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COLLUSION, COMPETITION AND DEMOCRACY

PART II

Stefano Bartolini

ABSTRACT

In the first part of this work, published in the *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 11(4), I discussed the nature of competitive interaction as opposed to other types of social interaction such as conflict, negotiation and cooperation. I subsequently analysed the relationship which exists between political competition and the two basic aspects of democratic accountability and responsiveness. Finally I introduced four concepts ('contestability', 'electoral availability', 'offer's decidability' and 'electoral vulnerability') which identify distinct and independent dimensions of the overall process of politico-electoral competition. Only the first two were discussed in the first part. In this second part the remaining two ('offer's decidability' and 'electoral vulnerability') will be considered, before concluding with a discussion of the ambivalent relationships which link these dimensions and how they can be organized for an empirical study of politico-electoral competition.

KEY WORDS • collusion • competition • democracy • parties • responsiveness

The Political Offer: The Problem of Decidability

In Part I of this work we have seen that the conditions for contestability and availability may create situations which allow parties and politicians to escape the vote-maximizing logic which is assumed to be embedded in electoral competition and hence create conditions for possible collusive behaviour. Now, granted the conditions for contestability and electoral availability as essential for competition, what happens if the parties do not want to compete? Or, to put it differently, which are the empirical conditions which may push parties to compete one against the other for voters' preferences? Parties offer programmes, policies, ideologies, images, issues or whatever else. The question is, however: how important is the type and quality of the offer for electoral competition? which aspects of the political offer are necessary to guarantee, improve, maximize or otherwise substantiate electoral competition? The level of policy or issue position differentiation among parties, and the visibility and clarity of these differences for the voter, are what I call here 'decidability'.

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The Political Offer in Spatial Models of Competition

Even in this case let us take our lead from how the problem is tackled in economic theories of electoral competition. In these models an important role is given to what I define here as decidability. The net utility of the victory of the voter's preferred candidate in Downs (1957: 38–40) or the differential benefits of outcomes (the party differential) in Riker and Ordeshook's 'calculus of voting' (1968, 1973) indicate how the voter perceives the difference it will make for her/him if party or candidate X or Y is elected. The implicit postulate is that the offer is decidable. This obviously depends on product differentiation. If products are undifferentiated this term is zero and the probability of affecting the outcome (which I will discuss in the next section as vulnerability) becomes irrelevant. Thus, party differentials count, and in formal models of competition they are reduced to party distances in a space either chosen as an example, or postulated, or drawn from some data set. Not much more is said about the type and quality of the political offer made by candidates and parties. In my opinion, this is so because in these models what the offer will be comes as a logical consequence of other postulates of the model itself and need not be given specific attention. In the next two subsections I will analyse the reasons for this limited attention in formal theories.

Perfect competition and decidability paradoxes. In perfect electoral competition parties are supposed to converge toward the median voter and in the end their offers will be exactly the same. What happens then? Are parties with identical offers still competing? At its perfection, competition ceases to exist and denies itself. In such a situation the victory of one party or the other is the result of chance and parties will see their appetite for power satisfied only randomly. Finally, at this stage, voters would no longer have any incentive whatsoever to vote. They would not even bear the minimal cost in order to cast their vote for one party rather than the other if the parties have equal profiles.

It is logically possible to regard the conditions for perfect competition as the same as those for perfect collusion. Not much space is devoted to collusion in formal modelling of competition, indeed because it is not thought to be possible within the range of postulates of such theories (Waldman, 1972: 237). Yet incentive to collude can emerge in spatial competition models out of the perfect competition situation. More precisely, the closer we approach perfect competition, the more likely it is that collusion would be a rational behaviour for parties.[1] Cooperation (i.e. collusion) emerges as a situation in which all actors are better off than in the competitive situation. Such a situation materializes when parties/candidates offer more or less the same platform, the chance to hold office is fulfilled only randomly and, therefore, no actor can have higher than equal chances of winning. As this stage approaches, there are no differences in winning

1. There is an interesting hint in this direction in Dinkel (1976).

chances between cooperative and competitive behaviour. In this situation the winning party, instead of taking all available offices for itself, could actually share them with the losing party and a credible agreement for future exchange could easily develop.[2] When incumbents fear losing office due to factors outside their control and for a non-specified long term, collusion becomes a rational outcome and is identified by an approximately proportional distribution of public offices and by an overall increase in them. As stated before, perfect competition denies itself by disappearing, and it may well disappear in perfect collusion, given that when the policy offered is that of the median voter, collusion and competition are identical as it does not matter who governs.

Given these premises, in formal models of competition any element of differentiation or decidability of the offer is only the result of *imperfection* in competition. The only possible competition is, indeed, imperfect competition, as perfect competition is a 'competitive nonsense'. The conclusion, tentative so far, is that only those facts which limit and deflect competition make it viable.

Exogenous preferences and political offer. The second important reason why decidability of the offer attracts little attention in formal theories is that the differentiation of products offered is assumed to result from other postulated features of the competitive process, namely: (1) that voters' preferences are 'intrinsic', that is, 'exogenous to the process of party competition' (Laver and Hunt, 1992: 3) and independent from the offer made by politicians and parties;[3] and (2) that voters' preferences are stable during the process of competition itself. Combining the endogenous versus exogenous shaping of voters' preferences, with their stability or change during the process of electoral competition, one can draw the scheme shown in Table 1:

Table 1. The Structure of Voter Preferences

	Exogenous to Party Competition	Endogenous to Party Competition
Stable	TYPE I (*preference-driven competition*)	N.P.
Changing	TYPE II (*hetero-directed competition*)	TYPE III (*preference-shaping competition*)

Clearly, a structure of preferences that is endogenously produced throughout the process of competition cannot be stable and therefore this type is impossible.

2. Note that the voter is not concerned by parties sharing offices, as they both have the same median-voter-satisfying programmes.

3. Downs (1957: 140) states that under some circumstances parties 'will also attempt to move voters toward their own location, then altering it' (the distribution of preferences). This remark is not developed because it requires a revision of the whole model. Downs' successors have more explicitly assumed that party competition does not affect the distribution of preferences.

Type I (preference-driven competition) is the one postulated by economic models of competition. Under these conditions party strategy is only an adaptive effort. Whatever complicating factors are added (activists' attitudes, organizational features, etc.) will only make the achievement of this pre-defined adaptation more or less easy and efficient. Type II (hetero-directed competition) is a variation on the same theme. Preferences can be modified even in the short term, but these changes result from factors external to party competition: cultural and value changes, sociostructural modifications, media coverage of events, and the like. Parties either can or cannot see the changes and the potential gains or losses associated with them, but they can neither influence them nor influence how voters perceive them. Electoral competition is hetero-directed.

Many authors have extensively criticized the lack of realism and the insurmountable problems that these postulates create for any analysis of party, providing arguments and examples of the fact that it is rational for incumbents to use the resources of incumbency *during their tenure of office* to reshape the preference of the voters (Dunleavy and Ward, 1981; Dunleavy, 1991: Chs 4–5). Formal theorists argue, however, that, *at election time and during campaigning*, voters' preferences can still be assumed to be fixed and exogenous. This line of defence is weak. If one admits that governmental and opposition parties engage in forming, shaping, manipulating or otherwise changing voters' preferences, then to assume that at election time they simply accommodate to those preferences that they have already shaped before amounts to a formal *escamotage*. Moreover, it is impossible to indicate the exact moment in which preferences can be assumed to be exogenous and fixed. So the postulate that preferences are fixed and exogenous can be upheld only if one isolates the limit of the instantaneous moment of party choice from the entire process of party competition.

What is important for my argument here, however, is not the logical consistency or the realism of such a postulate, but rather its implicit consequences. In the prospective of exogenous and stable preferences, the decidability problem – whether the offers are more or less differentiated, clear, comprehensive, etc. – becomes marginal by definitional *fiat*. If they cannot shape preferences, parties must adapt to them. The offer is *by definition* adequate as it is a mere reflection of preferences that cannot be changed. Political parties have only two ways to influence the voter's choice: (1) finding out without errors what the voter actually wants and then (2) presenting a case for their abiding by those preferences (Robertson, 1976: 12–15; Dunleavy, 1991: 113). How can they, for instance, collude if their collusion does not modify the preferences of voters? How can they follow an alternative strategy of maximum decidability? The only basis on which they can decide on one strategy rather than another without exposing themselves to totally unproductive risks is the shape of the given preferences. In this sense, the assumption of the exogenous and stable nature of preferences implicitly contributes to the rendering irrelevant of the problem of the decidability of the offer.

