What if Political Parties were to disappear or be abolished? What would happen to ‘Real-Existing” Democracies?

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A famous Harvard professor of political science, E. E. Schattschneider, made the following apodictic statement: “The political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.” Leaving aside that the first part is manifestly false, I suspect that today, over 70 years later, most political scientists would agree with the second. This helps to explain why they devote so much time and energy to analyzing parties, the elections they compete in and the parliaments they staff – in “real-existing” democracies or REDs.

Note, however, that Schattschneider did not claim “exclusivity” for political parties (PPs). He left open the possibility that other forms of representation and competition could also be indispensable (and went on himself to write a fundamental text, The Semi-Sovereign People, about the role of interest groups in American politics). And he prudently qualified his statement by inserting “modern” – i.e. explicitly restricting his observation to recent and present democracies and implicitly leaving open the possibility that in the future, “post-modern” democracies might become something different. It is precisely this latter gambit that has given me my opening for speculation: “If PPs were to disappear or be abolished, what might change so that REDs of tomorrow would become something other than what we know them to be today.”

The reader is reminded that PPs are a relatively recent political invention – first, they existed only in parliament (e.g. 18th century Sweden with its “Caps and Hats”) and later in the electorate by the middle of the 19th century (e.g. Great Britain ca. 1830s). Prior to that most democracies, e.g. Greek polis, Swiss cantons or Italian city-states, functioned without them and even today many local elections are “non-partisan.” Moreover, once they had
been invented and entrenched themselves (with the help of carefully tailored electoral laws), they have repeatedly changed their internal organizational structure and external relation with followers and voters. Peter Maier and Richard Katz have argued that what they call Cartel-Parties are the latest stage in a process of institutional evolution that began with the Parties of Notables in the 18th century, followed by the Mass, class-based, Parties that emerged toward the end of the 19th century and, then, the ’Catch-All’ Parties that came to dominate the latter half of the 20th Century.

**The Evidence of Decline:**

By now, there is an accumulation of ample evidence that something has been happening to PPs – and virtually all of this evidence points in a negative direction:

1. less members and voluntary contributors of money or labor
2. less citizens identify with them; more label themselves as “independents”
3. less consistent voting or more volatility from election to election.
4. less perceived difference between party programs; more convergence toward a common center.
5. less predictable electoral outcomes and lower margins of victory with the difference being made by so-called “swing voters” that have the least partisan ID.
6. more “anti-party” candidates with little or not previous history of party participation; even candidates “buying” existing parties or creating them *ex novo*.
7. more “all-party governing coalitions” and more “above party - überparteilich” ministers in cabinets.

And yet PPs persist and have been generally successful in defending their formal monopoly over nominations, campaigns, elections and the process of government formation. Recently, they have been less successful in preventing the formation of new parties, but more successful in preventing their participation in government.

**Three Scenarios for the Demise of Parties:**

1. A **gradual** one in which citizens increasingly ignore them by not joining, not believing their programs, not voting predictably for them with the
balance of electoral victory increasingly in the hands of a growing
number of better educated, more informed and more politically
discriminating independents. The future of PPs is especially sensitive
to the factor of aging. Older citizens are more likely to continue to
identify with the party they joined or voted for when they were young;
today’s youth is much less likely to identify with any PP and it is not
clear whether as they get older, they will eventually find one to which
they will identify. PPs could just “wither away” incrementally from one
generation to another until their relevance would be purely symbolic.
More and more candidates and elected deputies would call themselves
“independents” or “above-party,” more voters would demand American-
style primaries to break the control of party oligarchies over
nominations; campaigns would be run more and more by loose
coalitions of parties rather than individual ones; more of those elected
under one party label would switch to another one in parliament or vote
there without regard for party discipline.

2. A more dramatic scenario in which the eventual success of a populist
‘flash’ candidate or movement that would change the rules by lowering
the barriers to nominating candidates and gaining representation
through elections with lower thresholds and – most importantly – by
eliminating public funding for PPs or by changing the mode for
calculating them—the bedrock upon which today’s Cartel-parties are
built. Predictably, these populist winners would fail to please their
diverse supporters and decline in popularity, but they would have
succeeded in the meantime in weakening or destroying existing,
sclerotic party systems.

