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Review Article

Seán Hanley:^{*} All Fall Down? The Prospects for Established Parties in Europe and Beyond

Jean Michel De Waele, Fabien Escalona and Mathieu Vieira (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

Robert Rohrschneider and Stephen Whitefield, *The Strain of Representation: How Parties Represent Diverse Voters in Western and Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Margit Tavits, *Post-Communist Democracies and Party Organization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Jana Morgan, *Bankrupt Representation and Party System Collapse* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press 2011).

nyone contemplating the elections in May 2014 to the European Parliament cannot fail to have been struck by two contradictory phenomena. On the one hand, the continent seemed to have developed a recognizable and increasingly coordinated party political landscape of pan-European party families spanning the former East–West divide. On the other hand, the results suggested that established parties and party systems across Europe were very visibly under

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pressure from a variety of challenges. In Northern Europe socioeconomic malaise and democratic disconnect were often refracted through the politics of anti-immigration benefiting right-wing populists, while in Southern Europe anti-austerity parties of the radical left gained ground. Elsewhere voters backed loose, ideologically unplaceable, anti-political movements which claim to be replacements for political parties, such as Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy or the Yes (ANO) grouping of agro-billionaire Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic. In much of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) voters simply stayed away from the polls in record numbers. The elections thus simultaneously posed two (possibly related) questions which have long preoccupied researchers: whether, just over a century after they emerged in modern form (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), European parties are still satisfactory vehicles for democratic representation and how, 25 years after the fall of communism, party-based democracies in Central and Eastern Europe relate to those in older established West European states.

As De Waele, Escalona and Vieira's edited *Palgrave Handbook of Social Democracy in the European Union* makes clear, the appearance of a pan-European party landscape is not altogether illusory. Significant social democratic parties have emerged across the EU. The Socialists and Democrats faction in the European Parliament is the only group to include MEPs from every member state. The success and durability of social democracy, both historically and in contemporary Europe, De Waele, Escalona and Vieira suggest, has lain in its ability to respond to changing demands for the attenuation of market inequalities through social citizenship. Other questions – such as the relationship of social democracy to nationalism and the nation state; where social democratic parties should place themselves on the axis of social liberalism; and whether social democratic parties are workers' parties or broad popular coalitions – have proved historically more divisive and less central to social democratic identity. However, as the editors note, these are the questions that have weighed most heavily

on social democracy. They are still acutely felt in contrasting social democrat responses to European integration, de-industrialization and the decline of the traditional working class, globalization and the rise of more fragmented, multicultural societies. Such multiple challenges, the editors conclude in their introduction, have set 'social democracy ... travelling along an inevitably downward electoral slope' (De Waele et al. 2013: 21), losing votes to both the libertarian left and the radical right.

The Handbook does not, however, seek to address these questions directly. Rather, it is a reference work and research resource consisting of short, standardized chapters by national specialists giving an up-to-date overview of social democratic parties in each of the 27 states of the pre-2013 EU. Country chapters cover the history, internal organization, election results, electoral and social bases, government participation and programmes of social democratic parties. The collection thus succeeds well in its objective of furnishing a panoramic overview of the extended social democratic party family, taking in both core West European states and less familiar cases in Central and Eastern Europe. However, the collection's empirical breadth runs ahead of its analytical scope. Although a third of the book's length is devoted to Central and Eastern European cases, both the editorial introduction and the short concluding essay by George Ross dwell heavily on the development and dilemmas of Western European social democracy. This is a pity. The origins of many Central and Eastern European social democratic parties as successors of former ruling communist parties sharply highlight the issues of historical adaptability that the editors rightly draw attention to. Moreover, the performance of social democracy in the region is clearly relevant to wider debates about its supposed decline. Based on most recent parliamentary election results reported by De Waele et al. (2013: 6–7), Central and Eastern Europe contained both the most and least successful social democratic parties in Europe.

CAN PARTIES TAKE THE STRAIN

The capacities of parties in Europe to deliver democratic representation and the extent of democratic convergence between Western Europe and Eastern Europe are addressed in far more ambitious terms by Rohrschneider and Whitefield's *The Strain of Representation*. The authors' central concern is that the quality of party-based representation in Europe may be eroding, as parties struggle to reconcile the conflicting demands of voters with established party loyalties and the non-aligned independents, who make up a large and growing proportion of European electorates. Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012: 27) conservatively estimate that 45 per cent of West European voters and just under 54 per cent of Central and Eastern Europe voters are independent floating voters who do not identify with any party.

The reasons for the rise of dealigned electorates in Europe are well known and well studied. In Western Europe dealignment has been driven by the long-term socioeconomic, cultural and technological changes that advanced post-industrial capitalism societies have undergone over the last half-century (Bardi et al. 2014; Kitschelt 1994, 1999; Kriesi et al. 2008). Similar processes are now belatedly at work in Central and Eastern Europe following the region's opening up to European and global markets in 1989. However, the predominance of floating voters in Central and Eastern Europe is more strongly attributable to the interruption of historical patterns of party development by communism and the subsequent failure of post-communist societies to (re-)generate party identification on any scale after 1989 (Enyedi 2006).

