POLITICAL PARTIES

Political parties are the key players in political systems. These political systems may be democratic, authoritarian, or even totalitarian. Parties are well-established political organisations which perform the task of organising and presenting candidates up for elections where they are available, and it is implausible to think that any other form of social organisation will supplant it in the way it feeds the government.

Over the ages, the definition of parties has evolved and remains contentious. A definition we can analyse is that of Huckshorn in 1984: 'a political party is an autonomous group of citizens having the purpose of making nominations and contesting elections in the hope of gaining control over governmental power through the capture of public offices and the organisation of the government'.

In this definition, the *objective of parties* is gaining government power through elected office, the *methods* used for that are nominations and taking part in elections, *competition* is explicitly stated indicating contestation, and *autonomous* indicates the self-governing nature of a party. All these four aspects can be contested but remain core tenets of parties. An implied element that Huckshorn adds through his definition is that the group that forms a party has a level of cohesive consistency that helps them function in a coordinating fashion while perpetuating a particular identity.

What constitutes a political party is not merely a question for politics, it concerns the law as well. For instance, entities that are afforded recognition as parties are often granted special privileges, such as government funding and required to submit to obligations regarding transparency.

Functions of Parties

Political parties take part in core functions that are crucial for the operation of democracy.

They **coordinate** among public officials, among citizens who have identical political leanings, and between officials and citizens. To accomplish this, they keep up discipline and communication inside the parliamentary caucus, coordinating its action for or against the cabinet. They also organise political action among similarly inclined individuals and formulate links between organised party backers in the populace and their representatives in public office.

Political parties are usually the key participants **contesting in elections**. They are in charge of the candidates and choosing the issues on which voters will vote. They accomplish this by supplying candidates, and linking them individually to distinctly identifiable symbols, histories, and expectations of teamwork. They also develop the policy agenda and recruit and coordinate workers for campaigns.

Political parties participate in the **recruitment** and selection of staff for both elected and appointed offices. They also recruit activists for party purposes and train and socialise them to potentially hold office.

Finally, political parties function as **representatives** of both groups of citizens and of certain ideological leanings. They do so by speaking on behalf of their members in government and embodying the ideological position which has garnered them their supporters' backing.

Types of Party Organisation

The manner in which parties organise has transformed since the franchise has expanded and society has undergone change. As society continues to evolve, so will party organisation. Some types of parties are:

Cadre or Elite Parties

They are the earliest modern form of party that formed in parliaments comprised exclusively of elites and resourced entirely by personal wealth and connections.

Mass Parties

These parties came into being during the push for mass suffrage. Its members were organised locally and its membership large. The leadership was answerable to its members and the resource base was formed from membership fees and related organisations.

Catch-all Parties

Formed during the mid 1900s, they were more heterogeneous in membership, but with membership that was marginalised in the decision-making process as the party was resourced by interest groups and other individuals.

Cartel Parties

Parties that effectively form cartels to reduce electoral hazards and are resourced by state subsidies. Their central office is dominated by the party in office and reliant on political consultants. While plebiscites among members and supporters determine decisions, the difference between the two are blurred. These are parties currently in operation although not in the Sri Lankan context where party alliances shift and coalesce around various electoral exigencies such as in 2015 with the need to depose the incumbent.

Business-firm Parties

Parties with corporate resources that are operated by politically inclined entrepreneurs, with a focus on business and economic growth rather than the general membership. Forza Italia created by Italian businessman Silvio Berlusconi is an example of such a party.

Parties provide a vital conduit for political activity. They introduce and integrate new citizens into a political environment and enrich the democratic process. However, political parties today face certain challenges. In all forms of existing parties across the democratic world, party membership and the active participation of members in party organising are on the wane. Furthermore, parties are facing more and more legal regulations. This may be rationalised on the grounds of financial fair-play or general impartiality, however, this can entrench existing parties with a set structure formed over time.

Adapted from Richard S. Katz, 'Political parties' in Daniele Caramani (ed), *Comparative Politics* (OUP 2020)

Further Reading

Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties* (John Wiley 1954)

Richard S Katz and William Crotty, *Handbook of Party Politics* (Sage 2006)

Richard Katz and Peter Mair, *Party Organizations: A Data Handbook on Party Organizations in Western Democracies, 1960–90* (Sage 1992)

Amita Shastri and Jayadeva Uyangoda, *Political Parties in Sri Lanka* (OUP 2018)

Neil DeVotta, 'Parties, political decay, and democratic regression in Sri Lanka' (2014) 52 *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 139, 165