The picture changes if the structure of electoral preferences is not exogenous to party competition but is influenced, if not determined, by it (Type III: preference-shaping competition). Parties and politicians believe they can get the voters on their side, escaping a merely adaptive behaviour. Adaptation to and modification of the structure of preferences interact, begetting debates and choices about different mixes. Party competition becomes the process through which parties and the elite try to shape and modify to their advantage the structure of the electoral preferences. The way in which electoral preferences are structured is not irrelevant to party competition – it is the object, essence and core of party competition itself. It is in the context of a 'preference-shaping' type of competition that decidability becomes crucial.

The paradox is, therefore, that the optimized model of party competition foresees indifferentiation of the offer (as in perfect economic competition), while the actual functioning of the model, as far as voters' choices and party positioning are concerned, is based on party differentials. Yet the actual study of such party differentials is expelled from the model by the postulation *fiat* of exogenous and fixed preferences. In the light of these considerations, the empirical study of party competition should not be confined by such narrow conditions but should actually concern which features of the party and institutional system help to determine whether party competition will be more *preference-driven,* more *preference-shaped* or more *hetero-directed.*

The Decidability of the Political Offer

To sum up, the decidability of the offer is an essential aspect in competition processes which are meant to increase the elite's responsiveness towards citizens. To orient their choices rationally voters need to perceive differences between parties/candidates in terms of emphasis, priority or performance. I do not intend to present decidability as an inherently or unquestionably positive or negative, desirable or undesirable feature. Offers may be more or less decidable. Deliberate collusion among the suppliers can make the decision of the voter difficult or meaningless. On the contrary, excessive decidability may slide into policy polarization, and/or a too detailed and technical offer may hide the broad policy outlines and options. The point is that once decidability is regarded as an important condition of competition, we must empirically study the opportunities for deliberately choosing to increase offer differentiation or to blur party stances. The best way to approach this study is not by postulating conditions for which the offer is the implicit outcome, but by identifying the numerous and strong confining conditions for product differentiation built into political competition.

The offer can be non-decidable (1) because it is not made; (2) because its content is not clear; (3) because it is undifferentiated from other offers; or (4) because it is not clear who made the offer. These cases of low decidability refer to more general processes of competition avoidance. The latter can be attributed

to three types of situation that confine the competitive interactions among parties and candidates:

1. those situations in which the very interest or purpose of the group of suppliers necessitates a structure which strongly limits or even prohibits certain offers being made because they concern the very capsule within which competition is meant to take place;
2. those situations in which the interest and purpose of the suppliers are accessible to competition practices, but competition is limited in its scope as a result of sheer collusion practices which supersede competition itself; and
3. those situations in which competition as such is not limited, but the means through which it is pursued are more or less restricted.

In the next sections I will discuss these three instances.

The collusive pushes inherent in the capsule of competition. The set of norms, social practices and legal provisions which define the conditions of competition are normally protected from the basic principle of chance which operates in competition. The very interests and purposes of the group identify themes in which electoral competition, in terms of differentiated offers, is highly limited, as in the cases of symbols of national identity, unity, solidarity and, more generally, sets of formal and informal constitutional rules. That parties and the elite must represent the interests, wills or preferences of their respective clienteles is central to any definition of democracy. Yet, in order for a democratic regime to survive and to perform successfully, a certain balance between cooperation, negotiation, competition and conflict must be achieved. Party leaders and the elite articulate different and conflicting demands, but they have to do so in such a manner as to avoid an excessive polarization of society, to guarantee the working of parliamentary and governmental institutions (cabinet stability, obstructionism, parliamentary agendas, etc.), and to achieve or preserve the legitimacy of the representative institutions themselves. In other words, they have to avoid undermining the social and political capsule of political competition.

This is so because of one peculiarity of political competition which distinguishes it from economic competition altogether and which is sufficient, in my opinion, to make the analogy between economic and political competitive interaction only a facade. Contrary to economic competition, in which the normative and legal capsule is outside the range of competitive interactions, and in which it is therefore safe and under the responsibility of people other than the competitors, the capsule of political competition is set by the political competitors themselves and can be an object of competition. In politics this determines a situation in which a certain level of collusion among the suppliers is both implicit in and a precondition of political competition itself. To subtract the capsule of competition from the chance principle inherent in competitive interaction is necessary and beneficial.

There are numerous historical examples in which competitive interactions have slid into conflictual ones, suspending the legal-normative capsule of competition. Less frequent cases exist in which all or a set of the political actors have actually suspended competition and substituted it with cooperative relationships. The most obvious example is represented by those situations in which political actors engaged in a competitive interaction are, at the same time, trying to establish and consolidate the legal-normative capsule of competition itself. That is, they are dismantling an authoritarian regime and trying to establish or reform a democratic one. In this situation, the differing demands of party-building, competition for votes and regime founding or defending are, to a large extent, incompatible. The recent transition to democracy in Spain offers a particularly 'pure' example of these tensions and the necessary superseding of competitive interactions.

The success of the Spanish transition came, to a large extent, at the cost of high party and vote instability. The starting conditions were far from favourable to the consolidation of a viable capsule for party competition. In the middle of the 1970s the Spanish people were highly divided by the cumulation of at least four major cleavages: the monarchical issue, state–church relationship, centre–periphery conflicts and, finally, the more classic class cleavage. On all of these issues the stands of the Communist and Socialist parties, on the one hand, and of the Union of Democratic Centre and Popular Alliance, on the other hand, were opposed and consistent with those of their respective electorates. The practices necessary to find a workable compromise on these crucial choices were based on the demobilization of party militants; the involvement in inter-party negotiations of only a few top-ranking party leaders; the holding of these negotiations behind closed doors; the securing of systematic compromises between opposing groups. The same practices, however, created great dissatisfaction within parties and a sense of alienation among the respective clienteles. So, whilst inter-party conflicts were strong and even disruptive in post-Franco Spain, inter-elite interactions were characterized by restraint and high cooperation.

> Compromises secured concerning each of these issues were not dictated by the structure of public opinion, but were instead the product of initiatives by party leaders acting in the absence of a clear mandate from their respective electoral clienteles. (Gunther, 1987: 39)

Actually, it was not even an absent mandate, but a clear violation of such a mandate. The moderation of all parties resulted from the leadership's first priority of securing compromise agreements over matters that were crucial for the legitimacy and endurance of the democratic regime. Parties were simultaneously engaged in the negotiations founding the new regime and engaged in decisions concerning their future image, ideological stance and positioning and the organizational identity of their movements. Although the parties tried very hard to reshape the preference of the voters, the most moderating actors were shocked by the deep internal crisis and, in particular, the

Union of Democratic Centre and also the PCE (Communist party) paid a high electoral price for their concessions.

I have dwelt, to some extent, on the Spanish case as it indeed represents a clear-cut case but examples could be multiplied in space and time. We could actually argue that any constitution-making or constitution-revising process is indeed a process where competition is superseded by cooperation or negotiation. But this is not only the case of founding experiences. Issues concerning the rules of the game for competitive interaction amongst the elite continuously emerge and in politics there is no 'High Authority' to solve them. The elite themselves have to settle such problems and rarely can they be solved through competitive interaction. The common agreement among the elite in these cases is that 'responding sympathetically' to the voters' preferences may lead to results which jeopardize the conditions for competition themselves, with a resulting slide into conflictual relations among the actors.

The entire 'consociational democracy' theme is a theory of competition avoidance presented as a function necessary to democratic stability and performance. The basic idea is that the elite must keep the loyalty of its followers without representing or reproducing their (supposedly) uncompromising attitudes about crucial issues. This requires a reinforcement of the inertness and passivity of the segmental masses and, at the same time, their trust in, and deference towards, their respective elites. Decisions and their execution should be left to the segmental level on matters of no national concern; but whenever national decisions cannot be avoided, then each group must be granted some proportional influence through the devices of consensual government and of a coalescent, not adversarial, style of decision-making (secret negotiations among rival elites, logrolling, package deals, veto power, etc.) (Lijphart, 1977). The idea is that plural societies are so deeply divided that they cannot sustain or withstand political competition and they must limit it to a minimum. The end result is democracy with constrained competition.