The relationship of partisan and independent voters to parties has also been well studied. However, as Rohrschneider and Whitefield note, this literature has generally assumed one of two quite different patterns of representation: *dealignment models*, which see voters essentially as customers in an electoral market and parties as political enterprises competing centripetally for the median voter; and *partisan models*, which view electorates as structured into distinct

constituencies with clear, stable sets of ideological preferences and party loyalties rooted in deep-running social divisions and well-established collective identities.

What has been less well tested is the possibility that these two voter groups and models of representation may empirically coexist and the implications of this coexistence for party-based democracy. Taken together, Rohrschneider and Whitefield pessimistically suggest, they may constitute a mechanism for inducing ‘representational strain’ on parties’ as they attempt to balance the diverging demands of partisan and independent voters to assemble winning electoral coalitions. Such strain, they argue, may be particularly acute when (as is now the case in both Western and Eastern Europe) numbers of partisans and independents are relatively balanced.

Rohrschneider and Whitefield examine representational strain through a an ambitious cross-sectional comparison of parties, electorates and party system in 24 EU states, 14 in Western Europe and 10 in Central and Eastern Europe¹ presenting data on 146 parliamentary parties (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012: 7–15). Unsurprisingly given its grand sweep, the book relies on survey-based and statistical methodologies, drawing on, cross-checking and integrating a range of data, including expert surveys on party positioning and organization, Comparative Manifestos Project coding, European Social Survey responses and previously published literature on parties. The bulk of the data is drawn from 2003–7 shortly after the EU’s eastern enlargement, but before the onset of the global recession and the eurozone crisis.

They first investigate the ‘programmatisation’ of parties, finding that parties in both Western Europe and (more surprisingly) Central and Eastern Europe offer coherent programmatic packages which broadly match their self-declared party (family) identity. They additionally find that party systems across Europe offer a *range* of programmatic positions – essential for meaningful competition, choice and accountability (Roberts 2010). Similar patterns of programmatisation are also found among mass publics, both at the aggregate level (in national

electorates as whole) and within individual parties' constituencies: voters have coherent sets of views which they relate to distinctions of left and right. These are commonly understood in both halves of the continent in socio-economic terms.²

In both Eastern and Western Europe, the authors find, however, that party positions are, structured in two dimensions: the first centring on distributional conflicts and the role of the state and the market, the second on social, moral and cultural issues. At the European level there is thus no single overarching left–right dimension. Nor is there any rigid association between parties' left–right economic position and their positioning on liberal or conservative sociocultural issues.³ There is nevertheless an important caveat: Central and Eastern European parties' views on *currently* contested issues can be simplified (through factor analysis) into a single dimension opposing a cluster of parties with socially and economically liberal views to parties with socially illiberal and economically statist views. Party systems in Central and Eastern Europe are thus merely 'potentially two-dimensional'. Despite the formation of pan-European party families – of which the social democrats analysed by De Waele, Escalona and Vieira and their contributors are perhaps the best example – 25 years after the fall of communism patterns of party-political division in Central and Eastern Europe have still not truly converged with those characteristic of Western Europe.

CONVERGENT LEVELS OF REPRESENTATION

Such regional non-convergence need not, however, mean that parties and their varying electorates are mismatched or that parties are subject to representational strain. To assess representational strain directly Rohrschneider and Whitefield measure the congruence of voter and party positions through two (sets of) measures: *relative congruence*, the correlation between a party's ideological position and that of its supporters; and *absolute congruence*, the distance between a party's position and that of its supporters (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012: 103–4, 113). In broad-brush terms, they find a high degree of congruence between

European parties and their voters, with surprisingly little difference between Western and Eastern Europe.

However, for representational strain relative congruence is less important than absolute distances between parties and voters and, in particular, the comparative distances between a party and its independent and partisan supporters. Using a variety of measures, Rohrschneider and Whitefield establish that parties across Europe have quite high levels of ‘absolute congruence’ but are, as might be expected, on average closer to partisan rather than independent supporters. These general patterns, however, obscure national variations which sometimes crosscut variations in institutional design, socioeconomic development and the East/West location in puzzling ways.⁴ On the whole, though, this shows the functioning of party-based democracy in an optimistic light. Certainly, the authors’ initial fears that the rise of non-aligned centrist electorates could empty party competition of programmatic content or reduce it to vacuous centripetal competition around valence issues are not borne out for either Western or Eastern Europe. Even in highly dealigned systems such as the UK there are, for the moment, sufficient numbers of partisan voters to anchor meaningful programmatic competition.

There is, however, one striking cross-regional finding: that party–voter distances are slightly lower in new Central and Eastern European democracies than in Western Europe, suggesting that electorates in *established* European party systems generate greater ‘representational strain’ than the generally more volatile electoral environments of post-communist Europe (Tucker and Powell 2014). Moreover, when Rohrschneider and Whitefield examine the critical configuration that should exert the highest levels of representational strain – a situation where a party is closer to its partisans than to its independent supporters, and closer to its independent supporters than independents generally – they find it is much less prevalent in Central and Eastern Europe (50 per cent of parties) than in Europe as a whole (70 per cent

of all parties). Similarly, having a strongly class- or confessionally based core electorate is also less strenuous for mainstream Central and Eastern European parties than for the moderate centre-left or -right parties in Western Europe, perhaps perhaps offering some clue as to why some social democratic parties in post-communist Europe do not seem subject to the patterns of decline that afflict their counterparts in older EU states.

