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Democratic Political Culture: Democracy's Oxygen

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Can we change the culture of representation?

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Introduction

Europeans are disenchanted with their political representation. They are not alone in this: all over the world, with very few exceptions, voters answer in surveys that politicians are not representative for those who elected them and do not govern for the benefit of all. In comparison to the 2007 results, a 2009 Eurobarometer showed that a significantly higher number of respondents believe that "corruption is a problem for all levels of government." In the most troubling cases, at least nine out of ten respondents believe corruption to be a major national problem[1].

Political trust in parties in the European Union, although it varies greatly across countries, has reached a historical low: on average, less than a quarter of Europeans trust the parties who fill their representative offices. Membership in parties is extremely low in new democracies (1.6 percent of Estonian adults are party members, as compared to 6.6 percent in Denmark).

Political parties have been widely regarded as the backbone of democracy, performing such vital functions as presenting candidates for office, representing various social groups, aggregating interests, and integrating citizens into the political process. Yet parties appear to be underperforming, tempting one to venture that their shortcomings pose a major danger to today's brave new democratic world. Are these problems merely "growing pains[2]"? The evidence suggests that not only new democracies are subject to this trend. The world reads in stupor the list of expenses of United Kingdom MPs in Westminster, this reference of democracy. Neither could any student of Maurice Duverger have predicted the rise of a party like Nicholas Sarkozy's Union for a Presidential Majority in France.

In the global corruption perception survey organized by Gallup for Transparency International, the key institutions of democracy, political parties and legislatives, have been on top for the last editions as the

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[1] Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, Malta, Cyprus, Slovenia, Portugal and Romania
[2] *Confronting the Weakest Link. Aiding Political Parties in New Democracies*. By Thomas Carothers. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006

most corrupt organizations in national political systems. While this might be a misperception, it is more likely true. Since 1972, the number of (nominal) democracies in the world has increased from about 40 to well over 100. However, many of them have since become a 'defective' mode: fewer than 20 of them are *en route* to becoming successful, well-functioning democracies based on the rule of law. Many of the new democracies do no longer fight external enemies, domestic dictators or armed rebels: rather systemic corruption seems to have turned into their permanent defect, and its main vehicle is the political party. The competition to represent the people looks increasingly more like a competition for state capture by interest groups.

The issues arising from this brief presentation of the problem are as follows; first, we need to understand this crisis of representation; second, we need to understand the spontaneous responses to it, either democratic or non-democratic, and third, we need to ask ourselves what room is there for the intervention of international actors who promote democracy.

Why are new democracies subverted by poor governance and do classic political parties have the capacity to redress the situation? Surveys such as Gallup 'Voice of the People' 2006, the ISSP 2008 ('Attitudes towards the Role of Government'[3]) show that the public in more recent European democracies (and other recent democracies around the world) perceive politicians and democratic institutions (such as legislatures, political parties, and courts) as more corrupt and untrustworthy than bureaucracies and the administration.

The reason for this is the behavior of parties in democracies of the third and forth wave, which do not promote a modern administration based on ethical universalism, but one based on particularism, where as a rule certain interest groups or client networks get a disproportionate share of public goods and parties compete primarily for state exploitation. Under particularism, a culture of privilege reigns: you need to know who people are (their status) to know what they would get. Those who bribe do it usually to circumvent this discrimination and lack of access. The public resources up for grabs include public sector jobs; public spending; preferential concessions and privatizations of state property; and market advantages in the form of preferential regulation. Political parties in new democracies, but also in some older ones, seem to achieve party capacity and mobilization primarily through clientelism and state exploitation[4], similar to medieval armies that raised their pay from plunder. Political alternation to government thus becomes an alternation between particular groups, not specific ideologies, tending to leave those people not included in client networks permanently excluded. These people then become alienated from politics and turn against the system.

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[3] GALLUP International (2006*), Voice of the People*, Retrieved from the World Wide Web April 1st 2010, http://www.gallup-international.com/; Becher, I., Quandt, M. (2009). *Attitudes towards the Role of Government*, Gesis, Arbeitsberichte nr.

[4] See O'Dwyer, Conor (2006) Runaway State-Building: Patronage Politics and Democratic Development, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press; Grzymała-Busse, AM (2007) Rebuilding Leviathan : party competition and state exploitation in post-communist , Cambridge ; New York, Cambridge University Press

It is this systematic deviation from the norm of ethical universalism as basis for public distribution which feeds the political distrust and the widespread perception of systemic corruption. Fewer than 15 percent of Europeans have come into contact with bribes or bribing directly according to the Eurobarometer, so this could not justify in itself the generalized impression of unfairness and corruption of the political system stemming from surveys. The problem is that political parties are seen as the key actors of this, and many people believe that corrupt practices span across political boundaries both at the local and national levels, increasingly becoming institutionalized.

