzzling thing is why new political parties emerge and gain support at all.

Keywords: Party systems; 'freezing hypothesis'; party formation; stability

Ágrip: Tilgangur þessarar greinar er að sýna fram á nytsemi skynsemiskenninga við að útskýra af hverju flokkakerfi eru stöðug. Hugsanlegir flokksfrumkvöðlar lenda fyrst í „vanda sameiginlegra athafna" sem gerir það að ráðgátu að nýir flokkar myndast yfir höfuð. Ef vandi sameiginlegra athafna er leystur, þá eiga nýir flokkar erfitt með að fá kjósendur til fylgis við sig vegna þess að enginn vill kjósa flokk sem enginn annar kýs. Að lokum þá hafa keppinautar til langs tíma hvata og getu til að halda nýjum keppinautum niðri. Niðurstaða mín er sú að einfaldar og vel þekktar skynsemiskenningar útskýri vel þá niðurstöðu Lipset og Rokkan (1967) að flokkakerfi hafi tilhneigingu til að frjósa. Hin sanna ráðgáta felst í því af hverju nýir flokkar verði til yfir höfuð og njóti fylgis.

1. Introduction

It is now more than 40 years since Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) influential article 'Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments: An Introduction' was published. The authors made a fascinating observation. The party systems of the 1960s seemed, with few but significant exceptions, to reflect the cleavage structures of the 1920s. Three years later, Rose and Urwin (1970, p. 295) found robust empirical support for Lipset and Rokkan's observations, and concluded: '[T]he electoral strength of most parties in Western nations … has changed very little from election to election, from decade to decade, or within the lifespan of a generation'.

The 'freezing of party systems'[1] was perceived as puzzling by contemporary observers. A vast socioeconomic restructuring had taken place in most industrial democracies, and theories which dominated the social sciences at the time, in particular various versions of pluralism and Marxism, predicted that when society changed and became more differentiated, organisations representing new interests would arise (cf. Truman 1951; Dahl 1961). Hence, party systems were expected to evolve in response to social change. However, as Lipset and Rokkan showed, this was obviously not taking place. Although the degree of continuity can be debated, the stability in European party systems – here defined as the absence of new, competitive players – between 1920 and 1970 is in demand of explanation.

Surprisingly, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Karvonen and Kuhnle 2001), attempts to explain Lipset and Rokkan's observations have been scant. Lipset and Rokkan (1967, p. 30) themselves actually seem perplexed by their own findings, and state that '[t]here are no straightforward answers to these questions'. Mair (1997a, p. 5), who has written extensively in this field, maintained that neither Lipset and Rokkan nor their followers have sufficiently elaborated upon how and why party systems actually freeze into place, and what mechanisms are responsible for producing this type of party-system stability. Matt Golder (2003, p. 2) puts this even more bluntly, and states that '[c]urrent research has had very little to say about *why* party systems exhibit this type of stability'. Additionally – with one prominent exception (Hug 2001) – most scholars writing in this genre have not applied tools from rational action theory, but are instead firmly placed within the genre of political sociology.

The purpose of this research note is to demonstrate the usefulness of applying well-known rational choice models to 'solve' Lipset and Rokkan's puzzle. This contributes to elucidating individual-level mechanisms, and provides a less complex – and therefore better – explanation (than those, for instance, that build up arguments about the psychology or sociology of voter loyalty) as to why party systems typically tend to have so few competitive players. This is line with Popper's (1992) credo that simple explanations are to be preferred to more elaborate and intricate ones.

The approach proposed here is that instead of asking why party systems have been so surprisingly stable, it is fruitful to rephrase the question and ask: (a) Why are new parties so seldom formed, and if formed, (b) why do they have such a hard time attracting sufficient electoral support to gain representation in parliaments? I

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1   I am only interested in the part of the 'freezing hypothesis' that concerns the 'supply side', i.e. the relative absence of new, competitive alternative parties on the market for votes. The concept of frozen party systems is, however, not identical with that of systems where few new parties emerge. In fact, Bartolini and Mair (1990) claim that it is precisely the demand side that is important, i.e. that a *lack of electoral volatility* is the best indicator of freezing in party systems. However, in this research note, stability is defined at the party system level: as the relative absence of new party alternatives.

maintain that producing answers to these questions that are firmly grounded in the principles of methodological individualism and assumptions about the purposive behaviour of individuals enhances our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the 'freezing' of party systems. As it turns out, I conclude that it is actually not puzzling at all that party systems tend to be stable. Rather, it is the emergence of new parties that is genuinely puzzling.

