



Review Articles

Maurice Duverger and the Study of Political Parties

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Over a half century's experience with Duverger's *Les Partis Politiques* offers an opportunity to test his theory. His explanations for the numbers of parties survives as Duverger's Law, while his predictions for the development of the 'membership party' have not. Since the two rest on divergent explanations of electoral politics, the success of one and the failure of the other present an excellent test of our theories of electoral politics. Duverger's explanation of the numbers of parties understands free elections as markets in which candidates and voters alter their behavior as they try to get as close as possible to their preferred outcome. Duverger, in contrast, saw party organization as a product of 'social forces', notably the composition of the electorate. The 'cadre' party was the product of limited suffrage, while universal suffrage would lead to the 'mass-based membership' party. Given that the latter never developed, we argue that the logic Duverger applied to the numbers of parties also applies to their organization. We note how periodic free elections create markets where individuals pursue three fundamental political drives: ambition, choice, and benefits; whatever political organization develops, must respond to these three drives.

French Politics (2006) 4, 58–68. doi:10.1057/palgrave.fp.8200085

Keywords: parties; markets; ambition; choice; benefits

Maurice Duverger's *Les Partis Politiques* (1951) remains a major contribution to our understanding of politics. While political parties had attracted the attention of scholars since the days of de Tocqueville, Bryce, and Ostrogorski, no one had covered parties as broadly in order to explain their numbers and types of organization. In amassing data and deducing from them a theory of politics, Duverger must be accounted a founding father of the 'behavioral revolution', which was overtaking political science in the immediate post-war years. For those of us beginning our careers as students of both French and American parties, Duverger was must reading.

In revisiting the book after more than half a century, what worked and did not work in Duverger's analysis offer an uncommon test of political theory. He wrote vigorously, asserting propositions clearly, with occasional bows to their tentative nature. His survey encompassed all sorts of political organizations



calling themselves a 'party', including the monopolies governing totalitarian nations. Today there is little point in revisiting that aspect of his analysis. Fascist and Nazi regimes have been defeated, while the Communist model has collapsed. Today we best understand the governing 'parties' of the world's authoritarian regimes as direct instruments of government and a species of organization distinct from those that must compete for office in free elections.

On the other hand, Duverger's analysis of parties in democracies is worth revisiting. Some of his projections about their future have fared well, while others have not. Given the central role political parties play in all democracies what did and did not work in Duverger's theory offer us a clue to understanding democracy itself. And at a time when the spread of democracy has become the central stated goal of American foreign policy, understanding the organization of parties in democracies is ever more crucial.

Duverger's analysis has two parts, (1) a description of the varieties of party organization and a projection of their future development, and (2) an explanation of the number of parties within a country. Of the two, the more successful over time has been the latter, surviving in the literature as 'Duverger's Law.' Less successful have been his projections on party organization, notably his prediction that the 'mass membership' party would replace the 'cadre' party. The success of 'Duverger's law' and the failure of his party typology provide a cautionary tale. It leads us to ask what actually takes place when a nation uses free and periodic elections for its major offices. Is the number of parties in a nation and their organization independent of each other as Duverger treated them, or do the conditions that define the number of parties also define the ways parties must organize to compete for office?

In effect, Duverger in 1951 sat astride what would become two conflicting approaches to understanding democratic politics. His explanation of a nation's number of parties fits neatly into the rational-choice model, while his understanding of party organization rests on the social and economic composition of electorates. Of the two, it is Duverger's analysis of the numbers of parties that has withstood the test of time (Duverger, 1951, book II, Chapter 1).

In explaining the number of parties, Duverger starts with a brief historical explanation for the dualism found in England and America. From this, he concludes 'one must not minimize — as has too often been done — the influence ... of the electoral system' (*ibid.*, 247). This leads him to state the 'following formula: ... *the single-ballot majority vote favors the dualism of parties*. Of all the hypotheses that have been posited in this book, the latter is without a doubt the closest to a true sociological law' (*ibid.*). For Duverger, the numbers of parties are reduced by the 'mechanical' factor, the 'under-representation' of the third party, and the 'psychological' factor, voters' realization that they waste their votes if they vote for a third party (*ibid.*, 256).



This analysis led William Riker to dub the proposition ‘Duverger’s Law’ (Riker, 1982).