However, the argument presented in the case of ethnically, racially, religiously and/or linguistically divided societies extends to all sort of democracies. Whenever party systems are characterized by the presence of important legitimacy cleavages, there may exist among the established incumbents and/or loyal elite areas of interaction in which competition is not allowed to enter and tacitly agreed practices avoid competition if this is perceived to endanger the existing capsule of competition. All types of society have some degree of profound division which imposes some degree of competition avoidance, some degree of 'gag rule' (Holmes, 1988). In theory such constraints on competition and decision-making styles can be absent only in societies in which such a consensus exists on basic values and goals that everything can be subject to public debate, to open contestation and competition. This latter point is a translation in political terms of the formal theory postulate that position issues are linearly ordered sets of policy options resulting in a

one-dimensional scale on which voters have single-peaked symmetric preference curves. Yet, if presented in more mundane political language, it becomes evident how much of political life that postulate excludes.

It is because too much emphasis has been laid on 'competitive' theories of politics, democracy, election, voting and the like that it is necessary to stress the otherwise well known fundamental collusive preconditions for political competition. The point argued here is not the mere existence of numerous instances of behavioural collusion among political elites. This is so evident as to be trivial; moreover such instances do not undermine a model of competition which can interpret them as cases of imperfection. What I am saying is that every form of competitive interaction in politics presupposes a stable capsule which cannot be achieved without cooperation among the same actors who then use it to compete among themselves on other matters. Such cooperation, being external to the competitive interactions, cannot be treated as an imperfect aspect of them as it is actually their foundation. Political competition rests on collusive foundations among *the same* actors which compete. Nothing similar can be observed in economic relationships. In economic matters, the imagery of competition as a 'spontaneous' or auto-regulated order may be debated but it is at least conceivable. In politics there is probably nothing less 'spontaneous' than competition, and continuous efforts have to be made and costs met in order to keep it in a viable state.

Restricting the scope of competition. Restriction of the scope of competition in fields in principle accessible to political competition is the second form of competition avoidance. The number of forces and situations which lead to collusion and cartelization practices among political competitors could scarcely be underestimated. I will discuss three main sources of collusion and then conclude with a brief analysis of the ways in which such restriction of the scope of competition is normally achieved.

1. Collusion imposed by the exclusivity of public authority. The conditions for healthy competition in politics are generally identified in two-party or two-coalition dynamics. Political duopoly does not seem to produce the same effects as economic duopoly. This is presumably because of the assumption that parties and candidates aim at governmental powers. The exclusiveness of public authority imposes a high threshold for access and requires a high degree of concentration of the market. The indivisible nature of authority pushes toward oligarchic tendencies and requires large economies of scale, leaving room for only a limited number of parties. As a consequence of this radical difference from economic competition, the conditions for political competition have strong collusive prerequisites as they rest on the cooperation and negotiation necessary for reaching the economy of scale inherent to the exclusivity of public authority. The main feature of necessary coalition politics is, in essence, cartelization

practice. In the processes of coalition-making (electoral, parliamentary or governmental), policy positions, issues etc. are compromised, diluted or simply totally muted so as to obtain the economy of scale which is sought. Coalition politics may indeed maximize other necessary conditions of competition (see later) but, unquestionably, they bring about a restriction on the scope of competition on the offer side.

Note that the problem of coalition politics is only apparently linked to the existence of more than two parties. With two parties which behave as unitary actors, coalitions are thought not to be necessary and the collusive dynamics on which they are built is only apparently absent. However, if the goal is government and if parties strive toward that goal as a unitary actor, they do so as a result of cartelization practices in which different groups, fractions and candidates decide to cooperate to achieve the goal of public authority to the common advantage.[4] In essence, from this point of view, the problem is the same in two-party and multiparty systems. In such cooperative endeavours, groups find compromises, reach agreement and eventually collude in order to find the party profile which best serves the overall common interest of governmental competitiveness. The programmes and the policies they finally offer in the competition race are built on cooperative choices as much as the programmes and policies offered by multiparty cartels. In logical terms, only individual candidates are free to offer policies without any need to cooperate or to negotiate some sort of common platform. Electoral competition avoids cartelization only when it is parcelled into individual candidate races without party affiliation, or with party affiliations which are nothing more than labels. Otherwise, what is offered or not offered to voters, in part at least, is the result of pre-competitive cooperation and negotiation which are actually imposed by the exclusivity of the goal which is searched for by suppliers.

2. Collusion imposed by the multiplicity of sites of party interaction. Contrary to economic competition,[5] political competition takes place in different and yet interlinked sites or arenas (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950: 78; Dahl, 1966: 338). The competitive electoral game does not stop with the distribution of electoral gains and losses, but continues in other arenas – parliamentary and governmental – where different, non-competitive interactions prevail, where cooperation is needed among actors on procedural as well as on substantive matters. The multiplicity of the sites of party interaction is an opportunity and an incentive for collusion among rational actors.

4. Party discipline is a relevant aspect for the perspective or retrospective decidability of the offer. Individual legislators have their own tactics to escape the principle of political responsibility, which are even more effective than those available for a disciplined and visible party parliamentary group (Arnold, 1990: 99–102).

5. Collusive behaviours in sites other than the market can exist in economic interactions as well. But they *can exist*; they do not *necessarily exist* as is the case in politics.

The recognition that competition for votes does not exhaust the political process suggests that this competition needs to be constrained on the party side by considerations concerning the other arenas. If parties understand the cooperation needs of post-electoral politics, how can they be thought to forget about them when competing for votes? The question arises whether contradictions exist between vote maximization goals and office maximization goals.[6] That vote maximization strategies may hinder office maximization goals is both logically and empirically evident. If parties in the coalition process are supposed to be office-seeking, and in the electoral process are vote-seeking, the same actor has two goals. These two goals are separated in time: first elections and then coalition or government formation. However, it is in no way guaranteed that the strategy of vote maximization will be fully compatible with the strategy of office maximization. Vote- and office-seeking are goals which require tradeoff strategies. Note also that the multiplicity of sites of political competition defeats the argument formal theorists use against the possibility of party collusion: that is, that agreements not to compete on certain issues against the view of the voters are impossible because a party which would break such a collusive agreement would be rewarded by voters. This argument holds if the electoral competition process is isolated from all other sites of political interaction. But if this isolation is excluded, the party defecting from a collusive pact can be punished by other partners in parliamentary/governmental sites, even if rewarded by the voters in the electoral contest.

A second built-in tension due to the multiplicity of sites of political elite interactions derives from the duality between 'office' and 'policy' goals:

> assumptions about party behaviour at the governmental level have evolved from pure office seeking to almost pure policy-pursuit, while office seeking and vote maximisation have remained the sole motivation ascribed to politicians by most spatial analysis of electoral competition. (Budge, 1994: 443–67, 447)

If office and policy maximization are both goals of rational politicians seeking re-election, the two logics and corresponding behaviours may be contradictory. It is a case similar to that of retrospective and prospective voting discussed before: two parties with the same preferences may behave differently both in front of the voters and in front of other partners, according to whether they want to maximize office or policy.

In conclusion, formal theories of party competition establish a link between electoral, parliamentary and governmental processes by which selfish and office-seeking parties promise policies in order to be elected; and when in government

6. This is not the only tension present in the electoral process. In multiparty systems, where a manipulative electoral system forces parties into ex-ante electoral cartels to foster their common chances of winning seats, parties may be forced to operate a distinction between vote maximization and seat maximization. To the extent that the marginal seat can be obtained via electoral coalitions with other parties, this may require policy stands and policy emphasis which differ from those the party would follow if looking for its marginal vote. In formal models vote maximization is equal to seat maximization.

they want to implement those policies in order to appear trustworthy and responsible to the voters who elected them and who will then re-elect them. In this case, the condition which eliminates the tensions between motives for behaviours in electoral, parliamentary and governmental sites is simple and straightforward: a two-party system and perfect information; as only in a certain world could we assume office-seekers would be bound by policy commitments.