3. A technological one in which the progressive importance of
information and communications technology in the conduct of all
aspects of elections would either be resisted or inadequately exploited
by existing PPs. Alternative ‘virtual’ groups of citizens would
spontaneously emerge to select candidates, raise funds, finance and
even conduct campaigns, Moreover, by facilitating more direct
contacts between citizens and their representatives—e.g. through
‘smart voting’ arrangements that match the preferences of voters and
candidates, monitoring systems that continuously follow the voting behavior of parliamentary deputies; even periodic exercises over the internet that provide for exchanges of information about citizen preference ex ante – before agendas have been set – the role of parties as permanent intermediaries between citizens and their government could literally evaporate. One could even imagine, as we shall see, a system in which any citizen could nominate him or herself or choose his or her own constituency.

Needless to say, one’s speculation about “what, if … no parties” would be rather different depending on which of these scenarios [or which combination of them] plays itself out in the future of a given polity.

The potential disappearance of PPs is not just a functional matter. It is also likely to be a spatial one. Almost all REDs are multi-layered systems of government, with parties presumably playing a key role in coordinating citizen allegiances and political alliances from the local, to the provincial, to the national, even to the supra-national level of aggregation (at least, in the case of Europe). Another symptom of their decline has been increase in the diversity of sub-national party systems with only loose and opportunistic linkages to those at a higher level. PPs would probably first disappear at the level of municipal, cantonal or county elections where local knowledge and personal connections can more easily substitute for the declining organizational or ideological capacity of national PPs. At the level of Europe, PPs have yet to appear since most of the functions usually attributed to them are performed exclusively by national parties loosely grouped into party federations or secretariats in the European Parliament.

The Four Functions of PPs

Scholars doing empirical work on PPs in Western Europe and North America have inductively identified the “functions” that they are alleged to perform in all REDs. Usually, they have found four of them. The names differ, but there is considerable agreement on their substantive content. What is not so clear is their theoretical status. While they bare a superficial similarity to the famous four “AGIL” functions that sociological theorists such as Talcott Parsons postulated were indispensable for the survival of any social system, as we shall see below PPs seem to have survived despite a marked decline in
the performance of all of these tasks.

1) Political parties, first and foremost, should structure the electoral process by nominating competing candidates for office, by recruiting persons to participate actively in campaigns, and, thereby, by offering to citizens aggregated in territorial constituencies a choice between alternative sets of leaders. The successful performance of this function becomes considerably more difficult if one adds the caveat, proposed by Norberto Bobbio, that the alternative products offered to the “electoral consumer” should be real and significant in terms of citizen preferences. Let us call this the function of “electoral structuration.”

2) Political parties should provide most citizens with a stable and distinctive set of ideas and goals (symbols) that anchor their expectations about democracy, orient them in a general way toward policy options, and make them feel part of the process of collective choice. Needless to say, this function of “symbolic integration” makes a significant contribution to success in performing the function of electoral structuration, although there is reason to believe that party identification can only be acquired gradually across several political generations.

3) Political parties, once they have competed in the electoral process, should be capable of forming a government and of providing an internal structure to the legislative process—whether they do so alone or in alliance with other parties and whether the executive and legislative posts are independently or concurrently filled. Note that, in order to do this well, parties should be capable of maintaining a consistently high level of internal discipline during their terms in office, although to make this a strict functional requisite would surely disqualify many electoral groupings from acquiring the label of parties. We will call this the “governing function.”

4) Underlying all of the above functions is a single assumption: Political parties must be capable of aggregating the interests and passions of a significant proportion of the citizenry by channeling the expectations of these individuals, families, firms, associations, and movements through their internal processes and producing a program that mixes public policies in such a way as to satisfy the general demands of their constituents. It should be noted that it is not required (or even expected) that the parties monopolize the
“aggregation function” and, hence, force all individuals and collectivities to process their expectations through partisan channels. The process of representation is capacious enough than some persons and groups should find room to interact directly with authorities; it should be the system of political parties, however, that plays the most prominent role in packaging the more discrete and fragmentary demands into more manageable general objectives and proposals.

