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Post-Democratic Party Politics

In recent years many scholars have diagnosed a crisis of party politics. This article considers recent changes in the UK and Europe that appear to challenge this idea. Exploring Colin Crouch's notion of 'post-democratic' party politics and considering his diagnosis of shifts in parties' agenda setting, organisation and communication, the article considers evidence of post-democratic politics and the possibility for future renewal.

Key Words: Political Parties; Post-Democracy; Party Functions; Podemos; Participation; Renewal

Affiliation: Dr Kate Dommett is Lecturer in the Public Understanding of Politics and Deputy Director of the Sir Bernard Crick Centre at the University of Sheffield.

Introduction

Political parties have for centuries played a seminal role in Western democratic systems. In their ideal form they link citizens with the state by providing opportunities for participation and representation. And yet, in recent decades the role of parties has come into question. Alongside declines in party membership and affiliation,¹ parties' themselves are seen to have changed; becoming post-democratic organisations focused on maximising electoral gains rather than enabling participation. This article examines this idea in light of recent changes in party politics within the UK and Europe. Building on Colin Crouch's diagnosis of shifts in parties' agenda setting, organisation and communication, the article considers evidence of post-democratic politics and the possibility for future renewal.

Democracy and Parties

As a longstanding component of democratic politics parties fulfil a range of different functions. These can broadly be characterised under two headings. The first is participatory as parties

work to aggregate social interests, represent groups and facilitate participation with the political process. The second is electoral and conveys the role parties play in recruiting elites, running political campaigns, offering voting choices and governing when elected into office. These functions overlap and intersect but, for the most part, parties in their ideal state are seen to balance both objectives; working to facilitate participation and, through such activity, advance electoral objectives.

In recent years the balance between parties' functions is, however, seen to have altered with electoral aims coming to predominate at the expense of participation.² This trend is significant because whilst parties' electoral role is key to the democratic system, it is the 'promise of a political order that includes citizens in the process of political decision making' that is most commonly associated with democracy.³ It is for this reason parties are deemed to have become post-democratic. For Crouch three forms of interlinked change have reduced the capacity for ordinary people to participate, they are characterised here as: agenda setting, party organisation and communication.⁴

Crouch's work has proved highly influential, yet over 10 years on from the publication of his book recent developments appear to challenge his thesis. From the rise of 'insurgent' parties such as the Scottish National Party (SNP) and UK Independence Party (UKIP), increases in party membership and new participative parties such as Podemos and Syriza, there are suggestions that parties are improving their democratic credentials. This article considers these examples to reveal an ongoing tension between parties' electoral and participative functions and the endurance of post-democratic tendencies.

Agenda Setting

The first strand of Crouch's post-democracy argument diagnoses a significant shift in the way parties set agendas. Looking back to an era of mass party politics, he describes how parties linked citizens with the state by reflecting the 'concerns and interests of those parts of the electorate which the party most seeks to represent'.⁵ This created strong representative bonds,

whereby parties would aggregate specific (often class) interests into a political agenda. As society has altered parties were seen to need to alter their approach, no longer aggregating sectional interests, but rather producing an agenda that would maximise electoral appeal. This caused parties to move away from a bottom up, inclusive model of politics, to adopt a top down approach where leaders, informed by professional expertise, would develop an agenda. For Crouch this resulted in post-democratic tendencies as participatory opportunities were eroded and political choice was reduced.

Mainstream political parties continue to utilise expert advice and remain dominated by party elites, however, there are signs that alternative approaches to agenda setting have emerged. In the UK in recent years much has been made of the rise of 'insurgent' parties and the capacity of parties, such as the SNP and UKIP, to promote populist agendas.⁶ From UKIP's anti-establishment emphasis and the SNP's anti-Westminster rhetoric, it appeared that an alternative, type of party was emerging that was more connected to the public. And yet, it is important to be careful here – these 'insurgent' parties do not necessarily represent an alternative model of agenda setting. Whilst they may have been willing to divert from the 'centre ground' of politics and advance distinctive populist agendas, it appears that parties continue to be formed on a top down rather than bottom up basis. With the exception of the Green Party - with its commitment to member-led decision making - these parties are dominated by charismatic leaders who have developed populist messages that resonate with voters, meaning that whilst such parties are able to tap into public frustration, they do not directly tackle the trends highlighted by Crouch.⁷ As such their ability to challenge post-democratic tendencies is highly questionable.