In any other situation tensions and tradeoffs emerge. To maximize the chances of getting into office and of pursuing certain policies, the party may be obliged to soft-pedal those issues and policy promises which would maximize its votes. Seeking office may impose electoral or parliamentary alliances which sacrifice policy promises. A pure vote-seeking strategy may sacrifice office and, consequently, even policy pursuit. If coalition negotiation finally determines the equilibrium of the entire electoral–governmental process, then in the electoral process consideration about the possible consequences of choices for the coalition negotiations have to play a role. The same party may take different policy positions in various arenas. Legislators group differently in government from how they may do at election time. The decidability of issues and policies may be voluntarily but necessarily limited by the interplay of the electoral, legislative and governmental party systems. Opportunities to boost the salience of issues exploitable in the electoral arena, and which may concern sizeable sectors of public opinion, may not be taken up or may be dampened because they are damaging in other arenas: for instance, in light of the potential consequences for the succeeding legislative bargaining. Possibilities in the legislative or governmental arena may be left unexplored because of the reluctance to expose oneself to the risk of an election that one is unwilling to fight on those terms. It is possible to defeat an incumbent government with alliances and tactical moves which, however, may be detrimental in the electoral channel if obliged to fight an election on those terms. In other words, the necessary interplay between electoral competition and legislative bargaining may lead to the downplay of those issues regarded as favourable in one arena but possibly damaging in another (Laver, 1989: 302–5).

In conclusion, both the pre-electoral process of offer-making and the multiple-site character of party/candidates interaction give birth to a second paradox of economic models of rational behaviour as applied in politics. Just as voters became instrumental rational maximizers after having decided to vote for normative and expressive reasons, so parties/candidates are presented as rational maximizers of votes after having cooperated to establish and consolidate the capsule of competition, after having reached the coalitional economy of scale necessary to compete for government, and before cooperating again in parliamentary, legislative and cabinet-making politics. The competitive interaction in front of the voters is not supposed to be influenced by these ex-ante and ex-post processes dominated by non-competitive interactions. Party competition as rational maximization of votes and offices is floating in a

vacuum, suspended between the amount of expressive motivations which are necessary to trigger off the voting on one side, and the amount of elite collusion which is required in setting and defending the 'capsule' of political competition itself and in parliamentary and legislative politics on the other side: in short, a little island in the sea of not necessarily competitive interactions.

3. Collusion determined by lack of environmental control: the absence of price in electoral competition and its consequence. These considerations make evident the imaginary and intangible nature of the relationship between supply and demand in formal theories of competition where the mechanism of pricing is absent. To the many criticisms of the inapplicability of the economic model due to the absence of price in politics (Strom, 1992: 35), I would like to add the point that the absence of price induces tacit collusion in parties as a result of people's unconstrained preferences versus parties' highly constrained offers.

It goes without saying that competition in politics is not by price or quality. Prices do not exist and quality cannot be compared, because only one agency at each given moment can produce public goods. The characteristic form of political competition is by product differentiation, that is, by promise differentiation. In economics, the prices are directional mechanisms which focus the attention of the individuals towards what is worth knowing and how rare and scarce goods are. No-one would ever dream of considering the economic equilibrium as the result of the unconstrained preferences of consumers and then the adjustment of firms to these preferences. Prices indicate to the individuals what they can demand and what is worth looking for. Although in politics prices are not attached to political offers, problems of resource scarcity exist and it is impossible to have free preferences. The absence of the price system does not tell voters how much e.g. full employment, costs, that is, how rare such a good is and therefore how expensive it is to buy it and how much of other goods one has to sacrifice in order to acquire it. Similarly, a policy of improving education has obvious costs which, however, are not attached to it and we do not know what else we need to renounce for better schooling for our children. This calculation is left entirely in the hands of the leaders.

This liberty in political preferences unconstrained by price systems is necessarily accompanied by a similar, if not greater, liberty of political parties and leaders to limit the offer of goods which are rare or difficult to achieve and to interpret the relative scarcity of the same goods. The freedom voters have in formulating their preferences can only be balanced by the freedom and opportunities the suppliers have to manipulate and disregard those same preferences. Exactly because nothing says to the voters what they can buy and what they can afford to choose, the latitude of action by leaders in limiting the offer, in defining compatibility among different offers, and in convincing voters of good or lesser packages of offers, becomes crucial in politics.

Today, almost all parties have had experience of government participation. There has been both access to cabinet power for an increasing number of parties,

and a gradual broadening of the range of coalition alternatives (Mair, 1996). Therefore, almost all parties have experienced policy failures due to the low and declining control they have over the economic environment. Every fraction of the political elite nowadays has a strong sense of the feasibility problem in politics and of the external constraints which may make their governmental output deflect – possibly dramatically – from their electoral promises. Unintended effects, responsibility for long-term consequences and external constraints dominate the professional life of politicians, who live with the certainty that such constraints will restrict their capacity to translate their electoral promises into political decisions, and the latter into policy outputs. This only makes more evident their common interest in not raising public expectations too much because, if in government, their failure may cause their electoral defeat, if in opposition, they may produce unwanted constraints on their potential future government. How does this influence inter-party competition?

It might be argued that candidates and parties who make promises that cannot be implemented because of external constraints should be blamed. They should have considered the possible constraints and anticipated them. If in their promises they decided to ignore them, they should be accused of irresponsibility or incompetence. In arguing this, however, we challenge the basic tenets of the models of competition. Either parties maximize votes by positioning themselves where voters' preferences (which are exogenous and therefore not malleable) demand, or they do something else, advocating not those policies which maximize electoral consensus, but those which are more feasible given the unforeseeable but certain constraints. It is very likely that in this situation a tacit form of collusion develops among politicians of different parties not to boost those preferences which can be more difficult to satisfy, given the constraints. In short, the situation of being electorally responsible for something you do not control may lead parties to collude. New events, forces, actors, new data, etc. may offer valid arguments to the decision-makers for deviating from their campaign promises. In this case the imperative to take constraints into account beforehand, and to avoid over-promising, may push political elites towards non-decidable offers from the beginning. Collusion can also take the form of cooperation in 'persuasion'. When parties systematically do something very different from what they promised, they may still be able to convince the voters that what they did was the best thing to do. They may converge on a policy proposal persuading voters that, given the constraints, that is the only thing to do, and still continue to compete on the valence issue of who is to be regarded as more competent to achieve the commonly defined constrained goal. The elite may legitimately deviate from electoral promises if they manage to demonstrate that they do so under strong resistance or pressure from below, or if they present their change as an honest acceptance of new, more convincing arguments or more complete data and information which have been provided during the process of policy deliberation and even implementation.

Restricting the means through which competition obtains. A third instance of competition avoidance is that of the restriction of the means through which competition obtains. It is not particularly relevant for the general line of argument followed so far and does not need to be discussed in too much detail. The principle which supersedes competition is often that of the mechanical equality of the parts. For instance, equality of competitive means is often invoked and aimed at by agreement on sharing equal access to television broadcasting, equal attention in written media, proportional access to public resources for electoral competition, or ceilings on the total amount of resources candidates and parties can invest in political advertising. Even the proper style of campaigning and political advertising may be the object of inter-individual (that is, voluntarily reached) or super-individual (imposed by law or morality standards) limitations. The interesting question is whether the restriction of certain competitive means actually affects the substance of policy and issue competition.

Certain restrictions do not limit competition, but, on the contrary, they enhance true competition by freeing it from unnecessary elements. Preventing the diversion of competition from diminishing the capacity of competitors, these restrictions can force competition to concentrate on the offer itself. It is therefore possible for competitors to establish agreements in a specific area of competition without weakening it in other areas. These inter-individual restrictions may grow to free competition from all those things which do not constitute competition, because in principle they can cancel each other out without effect. As shop-keepers can agree on fixed opening hours or sale periods, so political actors can agree on the muting or soft pedalling of certain means and techniques of competition. Yet, one should not forget that the means of competition consist, in some cases, of advantages offered to the third party, which may bear the brunt of the excessive restrictions on such means. These agreements can, in extreme cases, affect the very essence of competition, that is, bring about forms of collusion and cartelization that become plans for feeding the market according to a pre-established design.

The means of offer obfuscation. The means through which collusion and cartelization may be achieved when conditions allow such behaviour is via coordinated manipulation of issue saliency. Analytically, this can be classified as follows:

1. blurred and unclear party position or party policy on certain issues;
2. slow transformation of certain problems from clear partisan to valence issue;
3. tacit removal of issues from the political agenda;
4. displacement of certain issues from the domain of politically legitimized decision-making to domains where different criteria of legitimation prevail.