But when the system of political parties as an ensemble does not fulfill the above four “core” tasks, or even when it finds itself competing extensively with other intermediaries to do so, one should question whether or not political parties are really so indispensable for the consolidation or even the simple perpetuation of democracy.

Note that I am not claiming that political parties do not make some contribution to the consolidation or functioning of democracy and I am certainly not predicting that they will somehow fade away in either archeo-or neo-democracies. As long as there are elections based on territorial constituencies, there will be organizations that call themselves political parties trying to control the nomination of candidates, to package them under a common label and to win contested seats. What I am claiming is that those organizations are less and less capable of performing the functions that parties have performed historically and that our theorizing about the nature and practice of democracy should be modified accordingly -- up to and including speculation about how constitutional, liberal, representative, capitalist democracy might function without them.

1. Structuring Electoral Competition

“Electoral structuration” is the primary and most visible function for parties, in the sense that it is this activity that constitutes their strongest claim to a distinctive political role. And there is no question that nominating rival candidacies for office and campaigning for the vote of citizens in territorial constituencies have been crucial for their prominence in the eyes of the public at large.

It is in two important regards that existing parties do not seem to be capable of performing well their “historic” function of structuring electoral choices in a reliable and relevant fashion: the rise of nonparty or “antiparty”
candidates and the higher rates of shifting party loyalties. Not only have politicians without the support of major parties managed to get themselves nominated as candidates for high office and run on “antiparty” programs, but they have been rewarded for doing so by the electorate. More and more, one gains the impression that there are independent political entrepreneurs who buy an existing “party brand” or create a new one exclusively for their own purposes, rather than the reverse that is presumed by the party literature. In other words, more and more candidates are selecting parties, rather than parties selecting candidates.

The principal mechanism that PPs used to perform this function has been to simplify voter choice via partisan ideology. Once public opinion survey research revealed what politicians already knew, namely, that with the increase of the franchise to include all adults regardless of taxable income, social class, educational level and/or gender, most of those voting had very low levels of information about politics and little incentive to acquire more in the course of an election, it became all the more important for mass-based parties to provide a general orientation to fill this gap. These “platforms” or “manifestos” were designed to provide citizens with, at least, the notion that they were being informed and participating in the process by choosing a candidate backed by an ideology that remained more or less consistent from one election to the next. To structure this choice and, thereby, succeed in focusing the political expectations of citizens upon elections rather than more direct and potentially disruptive alternative channels of expression, it was necessary that these programs offer credible and distinctive visions of the future – of how the winners would govern differently and what they intended to accomplish. This is precisely what party platforms have ceased to be for most voters. Not only have their visions of the future converged (or, if not, become less credible and marginal), but the rising mistrust in politicians has deeply undermined the credibility of the promises these platforms contain.

What might RED look like without the monopoly of PPs over the selection of candidates and without the pretense of governing according to some overarching set of principles?

Imagine a political regime in which any citizen could nominate him or herself for any election and would be placed on the ballot once a pre-
established number of signatures in pre-established sites had been collected. For example, each constituency would have a minimum of two nominees (if a first-past-post system) and a maximum that would depend on population size (if a proportional system) and the signatures would all have to come from the same site. If a regime with a presidential, rather than parliamentary executive, the nominating signatures would have to be distributed across a set number of constituencies. Presumably, much of this process could be accomplished electronically at very low cost and effort – provided of course that certain security provisions were in place and citizens had equal access to the use of internet technology. The officially nominated candidates would, then, receive public funding and also be eligible to receive private tax-deductible contributions up to some fixed amount to finance their respective campaigns.

Moreover, the introduction of widespread, even exclusive, electronic voting from homes, workplaces and/or dedicated public kiosks would enable citizens to reflect during a longer period on the enlarged competitive choices made available to them. This would serve to overcome the information gap that would naturally disfavor candidates with less of a prior public presence or coming from social or economic minorities. It should also provide more opportunity to interact electronically with candidates or their staffs during the electoral process and afterwards.