Why do electorates in long-established West European democracies generate higher levels of representational strain than those of the newer democratic systems of Central and Eastern Europe? Or, put in other words, how does Central and Eastern Europe achieve a quality of democratic representation comparable to West European democracies? Part of the answer to this ‘puzzle of equal congruence’, as Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012: 174) term it, lies in the greater complexity of party competition which operates in fully two dimensions in the diverse multicultural, post-industrial societies of Western Europe,. Such complexity poses formidable challenges to parties which need both to encompass such diversity and to simplify it into manageable lines of political competition.

This diagnosis is confirmed when the authors examine the influence of national-level factors such as socioeconomic structure and institutional design on party–voter congruence. The design of national democratic institutions, whether inclining towards majoritarianism or consensus has little effect on individual parties’ levels of congruence.⁵ Congruence is, however, influenced by levels of socioeconomic and human development: where levels of development are higher, party–voter distances are greater and congruence lower.. What matters for the emergence of representational strain, Rohrschneider and Whitefield conclude, is not simply the emergence of a certain proportion of independent non-aligned voters but also the *kind* of independents that emerge. Poorer Central and Eastern European states may have large pools of unaligned independent voters,⁶ but their emergence is attributable more to the dislocating

legacies of communism than to the type of social fragmentation and value shift driving dealignment in the advanced West.

ORGANIZATION MATTERS . .

All this begs questions: how have political parties in Western Europe – supposedly declining institutions burdened by historical baggage of a now vanished Golden Age of mass politics – coped so well in such a challenging representational environment? The explanation, Rohrschneider and Whitefield hypothesize, may lie in (some) Western parties' retention of substantial elements of mass organization which may help bridge the gap between partisans and independent voters. Central and Eastern European parties, by contrast, are normally viewed (with a few exceptions) as organizationally far weaker than those of core West European states (van Biezen 2003). Based on their expert survey data, however, Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012: 124) surprisingly find that 'party organizations are nearly as developed in CEE as in WE [Western Europe]' and even when parties are dichotomized into organizationally 'strong' and 'weak' groupings, the gap is small than might be expected.⁷

It is only when testing whether elements of mass organization actually alleviate representational strain, that the authors find a regional difference. Their hypothesis is strongly confirmed in Western Europe. Western European parties with stronger 'mass' characteristics are closer to all types of voter even when factors such as party age, incumbency, ideological extremism and class base are controlled for. In line with the 'partisan model', mass organizational features thus ease the representational strains induced by the bifurcation of the electorate into partisans and independents and the opening up of multiple issue dimensions. This paints a relatively optimistic picture of the robustness, adaptability and responsiveness of traditional forms of party-based democracy in the old EU, which cuts against the grain of much of the party-decline literature.

However, the hypothesis is not borne out in Central and Eastern Europe, where ‘congruence ... – to the extent that it exists – is not helped at all by contemporary party organizations’ as ‘*none* of the regression coefficients for party organization gets even close to statistical significance’ (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012: 133, emphasis in original). This, as Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012: 136) note, ‘supports the argument that mass organizational forms found in CEE are “hollow shells” and support an interpretation that views the development of party organizations [in the region] as *sui generis*’.

This implies an ominous future for party-based democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, despite the programmatic character of parties and party–voter linkages in the region and the fact that Central and Eastern Europe parties currently appear to be working as effective mechanisms of representation. If social change in Central and Eastern Europe – driven by ongoing modernization and integration – follows the same pattern as that in Western Europe, it will exert the same types of representational strain as those found in Western Europe, leaving ineffective *ersatz* organizations in the region ill equipped to prevent the fragmentation of party systems. Indeed, for observers of the region it is tempting to see the succession of ‘earthquake elections’ in 2010–13 in previously stable Central and East Europe party systems such those of as Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Hungary as the harbingers of such a process.

Rohrschneider and Whitefield’s data on Central and Eastern European party organization is, however, relatively weak and some aspects of their findings are perplexing : it is difficult, for example, to square their assertion that Central and Eastern European parties have levels of organization comparable to those of Western Europe with the broader literature. Van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke (2012: 29), for example, concluded that the average level of party membership in Central and Eastern Europe was little more than half the 5.6 per cent average for Western and Southern European democracies and placed all Central and Eastern Europe states with the exceptions of Bulgaria, Slovenia and Estonia below the European average. These

limitations may reflect a degree of imprecision in the expert survey questions,⁸ suggesting a need for more sustained empirical research into party organisation in the region.

In *Post-Communist Democracies and Party Organization* Margit Tavits sets out to fill this gap. Her comparative study examines the extent to which strong organization affects the survival, success and cohesion of parties in Central and Eastern Europe. Given the patchiness of data across the region, she focuses on four national cases: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Estonia, the first two representing (at the time the book was completed) relatively stable, predictable post-communist party systems, the latter two more fluid and changeable patterns.