Since then ‘Duverger’s Law’ has become a staple in the study of political parties. Generations of students have studied the law, and it is the most widely accepted explanation of two-party systems (Scarrow, 1986; Aldrich, 1995). For scholars with a more sociological bent, the rational-choice implications of Duverger’s Law are inadequate (Cox, 1997, 14ff.). Yet Pippa Norris, in the most recent and wide ranging effort to test the effects of electoral rules on political behavior in more than thirty nations, concludes that her study ‘...confirms Duverger’s main proposition that plurality electoral systems tend toward party dualism, whereas PR is associated with multipartyism’ (Norris, 2004, 96).

As for the organization of parties in democracies, Duverger sees that as the natural progression from the ‘cadre’ to the ‘membership’ party. The earliest parties, the major American parties, the British Conservative and Liberal parties, as well as the Radical Socialist party of the French Third Republic, he deems ‘cadre’ parties. These parties do not clearly define who is in the party. Their skeletal structure can be expanded for electoral purposes and reduced between elections. Their finances came from a variety of sources. For them the concept of ‘membership’ had little meaning. Rather these parties reflect the limited needs of party leaders for some means of reaching out to voters in the era before universal suffrage (Duverger, 1951, 84–101).

Universal suffrage, Duverger asserts, creates the conditions for a new type of organization. Such parties clearly define their members, give them the central role in the direction of the party, and devote themselves to the members’ interests. The members are intimately involved in defining party strategy and in providing its workers. The members’ dues provide the needed financial support for the parties’ activities.

For Duverger, the distinction between the ‘membership’ and the ‘cadre’ party is not a matter of membership claims; rather, it is the relationship between the party and its members that defines the ‘membership’ party. A true membership party is all about its members, about bringing them into politics and educating them about the tools of politics. Thus, despite the fact that the Third Republic’s Radical Socialist party actively sought members for its activities, he insists that it was not a ‘membership’ party because the party was about winning office rather than servicing members (Schlesinger, 1974). In contrast he deems the French Socialist party, a ‘membership’ party because its professed goal was the enrollment of the masses and their political education. This despite the fact that during the interwar years the party’s admitted membership figures were meager and it became increasingly preoccupied with the winning of office. Following the elections of 1936, the Socialist party



surpassed the Radicals in the chamber of deputies and replaced them as the principal party of government (Schlesinger, 1978). Nevertheless, Duverger sees the Socialist party as a variant of the 'membership' party, where the relationship between the members and the party's elected representatives evolves from domination by its elected representatives to their eventual domination by the external organization.

In envisioning the control of political parties by members drawn from the electorate, Duverger held what was and remains a widely held view about how parties ought to be organized. Recurrent elections offer any group an attractive organizing device. With the broadening of the suffrage, labor unions, churches, and cooperatives, all organizations that have members have sought to use them, both in creating new parties and in influencing existing parties. Socialist movements, in particular, have seen in elections a mechanism around which they can recruit members and organize themselves.

We must however distinguish between how we would wish parties to organize and how in fact they do. If the 'membership' party ever existed, there is little evidence that it has evolved as the party model in any of today's world democracies (Diamond and Gunther, 2001, ix–xxxiv). Thus with respect to party membership, the figures cited by Billordo (2003) for party membership in France and in other European democracies reveal only a small fraction of the electorate consider themselves party 'members'. Membership figures claimed by the parties are clearly unreliable. Yet, even they claim as members a paltry percentage of the party's voters, and, of these, still fewer as activists. With respect to party financing, no party in a developed democracy can claim to rely solely on its members' dues. We do not doubt that members can play a vital role in any political party. Susan Scarrow (1996) has detailed how British and German parties make use of their members. However, that is hardly what Duverger meant by the 'membership' party.

Why then did the membership party fail? One can find ready explanations in the vast changes over the past 50 years in communications and employment that have reduced the dependence of individuals on structures such as parties (Diamond and Gunther, 2001). However, we can also find an explanation, if we turn from Duverger, the theorist of party organization, to Duverger, the author of the 'Law' on party numbers. We can understand how the 'mechanical' factor, the 'under-representation of the third party', and the 'psychological' factor, the voters' rapid realization that voting for a third party wastes their vote, also shape the organization of parties (Duverger, 1951, 256). For the psychological and mechanical factors that Duverger cites mean that elections are not occasions where individuals simply express their preferences among the options presented. To be concerned about 'wasting' one's vote or to be concerned that one's party is 'under-represented' in office is to treat elections as markets in which both voters and parties weigh their options,



assess their relative chances of winning, and trade whatever they can in order to come as close as possible to their desired ends.