Some level of encapsulation of government or parliamentary policy-making from the episodic shifting in public opinion is an important safeguard of liberal

democracy. Such encapsulation may not necessarily serve honourable ends, such as defending or consolidating the democratic rules of the game or assuring policy continuity in delicate fields like foreign policy. Nothing in principle prevents the utilization of these techniques for other purposes which find tacit consensus among the party elite. The discussion of these means and situations will require far more space than is available in this paper. I limit the argument to a few points. The starting point is that the search for votes compels 'rational' politicians not to minimize electoral commitments, while their search for office and even policy should.

The transformation of divisive issues into valence issues is a process which weakens decidability. Position issues are 'those that involve advocacy of government actions from a set of alternatives over which a distribution of voter preferences is defined; and ... 'valence' issues [are] those that merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate' (Stokes, 1966: 170–3). Position issues are inherently divisive as they involve explicit 'for or against' choices. Valence issues, in contrast, entail only one value (positive or negative) that is shared by the vast majority, and they are essentially non-divisive. A 'choice' in position terms is simply the anticipation that one solution is better than the other, and that, therefore, it makes sense to change or not to change. In the case of valence issues, choice comes down to the question of whether one party can do better than the other on what is defined as a matter of general and agreed concern. The choice of specific remedies and policies is less defined, being overshadowed by questions of 'competence'.

Table 2. Typology of Issues

Party Choice	Issue	
	Divisive	Non-divisive
Clear	Partisan issue	Election issue
Unclear	Critical issue	Abstention issue

In an article devoted to the style of competition, Schneider proposes the typology of issues shown in Table 2, which combines the clarity of the party stance dimension with that of the more or less divisive nature of issues (Schneider, 1974, 1980: 91–7). The two dimensions together refer to the decidability of the offer. Divisive issues on which party stance is clear (partisan issues) are by far the most decidable. Valence issues with a clear partisan orientation (election issues) may still be decidable. A valence issue is not divisive, but this does not imply that it is not controversial. Its salience, to whom is blame attributed, whether voters perceive a difference between parties in terms

of priorities and performance, makes for its more or less controversial and debatable nature. The level of decidability declines progressively when party stances are unclear and it is at its lowest when, at the same time, issues are not divisive. If parties have spaces and opportunities to shape preferences through competition, they will tend to do so by defining issues as more or less divisive and by making their stances more or less well defined; that is, by manipulating decidability.

Sheer removal of an issue from the agenda may be due to rules of self-censorship which leave selected topics undiscussed. The burying of divisive issues or the suppression of controversial themes may disencumber political debate from seemingly untractable or unsolvable issues with the positive goal of making the political sphere indifferent to groups and sectarian practices and preferences, helping the viability and stability of democracy and national integration as well. The art of omission is practised in this case for the benefit of public life and institutions' credibility, stability, etc. From the point of view of a given institution, which is generally equipped to resolve certain problems better than others, such a strategy can be seen as an attempt to avoid damaging its credibility by facing issues it cannot solve (Holmes, 1988: 22–3). Yet one could have a less benign vision of the same process. Burying a divisive issue or suppressing a controversial theme is not necessarily diplomacy but more strategic self-censorship to achieve cooperation or agreement in other fields; it may also be sheer and unnecessary evasiveness, that is, the leaving of selected topics undiscussed for what the elite consider their own advantage. In other words, certain issues are silenced not because such silence is necessary to the collective life, but because it is functional to the survival, control, and maintenance and agenda-setting capacity of the political elite. In short, it is a cartelization device.

The last solution, issue displacement, tends to impose a commonly agreed redefinition of issues in a 'non-political' or 'non-partisan' way. For instance, the 'constitutionalization' of certain goals (the requirement of no public deficit; the prohibition on sending armed forces outside the national territory, etc.) keeps them out of the policy domain regulated by parties. The issue is, to a large extent, removed from public debate, and the need for parties and candidates to take clear stands is reduced correspondingly. Alternatively, issues and policies can be transferred to domains where legitimation principles other than political ones exist. Issues may be *pre-defined* and left to the decisions of bodies where competence is the key resource: defending the value of the currency can be defined as an institutional goal and thus made the preserve of central banking authorities; controlling the political fairness of the mass media can be devolved to other authoritative bodies on the basis of the same principle. Administrative regulation, that is, economic and social regulation organized through agencies which operate outside the line of hierarchical control and oversight of the central administration, has recently grown on the basis of this logic (Majone, 1994: 77–

101). Whatever their putative goals – market efficiency, stability of the currency, fair competition, etc. – what characterizes this administrative regulation is the agreement among political actors which pre-defines such a goal. Beyond the technical – and sometimes technocratic – reasons offered for such growth, the 'fourth branch of government' has its origins in the willingness of all political elites to be discharged of certain tasks. The displacement strategy is even more radical when issues and policies are not only *pre-defined* but also *pre-determined* by internationally accepted or imposed priorities and goals (EEC decisions, IMF requirements, GATT agreements, etc.), which may be used by political parties as a defence against taking clear political stands on, and sustaining direct responsibility for, controversial questions.

Finally, issues and policies can be left to the actors who control the resources for their implementation;[7] to forms of 'negotiated orders' in which key economic actors agree to regulate macroeconomic policies of interest to the parties. An interesting question is whether these negotiated orders impose themselves in situations of ineffective politico-electoral competition or whether they determine the enfeeblement of such competition. When in existence, such orders reduce the scope of electoral policy competition as policy is decided elsewhere. At the same time, they also require as a prerequisite such reduction of the scope of electoral competition. Actually the dynamics of electoral competition should normally represent a mechanism of instability for such negotiated orders. Actors aiming at the electoral conquest of office could challenge such orders, reserving for themselves the right to accept or refuse them in view of their electoral goals.

Whether the principle invoked for these displacements of political issues is efficiency, competence or resource control, the actual result may be an important muting of party differentials in key domains.

Decidability conclusion. The blurring, removal and displacement of certain issues from the main political agenda, exploiting the spaces of tacit collusion that political competition offers, has a number of potential consequences. Narrowing the political agenda by referring issues to individual consciousness, courts, regulatory bodies, international organisms, etc. may trivialize public life and make it useless. If divisive issues tend to be either avoided or made into private matters, and to be expelled from competitive politics, then they decline as a focus for group political identity and the group attachment related to these issues will no longer be able to provide the basis for politically salient subgroup solidarity. If religious feelings, preferences and customs are depoliticized and transferred into private preference matters by specific constitutional solutions, then religious attachment can no longer constitute the long-term basis for significant political allegiances. If issues of private versus public schools are removed from the political debate via legal or constitutional provisions which empower every

7. The extreme case of the devolution of political issues to forces controlling resources for implementation is when they are left to the market forces.

individual citizen with the right of choice, there are consequences for those individuals for whom this was a politically salient and identity-building issue. In this way, the process of competition avoidance and of displacement of politics to other domains contributes decisively to the process of political dealignment. As much as political competition may reinforce political identities, it can undermine them.

However, the long list of potential sources of collusive behaviour discussed in conjunction with the offer advanced by the competitors for votes is not meant to 'denounce' or otherwise 'fault' these practices. More simply, I wanted to emphasize that their diffusion is a crucial empirical dimension in the study of the conditions of competitive politics (Katz and Mair, 1995). Tendencies to collude are obviously checked and balanced to varying extents exactly by the competitive interaction inherent in the electoral process. There are barriers and obstacles to political cartelization and collusion set by the competitive electoral interactions. The first is imperfect knowledge of the consequences of rivalry and of the profit of collusion. When considering collusion, parties/candidates are uncertain as to the profit of this strategy as opposed to an adversarial competitive strategy. The second obstacle is the difficulty of determining the division of profits among colluders. Parties may be in disagreement and/or scared of the potential disagreement over how the advantages of collusion should then be distributed. In the first case, uncertainty concerns the unforeseeable potential reactions of the voters. In the second case, uncertainty concerns the divisions of the advantages among the actors. In both cases, the result is unstable choices between more cooperative and more competitive relationships in the struggle for the vote.

In this section I have basically argued that it is impossible to take competition on the offer side for granted simply because the electoral context is open (contestability) and voters are available to choose (availability). Inconsistencies arise in the relationship between political supply and demand from the elite's responsibility for the capsule of competition itself, from the economy of scale necessary to aim at government, from the external constraints problem, from different, all equally rational, logics of offer. Laying too much emphasis on competition, we may easily forget that collusion is the essence of politics, that the 'political classes' have much in common at stake to defend, that the political elite can easily agree to share a value through the voluntarily equalization of effort rather than fighting for it. Competition on the offer side is not a natural outcome: as continuous efforts are made to avoid it, continuous costs are met in order to preserve it. In studying the complex process of political competition, it is possible, as economic theories do, to start from optimized conditions which lead to a model of perfect competition and interpret any deviation from it as imperfections. Alternatively, I regard it as more profitable to take the lead from the inherent collusive tendencies of political rule, and consider electoral competition as a more or less effective obstruction of those same tendencies.