Beyond the UK, there are more radical examples of parties forming to advance alternative agendas. The rise of anti-austerity parties Syriza and Podemos in Greece and Spain show the potential for parties to act as vehicles for alternative political ideas expressed through public protest, with Podemos and Syriza developing populist anti-austerity agendas that reflected

public dissatisfaction with mainstream parties' responses to the financial crisis. However, again, it is important to sound a note of caution. Whilst both parties were founded on the back of public protests, agenda setting has come to be informed by other considerations. Indeed, Pablo Iglesias, leader of Podemos, argued that 'it would make no sense at this point to focus on zones of struggle [i.e. political issues] that would alienate us from the majority, who are not 'on the left''.⁸ As such the agenda offered by the party has been tailored to maximise popular appeal in an attempt to gain political office, drawing on opinion polls to determine policy (a practice for which it has been critiqued⁹). This suggests that the same pressures driving post-democratic agenda setting in mainstream UK parties are also evident in new, insurgent or populist parties. As such the emergence of new agendas and parties should not be automatically seen to tackle the post-democratic trends highlighted by Crouch as the tension between electoral goals and participation remains.

Party Organisation

Second, Crouch highlights a change in party organisation which he views as a key driver of dislocation between parties and the public. Whilst once, Crouch describes, parties were structured in concentric circles in which leaders were drawn from activists, who were drawn from party membership, parties are now seen to have hollowed out, becoming 'a formal shell' or an 'ellipse'.¹⁰ This trend is connected to the agenda setting practices highlighted above, but it extends beyond this to describe the way in which parties' link to local communities. In essence, parties have become increasingly alien organisations and hence fail to inspire loyalty or participation.

Again, there appear to be signs that parties' post-democratic tendencies in these regards are changing. At the most basic level there has been a recent increase in party membership numbers. The SNP have seen membership figures rise from 25,000 in December 2013 to around 110,000 members in June 2015, with a 10,000 increase for UKIP in the same period and a 47,200 increase for the Green Party, suggesting increased participation.¹¹ In addition, established

parties appear to have recognised the legitimacy problems provoked by an electoral focus and have begun to build new connections with citizens. In France, for example, the socialist party enabled citizens to register as party 'supporters' to vote in the party's leadership election. In the UK the Labour Party adopted community organising techniques to create more direct relationships with citizens. Whilst at the EU level the European Green Party utilised an open primary to select its lead candidates for the Green campaign. These initiatives suggest progress, but the integration of these practices does not necessarily counter post-democratic tendencies as they are often supplementary to, rather than replacements for existing practices. Indeed, it is unclear how supporters are able to inform agenda setting after a new leader is selected, whether new members will have influence, and therefore whether the top down model of party organisation is challenged by these changes.

Beyond the UK it is possible to discern the emergence of radically new modes of organisation. Podemos in particular has been singled out because of 'the level of participation in the project'.¹² Whilst dominated by charismatic political leaders, the party is underpinned by over a thousand 'circles' or branches in which citizens come together to discuss ideas, formulate proposals and campaign. This model appears to show the capacity for a more participatory, if somewhat 'chaotic' form of party organisation.¹³ And yet, as Podemos has developed the role and status of circles has been subject to challenge as leaders turn to focus groups and polling to develop electorally viable messages. This renders it unclear how local groups connect with national figures, and how the democratic energy that initially surrounded the party can be sustained.¹⁴ Once again it therefore appears that whilst innovations can be discerned, their capacity to counter post-democratic tendencies can be called into doubt.

Communication

Finally, Crouch depicts a shift in political communication which attests to a wider trend concerning the consumerisation of politics. Whilst parties were once central pillars of communities and spoke directly through local branches to citizens, he argues they have become

reliant on new techniques and technologies to communicate their message due to a collapse in party membership. These trends are seen to present barriers to participation as parties are seen to now 'rarely aspire to any complexity of language or argument' and aim 'not to engage in discussion but to persuade to buy'.¹⁵

This criticism reflects a notable shift in the way politicians' talk, evident when comparing speeches from 1945 with the modern day, but this aspect of Crouch's analysis could be challenged on the basis of recent trends. Whilst parties undoubtedly adopt sound-bites and focus local campaigning interventions on discerning electoral support, they have not entirely neglected more nuanced forms of political communication. The Scottish independence referendum campaign is a case in point as here political parties – as part of wider campaigns – helped to inform and lead political debate about the virtues of a 'yes' or 'no' vote. Elsewhere the rise of community organising has led party activists to focus on conversations with voters and common campaigns rather than simple electoral mobilisation activities. For example, the Secretary General of the Labour Party argued in 2012 that 'We're changing from a party that floods voters with leaflets delivered by a handful of volunteers; to being a movement, having hundreds of thousands of conversations with people'.¹⁶ Admittedly Labour is utilising community organising to also advance its electoral objectives, but it is also helping to rebuild links to the public and engage in a more direct and ordinary form of communication.

