

The Theory of Cartelisation and its Critique in Koole

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The concept of a cartel party as formulated by Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair initially provoked a debate between the authors and Professor Ruud Koole, but several empirical studies on the issue of cartelisation have led to a number of conclusions on the thesis that are worth further reflection.

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On parties

“Political parties are political organisations with a membership and an autonomous institutional structure, which put forward candidates for parliamentary and municipal elections with a view to gaining a share of political power and, through their representatives, play a decisive role in shaping the political process and indirectly exercising power over the life of society as a whole.”³

To put it a little more precisely, political representation, which emerged and became institutionalised in the 13th century, is a relationship between people, manifested in the representation of the will and interests of a community. In modern parliamentary democracies, where on the one hand the people exercise their power through elections and on the other hand the representatives collectively represent the will of the people, popular representation can be understood as the “real will of the nation”, i.e. as a representation of will or interests⁴ that points to future performance, and political parties are indispensable organisations that aim to mediate between the state and the citizens in the competition for and the filling of political positions.⁵

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3 SZARVAS–TÓTH 2003: 400–401.

4 NAGY 2019: 268–269.

5 MARCHUT 2019: 452.

Both formulations reflect the *pars pro toto* principle, i.e. that parties, while representing only one section of society, seek to influence the whole by exercising power and implementing their programmes. This requires, however, the acquisition of power, which in modern (representative) democracies is achieved through a parliamentary majority in elections. However, “democracy is costly, and clearly there can be no stable democracy without well-resourced, viable parties”⁶ The reasons for and background to this assertion that central budget funding for political parties is necessary can best be illustrated by looking at the history of party development. In describing this process, particular emphasis should be placed on the phenomenon of cartelisation as one of the defining issues of our time.

History of the development of political parties

The early forms of party formation were parliamentary clubs, societies, or in other words, loosely organised protoparties with no extra-parliamentary membership, which included honorary parties, parties organised by intellectuals, landowners and citizens interested in politics. The politicians of these parties lived for politics and not from politics.

Organised parties, which already had a national network, permanent organisation and apparatus, were the first true form of modern parties.

The emergence of the modern mass parties of the 20th century, which developed in part alongside the organised parties, was made possible by the extension of suffrage, both on the part of the electorate and on the part of the parties. In terms of expanding the parties’ voter base, the empowerment of the hitherto apolitical masses, especially the working class and the peasantry, had enormous potential. The mass socialist-social democratic parties that were then being formed benefited most from the availability of a new voter base. These parties had a broad membership and were characterised by strong party organisation and discipline. Class affiliation was the basis for membership of mass parties, and their main function was to articulate and represent class interests. Hence the typical forms of mass parties are class parties and ideological or ideological parties.

In the 1950s and 1960s, as a result of the transformation of the class and stratification structure of society on the one hand, and the expansion of mediatised politics and the professionalisation of politics on the other, the competing (competitive) people’s parties, or “catch all”⁷ parties, as they were also called, no longer aimed at representing a community, but at maximising votes. In order to achieve this, ideology became less important, party programmes became more general and the role of individual party members was significantly reduced, while the role of party leaders was considerably

6 NAGY 2018:

7 For the original version of the so-called catch-all thesis, see KIRCHHEIMER 1966: 177–200.

enhanced.⁸ The role of political marketing and the use of the mass media in political mobilisation and influence suggests that these parties could be called media parties.⁹ Although a significant number of parties have, for the reasons outlined above, become umbrella parties, ideological parties have also survived.¹⁰

The cartel party thesis and cartelisation

Following Katz and Mair,¹¹ a new type of party, the so-called cartel party, emerged, the origins of which are disputed in the literature. Some date it to the 1970s, others to the collapse of the bipolar world order.¹² Whereas the classical mass parties relied essentially on a broad, large membership (both in terms of activist work and party funding through membership fees), with the advent of state support for parties they became independent of the membership, entering into a symbiotic relationship with the state.¹³ It follows that the term cartel party is used in political science literature to refer to parties that rely exclusively on state resources, that are in fact identical in their acquisition, and that thus limit the conditions of competition and are thus separated from society.¹⁴

In the last decades of the 20th century, the big parties, dependent on state funding, collaborated with each other to build a closed system to make it difficult for new political parties to become a parliamentary factor and to secure their financial resources. The structure and operation of the cartel parties is also interesting in that they have retained the mass base as a source of legitimacy, but their activities are not primarily aimed at achieving social goals or representing values, but at the professional operation of politics and, above all, at gaining and retaining power. The ideological background is now blurred, and the ideological type of politician has been replaced by managerial skills in party leadership. Membership is atomised, represented not by social strata but by individuals; it follows that it has no real power, no influence, on the functioning of the party. Another new phenomenon is that parties and the state are more closely linked than in the past, while at the same time the relationship between parties is not defined by competition but by “collusion” and cooperation.¹⁵

8 MAAS 2001: 167.

9 SZARVAS–TÓTH 2003: 73.

10 BIHARI–POKOL 2009: 340–341.

11 KATZ–MAIR 1995: 5–28.

12 SMUK 2020: 747.

13 TÓTH 2017: 52.

14 SMUK 2020: 747.

15 KATZ–MAIR 1995: 13.

A critique of the cartel party thesis

The concept of the cartel party, as formulated by Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, initially provoked a debate between the authors and Professor Ruud Koole, but several empirical studies on the issue of cartelisation have led to a number of conclusions on the thesis that are worth further reflection.