Incumbency Vulnerability

In economic life and theory, the existence of a given product does not preclude the existence of a different one that can be chosen instead. In politics, the products offered in a more or less decidable way to voters are mutually exclusive: if a policy is implemented a different policy cannot be implemented at the same time. The exclusivity of policy and legislation rests on the exclusivity of government. In economic life, a firm which sells 49 percent of a product is not a failure. In politics it may well be.[8] Vulnerability originates from, and is meaningful only in relation to, the threshold and exclusivity of political authority, and no analogy with the market and economic competition seems possible. It may be defined as the possibility for an incumbent government to be ousted and replaced or otherwise modified in its composition as a result of changes in voters' choices. In effect, vulnerability has two psychological effects: (1) parties perceive the chance of gaining or losing the exclusive good of public authority; and (2) voters perceive an increase in the potential impact of their vote on the final outcome of governmental formation and/or renovation. It is not necessary to discuss this problem at length as a rich literature already exists.

In the American context, there have been a great many postwar studies concerning this particular dimension of competition. The reference point of these studies was naturally the two-party system, where it was easier to collapse several conditions of competition into the single one of vulnerability. Therefore, vulnerability is regarded as being basically the same as competition, although the phenomenon was given different names, from 'closeness of the electoral outcome' to 'uncertainty of the electoral result'; from 'performance sensitivity' to 'decisiveness of elections for governmental turnover' (Strom, 1984; Powell, 1989, 1981); from 'changeability' (Elkins, 1974: 686) to 'competitiveness' or 'systemic competition'. The basic difference between the alternative terms is that some of them tend to stress actual aspects of governmental turnover (Schlesinger, 1955: 1122), while others tend to stress the potential turnover, implying that vulnerability may be present without actual turnover taking place and vice versa (Ranney, 1965; Dowson and Robinson, 1963; Elkins, 1974).

The general idea of the 'uncertainty of the electoral outcome' refers to the psychological effect linked to the absence of safety, rather than the actual result. Closeness and uncertainty may not result in turnover but still provide their supposed effect on competition Yet, without any prior information, how can the level of closeness or symmetry which would guarantee vulnerability be

8. This difference is rarely addressed directly. Stigler (1972: 98) concludes that the difference is not so important as to challenge the analogy between political and economic competition. He challenges the idea of the winner as the monopoly provider of public policy, pointing out that competition for authority is not a zero-sum game; even losing parties have some form of influence on public policy and the percentage of votes/seats can be taken as an indicator of the general influence on the public policy of each of them.

ascertained? Both the dimension of actual past record and present uncertainty have to be incorporated into the idea of vulnerability. Some element of the objective closeness of electoral returns must give rise to a sense of lack of safety for incumbents and a sense of opportunity for opponents, but at the same time this objective base cannot be defined without reference to some record of past experience. For this reason, in the great variety of measures of electoral vulnerability tested in the context of the federal and state level as well as for presidential, governors and legislative elections in the United States (Pfeiffer, 1967; Milder, 1974; Mayer, 1972; Kelley et al, 1967; Kim et al, 1975; Aldrich, 1976; Powell, 1980; Jackman, 1987; Patterson and Caldeira, 1984), the measures which are expressed in the form of a ratio between some objective element of closeness of the race at a given moment and some objective element indicating the past competitive performance of the system are preferable.

Stern (1972; Meltz, 1973) suggests taking the vote for the majority party/candidate and relating it to the standard deviations of the same majority vote in the previous elections. If that vote minus two standard deviations is still over 50 percent, then the government is safe. If that vote minus two standard deviations is below 50 percent but the same vote minus one standard deviation is above 50 percent then the contest is classified as 'marginal'. If that vote minus a standard deviation falls below 50 percent, then the government is competitive. In so doing, Stern's measure links the majoritarian advantage of the winning party to the past variability of this margin. One goes from minimum vulnerability in the first case to maximum in the latter. I am currently testing a vulnerability measure that shares the same logic. For each given election, I consider the distance from the majority thresholds of each party/coalition/candidate. This distance is then related to the average aggregate volatility of previous elections along the incumbent versus non-incumbent dimension. A 10 percent margin over the 50 percent threshold does not give a secure indication of the real or perceived vulnerability of the incumbent unless it is related to the average aggregate voting switch which takes place between incumbents and the opposition. If that average aggregate voting shift is 20 percent, then a 10 percent margin does not make for safety. If, on the contrary, it is only 2 percent, then a 10 percent majority distance makes for considerably little vulnerability. The same level of closeness of the votes between government and opposition makes the government safe in a system with low electoral availability along the line which separates majority and opposition, and vulnerable in a system with high volatility.

There is no need to discuss these measures at any great length in this paper. It suffices to underline that the elements of uncertainty and lack of safety associated with the concept of incumbents' vulnerability are not fully tapped by measures of closeness or distance alone. Something is required which indicates the perception of incumbents and opponents about the probability of that distance being matched by aggregate voter shifts.

Vulnerability is a system property. It refers to the unit of the party system. It

results from specific configurations of the number, the strength and the alliance–opposition relationships among the units of the system without belonging to any of them. It has important empirical links with other conditions of competition (like contestability, availability and decidability) but it is independent from all of them. Only two conditions can be regarded as necessary for the maximization of governmental vulnerability:

1. the visibility of the division line between government and opposition;
2. an average electoral availability along the incumbent/opposition line large enough to approach (or bypass) the majority margin of incumbents.

Actually, at every election there is an incumbent government and that government can be more or less electorally vulnerable. However, we are not interested in vulnerability per se, but in vulnerability as a key to responsiveness. For this it is necessary that the dividing line between government and opposition be sufficiently clear to the voters. Therefore, the clarity of governmental responsibility can be regarded as a condition of vulnerability.[9] It is often argued that, contrary to two-party systems, multiparty systems make it very difficult to identify governmental responsibilities and opposition roles. This, however, does not need to be the case. Unquestionably, two-party formats are as rare as their government/opposition distinction is clear; but multiparty systems may also have well-defined borderlines between who is or has been in government and who was in opposition. To this end, two conditions are essential: (1) minimum winning coalitions and (2) legislature governments. Unclear (greatly oversized coalitions, frequency and extension of 'external support' to the government) or unstable (frequent cabinet change and reshuffles during the legislature) governmental composition makes vulnerability quite a meaningless aspect. Similarly, post-electoral multiparty coalitions make prospective voting quite complex and only retrospective evaluation may serve as a basis of rational choice. But when parties form post-electoral coalitions and modify them during the legislature, both prospective and retrospective choices become almost impossible and the vulnerability of government becomes an utterly immaterial aspect.

A special case is that of truly minority governments. They pose a special challenge to the concept of vulnerability. Minority governments are vulnerable by definition, as their survival rests on some sort of collusion with non-governmental parties. However, their high parliamentary vulnerability may result in their electoral invulnerability. The problem is what electoral (non-parliamentary) mechanism would make a minority government vulnerable. One can imagine that minority governments are relatively insensitive to electoral returns because their raison d'etre is not electoral. At the same time, we are not

9. Powell, (1989: 116, 125), includes 'clarity of responsibility' among the characteristics of elections which contribute to the general process of citizen control. The wording of the conditions is slightly different from mine but the aim is the same. Note, however, that I regard 'clarity of responsibility' as a condition of vulnerability, which I see as the key to responsiveness.

prepared to go so far as to say that the electoral process is irrelevant to them. We have to find some better argument than the 'non-applicable' one in this case.

As far as the second condition is concerned – large enough electoral availability along the incumbent/opposition line – it is sometimes argued that what matters for vulnerability is more the 'decisive location' of the available electorate than its sheer quantity (although one can say that the larger the quantity is, the greater the likelihood that a sufficient share of it will be located so as to contribute to vulnerability). The 'decisive location' of available voters is unquestionably crucial only if a spatial representation of politics is given. Whether a spatial dimension of politics exists (in the electorate), the number of dimensions it has and how good an instrument it is at describing concrete historical situations, are empirical questions. Therefore, we cannot make the 'decisive location' a necessary condition. What matters is 'sufficient' incumbent/opposition electoral availability.

