

# Political Parties in a Comparative Perspective

## Why Parties?

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## Last week

Last week, we discussed...

- what qualifies as 'good research'
- which components every empirical article should contain
- how to develop a research design

## Plan for today

Again, the session is split into two:

1. We'll talk about why we compare in political science.
2. We define political parties and discuss whether democracies really need them.

# Research at the Chair of Comparative Politics

At the Chair of Comparative Politics, we adopt an **evidence-based** approach in our studies of political phenomena. This implies that we...

- ...formulate research questions that are of both theoretical and empirical relevance
- ...derive testable research hypotheses
- ...identify causal explanations
- ...use appropriate designs to test our expectations empirically

Academic research should follow a stringent and transparent research process.

# The Comparative Method

*“all social science requires comparison, which entails judgments of which phenomena are “more” or “less” alike in degree (i.e., quantitative differences) or in kind (i.e., qualitative differences).” (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, p. 2)*

As the Chair of *Comparative Politics*, the comparative approach is the core pillar of our research.

Do you have an idea why it might be important to compare?

## An example

*“When told  $A$  causes  $B$ , someone who “thinks like a social scientist” asks whether that connection is a true causal one.”*

### Example:

*The more mainstream parties adopt restrictive positions on migration, the less successful is the far-right.*



# Fundamental problem of causal inference

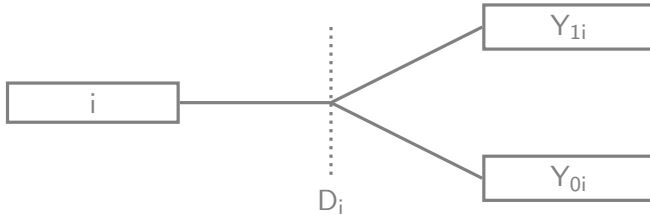


Figure: Potential Outcomes

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<sup>1</sup>see Cunningham (2021, pp. 125–128)

# Fundamental problem of causal inference

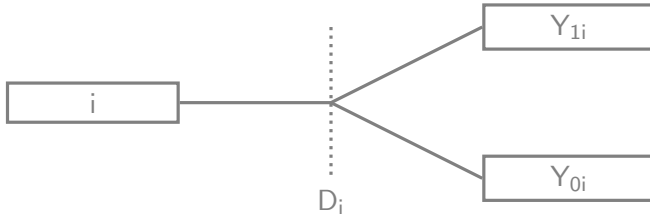


Figure: Potential Outcomes

**Problem:** We cannot observe the same unit in different conditions at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>see Cunningham (2021, pp. 125–128)



## Why comparison?



If we studied only one case, we would never know whether cats are responsible for bumpy roads.

## Why comparison? II

“If we cannot rerun history at the same time and the same place with different values of our explanatory variable each time—as a true solution to the Fundamental Problem of Causal Inference would require—we can attempt to make a second-best assumption: we can rerun our experiment in two different units that are ‘homogeneous.’” (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, p. 90)

# Comparative Designs

1. Experiments
2. Observational studies
  - Statistical studies
  - Comparative case studies

## What counts as a comparison?

- A global study of how political parties recruit their candidates?
- An experiment of how voters respond to restrictive migration positions of a mainstream party?
- A study of how the German Left has developed since the Fall of the Berlin Wall?

## What counts as a comparison?

- A global study of how political parties recruit their candidates?
- An experiment of how voters respond to restrictive migration positions of a mainstream party?
- A study of how the German Left has developed since the Fall of the Berlin Wall?

In the course of this seminar, we will define comparative politics more broadly. It's not necessarily a study across countries, but can very well be applied within countries (Pepinsky 2019).

## The Preference Struggle

You are elected legislators of a new democracy. Together, you must agree on one policy packages that reflects the interest of your citizens. Every one of you has their preferences on preference cards.

### Round 1:

- You have five minutes to find a common policy agenda.
- You are allowed to talk to each other individually but not in groups.
- Generally, you stick to the preferences on the cards (even if you have different personal preferences) but you are allowed to compromise
- After five minutes, we vote.

# The Preference Struggle

## Round 2:

- You have five more minutes to find a common policy agenda.
- This time, you are allowed to build groups to find consensus.
- After five minutes, we vote again.

# The Preference Struggle

- How did your experience change from round 1 to round 2?
- What was easier in round 1, what was more difficult?
- What was easier in round 2, what was more difficult?
- What could this tell us about political parties?