2. Rational choice and party-system stability

In this section I argue that three models or perspectives – complementary with each other, grounded in methodological individualism and placed within the rational choice framework – enhance our understanding of the 'freezing' of party systems. Taken by themselves, none of these arguments are novel. Put together, placed side by side, they give a simple and intuitive, yet powerful insight into the mechanisms producing the overwhelming stability inherent in party systems. These three perspectives involve:

— The problem of collective action among potential party entrepreneurs.
— The problem of getting voters to vote for new parties.
— The problem of having well-established, powerful competitors.

2.1. The problem of collective action among potential party entrepreneurs

As Olson (1971, p. 15) argues, the provision of public or collective goods is, generally speaking, the function of all organizations. Hence, political parties undoubtedly display the characteristics of collective goods. In the case of *new* political parties this means that people can benefit from the new party's efforts without contributing to its formation or without voting for it in a public election. Once a political party has been formed and is up and working, the activist's effort automatically becomes available to others since parties can influence the production of a range of collective goods through decisions made in elected assemblies. All policies that political parties can force through, influence, or veto affect society. This way of conceiving political parties mirrors Laver's (1997, p. 71) term 'political services':

> The notion of political services includes the direct provision of public goods but in addition encompasses the provision of more general political regimes that facilitate the production of public as well as other goods and services that might otherwise be available only suboptimally […] The outcome is the resolution of collective action problems as a result of the provision of what I am referring to here as 'political services'.

The argument can be traced back to several scholars working within the rational choice framework. For instance, it is implicit in Tullock's (1971, p. 917) reasoning: 'When [the voter] casts his vote in the public market, he is producing a public good'. Downs (1957, p. 137), Olson (1971, p. 15), McCulloch (1990, p. 499) and Whiteley *et al.*

(1994, p. 80) reason in a similar vein. This insight has important, yet often overlooked, theoretical implications (cf. Frohlich and Oppenheimer 1970, p. 105), because individuals who form political parties solve a collective-action problem. This fact makes it hardly surprising that not every potentially new political organization ultimately materializes, or as Olson (1971, p. 2) put it:

> Unless the number of individuals is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interest.

This is so because all potential party entrepreneurs wishing that a new political party be formed face a situation which resembles an N-person prisoner's dilemma (cf. Nownes and Neeley 1996).

		Other dissatisfied citizens	
		Form a new party	Refrain from forming a new party
The individual dissatisfied citizen	Engages in forming a new party	(2) Second-most preferred	(4) Least preferred
	Refrains from forming a new party	(1) Most preferred	(3) Second-least preferred

Figure 1. The paradox of participation.

Figure 1 illustrates the conflict between individual and collective rationality and explains why not all potential political parties materialize, even though there might be widespread public dissatisfaction with existing political parties and/or general agreement among citizens that a new party is needed. The individual potential party entrepreneur is assumed to reason like this: 'No matter if I engage in the project of forming a new political party or not, either one of two things will happen. Either enough other people will form a new party, or not enough of them will do this. If the first thing happens, I will be able to reap the fruits from the efforts of party entrepreneurs without having to invest (and risk) my money, time, energy and social status. If the second thing happens, my investments in the party formation project would be wasted.' To paraphrase Elster (1989, p. 126), it is better for the whole group if some individuals organize the new party, but best for each potential party entrepreneur to refrain from this strategy.

No matter what other citizens do, it is in the individual citizen's self-interest to refrain from the strategy of party formation. Non-participation is therefore the 'dominant strategy' for all who wish to see a party challenge the already established ones. Hence, the problem of collective action is a first obstacle to the 'de-freezing' of

party systems. It helps us understand why only a few of all potential new parties materialize.

2.2. The problem of getting voters to vote for new parties

If the collective action problem is somehow overcome – that is, if a party entrepreneur steps forward and solves the paradox of participation – the party entrepreneur faces the difficult challenge of attracting voters to his or her new party. This is the second obstacle for newcomers. To understand why newcomers might encounter a particularly large threshold for attracting voters, it is useful to revisit the 'problem of voter coordination'.

The problem of voter coordination rests on two premises: voters prefer to influence the outcome of elections and they formulate expectations about how other voters will behave before choosing a party. That is, elections can be seen as coordination games amongst strategic voters. In order to show that these premises constitute a problem for new parties, we need to take a detour through Duverger's (1954) 'law': majority systems tend to produce fewer political parties than do proportional ones (cf. Farrell 1997, p. 50). Duverger distinguished between the 'mechanical effect' and the 'psychological effect'. The mechanical effect stems from deviations from proportionality caused by the electoral system in the translation of votes into seats. In a party system that is strictly proportional each participating party gets the same percentage of seats as it receives of the vote. The less proportional the electoral system is, the more the distribution of seats will differ from the distribution of the votes. Almost all electoral systems have some effective thresholds that obstruct minor parties from gaining seats.

