PARTY SYSTEMS

Party systems are sets of party actors that compete (in elections) and cooperate (building coalitions) with one another to increase their power with the aim of commanding government in plural, democratic contexts. The types of parties that exist, the number and size of parties, and how they behave in order to increase their gains are all determinants of party systems. All political parties are coalesced around the principle of maximising votes and converting that to legislative power. Party systems have evolved over time and the number of competing parties and the government systems they operate in determine and perpetuate certain political outcomes over others. For instance, the party system in Sri Lanka has managed to keep power vested within the Sinhala majority.

The Genealogy of Party Systems

Party families emerged from socio-economic and cultural conflicts or cleavages created by industrialisation, urban growth, and state formation. The following are some of the cleavages that resulted in new party formations:

Centre–Periphery conflicts arose with resistance to centralised state power with regard to administration, taxation and cultural standardisation giving prominence to a certain language or religion. Regional parties and parties formed along linguistic, religious, and ethnic lines are characteristic of this cleavage. Sri Lanka's Tamil and Muslim parties are examples.

State–Church conflicts emerged when the centralised and secular state clashed with established but waning clerical and aristocratic entitlement over church influence in state affairs and religious education. Conservative, religious parties arose from this cleavage. Sri Lanka's BBS is such a party.

Rural–Urban cleavages were the result of agrarian support for protective trade barriers coming up against liberal urban industry that favoured the free markets and low tariffs. Agrarian and peasant party formations resulted from this cleavage.

Workers–Employers cleavages arose from the conflict between capital and labour, the industrialists who initiated industrialisation and the workers needed to power it. Some defining issues for labour or workers' parties formulated along this cleavage are job protection, pensions, social welfare, and degree of state involvement in the economy.

Communists–Socialists cleavages arose within left or labour movements over the question of revolution or reform. Systems of splinter communist parties resulted from this cleavage.

Materialist–Postmaterialist Values came into being after WWII when policy priorities between generations shifted. Various social movements demonstrated these new values and created Green parties and libertarian parties.

Open–Closed Societies were created with globalisation and the resultant opening up of markets that exacerbated anxieties and created threats related to employment, immigration, identity and being subsumed by supranational forces. Populist parties on the left and right resulted from this cleavage.

All of these cleavages are not featured in all countries. While the left-right cleavage is ubiquitous, the others vary across countries. Until the recent splits caused by globalisation and generational preferences, party systems had remained rather stable.

The Morphology of Party Systems

The number of parties and their size determine the nature of the competition between parties. Votes and the resultant number of seats in the legislature are indications of party strength, and as such the electoral system in which parties operate is a variable to be considered. Plural societies are inclined towards two-party systems and proportional representation towards multiparty systems.

Main Party Systems

Dominant-party systems are ones in which one large party is able to command an absolute majority of votes and seats for a protracted period of time. Other parties are unable to even come close to the 50% threshold, and thus there is no change of rule effectively creating one party rule.

Two-party systems have two equally large and powerful parties that command around 80% of the vote and seats together. Both parties receive 35-45% of the votes and one party is able to reach an absolute majority and form a one-party government. Power usually rotates between the parties.

Multiparty systems have no majoritarian parties that reach 50% of the votes and seats but are composed of many parties of different sizes. These parties contest elections individually but need to form coalitions following elections to wield power, and since these coalitions can change over time, there is alternation in power.

Bipolar systems consist of two large coalitions that can amass up to 80% of the vote and seats. Over time, these coalitions tend to be stable and contest elections as electoral alliances. The coalition governments that form alternate power with elections.

Adapted from Daniele Caramani, 'Party systems' in Daniele Caramani (ed), *Comparative Politics* (OUP 2020)

Further Reading

Gary W Cox, *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems* (Cambridge University Press 1997)

Seymour M Lipset and Stein Rokkan, *Party Systems and Voter Alignments* (Free Press 1967)

Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge University Press 1976).

Robert N Kearney, 'The Political Party System in Sri Lanka' (1983) 98 *Political Science Quarterly* 17, 33

John Hickman, 'Explaining the two-party system in Sri Lanka's National Assembly' (1999) 8 *Contemporary South Asia* 29, 40