Parties and movements in the functioning of western democratic systems

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Abstract

One of the main causes of the birth of the new political movements consists in the impossibility by the political parties to receipt all the amount of political demand coming from the social environment. Movements originate essentially because of the missing meeting between these kinds of demand with the political offer represented by the parties. For political “demand” we must intend whether demand concerning to specific interests, economic or material ones, or the one that concerns political identity, that is near to values, to ideals, to symbols of membership. Political parties too, however, are born, develop and decline in function of their capacity to offer responses to political demand coming from the social environment, external as regards the political system.

What makes different parties and movements between them, for what concerns the capacity of the political “offer” as regards the demand coming from the civil society? The goal of this paper is to point out the “division of the work” between parties and movements in accomplishing this essential task in the dynamics of democratic functioning, and also to show how the recent changes of the political parties are going exactly in the direction to be able to continue to absolve this task under the cadre of the social, technological and cultural changes which has been happened in the advanced democracies in the last decades.

1. Introduction

One of the causes of the appearance of new political movements is the impossibility for parties to deal with the whole ‘stock’ of political demand coming from the society (Easton, 1965). The main reason behind the rise of new Movements, therefore, lies in the fact that the political supply of parties is not able to meet the political demand of the civil society.

By political ‘demand’ we mean both one linked to specific – or, at least, economic, material interests, and one that has to do with ‘identity’ – that is to say, related to values, ideals and symbols of belonging (Weber, 1978).

Moreover, parties are born, grow and decline according to their ability to provide answers to the political demand coming from the social arena outside the political system (Lawson, 1980).

What is the difference between parties and movements in terms of ability to provide a political ‘supply’ meeting the demand coming from the civil society? And what, then, causes and affects the rise of new parties and movements and their decline?

The aim of the paper is to highlight the ‘task sharing’ between parties and movements in performing this essential role in the functioning of democracies. The paper will show how, despite the recent changes they have undergone, political parties keep performing this function in the framework of the social, technological and cultural transformations that have taken place in advanced democracies in the past ten years, while showing growing

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criticalities and limits that can sometimes question their very legitimation to the eyes of voters and the general public.

2. Parties. Function and position in the political system

Political parties are agencies that receive the political demand coming from the social arena (civil society), and then translate it into potestative decisions of the political system (Easton, 1971).

In this perspective, the system of parties constitutes an essential part of the political system as a whole thanks to its strategic position at the borders of the political system and the social environment, and is therefore able to better ‘intercept’ the Eastonian inputs coming from the civil society, which the government and parliamentary system (themselves part of the political system) then have to translate into outputs.

Taken as a whole, parties are also usually able to satisfy most of the political demand, since they can express overall views of society and thus put forward syntheses of complexity with a high level of generalisation and universalism, which, in turn, strengthens the parties’ supply in terms of identity.

As was briefly stated in the introduction, parties are not able to satisfy 100% of the political demand coming from the civil society, however. The paper will therefore try and explain why they cannot perform this function fully or at least not in a satisfactory way.

Parties usually cover the entire political spectrum available in the political culture of a given community. For example, if the political culture of Italians includes values, symbols, ideas, etc. that are placed along a continuum ranging from the extreme left to the extreme right, then there will be political parties covering the whole continuum. Parties can therefore occupy positions along the continuum from the extreme left (e.g., in Italy, the Rifondazione Comunista - Communist Refoundation party) to the extreme right (e.g., still in Italy, the La Destra - The Right party).

As long as ideologies were a key element in the political cultures of European democracies, they also contributed to shaping strong, well-organised parties carrying universalistic views of the world. These parties enjoyed great legitimation and authority with the general public and in the population’s collective imagination. Thus, party systems were stable, long-lasting and rather static entities.

As ideologies weakened to the point of disappearing at times, political parties began a slow, yet inexorable process of change that has entailed a transformation of the set of values, symbols and ideals of their political culture and hence of the language used to express it, as well as an important, overall restructuring and simplification of their organisation. A shift has been recorded from the mass ideological party to the mass electoral party (Neumann, 1971; Blondel, 1978; Panebianco, 1982).

A comparison between the history of European parties with that of American parties shows a constant tendency, which started even before the fall of the Berlin wall, whereby the former look more and more like the latter in terms of both organisation and political culture. American parties have always been characterised by a more slender party machine compared to the number of party members within representative institutions and Government (exactly the opposite of what it was like in Europe, and even more in Italy, until some time ago). In addition, the American political culture – both Democratic and Republican – has typically little or no grounds in ideology, being based on few though firm principles (Teodori, 2004). One instance of this tendency in Europe has been the introduction of primary elections to choose political candidates in several parties, especially left-wing ones. The effects of this process are twofold, one virtuous and one vicious.

The ‘virtuous’ effect is the greater ability that parties are developing to capture every change of mood of the public, especially with the growing use of surveys and social networks. As a consequence, parties are identifying the political demand more quickly, especially when it means single issues and specific requests, which are immediately apparent and easy to identify.