Koole has criticised Katz and Mair's work from an analytical point of view on several points, noting that the characteristics generally attributed to the type of cartel party should be taken into account depending on the specific circumstances of the country. Closely related to this is the criticism of the evolutionary approach to parties. In Katz and Mair's approach, the cartel party is the fourth form of party that has evolved in the course of contemporary history. Koole, on the other hand, argues that the coexistence of different types of parties should be assumed in research on parties. In his view, instead of assuming the existence of an ideal party type at a given time, it is better to examine why a certain type of party underwent certain changes and became different at a given time. He is convinced that a closer relationship between party and state can have different effects depending on, for example, the electoral system, the media system and the history of the country.¹⁶ As an example, the parties and political systems of the Central and Eastern European states, which suffered from decades of communist dictatorship, show significant differences compared to the changes in Western countries under liberal democracy. It follows that only a valid explanation for the transformation of parties from one type to another can be given in the light of a country's specific situation and history.

In addition to the theoretical criticism of the thesis, practical, empirical studies also pointed to weaknesses, as some of these studies found the theory to be adaptable only with minor or major reservations. Detterbeck concludes that, even if the party systems he has studied do exhibit features of cartel partisanship, these cannot always be explained by Katz and Mair's theory.¹⁷ In the case of the Canadian party system – and of the Anglo-Saxon party system in general – Young found no evidence for the cartel thesis either at the level of the individual party or at the level of the party system.¹⁸ And Scarrow's studies¹⁹ have shown that, contrary to a strong implication of the cartel thesis, state subsidies to parties do not affect the outcome of party competition, so that the "crowding-out effect" does not really work.²⁰

Overall, Koole's criticisms were certainly valid, as Katz and Mair often cited only a few suitable examples to support their theory. This shortcoming has been well demonstrated by the results of subsequent empirical research. It is important to note that elsewhere, the authors have noted that the theory was not sufficiently tested in

16 KOOLE 1996: 519–520.

17 See DETTERBECK 2005: 173–191 and DETTERBECK 2008: 27–40.

18 See YOUNG 1998: 339–358.

19 See SCARROW 2006: 619–639.

20 HORVÁTH–SOÓS 2015: 268.

its initial phase, but that they had subsequently refined and supplemented their thesis several times.

The Koole critique of domestic data²¹

Over the past thirty years, a dependency relationship has developed between parties in the domestic system and state resources that has made state subsidies an indispensable element of the parties' operation and existence.

By 2022, a close symbiosis between the total revenues of parliamentary parties and the share of state subsidies can be said to have developed.

Katz and Mair's theory of cartel parties, however, as critically formulated, should be "tailored" to the specificities of the parties. The term "cartel" (a foreign word) has been able to establish itself with a content in line with international standards primarily in the domestic economic milieu, but less so in political science. The activity of restricting competition between political parties (cartel) has no place in the case of domestic parties. The unquestionable and natural premise of political parties is still competition. This is why the name of the party of interest²² could be a possible way of embedding political science.

But being in the political arena has become extremely capital-intensive in recent decades. This has made it in the common interest of parties to tacitly "play in the same direction" for their organisational survival. In Katz and Mair's theory of cartel parties, this inter-party collusion is interpreted as a typical pattern, which can be understood in an extended spectrum. In the domestic pattern, however, "quasi-alliance" between parties is/can be almost exclusively established only in connection with the adoption of the budget. Thus, the domestic pattern can be equated to a minimalist collusion.

Katz and Mair say that the parties have "conquered" the state in the context of the exclusionary behaviour of the cartel party. The incumbents want broadly acceptable governance, their aim is to keep those in and those on the outside still excluded. This process is good for those on the inside and bad for those on the outside. This claim is not clear-cut for domestic practice either, because by the end of the first decade of the 2000s we witnessed a marked reshuffling in the ranks of domestic parliamentary parties.

The contradiction was born, the domestic interest league parties emerged, because the dependency of the parties on state subsidies is not questionable, but at the same time the exclusionary attitude of the system did not prevail, because new parties had a chance to become powerful.

It would be desirable, however, to aim for a proper balance between public funding and donations in terms of the parties' sources of income. If the parties obtain all or most of their funding from the state budget, it is likely that in the long term they will lack the motivation to maintain regular contact with the various social groups.

21 HORVÁTH 2022: 185–196.

22 Interest – potential for a profitable outcome; league – association.

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