As for the absence of an all-embracing ideological platform that presumably would pre-commit winning candidates to vote according to party discipline – as well as provide citizens with the sort of comprehensive vision of politics which they failed to acquire on their own – is it still needed? Citizens are much better educated and informed than in the past (and more evenly so across social and economic groups) and, therefore, presumably more capable of making choices based on their increasingly complex individual conditions. With the more rapid turnover of parties in power and greater frequency of coalition governments (in parliamentary regimes) and deadlocked executive-legislative relations (in presidential ones), winning candidates not so
encumbered by party loyalty might provide a more stable (if also more flexible) basis for governing. At the extreme, such an outcome could provide the real world test for something that has become theoretically fashionable, namely, “deliberative democracy.” In a body composed of winners committed to individual programs without party leaders or whips, and, therefore, presumably closer to the “herrschaftsfreie” discourse advocated by Habermas as a precondition for rational political communication, the participants would be compelled to deliberate (and, of course, to negotiate) both with regard to the internal organization of the legislature and the external elaboration of a pact to govern for some specific period. In effect, this would involve a return to the origins of representative democracy when PPs were composed of local notables and only formed in the parliament after the elections had been held.

Eventually, such an individualistic, supra-party system of electoral representation could go even further by abolishing the present presumption that territorial constituencies are the ‘natural’ and exclusive ones and permit citizens (again, electronically) to select their own preferred constituencies through some iterative process. Candidates could then come forward to compete in a variety of territorial, functional and ideational constituencies on the basis of either proportional representation (PR) or first-past-the-post (FPP) rules with the number of representatives being roughly proportional to the size of these virtual constituencies. Moreover, on some periodic basis, citizens would be allowed to change their preferred constituency, as well as their preferred candidate within that constituency. Once the historic connection between exclusively territorial constituencies and the monopolistic nomination of candidates is broken, the structuration function of PPs would become effectively irrelevant.

### 2. Providing Symbolic Identity

The primary weapon that parties have developed historically in their effort to “fix” the electoral preferences of the citizenry (and to transmit these preferences to future generations) is their capacity to manipulate symbols and memories in such a way that, over time, individuals come to identify exclusively with one party. Regardless of the candidate(s) a party chooses or the program(s) it espouses for a specific contest, its core identifiers were
expected to vote for it as the party that “naturally” represents them.

Most theories of “stable” democracy presume that PPs are capable of providing such a valued and continuous political identity to individual citizens – which implies that their voting behavior will be more or less consistent across subsequent elections. Not only does this facilitate the formation of governments – whose partisan composition should only vary within predictable margins – but it also provides citizens with a general orientation and set of expectations which they are supposed to be capable of transmitting to the forthcoming generation. This socialization function is admittedly imperfect – or else electoral results would be a form of familistic census-taking affected only by demographic trends – but its absence would severely undermine the likelihood of practicing the “contingent consent” that lies at the core of all REDs. If they are to persist and to stay in the electoral game, the losers have to be confident that the winners will only exercise power within both formal constitutional and informal consensual limits – otherwise, they would have no confidence that they could compete for office and power in the future. Parties have historically played a major role in reassuring the losers. When the competition between them becomes so polarized that this is not the case, then, the stability or even survival of RED becomes problematic.

In my view, this ‘function’ is no longer being effectively performed by most existing PPs; however, this is no reason for concern about the future of REDs. The time when one’s choice to join or identify with a particular political party also determined what newspaper to read, what television station to listen to, what recreational center to use, what interest associations or social movements to participate in, or even who one might be expected to marry has long been over. In the multi-layered, poly-centric polity that is today’s Europe it has become impossible to simplify one’s political life in such a way. We all have different “individuated” identities from which we are constantly choosing depending on the issue that we are confronted with. Not even ‘national’ identity suffices any longer as an exclusive, over-riding anchor for citizen expectations – much less that of a particular PP.

Without denying that this undermining of the more encompassing collective identities of nation, class, profession, status, religion and peripheral region that played such a central role in the creation of national party systems
in Europe during the 19th and most of the 20th century has created a variety of new (and often unresolved) problems for contemporary REDs – not the least of which is a declining ability to identify and act upon “the common interest” or “the public good,” – I cannot see any prospect that PPs can be revived and empowered to fill this void. For some, participation in social movements may accomplish this – but the effect is usually ephemeral (and most often limited to youths). For others, ‘populist’ leaders may temporarily provide the illusion that all these competing layers and sites can somehow be coordinated (usually around a single national and xenophobic ‘project’), but they succeed only in further undermining the existing party system without providing an enduring replacement.