What does it mean to be an organizationally ‘strong’ party? Distilling the literature, Tavits offers a composite measure based on four indicators: professionalism of the central apparatus, extensiveness of the organizational network, membership size and levels of participation by parties of local elections (with numbers of candidates fielded seen as loose proxy for levels of activism). This overlaps closely with Rohrschneider and Whitefield’s conceptualization of (residual) mass party features,⁹ and, like Rohrschneider and Whitefield, Tavits finds such features empirically clustered, suggesting that organizational strength is a unitary phenomenon (Tavits (2013: 41). However, while Rohrschneider and Whitefield are largely confined to expert survey data, Tavits furnishes harder, more detailed evidence using electoral data at national and subnational levels, detailed analyses of local press and media and information from direct contacts with parties to assess party organization in Central and Eastern Europe.

Pooling the results of 82 more stable parliamentary parties across elections in all four countries, she finds – even when controlling for variables such as resources and incumbency – that organization matters for political success: there is a significant and positive correlation between organizational strength and levels of electoral performance. This relationship also

holds up when parties' electoral performance is compared *within* states across subnational units. Investigating this relationship in qualitative case studies, she argues that a focus on organization-building helps explain the survival of niche parties such as the Czech Communists (KSČM) or the Polish Peasant Party (PSL), the successful emergence of the main centre-right Hungarian and Czech parties against earlier established rivals, the success of the Estonian Centre Party (K) against the ideologically similar Coalition Party (KE), and the ability of the Czech Social Democrats (ČSSD) in 1990s to move from minor to major party status.

Tavits also finds that party organization correlates with levels of (parliamentary) party unity, suggesting that the electoral benefits that a strong party organization brings dissuade legislators from defection or violating party discipline. Analysing rebellions and splits, she finds that organizationally stronger parties such as the Czech Civic Democrats (ODS) and the Estonian Centre Party (KE) punish rebels more often and more severely than organizationally weaker groupings. Varying levels of organizational strength also have impacts *within* parties: party branches with higher levels of grassroots organization wield more power than weaker branches, and the leaders of stronger branches enjoy greater levels of autonomy and visibility. This, she argues, leaves top national party leaders with a political dilemma over whether to invest in organization-building strategies: stronger overall, national party organization lead to greater party success and parliamentary cohesion, but will at the same time upset internal party dynamics by throwing up new challengers to established leaders. The dilemma is made more acute by the fact that the strongest branches in organizationally stronger parties appear to wield disproportionately more power.

Variation in the strength of party organization, Tavits argues, can be explained by a combination (interaction) of three environmental factors, all of which increase the likelihood of party- building: pariah status, stemming from political extremism or being a former regime party (or both); having a hard-to-reach rural or small town electoral base; or possessing a

greater preponderance of party leaders made up of ‘professional’ elites with skills and inclinations to build organization, rather than ‘amateurs’ who underestimate the need for party organization.

.. BUT HOW AND WHEN

In some respects, Tavits arrives at conclusions very similar to those of Rohrschneider and Whitefield. *Post-Communist Democracies and Party Organization* makes a compelling case that party organization matters for the electoral success in Central and Eastern Europe and, like Rohrschneider and Whitefield, she concludes that accounts which dismiss the importance of building party organization on the grounds of changes in social structure or communications technologies are over-stated. Her reading of the utility of strong party organizations is virtually identical to that posited by Rohrschneider and Whitefield in their discussion of how ‘mass’ organization can ease representational strain. Greater organization and membership, both sets of authors agree, exercise their effects by: 1) cementing a loyal, core electorate; 2) acting as a channel for engagement and implantation in local communities; and 3) providing additional (human) resources for on-the-ground electoral campaigning. </bni>

<BI>In other ways, however, their conclusions regarding Central and Eastern Europe appear diametrically opposed. While Rohrschneider and Whitefield see Central and Eastern European parties as organizationally ‘hollow shells’ when it comes to delivering representation, Tavits views them as highly effective in delivering electoral success and survival. There is, however, no necessary contradiction here. Central and Eastern European party organizations may help deliver voters, but they may deliver them in a form ill-matched to parties’ positions in terms of representational quality.

The gap between the two books’ interpretations of the role of party organization in Central and Eastern Europe can also be narrowed by unpicking some of the broader claims in

Post-Communist Democracies and Party Organization. The book argues that organizationally stronger parties can more ‘successfully overcome any crisis and survive as significant players than their organisationally weak counterparts’ (Tavits 2013: 195) and that parties’ organizational strength contributes to their institutionalization (Tavits 2013: 5–6, 198, 202). However, as Nicole Bolleyer (2013) has convincingly argued, electoral success, longer-term survival and the processes of deeper institutionalization are arguably quite different concepts which need to be measured in different ways. Small niche parties may be relatively electorally unsuccessful, but at the same time well institutionalized long-term survivors. Repeat electoral success of large parties, by contrast, may happen without any resulting institutionalisation.

Post-Communist Democracies and Party Organization tends to conflate such processes both theoretically and empirically, and its conclusions sometimes run ahead of the evidence it is able to marshal.¹⁰ Thus, while the suggestion that a strong organization helps Central and Eastern European parties survive crises and shocks is highly plausible, the book’s case study material – which focuses on early periods of party system formation – offers limited evidence that this is so. The subsequent electoral collapse of two of the successful, organizationally strong parties examined by Tavits, the Czech Civic Democrats (ODS) and the Hungarian Socialists (MSzP), suggests the relationship between organizational strength and party sustainability may be more complex than the book allows.