There are also signs that party communication is adapting to new technology, with the rise of social media and online forums enabling parties to engage citizens directly rather than through the media. Whilst 'official' party channels have exhibited little evidence of change in approach,¹⁷ many unofficial blogs and sites run by party activists and representatives show the potential for alternative forms of political communication that educate citizens and invite participation.

In addition, the example of Podemos shows how politicians can utilise the media for their own ends. Iglesias has cultivated a television persona to help shape debate, explaining how '[b]efore and during the campaign, our work on TV talk shows aimed to introduce new concepts and

arguments that would help to define the political battlefield to our advantage'.¹⁸ In this way party communication is adapting in attempts to reconnect with citizens, and yet it is unclear whether this is to enhance participation or simply maximise electoral outcomes – rendering the impact of such changes on post-democratic trends opaque.

Post-Democratic Politics?

There have clearly been changes to the political environment and Crouch's analysis precisely highlights a number of these. Whilst there are signs in the UK and beyond that alternative ways of engaging in party politics can arise, there remains a clear tension between parties' electoral and participative functions that makes it difficult to overcome post-democratic tendencies.

Crouch himself called for reform of political practice and improvements in opportunities for citizen participation to tackle these trends, but this article has shown the challenges faced in enacting these forms of change. Whilst it is possible for parties to present new agendas and create new opportunities for participation, balancing these against electoral imperatives is exceedingly challenging and can often result in barriers that limit attempts to counter post-democratic tendencies. This suggests that in the future parties will continue to face accusations of illegitimacy and decline unless a new balance can be struck between participative and electoral functions.

Notes:

¹ Ingrid van Biezen and Thomas Poguntke. (2014) 'The Decline of Membership-Based Politics', *Party Politics*, 20(2): 205-216; Russell Dalton and Martin Wattenberg, *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Martin Smith. (2014) 'A Crisis of Political Parties' in Richards, D. and Smith, M. (eds) *Institutional Crisis in 21st Century Britain*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan: 101-124.

² Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, (London: Verso, 2013); Paul Webb, *Democracy and Political Parties*, (London: Hansard Society, 2007).

³ Hubertus Buchstein and Dirk Jörke, "Redescribing Democracy," *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought and Conceptual History* 11 (2007): 193.

⁴ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2004): 2.

⁵ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2004): 70.

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- ⁶ John Curtice. (2014), 'Insurgent' parties gaining support from voters', *The Independent*, 31 December, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/insurgent-parties-gaining-support-from-voters-9952295.html>, accessed 28.8.2015.
- ⁷ Amir Abedi and Thomas Carl Lundberg. (2009) 'Doomed To Failure? UKIP And The Organisational Challenges Facing Right-Wing Populist Anti-Political Establishment Parties', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 62 No. 1, 2009, 74.
- ⁸ Pablo Iglesias. (2015), 'Understanding Podemos', *New Left Review*, 93: 16.
- ⁹ Isidro López, Emmanuel Rodríguez, & Pablo Carmona. (2015) 'The Future of Podemos', <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/05/podemos-iglesias-spain-elections-populist/>, accessed 26.8.2015.
- ¹⁰ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2004): 72.
- ¹¹ Richard Keen. (2015) 'Membership of Political Parties', *House of Commons Library briefing Paper No. SN05125*: 3.
- ¹² Luke Stobart. (2014) 'Understanding Podemos', Left Flank, 5 November, <http://left-flank.org/2014/11/05/explaining-podemos-1-15-m-counter-politics/>, accessed 27.8.2015.
- ¹³ Luke Stobart. (2014) 'Understanding Podemos', Left Flank, 5 November, <http://left-flank.org/2014/11/05/explaining-podemos-1-15-m-counter-politics/>, accessed 27.8.2015.
- ¹⁴ Isidro López, Emmanuel Rodríguez, & Pablo Carmona. (2015) 'The Future of Podemos', <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/05/podemos-iglesias-spain-elections-populist/>, accessed 26.8.2015.
- ¹⁵ Colin Crouch, *Coping with Post-Democracy*, (Fabian Society Pamphlet, 2000); Ralph Negrine, *The Transformation of Political Communication*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008); James Stanyer, *Modern Political Communication*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).
- ¹⁶ Iain McNichol. (2013) 'Labour's faith in community organising will lead it to victory', *The New Statesman*, 21 September, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/09/labours-faith-community-organising-will-lead-it-victory>, accessed 27.8.2015.
- ¹⁷ Darren Lilleker, Mark Pack and Nigel Jackson. (2010) 'Political Parties and Web 2.0: The Liberal Democrat Perspective', *Politics*, 30(2), 105–112.
- ¹⁸ Pablo Iglesias. (2015), 'Understanding Podemos', *New Left Review*, 93: 17.