The Indispensability of Political Parties

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In considering the forces and institutions that enabled democracy to flourish in the postrevolutionary United States, Alexis de Tocqueville paid particular attention to political associations and parties, which he identified as the key institutions of civil society. E.E. Schattschneider, perhaps the most important pre-World War II American student of political parties, put it even more unequivocally, claiming at the start of his now classic work on party government that "political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties." In my own attempt to present a "minimalist conception of democracy," I have stressed the centrality of institutionalized party competition: "Democracy in a complex society may be defined as a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office"--that is, through political parties.

The existence of an opposition--in essence, an alternative government--restrains incumbents. An opposition seeks to reduce the resources available to officeholders and to enlarge the rights available to those out of power. Over time, in both new and revived democracies, conflict between the governing and opposition parties helps establish democratic norms and rules.

Tocqueville stressed that although political associations, by definition, seek to impose their views on the polity, in practice the interplay among them has contributed to the emergence of norms of tolerance and the institutionalization of democratic rights. In the then-emerging democracies of nineteenth-century North America and northern Europe, various groups learned that none of them--neither Catholics nor Protestants, the bourgeoisie nor the landed gentry, adherents nor opponents of monarchy--could eliminate its opposition without destroying the very fabric of society.

Stable democracy requires the creation of a supportive culture that fosters the
acceptance of the rights of opposition, of free speech and assembly, of the rule of law, of regular elections, of turnover in office, and the like. The requirement that incumbents accept the principle of turnover in office is the most difficult to institutionalize, particularly in poor nations with state-dominated economies, where yielding office means not only that incumbent leaders must give up their source of status, power, and income but also that a large coterie of their followers (sometimes millions of people) must yield preferments. Another requirement, almost as difficult as the former, is that parties must have an almost permanent base of support among a significant segment of the population if they are to survive electorally. Parties in new electoral democracies will be inherently unstable unless they become linked to deep-rooted sources of cleavage, as parties in the older, institutionalized Western democracies have been.

Recently, there has been a revival of Tocqueville's emphasis on the role of voluntary associations in making democracy possible, but almost all of the discussion has ignored the fact that he gave priority to political associations (the most important of which are parties) because of their role in stimulating other associational activity. George Kateb has correctly noted that Tocqueville's decision to focus upon parties at a time (the early 1830s) when they were weak and noninstitutionalized "indicates a rare prescience; that he also . . . thought them indispensable to the life of a healthy democracy is even more remarkable." 2

What do parties fight about? Tocqueville asserted that there are two kinds of parties: those that emphasize ideology and those that emphasize interests. The former "cling to principles rather than to consequences. . . . In them, private interest, which always plays the chief part in political passions, is more studiously veiled under the pretext of the public good." The latter, which primarily represent interests, "glow with a fictitious zeal; their language is vehement, but their conduct is timid and irresolute" (I, 175). The most important and general source of conflicting interests, of course, is class.

The great thinkers of the nineteenth century emphasized class divisions. Not only Marx, but Tocqueville himself pointed to an inherent conflict between the privileged and the poor. He wrote of "those two great divisions which have always existed in free communities. . . . The object of the one is to limit and that of the other to extend the authority of the people"; and he affirmed that "aristocratic or [End Page 49] democratic passions may be easily detected at the bottom of all parties" (I, 178). Tocqueville anticipated the ultimate triumph of the poor once the idea of equality had fully emerged, since the economically deprived were much more numerous than the advantaged. Karl Marx, who much admired Tocqueville and read him closely, also emphasized the continuing nature of the class struggle; unlike Tocqueville, however, Marx called attention to the ways that the power and cultural hegemony of the privileged strata would produce "false consciousness." In other words, the poor would accept the values of the upper class (an argument more fully developed by Antonio Gramsci).
Class, Cleavages, and Elections

Four decades ago, I described elections as the "democratic class struggle," noting that "in virtually every economically developed country, the lower income groups vote mainly for the parties of the left, while the higher income groups vote mainly for the parties of the right." Yet it would be an exaggeration to say that economic interests are the only important determinant of political cleavage. There are a number of other bases of cleavage. Cultural differences deriving from ethnoreligious variations, for example, have helped to define the orientation and social bases of major parties almost everywhere.

In the United States, this has been seen in the tension between "insiders" (white Anglo-Saxon and Nordic native-born Protestants) and "outsiders" (more recent immigrants, Catholics, Jews, and blacks). The former have been found disproportionately among the Federalists, Whigs, and Republicans, while the latter have found their political home among the Democrats. The former have exhibited more puritanical, individualistic, and in the twentieth century, antistatist tendencies—the values of the Protestant sectarians, the dominant religious tradition. The latter have been less moralistic and more communitarian, group-oriented, and state-centered. While the story of American politics has obviously been much more complex than this scheme indicates, the United States has been fortunate that the two natural divisions that Tocqueville wrote about have been encapsulated for over two centuries in two enduring political camps.