Both books rest, in the end, on assumptions about the activism of Central and Eastern Europe party members, which seem more carried over from literature rooted in the West European and North American experiences than directly evidenced by the literature on the region itself. This is unsurprising. Existing studies of Central and Eastern European party organization have focused heavily on forms, resources and formal rules (van Biezen 2003; Lewis 1996; Szczerbiak 2001), but left questions of Central and Eastern European parties’ real internal life and what their members and activists do from day-to-day and election-to-election

largely unprobed. The precise nature of Central and Eastern European parties' organizational 'hollowness' or (in)activity thus remains something of an open question.</bi>

LESSONS FROM LATIN AMERICA

<BNI>What are the longer-term prospects for party democracy in Europe? Rohrschneider and Whitefield are careful not to overstate their conclusions about the robustness of West European party systems and parties. One limitation of their study, as they readily acknowledge, is that it essentially offers a cross-national, cross-regional snapshot which tells us little about trends in party organization and institutionalization. If West European parties can hold together diverse electorates by anchoring themselves in a declining core of loyal voters and remnants of mass organization inherited from a Golden Age of partisan politics, it does not mean they will be able to do so indefinitely. Rohrschneider and Whitefield's findings thus qualify, but do not invalidate the findings of the party-decline literature about the erosion of traditional forms of party organization and the secular decline of party membership (van Biezen et al. 2012; Mair 2013).</bni>

Parties in Central and Eastern Europe are also dependent on a declining, hard-to-replace (if much weaker) legacy of inherited organizational assets carried over from the communist period and the intense mobilization of 1989–90. This is a point overlooked in *Post-Communist Democracies and Party Organization*, which argues that classic perspectives on the path-dependent formation of parties (Panebianco 1988) are inapplicable to Central and Eastern Europe as 'parties emerged relatively simultaneously, with all possessing relatively similar resources' (Tavits 2013:153; see also 196).

Tavits is certainly right to stress the role of purposive action in Central and Eastern European parties' organizational development and the mixed incentives faced by party leaders contemplating organization building. However, such a broad-brush dismissal of historical

legacies lacks credibility. Communist successor parties and their former satellites enjoyed marked organizational and resource advantages over parties emerging from the former opposition, precisely because of path-dependence and the legacies of the communist (and sometimes pre-communist) past (Lewis 1996). Moreover, many of the most significant parties of the post-communist right such as the Czech Civic Democrats also drew path dependently on the organizational and activist legacies of anti-communist civic mobilization in 1989–90 (Hanley 2001).¹¹ As in Western Europe, therefore, building organization or renewing ‘hollow’ party structures in Central and Eastern Europe is likely to be rendered more difficult by the unwinding of organizational legacies.

What are the longer-term prospects for party-based democracy in Europe? Rohrschneider and Whitefield remain circumspect about the potential threat confronting party systems faced with the prospect of rising levels of ‘representational strain’. However, recent scholarship on Central and Eastern Europe, the region where such issues seem most sharply posed, suggests that the unnamed spectre that of major party system instabilities, and perhaps even the breakdown, failure or collapse of party-based representation (Bakke and Sitter 2013; Hanley and Sikk 2014; Haughton and Deegan-Krause forthcoming).

Scholarship on parties and party systems rooted in the West European experience has viewed such breakdowns as such rare and unlikely occurrences that it can safely be dismissed as ‘a theoretical possibility lurking in the background, becoming a reality only in spectacular instances, such as the breakdown of the Italian party system . . . that can easily be dismissed as exceptional’ (Bolleyer 2013: 12). For a more worked-out theory of party system collapse, we thus need to look beyond Europe.

In Latin America the collapse of relatively well-institutionalized party systems has been a more common and better-studied phenomenon. Although early analogies between

democratization in Eastern Europe and Latin America were misleading (Bunce 1995), there are strong arguments that aspects of the Latin American experience – and, in particular, the impact of crisis on parties and their electorates – can usefully inform thinking about contemporary Europe (Hernández and Kriesi 2013; Rovira-Kaltwasser 2013). Jana Morgan’s *Bankrupt Representation and Party System Collapse* (2011) uses Latin American experiences and, above all, the Venezuelan case, to think through and formulate a theory of party system collapse.

Party system collapse, Morgan argues, must be conceptually distinguished from related but less wide-ranging forms of instability such as party system change or the collapse and replacement of individual parties. It entails, she argues, the failure within a concentrated period of time – she proposes the span of two parliamentary elections – of all established parties and the accompanying transformation of underlying structures of party competition.

Venezuela is chosen as, at least in a Latin American context, a ‘least likely’ case for party system collapse. Following the 1958 Punto Fijo Pact, which marked a break with a history of dictatorship and military strongmen, Venezuela had developed a well-institutionalized two-and-half party system centring on the Christian Democratic COPEI and the social-democratic Democratic Action (AD). However, to the surprise of many, in the 1990s this seemingly well-entrenched system crumbled within the space of a few short years in the face of social and political tensions triggered by declining oil prices and unpopular neoliberal reforms. Crisis elections in 1993 – following two unsuccessful military coups – saw a haemorrhaging of support for the two established parties, before the presidential elections of 1998 brought Hugo Chávez to power, marking the beginning of a quite different political era.