So, the future of REDs would seem to lie in a novel and extreme form of pluralism that is deprived of stable, overriding, encompassing symbolic identities. So extreme, that its lines of overlapping and intersecting cleavages reflect not just the external differences between social, economic and cultural groups as in the past, but also the diverse internal loyalties and preferences that have come to divide individual citizens internally -- making them alternatively national, sub-national and supra-national; producers, intermediaries and consumers; members of upper, middle and lower status groups, e cosí via.

The only way to govern (or to “governance”) such a democracy is through flexible networks of rulers, representatives and citizens that form and dissolve as a function of changing issue content. And, fortunately in my view, the new information and communication technologies by facilitating exchanges and reducing costs will allow us to connect the multiplicity of decision-making layers and sites in ways that were previously unimaginable – and without relying on the symbolic integration previously provided by PPs.

3. Forming Governments

Electoral structuration may be the most distinctive and visible function of parties, but the most important when it comes to the effectiveness of REDs is their collective capacity to make (and unmake) governments. Regardless of how well parties present alternative political programs and provide attractive political identities, if they are incapable of playing a leading role in filling top political offices and supporting the policies of subsequent governments with
predictable parliamentary majorities, they are in deep trouble as agents of democracy.

Relatively rapid turnover in power due to electoral volatility or, in some cases, factional defections within parliament that result in premature elections have already undermined the practice of this function. As has the occasional emergence of ‘flash’ protest parties or success of populist candidates. But the most significant development has been changes in the way that winning parties or coalitions select leading government personnel and control their behavior in office. Ironically, this is related to a deep-seated modification in the “political class” that has enveloped virtually all political parties, namely, the tendency for their leaderships to be composed of professional politicians, that is, persons who intend to live from and not just for politics. These politicians intend to perpetuate themselves in power and, in order to do so, they need more or less continuous access to public authority and, more specifically, to public money. They often have no independent source of income to rely upon and their parties alone are incapable of rewarding them materially or spiritually. Precisely because they have so few loyal dues-paying members, contemporary parties themselves have become much more reliant on public funding. There has also been a growing tendency for the constitutions to refer more explicitly than in the past to the role of parties, even to legally ensure them monopolistic access to specified funds and forums.

The irony arises because, despite these efforts, PPs have become less capable of exercising a monopoly over elite selection, of disciplining the subsequent behavior of those who are selected or of ensuring that their platform gets implemented when “they” are in power. Patronage, in the sense of favoritism in appointments to government jobs and awards of government contracts, continues to be a mainstay of political parties and may even have increased in importance as parties have less of their traditional sources of power, status and money to draw on. Effective control over the macro aspects of public policy, however, has declined as more and more issues have been assigned to expert-led ‘guardian institutions’ such as Central Banks and independent regulatory agencies. Key ministries have increasingly been assigned to technocrats capable of dealing with regional and global agencies – and their policies made to conform to the ‘epistemic communities’
and ‘organized business interests’ that surround them. Needless to say, relatively few of these technocrats have any prior party affiliations, and their preferred solutions frequently clash head-on with the party programs, especially those on the left. Given the declining mobilization capacity of these very same parties, it is increasingly unlikely that they will be able to contest the policies of their own technocrats.

So, why bother with parties in the future formation of governments, if so much of this function has already been ceded? Winning candidates in a parliamentary system would arrive without such encumbering labels (even if, as is the case in many local non-partisan elections, their general political proclivities are likely to be known) and, as we have noted above, the formation of a government would be the product of deliberation (plus a lot of “wheeling and dealing”) among those recently elected until a coalition with majority support emerged. Some polities with highly fragmented party systems already seem to approach this situation. In a presidential system where such an initial majority is not necessary and where cabinet members do not generally come from those elected to the legislature, the winner is even less constrained by partisanship – especially if he or she has assembled an overwhelming personal following and if he or she has an independent basis of funding.

As for their role within the parliamentary process, especially in selecting the leaders of chambers and assigning deputies to committees, this could just as well be handled by some system of preferential voting by the deputies themselves, rather than by party leaders.