Parties that succeed in elections then must be organized to meet the peculiar demands of the electoral market. However, to understand party organization, we must recognize how free and periodic elections create peculiarly imbalanced markets that treat the participants differently. These differences have significant consequences for the organization of parties able to succeed in free electoral markets (Schlesinger, 1991, 12–28).¹ To understand how electoral markets shape the organization of parties, we must recognize how free and periodic elections isolate and expose individuals as they pursue the three most basic of political goals. Note also that, while the goals themselves are distinct, individuals may actively pursue any combination of them, from none to all three. Free electoral markets, however, deal with each goal in a different manner, and it is these differences that shape whatever party organization emerges.

The three goals are: (1) *Choice of officials*: Those who actually choose are the voters, the individuals who do whatever is required to come to the polls and record their preferences. Whatever the balloting arrangement in a nation, who votes, and how they vote are matters of public record. (2) *Benefits*: Elections expose those individuals who hope to benefit from the electoral choice. ‘Benefit-seekers’ by influencing the choice of elected officials expect in turn to gain some benefit from those they help elect. Most efforts to influence elections must be open to view as individuals form and join parties, nominate and support candidates, and do the countless things available in campaigns to affect the outcome of elections. (3) *Ambition for office*: Free elections require candidates, people prepared to declare openly their ambitions for office and to contest for it. Elective offices cannot be gained solely by inheritance, subterfuge, friendship, favoritism, assassination, or force of arms.

For only one of the sets of individuals pursuing their goals do electoral markets provide a clear, well-defined, and unambiguous outcome. Only the ambitious (the candidates) know immediately after an election how well they have achieved their goal. Satisfaction with one’s choice and achievement of benefits must await the actions of the elected. Critical then to understanding party organization is recognizing how those pursuing each goal must have a distinctly different relation to parties. For it is these inherent differences that make the maintenance of the membership party as envisioned by Duverger unlikely.

Choice: The importance of voters to parties is unquestioned. However, can voters as voters belong to parties? Much of the failure to understand parties comes from not knowing what to do with voters. Yet, it should be clear that voters cannot be party members for the simple reason that the secret ballot makes it impossible to identify them. The emergence of universal suffrage with



its implicit demand for the equality of all voters made the secret ballot irresistible. Secrecy as a guarantee of equality, however, meant that the voter had to be free of all external pressures, including membership in a political party.

The exclusion of voters from partisan activity has become central to free elections. In the two-ballot French presidential election of 2002 divisions among voters on the first ballot denied the parties of the left a candidate on the second ballot, creating a decisive contest between two right-wing candidates, the RPR's Jacques Chirac, and the National Front's leader Jean-Marie Le Pen. On the second ballot, voters unhappy with that choice were warned by the Constitutional Council not to try to cast a ballot with clothespins on their noses or wearing gloves for that would not only void the secrecy of their ballots but represent an effort by some voters to influence other voters. Indeed, democracies commonly put up safeguards against all electioneering at the polls, precisely to void such pressures.

Thus, the secret ballot makes voters a distinct class, independent of and isolated from all other groups, including parties. The secret ballot assures voters not only that they can but that they must act freely, of their employer, their neighbor, their spouse, their friends, and, should they be a party member, of their party. The secrecy of the ballot ensures that no one can be certain about how anyone else voted, including the candidate, even when they tell us, except for the rare instance in which the vote in a precinct is unanimous. To infer, therefore, that parties consist of voters contradicts a basic precept of free democratic elections. The logic of the secret ballot ensures the exclusion of voters from parties.

Duverger understood that the secret ballot excluded voters from parties. In *Les Partis Politiques*, he wrote 'A voter who declares how he has voted is no longer merely a voter: he is on the way to becoming a supporter.... his declaration implies propaganda...' (Duverger, 1951, 125). This explains Duverger's caution in using polls to understand parties. Unfortunately, his caution has largely been ignored by generations of scholars and journalists who have assumed that they were studying political parties through public opinion polls. It is to these legions of scholars that we owe such manifestly incongruous conclusions that parties are 'over', don't 'matter', or are 'declining'. This at the same time that parties continue to control all of the elective offices and form all of the governments in democracies.