The collapse of the old Venezuelan party system, Morgan argues, cannot simply be read as a salutatory tale about the destabilizing effects of (stop-go) neoliberal reforms and falling commodity prices. Although some form of exogenous shock or external constraint is usually

necessary for party system collapse, less well-institutionalized party systems, such as that of Argentina after 1998, successfully rode out much bigger crises. The key to the Venezuelan conundrum and the wider question of party system collapse, Morgan argues, is instead to be found in the across-the-board failure of party–society linkages as oil revenues dried up and major social change ensued, primarily taking the form of a huge expansion of the informal sector of the economy.

The idea that parties subsist by maintaining links with voters and social (electoral) constituencies and die off when these links erode (Lawson and Merkl 1988) is hardly new. Morgan’s key insight, however, is to note that the stability and resilience of an established party or party system can rest on a complex mix of forms of linkage, which may combine programmatic, clientelistic and corporatist elements. Party system collapse, she claims, occurs when all forms of linkage simultaneously fail or fail in rapid succession across all major parties

In Venezuela, she argues, programmatic linkage was broken when both major parties were confronted with the failure of old economic policy paradigms, avoided innovating ideologically and were thrown back on externally mandated neoliberal policies which contradicted their established social Christian and social democratic identities. The two parties’ predilection for cooperation and pacting – a key feature of the ‘Punto Fijo settlement’ – served to sever further programmatic links, with voters concluding that established parties offered no meaningful programmatic choice.

Austerity and the rapid informalization of the Venezuelan economy also undercut established parties’ abilities to fall back on corporatist and clientelistic linkages. Informalization both drastically reduced the numbers of voters working in formal sector and marginalized traditional class-based interest organizations of peasants, employers and labour. Moreover, the conventional hierarchical structure of the two parties and their allied mass social

organizations left them poorly placed to organize the growing ranks of the urban precariat and unemployed.

Finally, the possibility of using (or rebuilding) clientelistic networks was cut off by a sharp decline in public resources and by an exploding demand for patronage, which rapidly outstripped supply. Such demands were aggravated by the unintended consequence of earlier decentralization reforms intended to increase accountability. Instead political decentralization merely boosted demand for clientelistic resources by introducing a raft of expensive-to-fight subnational elections, while budgetary decentralization empowered local political bosses at the expense of national party leaders, further weakening party structures. The stage in the process of party system collapse took the form of dual chain reactions: the crisis of one major established party placed additional burdens on others, while the failure of one form of linkage pushed additional (and unmeetable) demands onto other linkage strategies (as evidence by the growing demand for patronage as programmatic differences between Venezuelan parties faded).

Morgan tests her model of collapse in a series of paired comparisons of party systems under strain, some of which buckled, some of which endured: Venezuela (1992–8) versus Argentina (after 1998), Italy in the 1990s versus Belgium in the 1970s, Colombia versus Uruguay, and Bolivia (1985–2005) versus India in the 1980s. These contrasting cases, she argues, bear out her model of party system collapse as the simultaneous failure of multiple linkage forms brought on by the combined effects of external constraints on programmatic competition and rapid social transformation. Local variants on policy constraint (for example, preparation for the euro in Italy or US anti-drugs policies in Colombia) and cleavage change (the rise of regional or ethno-regional identities in Italy, Belgium, Bolivia and India; de-industrialization in Belgium and Italy) stand in for the specifics of the Venezuelan case.

Where traditional party systems under extreme stress survive, they usually do so because one or more of the necessary conditions of fully blown collapse is absent. In some survival cases, however, specificities of traditional party organization, such as the Argentine Peronists' and Radicals' decentralized informal structures, also allow for successful adaptation. Moreover, when a perfect storm does gather, politicians can still sometimes stave off party system collapse by resisting the temptation for anti-crisis pacting, grand coalitions or technocratic substitutes for party government. The presence in a party system of outsider parties, which can step into the gap left by the collapse of established parties, and the availability of resources allowing new forms of clientelism, Morgan suggests, may also help tottering party systems avert total collapse .

CAN INSTABILITY BE AVOIDED

Not all aspects of Morgan's theory-building comparison are convincing. Her account, for example, lacks any clear means of quantifying the relative weight of different linkage strategies and some cases appear shoe-horned into a model tailored around the Venezuelan experience. Her work nevertheless provides insights relevant to European party systems and, in particular, to potentially fragile party systems of Central and Eastern Europe. The first of these concerns the capacities and vulnerabilities of mass organizations. The rigid, over-institutionalized character of Venezuela's mass parties was a source of both their long-time endurance and their ultimate demise, leaving them in the end brittle, unadaptable and vulnerable to collapse. This suggests that as organizations need to be viewed much more in terms of linkage and their adaptive capacities, than through formal, static measures of organizational strength or bulk.