What can parties themselves do to stem the tide? Reform themselves, or reform the political system. But why should they do it, as they are the main beneficiaries of the system? Economic crises seem to offer an opportunity for change. In Italy, for example, it was only when the judicial campaign against corruption combined with a deep budgetary crisis, which dried the spoils for political clients, did the whole cartel of old parties collapse.[5] The crisis was provoked by the EU's request to cut Italy's budget deficit in order to join the euro - so it was in effect a bonus of EU integration. But in another famous EU example, Greece, the state went bankrupt before the political system did.

Contemporary populists perceive and often take advantage of this profound crisis of representative democracy caused by elites which are neither representative, nor responsive to the people. It seems increasingly that the populist view of the establishment as the political 'other' is not merely an opportunistic electoral strategy, but part of a wider ideologically founded critique. Populism might play a positive role in a democracy by mobilizing alienated voters and raising interest in politics, as well as putting political accountability on top of the political agenda. On the downside, populism can easily be irresponsible, blaming traditional parties, foreigners or 'Brussels' for problems without offering any realistic alternatives. Also, the political socialization that some populist parties provide risks not being democratic.

The circumstances which causes populist movements to turn benign or malign need still to be studied carefully. But what emerges increasingly is that domestic political accountability problems rather than pan-European ones explain the success of populist movements and politicians across Europe. With a few exceptions, populism is fed less by a European democratic deficit than by multiple domestic ones, by national politicians more than by EU technocrats.

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[5] Guzinni, S. (1995), 'The "Long Night of the First Republic": years of clientelistic implosion in Italy', In *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 27- 61

The rise of strong political non-party actors, such as religious political movements or civil-society alliances that play decisive roles in elections, should also be studied with an open mind. The general assumption is that non-party actors will at some point turn into classical parties. But what if they do not?

The second alternative to classic political representation is civil society. In the steps of classic literature, we find at least two distinct approaches discussed in relation to governance and civil society:

- a neo-tocquevillian *social capital* idea, which presumes civil society works indirectly for better representation by creating an associative texture of society, thereby fostering collective action based on horizontal ties and social trust;[6] and

- a *social accountability* idea which stresses civil society's direct role in citizen empowerment, and the oversight component of government accountability in the context of growing disillusionment among citizens, with governments perceived as unresponsive, abusive and corrupt[7].

Social capital and social accountability mechanisms can in fact be seen as intertwined and complementary rather than competitive approaches, as accountability building needs both the general capacity for autonomous collective action by members of a society (sustained through non-political associations) and political engagement. The latter is barely sustainable in democratic societies without the former. Isolated groups demanding government accountability in an otherwise submissive, indifferent or fragmented society cannot be effective. On the other hand, associations and a capacity for collective action which does not translate into demands for good governance are also difficult to imagine: we find no example in World Values Survey of a country where voluntary civic participation is high and governance is poor.

For social accountability to work and civil society to be an effective actor, four elements need to coincide in a given society:

- a prevailing *norm* of honesty and integrity in a given society, *civic capital*[8]*;*

- a *customary practice* of engaging in formal or informal collective action around shared interests, purposes and values, *social capital*[9];

- a *network of voluntary associations* (among which NGOs), *civil society*;

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[6] Putnam, R. D. (1993), *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press

[7] C Malena, R Forster, J Singh (2004) Social accountability: An introduction to the concept and emerging practice, World Bank, Social Development Paper, no. 76.

[8] Rose-Ackerman, S, Kornai, J. (Eds.) (2004*) Building a Trustworthy State in Post Socialist Transition*, New York, Palgrave/Macmillan

[9] Fukuyama, F. (1995), Trust: Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity, NY, Free Press

- a sustained participation and political engagement on behalf of civil society, *civic culture*[10].

These four indispensable characteristics are not easy to 'build' by external actors, though empowerment strategies do exist. However, doubts have recently followed the remarkable enthusiasm about civil society from the nineties. Why should civil society groups be seen as something other than mere groups of interests themselves? And even when their altruism if beyond doubt, should they complement or supplant the political parties? Are they an alternative to radical populism or rather by their rhetoric do they contribute to its rise?

After all, political parties are by their definition partisan and catering to specific interests. Is equilibrium not reached by the balancing of such different interests? What is the threshold after which representing specific interests becomes illegitimate? Does the answer indeed lie in the area of appropriation of the state by interested groups in order to generate rents in the private interest? How can government impartiality and state autonomy be ensured towards such groups?

What designs can we conceive to harness popular discontent, turning alienated voters not into saboteurs of the political system, but into monitors of governance and auditors of public services? What incentives could be offered to traditional parties to engage in reforms to make them more accountable and transparent? How can new populist parties be engaged to promote democratic policies once in government? Can we conceive of the possibility of a democratic world where parties fall beyond redemption, and where representation is taken over by other entities, and what might these look like?

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[10] Almond, G., Verba, S. (1963), *The Civic Culture*, Boston, Little, Brown and Company