The Relationship between the Different Dimensions of Competition

In the two parts of this work I have discussed the four conditions which seem to me the essential empirical dimensions of electoral competitive interactions: *contestability*, *availability*, *decidability* and *vulnerability*. For each of them I have discussed their importance for competition as well as their scope for collusion, pointing to the empirical consequences of the maximization and minimization of each of them. In most cases I have argued the inadequacy and sometimes the misleading nature of the analogies drawn from economic models of competition. In this section I want to bring together the four conditions and discuss their mutual relationships, the way in which variations in each of them relates to and impinges upon variations in the others.

In Table 3, I have summarized the main points of the argument which sees competition as the process leading to elite responsiveness to voters' preferences. The opposite of contestability is closure; that of availability is encapsulation; that of decidability is obfuscation of the offer; and that of vulnerability is safety of tenure or impossibility of punishing or rewarding. If contestability is minimized, the process can go so far as to endanger pluralism (which is also a defining condition of democracy). Beyond the minimum necessary level, contestability can vary, but a maximization of contestability is likely to bring about excessive fragmentation on the offer side. In the theoretical case of total absence of barriers to entry there are no antidotes against the proliferation of the offer of office-seeking politicians.

When the forces of voter encapsulation are so strong as to lead to the extinction of electoral availability, then electoral transactions also become extinct. Whatever change is made to the political offer, it is unlikely that buyers will be found. On the other hand, the maximization of electoral availability

Table 3. The Dimensions of Electoral Competition: A Summary

Dimension	Contestability	Availability	Decidability	Vulnerability
Polar opposite	Closure	Encapsulation	Obfuscation	Safety of tenure/ inability to sanction or reward
It indicates	Openness of the market: supply side	Openness of the market: demand side	Party differentials	Expectations about the decisiveness of elections for the governmental outcome
Conditions	Low threshold for accession	Weakness of identifications	Clarity of party positions Divisive issues No muting or deflection of issues	Visibility of the dividing line between government and opposition (decisive location of available voters)
Status	Necessary condition of pluralism	Necessary and non-sufficient condition for decidability and vulnerability *[Contestability and availability are not sufficient conditions for decidability and vulnerability]*	Necessary condition for responsiveness *[Contestability, availability and decidability are not sufficient conditions for vulnerability]*	Necessary condition of responsiveness *[Vulnerability alone is not a sufficient condition for responsiveness]*
Consequence of maximization	Excessive fragmentation	Electoral instability	Excessive polarization	'Permanent campaign' syndrome
Consequence of minimization	No exit options for voters	No incentive to product differentiation	No differentiation of the offer (political indifference and/or alienation)	No anticipated reactions of incumbents

points to a situation of total elasticity of the vote in which every voter is likely to change his/her mind. The consequence is exceptional volatility from election to election.

When decidability is brought to a minimum, party positions on issues and policies are blurred and unclear, issues tend to slide from 'divisive' to 'valence' or simply to be muted and/or transferred to another domain of decision-making different from the electoral political channel. Consequences of maximum obfuscation tendencies may include growing political dissatisfaction, voter defection and even mass disenfranchisement. At the other extreme, a situation is defined in which the maximization of decidability brings about very high policy differentials and a very adversarial style of politics. This tendency can result in clear ideological polarization.

Finally, safety of governmental tenure or the actual inability to sanction or reward government strongly undermines responsiveness. Yet, maximization of vulnerability has its own drawbacks. In the extreme case, it could bring about a 'permanent campaign' syndrome (Blumenthal, 1982): frequent feedback on government popularity, on the relative salience of issues to the mass public and on the preference of the public (even on issues not yet articulated by the opinion-makers); more awareness by citizens of governmental actions or possible actions, and better chances to react more visibly to them; correspondingly, government's sense of being more exposed to political pressures from the general public; constant watching of opinion polls by politicians in order to evaluate the response of public opinion to policy options; politicians' belief in their capacity to immediately estimate the costs in terms of support for specific decisions (far greater than the capacity to appreciate the gains in support of the same decisions); postponement of critical and divisive decisions by elected officials for fear of alienating potential supporters. In the extreme case, change in government becomes frequent and erratic.

It follows that each dimension impinges on the other, not in a linear and additive way, but in a rather contradictory one. High contestability may allow high fragmentation. Intense minorities may find it preferable to enter the electoral race rather than to articulate their demands within more encompassing political parties, even if motivated by single issues or small-range concerns. This is likely to have a negative effect on the clear distinction between government and opposition, and therefore on vulnerability. High vulnerability may lead to low decidability and no differentiation of the political offer. 'Perfect' vulnerability is achieved when two parties (coalitions) of equal size compete for a few median voters (in theory just for the median voter). Unless the degree of contestability allows for credible third-party alternatives, party willingness to shape clear and alternative choices to voters is likely to be nil in this case.

In order to ensure decidability, one needs a certain amount of electoral availability which is not functional to vulnerability. At the same time, excessively volatile electorates, resulting from declining cultural and

organizational ties, may bring about an issue- or policy-'balkanized' electorate with no dimensionality whatsoever (Thomas, 1975, 1980). A certain amount of vote identification and vote stability is necessary to allow parties to plan the offer, to interpret the reaction of the electorate and to reduce the risks of collusion resulting from their failing in this respect.

In my view, a conspicuously attractive interaction takes place between decidability and vulnerability. A maximum of decidability requires clear alternative choices: a clear-cut policy or programme profile of candidates and parties (coalitions); no muting or displacement of major and divisive issues; no transformation of divisive issues into valence issues. A maximum of vulnerability rests on institutional solutions which reduce contestability, avoiding fragmentation (majority formula), and allow clear attribution of political responsibility (unitary executive, direct responsibility, clear-cut alternative coalitions). It also rests on political conditions: no disagreement on fundamentals (to avoid performance evaluation being overshadowed by consideration of system defence); broad electoral coalitions open to all sectors of the population; the absence of polarizing ideological issues; the bypassing of historical divisions and the identities linked to them; a strong orientation of the vote toward performance evaluation.

To what extent are these two sets of conditions mutually compatible? Is it possible in practice to simultaneously maximize decidability and vulnerability? Probably not. A vicious circle may exist in which increasing credibility of sanctions for incumbents implies increasing responsiveness; the latter implies that increasing weight is given to median voter preferences by both governing and opposition parties; this in turn implies the increasing non-differentiation of political offer, declining policy competition, declining decidability and, finally, reduced responsiveness to preferences. Certainly, sensitive far-from-median voters can exit. But the opportunity to have their preferences considered is linked to their chance of obtaining an alternative new party. Maximizing competition as vulnerability in the absence of easy exit options will result in a widening 'ideological gap' between governmental positions and sections of the electorate (Matthews, 1985: 12). The need to be 'competitive' at the governmental level may prevent parties from taking stands on controversial and divisive issues. In situations of high vulnerability, established parties may be unwilling to take the risk of identifying clearly with policies and issues highlighting the cost to be shared by specific groups in exchange for broadly collective advantages whose electoral returns are uncertain. In these situations, there is a strong incentive to define issues in such a way that no opposing sides are identifiable, and to push parties to argue more about who is more competent or capable of assuring the achievement of consensually accepted principles, rather than arguing about which principles should be embodied in policy. For these reasons, new parties emerge which concentrate on issues removed and transformed into 'valence' problems. Having no traditional constituency to defend, they can appeal across

partisan lines. However, if new parties are needed for taking partisan stands on new issues, then a decline in the vulnerability at the system level may well be the result, so that what is gained in decidability is lost in vulnerability of incumbents.

Some recent tendencies in electioneering (Semetko et al., 1991; Butler and Ranney, 1992; Field, 1994; Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 1995), with their stress on candidate-centric campaigning, on fund-raising as 'primary', on heavy concentration on radio and television campaigns, packaging of candidates by professional advisers, well-prepared, media-controlled public appearances, parading before carefully screened audiences (up to the point of reducing appearances to chat-shows and 'infomercials') are the correlate of high leadership vulnerability, but they also tend to deprive the public, even the most informed part of it, of any real choice.