Secondly, although critics have argued that Morgan's emphasis on socioeconomic change neglected public frustrations with corruption and poor governance (Seawright 2012), her

concept of parties as having a multifaceted ‘linkage portfolios’ offers useful a prism through which to consider European (and, in particular, East European) party systems. Although Rohrschneider and Whitefield’s concept of ‘partisan’ linkage and the inclusion of interest group links as a facet of mass party organization overlap to some extent with Morgan’s (2011: 39–40) category of class-based ‘incorporation’, both *The Strain of Representation* and *Post-Communist Democracies and Party Organization* stress programmatic linkage. Moreover, despite acknowledging their potential importance for party development in Central and Eastern Europe, both largely sidestep issues of clientelism and patronage.¹²

Morgan’s work also invites us to rethink whether the complexity and hybridity of party–voter linkage is a source of strength or weakness. Rohrschneider and Whitefield see West European parties’ need to manage the contending forms of linkage demanded by (class-based) partisan and independent voters as a source of strain. However, Morgan’s concept of ‘linkage portfolio’ suggests that (if it can be managed) it may be also a source of resilience. In this light, the straightforward programmatic demands placed on Central and Eastern Europe parties by their societies appear a source of potential weakness for party systems in the region, underlining the poverty of their ‘linkage portfolios’. Few, if any, Central and Eastern European parties, for example, could have recourse to ‘incorporation’ strategies as, with the possible exception of Slovenia, strong class-based mass organizations are absent in the region (and those socially rooted interest organizations that do exist are not aligned with parties) (Ost 2009).

Patronage and clientelism appear to be a more viable additional linkage strategy for Central and Eastern European parties. Indeed, party exploitation of the state apparatus is already a feature of mainstream politics in the region (O’Dwyer 2006; Grzymała-Busse 2007; Kopecký et al. 2011) and, even allowing that parties’ have electoral incentives to build organizations, it is unclear why the two could not sit comfortably a single linkage portfolio.

Moreover, as in Latin America, decentralization and the expansion of regionally administered (EU) development funds appear to have bolstered resources for clientelism (Fazekas 2013).

However, available evidence suggests that the clientelistic networks and practices of Central and Eastern European parties function at elite, rather than mass level (Grødeland 2007) and, with the possible exception of Romania and Bulgaria, serve as a means of securing political control and resources, rather than votes or members (Kopecký and Spirova 2011). Moreover, squeezed public budgets and the limited size of the rural and informal sectors in the region seem rule out the reinstatement of clientelism as a *mass* linkage strategy. Indeed, even elite-level clientelism is increasingly contested by new (would-be) reformist anti-corruption parties (Hanley and Sikk 2014) and grassroots-based protest movements (Ganev 2014).¹³

In addition to having only a single, possibly precarious, form of (programmatic) linkage, Central and Eastern Europe already exhibits other preconditions for party system collapse. The region's small, export-oriented economies are susceptible to exogenous shocks and face external mandated fiscal constraints associated with (prospective) eurozone membership and EU deficit rules. As Rohrschneider and Whitefield ably show, unlike in Western Europe, there is also the potential for social change to transform the existing bases of party competition, opening up multiple dimensions of competitions. Politicians in the region have – recently in Bulgaria in 2013 – also proved adept at provoking popular wrath by sometimes forming inchoate left–right coalitions or hiding behind technocratic governments of exactly the type Morgan counsels against (Ganev 2013).

There are, though, reasons to think that Central and Eastern Europe may avoid the spectre of full-blown party system collapse. Firstly, while the region's small, open economies are potentially vulnerable, they are fiscally in better shape than Latin American states of the 1980s and 1990s and are to some extent cushioned by EU membership. It also remains an open

question whether the convergence of Central and Eastern European societies with advanced post-industrial Western Europe will be as rapid and unmanageable as the crisis-induced informalization of Venezuelan society in the 1990s. Indeed, there is no reason to assume that such a convergence will fully take place at all. In the judgement of some economists, the new member states in Central and Eastern Europe will struggle to catch up socially and economically with the old, core EU and, in some cases, may never do so (Epstein 2014). Paradoxically, while failing to deliver on the long-term promise of EU enlargement, such a stalling of socioeconomic modernization might aid longer-term democratization, damping down levels of representational strain that wealthier, more complex societies generate.

Secondly, party system collapse, as Morgan defines it, appears empirically to be a predominantly Latin American phenomenon. This seems largely because it assumes a set of well-institutionalized parties as the object of collapse and high initial barriers to new party success. In Central and Eastern Europe, such conditions are largely absent. In contrast to Venezuela's rigid two-and-a-half party system or the 'degenerated consociationalism' of Italy's outwardly polarized post-war politics, much of Central and Eastern Europe has volatile and open party systems with a plentiful supply of challenger parties. Indeed, in some states it is questionable whether there was ever sufficient 'systemness' of parties and interparty competition to qualify them as party systems at all (Lewis 2006). Such dynamics have grown more marked in the region in recent years with repeat breakthroughs by new anti-establishment parties, even in states where party politics seemed more consolidated. Party system collapse, as Morgan defines it, thus seems precluded in Central and Eastern Europe by the prevalence of lower-level forms of instability and volatility, including the collapse of individual parties and the emergence of cycles and 'subsystems' of protest voting for short-lived anti-establishment parties (Hanley and Sikk 2014; Haughton and Deegan-Krause forthcoming).