# Definitions?

What is a party? What's a party system?

## Definitions?

**Parties** are collective agents which are comprised of individual politicians who pool their resources to seek votes, policies and offices.

**Party systems** denote the interactions between parties. Analysis on party systems is about their composition in terms of ideology and numbers as well as the behaviour of political agents.

# Why do parties have such a bad reputation?

*“Political parties are widely discredited as one of the main culprits of the so-called crisis of democracy” (Saffon and Urbinati 2025, p. 381)*

Why are parties seen as bad for democracy?

# Why do parties have such a bad reputation?

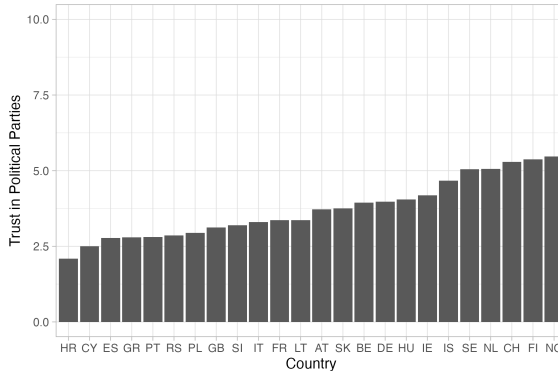


Figure: Trust in political parties, source: European Social Survey Wave 11 , own visualization

# Why do parties have such a bad reputation?

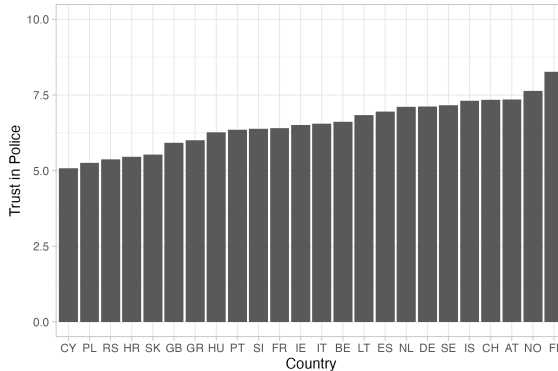


Figure: Trust in the police, source: European Social Survey Wave 11 , own visualization

# Why do parties have such a bad reputation?

According to Saffon and Urbinati (2025):

1. parties obstruct the common good (epistemic and populist critique)
2. they complicate effective governance
3. ...and build cartels

# The natural evolution of parties?



(a) Elite parties



(b) Mass parties



(c) 'Catch-all' parties



Table 4: Party membership change in established democracies, 1980-2000

Country	Change in ratio of members to electorate	Change in number of members	% change in number of members
United Kingdom	-2.81	-1,118,274	-46.05
Norway	-18.20	-24,401	-61.75
France	-3.31	-574,472	-56.09
Sweden	-4.54	-241,130	-47.46
Ireland	-2.91	-50,836	-46.27
Netherlands	-2.96	-79,800	-41.22
Poland	-7.80	-160,241	-40.86
Denmark	-1.27	-39,462	-39.70
Italy	-4.49	-141,043	-39.41
Belgium	-1.41	-31,143	-38.97
Austria	-13.21	-42,401	-38.41
Netherlands	-2.75	-31,499	-35.19
Germany	-2.22	-31,876	-27.33
Portugal	-1.86	-45,306	-1.26
Spain	-1.56	-110,808	-18.49
Spain	-1.35	-1,208,218	-179.40

Source: Van der Meer et al. (2009)

(d) Cartel parties according to Mair (2013, 41)

Figure: Evolution of Party Types

## Why parties are still important?

*“European democracies are not only parliamentary democracies but also party democracies.” (Müller 2000, p. 309)*

*“political parties created democracy and [...] modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.” (Schattschneider and Pearson 2004, p. 1)*

According to Saffon and Urbinati (2025), why are parties important for democracy?