The main problem with this scenario is the power potential accorded to those who would be tempted to defect on close legislative or controversial cabinet decisions. There would be no party whips in parliament, selective placement on closed partisan lists or credible threats to influence on primary contests to enforce discipline. And this could lead to unstable governments or opportunistic threats. Here is where an effective system of interactive ICT monitoring of the behavior of elected deputies and selected officials might counter these temptations by making those involved aware ex ante of potential reprisals by citizen activists or group leaders. If all candidates were required as a condition for competing for office to commit to a set of policy
positions and all citizens were to be informed *ex post* when the elected official deviated from these promises, then, the general public (and even more specifically those who voted for the winning candidate) would play the role of “whip” and, at the very least, compel their representatives to explain why they had changed their position. Granted that to be effective this mechanism of accountability would have to be augmented by the active participation of mass media and internet communications, but this does not seem problematic.

4. Aggregating Interests and Passions

Most of the normative case for the superiority of political parties as intermediaries seems to hinge on their ability to aggregate the interests and passions of citizens. *Because* parties are the only institutions capable of combining a broad spectrum of diverse preferences, *therefore*, they are the only ones legitimately entitled to rule in the name of society as a whole. Even though, by their etymological origin (if nothing else), they are bound to represent only a “part” of the citizenry, the competition between parties and/or the cooperation among parties when they form governments is supposed to compel them to offer general programs designed to appeal beyond their core militants and constituencies in ways that are denied to interest associations and social movements—no matter how hard the latter work at “catching” as many members as possible. Even if parties have fewer members and less reputable images than associations or movements, the process of competition in which they are engaged is supposed to force them to address larger issues and to help the citizenry identify their ‘common interests” or “the public good.”

As we have seen in earlier periods, the primary weapon of parties as interest aggregators was their articulation (one is tempted to say, their embodiment) of a distinctive ideology. By offering to citizens a comprehensive vision of how much better the society might look if they were given responsibility for governing, parties seemed to ensure that the political process would attend to “the will of the public as a whole” and not just the specialized interests of associations or momentary passions of movements.

With the decline in the credibility of the ideologies of major, potentially governing, parties and their convergence toward a relatively narrow range of policy objectives, these parties tended to shift towards a “catch-all” strategy that aimed at appealing to as many voters as possible, that is, to those closest
to the median position on most issues. Not only did this weaken their symbolic capacity, but it tended to encourage more opportunistic behavior on the part of the voters. Rather than aggregate “actively” by asserting a higher public purpose, parties aggregated “passively” by assembling a multitude of private purposes. This helped some of them, no doubt, to escape from their class or regional “ghettos” and to win general elections, but often at the expense of their functional performance.

However important have been ideology and party platform, these were rarely the only aggregative devices deployed by parties. They also tended to rely heavily on inter-organizational linkages with other types of intermediary representatives. While this was particularly important for progressive parties through their allegedly “organic” connection with workers’ movements, trade unions, and producer and consumer cooperatives, conservative parties also tended to have stable alliances with business and professional associations, lodges, gun clubs and fraternal societies. Where they existed, farmers’ parties were literally the electoral expression of agrarian associations. Today, these linkages have become much weaker. As organizations, interest associations, trade unions and social movements have become much more independent and many even proudly proclaim to be “above all parties.” Thanks in large part to globalization and Europeanization, parties in government have been forced by international constraints to resort to policies of privatization, de-regulation and liberalization that have conflicted with the specific interests of workers, retirees, and other “policy-takers – their so-called historic sister organizations.”

Another major factor has been the rapidly changing technology of electoral competition and, one is tempted to say, of politics in general due to developments in the mass media. Parties no longer own or control their own media. And they have only very limited channels of direct access to their members or potential voters (such as rallies, caucuses, and conventions). So, they must increasingly rely upon media owned and controlled by others to send out their message. Effective aggregation of interests and passions, if it takes place at all, occurs not directly through channels internal to parties and their “sister” organizations, but indirectly through the media before undifferentiated mass audiences. Especially when the message is transmitted
via television, its form and content must be tailored to fit parameters imposed by this medium—which seems to have opened up the electoral process to telegenic candidates with little or no party experience or loyalty.