As for the ‘vicious’ effect, it entails essentially two things: first, the loss of a ‘strong’ connection with major parts and sectors of the society (local political subcultures, productive areas, social categories) and, secondly, the lack of representative capacity in the above sectors and a difficulty to appeal to the public in general, who no longer identify themselves with political parties especially because of the weakening of ideological feelings. It should also
be remarked that the de-ideologisation has had negative effects on the parties’ legitimisation with the public as well as inside the parties themselves. Because of this, there has been a lowering of the moral and ethical standards that until the 1970s would inform the behaviour of militants, executives and leaders of these organisations – at least in ways which citizens would consider acceptable.

This also had a feedback countereffect, once again on the public, who therefore detached themselves even more from the parties, not only because of the weakening of ideological feelings, but also of the evident decline of behaviour in the political class.

A further consequence of the ‘vicious’ effect, which can quantified with a high degree of precision, has been the gradual increase in abstentionism in western European democracies.

A certain percentage of abstentionism is, however, quite natural in mature democracies, including the United States, where electoral abstentionism has long been present on a wide scale, and is therefore said to be ‘structural’. The political parties of the United States have been a model for similar organisations throughout Europe, including post-ideological parties. Interestingly, it was the American political scientists Almond and Powell who stated that too intense a political participation might prevent the good, effective functioning of a democracy (Almond, Powell, 1966). This is because parties which are highly ideologised risk preventing the natural alternation between the majority and opposition in government (Sartori, 1976).

As a summary of what has been stated so far about contemporary parties, it can be said that:

1. they continue to perform a function of interest aggregation and representation, although not as effectively as they used to, and reaching a smaller share of citizens;
2. as for the identity-related political supply, instead, the weakening of the universalistic ideal and motivational drive in parties is reducing their ability to generate political participation (members and militants) and to control and keep a strong body of regular voters. With respect to this, what seems to be still able to realise an encounter between the political demand and political supply in western democracies is the persistence of reference areas in political culture – in the left, right and centre alignments.

The picture described above outlines the framework within which the most significant dynamics of party systems develop today. Such dynamics include the following:

- the space that used to be occupied by the old mass ideological parties has been taken up by new parties with a populist, locally-focused (in some European countries, secessionist) approach;
- the restructuring and re-grouping of parties belonging to the same political area or the birth and/or quick alternation, in these areas, of new parties having shorter life cycles than traditional ones;
- the emergence of a new type of party leaders following the personalisation of political processes. These are a consequence of two typical features of the past few decades, namely the process of individualisation and the mediatisation of political communication and political language;
- the growing weight gained by lobbies in agenda setting processes and in the design and implementation of policies; in so doing, these groups tend to get successfully involved in these processes, using technical and professional resources which are not always available to parties for each single problem, thus producing a sort of ‘competence outsourcing’ (Saccà, 2013).

Overall, it is possible to state that the political parties of the new millennium suffer a crisis of representativeness, hence of legitimisation, which erodes the spaces they have traditionally occupied within the political system as a consequence of the social transformation processes that have actually moved beyond the mass ideological party model.

The parties respond to this crisis of legitimisation by:

- focusing the political supply on short- and medium-term issues (‘single issues’);
- simplifying the structure of their organisation;
- outsourcing competences and involving subjects and associations belonging to the civil society in decision-making processes;
- a personalisation and consequent growing presence of strong leaders in politics;
Parties and movements in the functioning of western democratic systems

- the mediatisation of the political message and language;
- using and involving citizens, namely potential voters, through a growing, more sophisticated use of the new media.

3. Movements in the ‘gravitational field’ between the political system and the society

Where is the political action of movements concentrated in the framework of the political systems of advanced democracies?

As it was briefly mentioned in the introduction, to answer this question means to outline the capacity of political supply held by the movements themselves, and thus to outline a picture of their potential ‘competition’ to parties.

Before focusing on this particular aspect, however, it may be useful to give a brief overview of the various theoretical approaches to the study of the birth and development of movements. This will provide some valid criteria to better analyse the different types of movement operating in the political field included between the political system tout-court on the one hand (parties and institutions) and the civil society on the other.

Due to lack of space and time, this paper is not going to present the whole tradition of studies and research on collective movements (De Nardis, 2013), but will briefly describe the approaches that can still be considered to be topical with a view to providing a satisfactory explanation of the movements’ ‘life cycles’.

1. The first approach to the study of movements, which was also the first to be fully formulated, dates back to the 1960s and the structural-functionalist currents (Smelser, 1962). In fact, the approach has its scientific roots in the studies on the crowd, turmoil, and revolts carried out by Scipio Sighele and Gustave Le Bon as early as the late 19th century. The “Collective behaviour” or “Collective action” approach views movements as a symptom of various types of tensions existing in the community and that the social organisation as a whole is not able to respond to.

2. The second approach, which may be defined “Identity approach” (Weber, 1922; Alberoni, 1981; Melucci, 1982), focuses – rather than on the concrete (social or political) causes giving rise to movements – on the psycho-social dynamics that characterise their processes, the mechanisms on which they are founded and which determine their actions, evolution and/or decline. These processes rest on identity-related dynamics which, through movements, play a major role in creating a sense of belonging among movements’ members.