Certainly the relationship between parties and voters has changed over the past two centuries. However, that is true also of social and economic relationships — between employers and workers, buyers and sellers, producers and consumers, parents and children, husbands and wives, and students and teachers. Given how central communication with voters is to any effort to win elections, it is hardly surprising that candidates and their parties that sought



office in the days of town criers and handbills, of newspapers and public rallies, differ from parties that reach out to voters through television and the internet. Rather, it is striking how adaptive parties have been to the newer methods of communication.

Benefits: Benefit-seekers' reasons for involvement in parties range from the simplest to the most complex, from the desire to aid a friend, to gain personal advantage, and to the broadest policy concerns. Thus they recruit and work for candidates, give and raise money, write letters to the editor, and op-ed pieces. They may also actively create or join parties, take party office, and urge others to vote, seeking in countless ways to influence the outcome of elections. Benefit seekers may also form and join associations aimed at affecting public policy. Certainly, the most effective way such groups have of affecting policy is through influencing the results of elections. Free and periodic elections provide the best opportunities for influencing elected officials by aiding or thwarting their ambitions. While some efforts to influence elections may be undercover, to be effective most must be open to view. Indeed in most democracies, giving money, the most fluid and potentially hidden form of support has been subject to limits, as well as requirements that the sources and amounts be made public.

The 'membership party' as envisioned by Duverger is, of course, one composed of and dominated by benefit-seekers. Yet, the means of influence that benefit-seekers have over parties rests less on their assured membership than on their flexibility, their tentative rather than their unwavering support. Indeed, loyal party members must always be less important to the party than wavering supporters. Hence, Duverger's explanation of the number of parties, the 'mechanical' and 'psychological' factors, lead not to his concept of the membership party, but parties that organize according to the rules of competitive elections.

Ambition: One of the most impressive accomplishments of free elections has been the taming of political ambitions by increasing rather than decreasing opportunities for the politically ambitious. Ambition for position and power has emerged throughout history as an independent political force needful of control and direction. Indeed, so corrosive to political and social harmony have unfettered ambitions been that, rather than allowing them free play, individuals have put up with almost any means to suppress them, often by transferring positions and their powers through such a risky, but easily understood, automatic device as advancement through inheritance. More successful has been the filling of positions of power through periodic and frequent public elections. In these circumstances, opportunities for the ambitious are multiplied, not repressed. Democracy above all requires a ready supply of individuals who want and are willing to contest openly for office in a prescribed fashion, and equally as important, to accept the electoral outcome (Schlesinger, 1966).



Yet, because few individuals would vote for a person simply because they wanted an office, ambition alone can never be enough to win elections. The ambitious need some way to appeal to voters and to get them to the polls. For the ambitious political parties solve four problems, any one of which would lead the ambitious to create and support a party. Together, they make parties inevitable wherever there are free and periodic elections. (1) The ambitious must frame and communicate an appeal to voters that goes beyond their own ambitions. Parties with their labels, programs, and slogans communicate something more to voters than the sheer ambition of the candidate. (2) The number of offices available and the number of distinct appeals to voters are limited in any political system. Thus, the ambitious need some way to prevent more than one person from making precisely the same appeal to voters and thus splitting their potential support. Parties are thus needed to make nominations, naming but one candidate for each available office. (3) Since ambitions develop over an individual's lifetime, the ambitious need to cooperate within an enduring organization, one capable of sorting out and ordering potentially conflicting ambitions, again a political party. (4) Finally once in government, in order to insure their continued political success, the ambitious need to cooperate within the confines of a party in order to pursue other offices in legislatures and administrations that are controlled by the elected.

The performance of all four tasks is self-evident to anyone pursuing a career in elective office and explains why the ambitious create, join, and support political parties wherever there are free elections. Together, they make parties imperative. While it is conceivable that with modern means of communication an individual could amass the resources to direct an appeal to enough voters to gain an office without joining or creating a party, the existence of many other elected officials with whom that individual would have to deal makes some accommodation with a party essential.