The composite picture that emerges is one of enduring regional difference. Conditions in Western and Eastern Europe and, less surprisingly, Europe and Latin America remain distinct – as do challenges to established party systems and principles of party representation. While cross-regional lessons can be drawn, they are not straightforward. Distinct, however, need not mean discrete. As Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012: 178) observe ‘in a single Europe, especially one that strives to be economically and politically integrated, representational challenges cannot be regionally isolated’. Processes of party political ‘contagion’ and emulation can quickly make themselves felt across diverse regions, as the spread of social democracy into post-communist Europe illustrates. Patterns of political and economic interdependence in Europe are such that the failure of mainstream party representation in one part of the continent would certainly have repercussions elsewhere.

The authors of the three monographs contemplate the potential failure of democratic representation through programmatic parties to varying extents. Tavits (2013: 198), writing before the turbulent ‘earthquake elections’ in Central and Eastern Europe, thinks in terms of the growth of democratic consolidation, achievable *inter alia* through investing in party organization building. Rohrschneider and Whitefield have a keener sense of the vulnerabilities of party-based democracy in Europe (the ‘party representation model’) – whether from a slide into extreme centripetal competition or the growth of voter–party incongruities – but do not look beyond it. Morgan (2011: 287–94) looks furthest over the horizon, seeing a world of loosely structured, personalized politics, part Berlusconi and part Chávez, which contains both the seeds of democratic renewal and a descent into authoritarianism. All, three writers, however, in different ways highlight that the normal state of political parties is one of mutability and adaptability – and that, if their strength lies anywhere, it lies in this protean quality.

NOTES

¹ Luxembourg, Malta and Cyprus are excluded, as is Croatia, which joined the EU in 2013.

² Western European voters with left-wing economic views, however, tend to have liberal views on social issues, while no such linkage exists in Central and Eastern Europe.

³ Party stances on European integration, however, cannot easily be integrated into these two dimensions, although in Central and Eastern Europe there is an association between pro-integration and socially liberal stances.

⁴ Thus Finland and Sweden have high levels of absolute congruence – as do newer Central and Eastern European democracies such as Hungary and Bulgaria – while in other West European states such as Austria, Belgium and Portugal it is lower.

⁵ Institutional effects are confined to the tendency of majoritarian forms of democracy (measured through district magnitude) to promote congruence with independent voters in wealthier states with large numbers of independent voters.

⁶ In Western Europe, only the UK, Ireland, Germany and Spain had majorities of independent voters.

⁷ 69 per cent (51/74) of West European parties and 51 per cent of Central and Eastern European parties (30/59) were categorized as ‘strong’ (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012: 130).

⁸ Experts were asked to rate (on a seven-point scale whether) parties in their country of expertise had a ‘significant’ membership based on a loose distinction between ‘parties that have a few members and those with relatively large numbers’. They were also asked to rate the extent of parties’ ‘organizational affiliation’ with civil society or interest groups and the relative importance in decision-making of each of the three ‘faces of party’ (membership,

apparatus and parliamentary caucus) (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2012: 120–4). For West European parties, responses were cross-checked with more empirical data on party organization. No similar exercise was attempted for Central and Eastern Europe.

⁹ Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012: 118) see mass organization as a triad of:

organizational centralization and strong party apparatus, relatively large membership, and links with civil society organizations.

¹⁰ For example, although mentioned throughout the book, the concept of party institutionalization is discussed only briefly (Tavits 2013: 6–7) and presented largely as the consequences of organizational strength making little reference to large wider literature on the topic.

¹¹ The book's attempts to reduce party-building strategies to the organizational style and varying 'cognitions and behaviors' (Tavits 2013: 164) of 'professional' or 'amateur' elites are also problematic. Anyone familiar with Czech politics, for example, will find the categorization of the Czech Social Democrat leader and prime minister Vladimír Špidla as an 'amateur' but his successor Jiří Paroubek as a 'professional' somewhat contrived. Both were long-standing career politicians with similar executive experience in public administration, who differed mainly in their political priorities and levels of internal party support. Similarly, the categorization of 'amateurs' as ideological purists indifferent to organization building and 'professionals' as non-ideological party-building pragmatists breaks down for many of the region's most significant politicians. Václav Klaus and Viktor Orbán, for example, combined commitments to party organization with aggressive promotion of new right-wing ideologies. Arguably organization- and ideology-building often go hand in hand.

¹² Rohrschneider and Whitefield (2012: 37 n. 15) note that ‘parties in CEE states may base their appeal more on the charisma of leaders or on clientelistic relationships’ but see this as ‘beyond the main concern of the current study’. Tavits (2013: 48, 157) argues that the effect of clientelism on electoral success is ambivalent, but concedes that parties with poorer, more rural electorates may use it to build their organizations. However, she does not engage further with the issue because clientelism is ‘almost impossible to capture empirically’ (Tavits 2013: 48). She uses incumbency as a rough proxy for patronage opportunities (Tavits 2013: 48).

¹³ As Morgan (2011: 172–4) astutely notes, mass electorates in Venezuela become actively concerned about corrupt clientelistic linkages – and embraced the rhetoric of anti-corruption – only when these networks began to break down and ceased to deliver benefits. It is unclear if there are parallels in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe.

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