However, the psychological effect is the mechanism that underlies the 'problem of voter coordination' and constitutes the real problem for party entrepreneurs that manage to solve the initial collective action problem. The psychological effect assumes that voters are aware of the workings of the mechanical effect: voters form expectations about which parties other voters will vote for. If the voter does not expect that enough other voters will support the newly formed party to pass the effective electoral threshold, the voter expects that his or her vote for the new party will be wasted. The individual voter, whose goal is to influence the outcome of the election, will therefore abandon the new alternative and turn to a more established party. Without credible signals about how strong the new party actually might be, potential new party voters will be insecure about how widespread support for it is, and hence – *ceteris paribus* – they will form the expectation that the new party will not get enough votes. Therefore, they will refrain from supporting it.

Golder (2003, p. 23) develops this line of reasoning nicely, and suggests an explanation for party-system stability drawing on evolutionary game theory. He shows how voters become coordinated on a set of established parties over time, and how path-dependent processes make it harder for them to switch 'paths' and

coordinate on some newcomer party: 'Once an equilibrium is reached, it is extremely difficult for voters to individually switch their support to a new party. Thus it is not sufficient for new parties to be preferred by large numbers of people for it to achieve success. There are significant coordination problems to overcome as well'.

2.3. The problem of having well established and powerful competitors

As if these two obstacles – 'the collective action problem among potential party entrepreneurs' and 'the problem of getting voters to vote for new parties' – were not enough, there is a third factor, perhaps the most forceful when it comes to pushing new parties to the periphery. Because the market for votes is a zero-sum game, political parties already established in parliaments do not – *ceteris paribus* – wish to see any new competitors on this market at all.

This argument is a recurrent theme in the literature on 'cartel parties'. Established parties are said to have formed a cartel on the market for votes to exploit the resources provided by the state, and hence exclude newcomers from representation (cf. Detterbeck 2005; Blyth and Katz 2005; Katz and Mair 1995). In fact, Lipset and Rokkan's (1967, p. 61) own attempt to explain the freezing process resembles this argument. They underscore how important it is to note what took place when democracy began to consolidate through the introduction of universal suffrage. The party organizations had to adapt to this new situation and transform into mass party organizations in order to connect with the electorate, and hence be able to catch as many votes as possible. These parties – the 'original' or 'early' players in the evolving party systems – constituted an oligopoly in the market for votes. This, of course, like in all kinds of markets, gave these early players an important head start over all potential future challengers.

At the same time, the 'early players' got hold of useful instruments to guarantee their representation. In fact, they got the great advantage of constructing and controlling the rules of the game that structure the possibilities for newcomers to enter publicly elected assemblies. The importance for parties of being able to adjust the rules concerning the electoral system and other types of institutions, like public party finance for instance, cannot be overestimated if we want to understand party-system stability (cf. Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Boix 1999). As Geddes (1995) concludes, political institutions often reflect the interests of those who devised them.

This way of analysing party-system stability is intimately related to a strand in the economic literature which considers why it is the case that newly formed firms often have a hard time establishing themselves in pre-existing markets for goods or services. The 'early players', i.e. the parties that originally got established in the formative years of party systems, got what the economics have dubbed a 'first-mover advantage' (cf. Rajshree and Gort 2001). Their position as first movers allowed them to use strategies such as 'entry deterrence' (cf. Schmalensee 1978), and to devise different kinds of institutional 'barriers to entry' (cf. Demsetz 1982) to increase the

costs to newcomers of competing with established players (see Mueller 1997 for further discussion).

When the 'freezing process' is analyzed through these analytical lenses, with the help of concepts like 'cartels', 'first-mover advantage', 'entry deterrence' and 'barriers to entry', it becomes clear that explanations of party-system stability can be and ought to be placed in the 'actor-centred historical institutionalist' tradition (Thelen 1999). Here, the concept of 'path dependence' is often used to understand the mechanisms underlying stability, continuity and inertia. Paul Pierson (2000, p. 81) illustrates processes of path dependence nicely. He notes that power structures tend to be stable and hard to alter as a result of 'early players' who get control over a political arena, and 'achieve a position of influence first, and are able to use that position to consolidate their hold on a particular "political space". [... G]etting there first often confers very substantial advantages in politics'.

Path-dependent processes kick in as a consequence of the rational behaviour of powerful early players, and these processes make original parties stronger as time passes by. Success fosters success, and thus early players increase their number of members (who contribute monetary and personnel resources), they gain experience and tactical skills for each electoral campaign, and they develop important contacts with mass media and important interest groups, which further strengthens their advantage over potential challengers.