Democracy and modern political systems took longer to emerge in Europe. In the northern, largely Protestant countries, the struggle between liberals and conservatives gradually produced a democratic culture without revolutionary turmoil, as demonstrated by the preservation of constitutional monarchies in Britain, Scandinavia, and the Low Countries. Efforts at democratic transformation in the predominantly Catholic or Orthodox countries of Southern and Central Europe were marked by tension between the emerging national state, which sought to dominate, and the Church, which tried to maintain its historic corporate rights. Monarchies were overthrown, but their democratic successors lacked legitimacy and stability and were threatened by severe ideological cleavages. Many states in these regions were governed by nondemocratic regimes until the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Although over two-thirds of the countries in the world are now electoral democracies, widespread popular rule is a fairly recent phenomenon. As of 1959, I was able to classify only 15 countries as stable democracies. The remainder were either unstable democracies or dictatorships. Outside of Canada and the United States, efforts to establish democracy in the Western hemisphere had largely failed. Almost all Latin American countries lacked some favorable conditions for democracy, but above all they were unable to create or institutionalize competitive party systems. Organizations calling themselves parties had been formed repeatedly since the early nineteenth century, but for the most part, they proved to be unstable populist movements, regional groupings, or personalistic formations that were unable to retain their
base in a crisis. By contrast, the so-called third wave of democracy that began to emerge in the mid-1970s has been characterized by competitive party systems, but it remains to be seen how many parties in Latin America will be able to form enduring democratic normative structures and deep-rooted partisan bases. Many of these parties are class-linked, which is a hopeful sign, but some (as in Peru and Venezuela) have already moved away from democracy.

The countries that have gained their independence since World War II have had a disparate history. Prior to the start of the third wave, only some former British colonies that experienced the rule of law and the beginnings of elections before independence had achieved a record of democratic success. Few of the world's more than three dozen Islamic societies can be classified as democratic.

India, the great exception to most empirical generalizations about the social conditions for democracy, has also succeeded in remaining democratic without stable national parties. The Congress party is a partial exception. Indian democracy appears to have been sustained by major cross-cutting cleavages--caste, race, ethnicity, religion, economic class, language--that provide the underlying structures for long-term conflictual relationships as well as alliances. These cleavages persist even after party allegiances break down. The continuing strength of British political traditions, especially within the political class, including the civil service and the judiciary, has also contributed to India's democratic stability.

The Postcommunist World

With the fall of communism and the breakup of the Soviet Union, the list of aspiring democracies that have attempted open and competitive elections has grown enormously. Russia and Ukraine, the two most populous and important of these states, have multicandidate elections but remain extremely shaky polities. Both lack stable party systems. The Communists are the only institutionalized national party with a stable base; others rise and fall from election to election. Some of these are composed of personal followings; others are regional associations that do not offer candidates outside their own areas in the constituency contests. For the most part, noncommunist efforts at party-building have been unable to tie into basic cleavages, particularly class.

Linking class or socioeconomic divisions to parties is difficult in the former Soviet Union because the Communists not only are the party of the old ruling class--the nomenklatura or bureaucracy, many of whom are now among the new capitalist elite--but also appeal to the masses. The new (old) rulers in the former Soviet Union defend their claim to power as those in the postcolonial nations once did, in the language of leftist or egalitarian ideologies. They proclaim themselves to be the representatives of the workers and peasants, the trade unions and mass farm organizations. They are, therefore, on both the right and the left.

In the older democratic polities that arose in Europe in the nineteenth century,
the conservatives commanded the national summits, generally including the monarchy, the state church, and the landowning classes, but lacked appeal to the lower classes. They tried to preserve strong state authority. They were challenged by the liberals, with their base in the rising business strata, who sought to dismantle the power of the state and advocated freer trade and religious toleration. The masses, both urban and rural, were "outliers." They eventually formed their own parties when the agrarian-based conservatives and the more urban-based bourgeois liberals, each seeking support from the lower orders, decided to extend the franchise.