3. The third approach is defined in the literature as a “Mobilisation of resources”. According to this research approach, “analysing the structural tensions that generate protests is important, but it is even more important to study the conditions that turn discontent into mobilisation. Much depends on the resources available – both material (money, time and services) and immaterial (authority, moral commitment, faith, friendship relations), as well as on the ability of ‘movement entrepreneurs’ to organise discontent by reducing the costs of the action, setting up solidarity networks, gaining consent from outside and, finally, distributing incentives among activists” (De Nardis, 2013).

4. The fourth approach is the one called “New social movements”. Contrary to the structural-functionalist definition, which views movements as symptoms of subterranean pathologies existing in the society, in this view movements perform a function of social clarification, meaning that without them a fundamental element in the dynamics of historical action would be missing, because of the three principles characterising movements, namely the principle of identity, the principle of totality, and the principle of opposition (Touraine, 1965).

5. The fifth and last paradigm is the one of the so-called “Structure of political opportunities”. The authors adopting this perspective (Tarrow, 1989; Della Porta, 1996) stress the close relationship existing between the dynamics of movements and the political-institutional context in which they take shape. According to these authors, the success or failure of a movement depends very much on the opportunities its leaders have (and on their ability to catch them) to set up political relationships...
and negotiations with the actors of the political system (parties, government, parliament), trying to take advantage of the opportunities that various political subjects may offer movements and that the latter must be able to benefit from in order to gain space in the political arena of a society.

Based on what has been outlined so far, it is now possible to draw an overall picture of the functions performed by movements in contemporary advanced democracies.

The so-called “season of collective movements” that characterised western Europe and North America in the 1960s and 1970s is now well behind us, and the whole society today is shaped in such a way that such an experience would be difficult to replicate in that form and, above all, with the same degree of intensity.

However, since that time the reality of movements has not disappeared: on the contrary, it has evolved, and they can now said to be stable actors placed midway between the political system and the civil society and alternating constantly with one another. In other words, new movements take the place of movements that have reached the final stages of their ‘life cycle’ - a life cycle that can vary in length depending on a number of factors that are briefly outlined below:

a) ability to motivate their members to take political action by focussing on strong identity factors and incentives coming from inside or outside the movement itself;

b) possibility to benefit from the so-called ‘movement entrepreneurs’, that is to say subjects who are charismatic, natural-born leaders, can organise discontent in an efficient, sustainable way and, finally, have a good instinct and are able to catch and use all the opportunities that the political system offers to movements;

c) represent issues that are of interest for the society, due to changes in relationships of interest, in the idea of self-fulfilment, in the social representation of reality, and in the conflicts between roles and social functions, which the universe of political parties does not represent in a satisfactory way.

Needless to say, a movement that represents identity-related issues, values and interests in a growing manner both in terms of extension (within the social fabric) and of depth (that is, able to involve human resources willing to invest time, energies and their own lives to the benefit of the movement), may definitely make the ‘leap’, i.e. cross the border dividing the social arena from the actual political system to become a veritable political party.

From the perspective of political science, only one condition must be fulfilled for this to happen: the movement must be willing, and able, to compete in elections to win seats in parliament.

In sociological-organisational terms, for a movement to turn into a party it is also necessary for the movement’s organisation to have reached a sufficient degree of complexity in its structure and presence throughout the territory (ranging from the regional to the international scale), an internal well-defined distribution of roles and functions, and to have a professional team of leaders who are fully dedicated to the movement (or future party).

Considering the above, it can be stated that the political supply of movements can be made up of any or all of the following, depending on the type of movement:

- enabling citizens to voice issues, values, interests and ideas which have not fully emerged in the public debate, even though they are already expressed by the ‘life worlds’ (Schütz, Luckmann, 1973) under the surface. Thus movements become an extraordinary tool for these issues to spread more widely and faster (think, for example, of the movements relating value-conscious consumption or fair trade, the Lilliput networks, etc.);

- outlining the concept of identity to create a feeling of belonging, by putting forward new, innovative ways of representing, interpreting and ‘enacting’ the social reality and the way in which it is organised and imagined (for example, the no-global movement);

- representing, organising and expressing interests which are not directly voiced by political parties, but play a major role in the public debate and are high on the political agenda (for example, non-profit associations, volunteer work, various forms of civic engagement);

- covering political spaces of emerging radicalism (left- or right-winged, pro-independence, anti-political, etc.), which have not yet been organised as political parties but are able to find followers among (sometimes few) citizens (for example, the Black Blocs or Golden Dawn, or the Lombard League in its early stages).
4. Conclusions

As a brief conclusion, it can be said that despite their much wakened role and loss of ground within the political system, political parties continue to hold a few major functions, namely they:

a) cover the whole political-cultural continuum: left – centre – right;

b) aggregate and express interests;

c) select leaders;

d) recruit politicians and encourage political participation.

Movements, on the other hand:

a) help clarify unexpressed social needs or conflicts;

b) motivate and encourage citizens to political participation by means of a strong supply in terms of identity;

c) select leaders.

References


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