To understand the 'freezing process' in this way is to embrace the insight that the rational behaviour of established parties explains why newcomers have such limited manoeuvering room and such a hard time entering parliaments. This is also the way in which Mair (1983, 1997a) attempts to make the freezing of party systems intelligible: it is the established parties' ability to *adapt* to challengers and changing circumstances, and their ability to *control* the political agenda, that make newcomers so disadvantaged on the market for votes. In fact, if we look at the adaptation argument empirically, it finds support: mainstream parties seem to have a consistent tendency to adapt to public opinion shifts (cf. Adams *et al.* 2006).[2] This insight turns the causal relationship of structurally oriented theories around: it is not the electorate or the 'class structure' that determines the activities of political parties and the design of party systems, but rather, the political parties that decide what sorts of political conflicts are allowed on the public political agenda.

Three influential scholars – Schattschneider, Schumpeter and Sartori – have developed concepts that are useful for analyses that attempt to explain how and why established party organizations are able to hold back new competitors from the

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2 We find an interesting version of the adaptation theme in Meguid (2005), although it is meant as a description of niche parties rather than new parties: whether an established political party chooses to adopt the newcomer's political positions seems to decide the electoral fortunes of the newcomer. This further underscores the importance of how established political parties can act as a threshold to push newcomers back to the political periphery.

market for votes. All three of them criticize structural theories and turn the relationship between independent and dependent variables around: politicians and political parties are analyzed as independent variables, a society's conflict structure as the dependent variable. All of the stress the importance of analysing the supply side of political markets, rather than narrowly focusing on the demand side.

Schattschneider (1960: 66, 69, 102) developed the concept 'mobilization of bias' to underscore that we ought not to analyze political parties as organizational mirrors of what political conflicts exist between social classes in a given society. Instead, political parties need to be analyzed as active subjects with the ability to manipulate public opinion so that they themselves are favoured and potential challengers that wish to bring new issues up to public debate are pushed to the periphery.[3] Schumpeter (1976: 270) used the concept of 'the manufactured will' to capture the same idea: that politicians can actively affect and mould public opinion to their own benefit. Finally, Sartori (1969: 84) launched the concept of 'translation handling' to show how political parties are always actively occupied with translating some of the many possible conflicts in society onto the *public* political agenda, while deliberately toning down other conflicts and keeping them away from political debate.

2.4. Summary

Each of the three perspectives presented above is, by itself, a good instrument for explaining stability in party systems. However, when presented in the stepwise fashion that I have used above, they work together to provide a powerful tool for making party-system stability intelligible. The perspectives are related to each other in the following manner: Those few potential political party organizations that survive the first threshold, the problem of collective action, face the next one, that of getting enough voters interested in the new programme being launched. If the second threshold is overcome, established parties become aware of the new challenger, and use their superior resources to keep the challenger away from the political limelight. Note also that a potential party entrepreneur's awareness of the first and second thresholds makes it even less probable that someone will step forward and bear the costs (financial, social, and in terms of time) of forming a new political party.

3. Conclusion

Most students of parties and party systems are acquainted with Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) classic piece. It is notable that it has become famous for its empirical observations about party-system stability rather than for its explanatory contributions. Still today there seems to be agreement that there is a lack of

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3   Mair (1997b) discusses in detail how Schattschneider's perspective can be applied to explain party-system stability.

theoretically grounded explanations of party-system stability (cf. Golder 2003; Mair 1997a), and it is rare that scholars attempt to make party-system stability intelligible in a way that is grounded in methodological individualism and rational choice.

The purpose of this article has been to show that our understanding in this regard can be enhanced if we import basic lessons from the rational choice framework in order to elucidate individual-level mechanisms that underlie the freezing process. This, I argue, gives us simpler, hence better, intuitions for why party systems tend to be so stable. Committed to a research program that adheres to the principles of methodological individualism, the assumptions of rational choice, and a mechanism-based approach, I maintain that three complementary models provide us a simpler, and therefore a better understanding of the mechanics underlying the so-called freezing process.

Firstly, 'the problem of collective action' makes it hard for potential political organizations to materialize, and therefore not all interest groups that wish for parliamentary representation actually form political parties. Secondly, the 'problem of voter coordination' makes it hard for new political parties – if their initial collective-action problem is somehow overcome – to gain voter support. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, because the competition for votes is a zero-sum game, well-established and powerful competitors have both the incentives and the instruments to fight newcomers and keep them away from the political arena. Indeed, this third factor is the explanation that Lipset and Rokkan themselves tentatively elaborate upon.

To conclude, it is not surprising that Lipset and Rokkan found such remarkable party-system stability. Instead, the genuinely puzzling fact is why all the parties that have been formed throughout the post-WW2 period were formed in the first place and gained support at all. *These* puzzles are the genuine challenges for political sociology, and for future research on parties and party systems.

Does this mean that an exercise like the one performed here – explaining party-system stability – is trivial? Not at all. Having a good hunch about what explains political stability is a prerequisite for generating hypotheses about political change, or, as Thelen (1999: 399) elegantly put it: 'an understanding of political change is inseparable – and indeed rests on – an analysis of the foundations of political stability.'

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