# Why parties are still important?

## Parties...

- offer channels for citizens' influence in politics
- they introduce multiple issues to politics and, by that, make compromise more likely (unlike factionalism)
- parties enable political careers, regulating politicians' democratic self-determination
- they are part of a democratic socialization process

...and as you realized by yourselves, parties greatly reduce transaction costs (Müller 2000)

## Parties in the chain of delegation

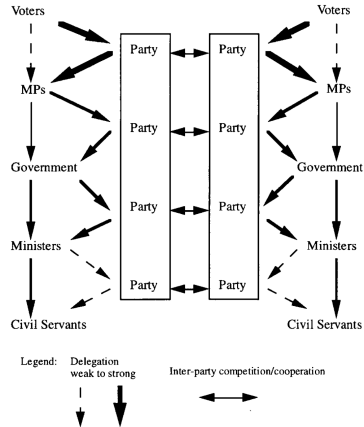


Figure: Parties' influence on different levels of delegation (Müller 2000, p. 312)

# Party's Motivations

Why are parties doing this? What motivates their contribution to society?

## Party's Motivations

Scholars often distinguish three different motivations of parties

- *vote-seeking*: parties seek to maximize votes (Downs 1957)
- *office-seeking*: parties aim to get into office (Riker 1962)
- *policy-seeking*: parties want to implement policy

# Party's Motivations



(a) Austrian Greens  
1986



(b) Austrian Greens  
2020

## Party's Motivations



(c) Austrian Greens  
1986



(d) Austrian Greens  
2020

→ Motivations interact and are dynamic (Strøm 1990)

## To prepare for next week...

- Next week, we'll enter the second block of the seminar and talk about institutional explanations of party emergence
- we will also read our first empirical paper (refer to [Keshav](#) on how to read empirical papers) and some of you submit essays or questions
- **Main reading**
  - **Tavits M (2008)** Party Systems in the Making: The Emergence and Success of New Parties in New Democracies. *British Journal of Political Science* **38** (1), 113–133. ISSN: 1469-2112, 0007-1234. DOI: [10.1017/S0007123408000069](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123408000069)

## To prepare for next week...

- **Boix C** (2009) The Emergence of Parties and Party Systems. *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*. Ed. by C Boix and SC Stokes. 1st ed. Oxford University Press, 499–521. ISBN: 978-0-19-956602-0 978-0-19-157748-2. DOI: [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566020.003.0021](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566020.003.0021), only section 2.3!
- **Complementary readings**
  - **Boix C** (1999) Setting the Rules of the Game: The Choice of Electoral Systems in Advanced Democracies. *American Political Science Review* **93** (3), 609–624. ISSN: 0003-0554, 1537-5943. DOI: [10.2307/2585577](https://doi.org/10.2307/2585577)
  - **Blondel J** (1968) Party Systems and Patterns of Government in Western Democracies. *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique* **1** (2), 180–203. ISSN: 0008-4239. JSTOR: [3231605](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3231605)



Thank you for your attention!  
Any further questions?

## Literature



**Blondel J** (1968) Party Systems and Patterns of Government in Western Democracies. *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique* **1** (2), 180–203.  
JSTOR: [3231605](#).



**Boix C** (1999) Setting the Rules of the Game: The Choice of Electoral Systems in Advanced Democracies. *American Political Science Review* **93** (3), 609–624.



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**Cunningham S** (2021) *Causal Inference: The Mixtape*. Yale University Press, 2021. JSTOR: [j.ctv1c29t27](#).



**Downs A** (1957) An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy. *Journal of Political Economy* **65** (2), 135–150.

## Literature

-  **King G, Keohane RO, and Verba S (1994)** *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research, New Edition*. Princeton University Press, 1994. 266 pp. Google Books: [RFMgEAAAQBAJ](#).
-  **Mair P (2013)** *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. London: Verso, 2013. 174 pp.
-  **Müller WC (2000)** Political Parties in Parliamentary Democracies: Making Delegation and Accountability Work. *European Journal of Political Research* **37** (3), 309–333.
-  **Pepinsky TB (2019)** The Return of the Single-Country Study. *Annual Review of Political Science* **22**, 187–203.
-  **Riker WH (1962)** *The Theory of Political Coalitions*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1962. 300 pp.

## Literature

-  **Saffon MP and Urbinati N (2025)** Parties As Agents of Equal Political Freedom. *Political Theory* **53** (3), 380–406.
-  **Schattschneider EE and Pearson SA (2004)** *Party Government: American Government in Action*. 1st ed. Routledge, 2004.
-  **Strøm K (1990)** A Behavioral Theory of Competitive Political Parties. *American Journal of Political Science* **34** (2), 565–598.
-  **Tavits M (2008)** Party Systems in the Making: The Emergence and Success of New Parties in New Democracies. *British Journal of Political Science* **38** (1), 113–133.