Finally, and closely coupled with this growing reliance on mass media, another shift has come in the technology of contemporary electoral politics: the development and increased reliance upon mass opinion surveys and other devices such as “focus groups” to capture the expectations of mass publics. Candidates, even those who go through the ranks and are nominated by some regular party process, have tended to develop their own means of sounding out public opinion. They do not need to rely upon partisan channels for guidance; indeed, in their quest for vote maximization, they may become quite wary of such “biased” sources. Witness the enormous rise in the importance of political consultants—most of whom are proud of their ability to work across party lines.

My hunch is that this ready availability of public opinion data has irrevocably undermined the aggregative role of parties per se. Not only does the information come to candidates independently of partisan channels (and, in the American case, closely tied to the individual candidate), but they use it “passively” to position themselves as closely as possible to the median voter on each issue—irrespective of the compatibility of the positions they take. Parties abandon all pretense of “actively” intervening to form and direct the opinions of their members or followers toward some higher and more general set of goals. Once their candidate has won, he or she is saddled with a mish-mash of incompatible (if popular) promises that cannot be satisfied simultaneously; thereby, generating further disenchantment with the vacuousness of party platforms and the perfidy of party politicians.

**Conclusion**

Let me finally conclude with what I have not said and certainly not claimed. The decline and eventual demise of PPs is not the result of the success of other channels of representation – interest associations and social movement. And there is no evidence that I know of to prove that IAs and/or SMs are moving in to replace PPs.

The fashionable notions that Party Democracy will be gradually replaced by Associative Democracy or by Participatory Democracy or by
Deliberative Democracy – all seem to me to be misguided. What may emerge out of this decline/demise are new forms of citizen engagement and collective action connected with the large-scale application of ICT. The four functions that used to be so exclusively assigned to PPs will either become less relevant (e.g. the one of symbolic identification) or by performed by interactive networks of citizens, electronic monitoring systems, constituencies and other arrangements that I cannot even imagine.

Whether ‘post-partisan’ democracy” will be a better democracy than the one that we are used to, I am not sure. In any case, I am hopeful that its advent will arrest the decline in the quality of democracy that we have experienced in recent years. I am only sure of two things: (1) that ‘real-existing’ democracies can no longer rely on political parties as they have in the past; and (2) whatever the eventual role of political parties, “the future of democracy … lies less in fortifying and perpetuating existing formal institutions and informal practices than in changing them.”

ENDNOTES


iv  Consider the following quotation by Eugenio Scalfari, in an article, “Scelta Riformista o Cesarismo Autoritario” in La Repubblica, 21 dicembre 2008, p. 1: “Parties do not make politics any more. They have degenerated and this is the origin of the mali (bads) of Italy. They manage the most disparate, the most contradictory, sometimes the most suspicious interests without any relations to human expectations and needs, or they distort them without regard for the common good. ... They are not longer organizations that promote civic maturity and popular initiative, but just federations of tendencies and clacks, each one with its ‘boss’ and ‘under-bosses.’"

v  I apologize to the reader for not documenting these assertions. They remain generic descriptive impressions and undoubtedly are not characteristic of all contemporary liberal democracies. For some substantiation with regard to Europe, see Philippe C. Schmitter and Alexandre Trechsel, eds., The Future of Democracy in Europe Trends, Analyses and Reforms (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2004).


vii  Strict and enforceable limits on spending are an important component of this scenario. Otherwise, wealthy citizens could simply buy their candidacy. It should be prohibited to pay
for signatures on nomination petitions or to hire firms to collect them. Once the nominations are determined and the campaigns begin it will be increasingly impossible to prevent private funds from being used and eventual sanctions would come too late to be an effective deterrent.

Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan offer a typical (and recent) example of such an assumption: “A consolidated democracy requires that a range of political parties not only represent interests but seek by coherent programs and organizational activity to aggregate interests.” See: Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 274.


While admittedly have not examined this systematically, I have not detected in neo-democracies (nor in most established democracies) the inverse trend, which seems to be affecting the party system in the United States where a dramatic increase—not decrease—in inter-organizational linkages has been taking place. One party (the Republican) has been virtually taken over by social movements (first, the Christian Coalition and, later, the Tea Party); the other party (the Democratic) has benefitted from an extraordinary revival in its links to the trade union movement.