It is therefore ultimately around ambitions for office that political parties form. If the numbers of the politically ambitious must multiply, it is the ambitious themselves who find it necessary to both direct and curb ambitions. To this end, they invented political parties and sustain them wherever free elections exist. This also means that parties cannot stray from the structures and rules that shape ambitions. Writing at the dawn of the development of modern democracies, de Tocqueville argued that America no longer had what he termed 'great' parties, such as the Federalists and Anti-Federalists, which had been in conflict over the form and role of the national government. Nor did America have the conflicts of religion or class, which he asserted animated European parties. He concluded: 'Nevertheless, the ambitious are bound to create parties, for it is difficult to turn the man in power out simply for the reason that one would like to take



his place. Hence all the skill of politicians consists in forming parties ...' (De Tocqueville, 1969, 177).

True, within the free electoral exchange it is critical to our understanding of how parties organize to perceive how each of the three goals, choice, benefits, and ambition, is achieved. While free elections expose and isolate people as they pursue the three basic political goals, individuals may pursue none, one, two, or all three goals. Thus, the independence of ambition for office as a political goal does not imply that those with ambitions for office are impelled by that goal alone. Everything we know about candidates for office indicates that most feel strongly on political issues and seek to affect political decisions accordingly (Williams and Lascher (eds.), 1993). The political parties that develop in free electoral democracies will reflect how individuals pursuing office ambitions and public policy come together, organize themselves, and face the prospect of election after election.

Moreover, under free and periodic elections individuals pursue each of the three political goals under tight constraints. Reasonable ambitions for office develop around the offices that exist and the rules that define who is eligible to seek them. Electoral schedules lay out timetables everyone must follow. Election laws define constituencies for offices, who is eligible to vote for what offices, as well as how votes cast are translated into offices gained. The framework of elective offices, their numbers, their terms, and relative status, are all set in law. The legitimate ways of influencing voters and officeholders are also defined. As a result, political parties and everything of significance about them — their numbers, their organization, their candidates, and electoral strategies — must reflect national institutions and their rules.

The similarity between free elections and free economic markets is no coincidence. Both rest on practices, attitudes, and legal systems able to define and enforce the outcomes of decisions reached in their respective markets. Nothing illustrates better the importance of an accepted legal system in maintaining electoral markets than the disputed American presidential election of 2000. Similarly, the Ukrainian Supreme Court's intervention in the disputed presidential election of 2005 was crucial to the resolution of that country's electoral crisis. Indeed, it is not an historical coincidence that Adam Smith published his *Wealth of Nations*, the most influential exposition of how economic markets work, in 1776, when the idea that governments should be chosen through free elections was taking hold in both America and later in France. Free elections and free markets developed in tandem.

More than two centuries of experience provide no examples of successful democracies in nations lacking free market economies. Indeed, what little evidence we have is that the attitudes and legal safeguards that sustain a free market economy may not be enough to sustain free elections. Today China has developed a market economy with no sign of adopting free electoral politics.



How viable this arrangement is remains to be seen. As the democratic theorist Robert Dahl has stated: ‘... the denouement of a momentous historical drama to be played out during the twenty-first century will reveal whether China’s nondemocratic regime can withstand the democratizing forces generated by market-capitalism’ (2000, 170).

It is the market character of elections, therefore, that makes the goal of ambition the dominant force in the organization of parties. As in the economic market, where the profit motive dominates, it is only those with ambitions for office who achieve a private and immediate gain or loss from elections and therefore dominance of the electoral market. Those pursuing the two other goals are dependent for satisfaction upon the achievements of the ambitious. In the organization of political parties, then, they must always play a supportive role, as must the consumer and the government functionary in the operation of the market economy. It is greatly to Duverger’s credit that over half a century ago he recognized the importance of electoral markets in defining the numbers of parties in democracies. His failing was that he ignored the decisive effect of electoral markets on party organization.

Note

1 We do not imply here that electoral and economic markets are identical. For example, competitiveness has an almost opposed meaning in politics and economics. In politics, a competitive election is one where a change of a few votes would alter the results. In contrast, in economic analysis a highly competitive market, or one where ‘pure competition’ exists, is one where no single buyer or seller can affect the price.

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