Who are the conservatives, the defenders of traditional authority and privileged interests, in countries like Russia or Ukraine today? They are former communists in the higher strata, who defend the status quo while remaining statist and maintaining their ties to labor unions and other mass organizations. Ironically, the presence of strong communist parties presents the greatest obstacle to the emergence of institutionalized class conflict in most former communist countries. This pattern is not unique to the ex-Soviet Union. Mexico offers a good example of a similar system. The ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), despite its leftist ideological veneer, incorporates the economically privileged along with the trade unions and workers, the peasant leagues, and most of the rural population in one electoral bloc. It has taken 70 years for a market-oriented party appealing to the urban business and professional classes and a welfare-oriented party addressing the interests of the proletariat and peasantry to emerge as significant players in the Mexican polity. The PRI still retains its grip [End Page 52] on national power, however, and will probably win the presidential election in 2000. Like the communists in Eastern Europe, it continues to command mass appeal.

Yet institutionalized multiparty systems have emerged in some Eastern European countries, those that had democratic experience prior to the demise of the USSR. Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the Baltic states, for example, had social-democratic, peasant, Christian, and liberal parties before World War II--groups that could reemerge after the downfall of communism, recreating their previous links to major social cleavages. Hence, although Communist successor parties have survived in most of the Eastern-bloc countries to the west of Russia and Ukraine, their electoral democracies are based on a revived political pluralism. Beyond class, other structural cleavages--clerical/anticlerical, ethnoreligious, and regional--have become associated anew with parties that have been able to find loyal mass followings.

A Postmaterialist World?

The Western world appears to have entered a new political phase, roughly dating back to the mid-1960s, characterized by the emergence of so-called postmaterialist issues--a cleaner environment, equal status for women and minorities, improvements in education and culture, a more permissive morality (particularly in regard to familial and sexual issues), and a greater emphasis on rights. This has been perceived by some students of politics as the consequence of a "postindustrial revolution" that has introduced new sources of social and political cleavage, giving rise to new parties and rearranging the bases of
support of older ones. The underlying economic analysis has been associated with the writings of Daniel Bell, while the emphasis on sociopolitical issues is linked to the work of Ronald Inglehart. Bell and others have sought to document the cultural effects of structural shifts that have sharply increased the importance of knowledge-based and public-service occupations (which entail greater reliance on universities and research and development centers) at the expense of production-related jobs. Inglehart and others have pointed out that this structural shift has opened up new lines of cleavage between those involved with "materialist," production-related issues and the increasing numbers of people employed in the postindustrial high-tech economy. The latter typically are recipients of higher education, place greater emphasis on postmaterialist quality-of-life issues, and hold liberal views on social and environmental issues. Such values are difficult to institutionalize as party issues, but groups like the Green parties and the "new politics" tendencies within the traditional left-wing parties have sought to capitalize on them.

Nevertheless, the old issues and cleavages derivative from "industrial society" still remain the more important source of policy division and electoral choice, as the "materialistically oriented" workers and the self-employed (including peasants) make up a much larger group than the intelligentsia. The biggest changes in party alignments have resulted from the perceived failure of the social-democratic welfare state to solve key economic problems, which has produced a renewal of classically liberal (free-market) approaches, sometimes presented by their advocates as solutions to quality-of-life concerns as well.

But the central question remains: How does a polity develop parties firmly rooted in cleavages if there are no stark differences in interests and values at the outset? What can be done in Russia, for example? Some of the consequences of adopting alternative constitutional systems can be predicted. Parliamentary government makes for a strong executive, while dividing power between a president and congress produces a head of government with less authority. A presidential system should encourage the formation of two broad alliances or parties, as in the United States. Yet this has not happened in Russia or Ukraine. In parliamentary polities, first-past-the-post electoral systems encourage regional diversity; proportional representation presses groups to create national party lists. Russia and Ukraine are trying both, following the German model. Both countries still have numerous "parties." Russia will have 28 party lists in the proportional-representation part of the 1999 Duma election, while 30 parties were on the 1998 Ukrainian ballot. Not surprisingly, the Communists and their allies have won impressive pluralities. So far, there is little sign of an ideologically coherent party system emerging in either country. Michael McFaul suggests that the basic division in Russia is between supporters and opponents of the old statist social and political systems and that "class divisions and ethnic identities" are subsumed under this division.

In new democratic polities, political elites may heavily influence the nature of parties: for good, as in the postrevolutionary United States, or for ill, as in postrevolutionary France and nineteenth-century Latin America. Scott Mainwaring has argued that in some third-wave democracies with weak party
systems, personalism or elite interests, rather than cleavages, have formed the basis of most so-called parties, further weakening these fledgling democracies. The evolution of strong parties based on deep cleavages appears to result not only from the existence of these divisions; it may also be an outcome of a mix of elite behavior and fortuitous history, as recent Iberian political history demonstrates. Of course, higher national income, more widespread education, a less expansive state, a vital civil society, and religious values that foster individualism will also help those seeking to institutionalize a competitive party system.

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Notes


5. For a case study within a private government, see Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow, and James S. Coleman, *Union Democracy* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1956), 14-16.