There may be too much pragmatism and incrementalism, as has been suggested, and the bringing of controversial issues before the public may be welcomed. The increasing sharpness of policy alternatives will provide voters with the opportunity of making choices between clear-cut policy sets (Key, 1966). But voters might also have too little influence on government and leadership selection, as others argue (Schattschneider, 1960). Thus, we should welcome the bringing about of coalition formulae, of electoral institutions, of forms of government, of chief executive selection which, maximizing vulnerability, will provide the voter with a direct say in the selection of alternative government.

For voters *to have a direct say*, influential decisions among alternative governments must be available. Voters choose clear parties (coalitions) with a governmental vocation, that is, clearly decide on the decision-makers, whose programme, however, is already a package compromise as a result of the need to approach the high exclusion thresholds of public authority. For voters *to have a choice*, meaningful options among alternative and clear policy sets are necessary. Voters choose ideological policy or identity alternatives in a system in which subsequently the package compromise will be reached by the multiple actors through power-sharing, coalition government, etc. Between 'having a choice' and 'having a say', we may face a difficult predicament: choice at the cost of say or say at the cost of choice.

The infeasibility of simultaneous maximization need not be regarded as disruptive or suggest that political competition is nonviable or ineffective. Quite the contrary, it indicates that in concrete situations, *competition inevitably rests on tough tradeoff between its own dimensions*: that is, a dynamic process in which at every single moment the gains in one dimension are traded against losses in the others. The empirical study of competition has no way in which to escape its contradictory multidimensionality. This can only be avoided by stipulative decisions or assumptions. The appealing metaphor of 'perfect competition' is not applicable in politics if we agree that (a) collusive tendencies are inherent in the special character of political interactions; and (b) the parallel

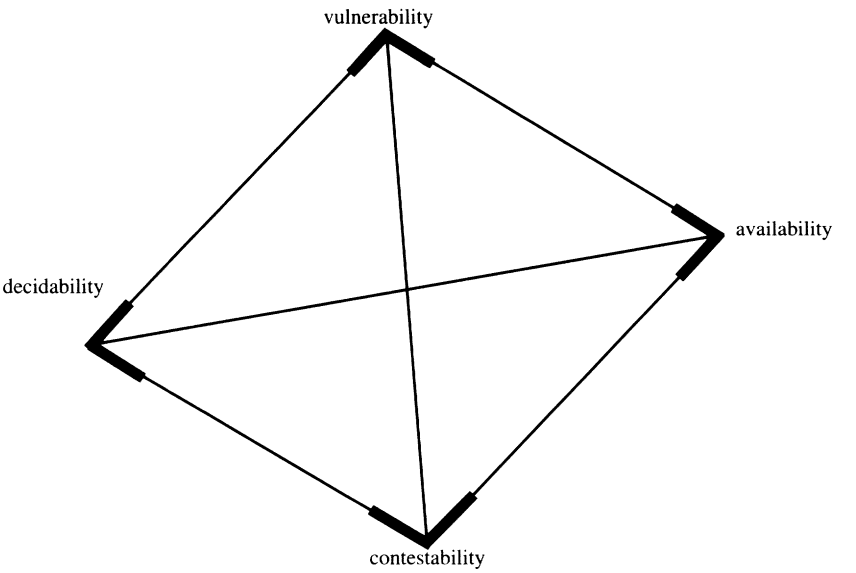

Figure 1. The Dimensions of Competition

maximization of all conditions of competition is not only impossible, because of the aforementioned interactive effect among them, but also detrimental. One should not speak, therefore, of more or less competition, but rather of a different mix of contestability, availability, decidability and vulnerability, without being able to incorporate them into the single dimension of competition. The level of actual competition in any given setting is a point moving in a four-dimensional space where no equilibrium can be found as the maximization of one dimension comes at the expense of other equally necessary conditions. If all possible maximizations present weakness, unintended or contradictory results, then all reference to full information, to vote maximization, to perfect vulnerability etc. is irrelevant from the operative point of view. It is necessary to abandon the analysis of an optimized system and to concentrate on the study of which alternative decisions are available and valid in practice, concentrating on configurations that need to pass the test of feasibility. And a different mix of each dimension can be evaluated only via choices motivated in each historical circumstance by the most necessary and sought-after values.

Figure 1 shows a graphical representation of the four dimensions of competition which helps in discussing how the mix of competitive and collusive interaction which is typical of the political process identifies different models of democratic competitiveness. The Downsonian models of competition maximize vulnerability, postulating high availability, but they also imply low contestability and, at the same time, the irrelevance of decidability, which tends to zero. On the opposite side, a 'pure' model of *Proporz* or consociational competitive

interaction is characterized by much higher contestability and modest decidability but, at the same time, it necessarily implies reduced electoral availability and blurred vulnerability. A pure accountability model of elections of the Schumpeterian type is satisfied with a less demanding mix. It is mostly characterized by the condition of contestability and vulnerability and does not have particular requirements for decidability and availability. Other intermediate models of competition can be framed and individual empirical situations can be classified in such a scheme as different cases of 'situational competitiveness' (Strom, 1992). An empirical theory of competition should therefore take the form of a set of hypotheses concerning the tradeoff between dimensions and the consequence of such tradeoffs. It should link the character or value of one dimension to the consequences it entails for the other.

Competition, Collusion and Democracy

Competition is not a defining characteristic of democracy but one of its properties, of which there can be more or less. Collusive tendencies, in the form of necessary and unavoidable cooperation/negotiation between the same actors who are supposed to compete, are inherent in the special character of the capsule of political competition and in the exclusivity of the public authority goal and in the multiplicity of arenas in which political interaction takes place. Others, not necessarily inherent, but probable pushes toward non-competitive interactions in politics, emerge from other inconsistencies of the fit between political demand and political offer. These situations stud the political process to such an extent that they cannot be left out of electoral competition by its artificial isolation.

The conclusion I draw from this analysis is that if competition has to produce valuable (to third party) unintended effects in terms of responsiveness, it must remain within relatively narrow boundaries. It must operate with a relatively restricted range of options, which are bounded either by a natural and deep consensus on the major parameters of the political process or by a political elite which displaces and manipulates those issues which are likely to challenge the capsule of competition. Those conditions which, from an optimal model perspective, limit and contain competition, simultaneously sustain it and make it viable. The set of normative factors, of social bonds, and of legal and institutional provisions which shape group loyalties and identifications, which determine a certain amount of collusive practices and which prevent an outright competitive logic from prevailing, limiting both its scope and means, *do not represent elements of 'imperfection', but conditions of viability.* Nothing in principle guarantees that these confining conditions of competition will not be used to the advantage of the political elite, offering them, in the jargon of economic theorists, 'unnecessary returns'. Obviously, the factors which contain competition can be so powerful, encompassing and tight that the restraint on

competition can suppress it altogether. At the same time, these confining conditions can be so weak that they do not have the capacity to contain competition, whose effects in different domains of political life can be detrimental to the same beneficial effects competition is thought to produce. Political competition needs constraining–sustaining conditions as it is unlikely to be effective in a world of rational, maximizing, selfish independent actors as much as it is in a world of communal closed groups.

Considerations concerning goal or need are not an adequate explanation of any activity which serves a goal or satisfies a need. Competition is not explained by its unintended consequences, nor can it be explained by its intended consequences which are not defined. If one excludes cultural explanations, competition can be explained as the result of constrained choices of actors who would probably all have other first preferences for non- (or less) competitive interactions. Electoral competition is a by-product of the struggle for power among the political elite in historical circumstances in which they are compelled to accept it. In a sense, as economic competition is incidental with respect to the goal of profit, so political competition is incidental with respect to the goal of power or policy. One must therefore study the conditions for strategic interaction which *incidentally* produce and maintain as an outcome a more or less competitive situation, keeping in mind the alternative conditions which may transform a competitive relationship into a cooperative game or an overt conflict.

In formal models of competition the simplification is so radical that it cannot be justified. Such simplification, instead of grasping the essential aspects of the process of political interaction, conceals its own preconditions and a large part of its dynamic. The equilibrium status such theories look for is achieved by insulating the instantaneous adjustments of known party policies to known voters' preference from all other aspects of the competition process. They take the lead from the existence of a demand (from the voter) and of an offer (from the leaders). However, it is exactly what the demand and what the offer are which are meant to be discovered by competition, which are the essence of competition. By postulating that nothing need be discovered *by competing*, that no advantage is gained by access to information unknown to competitors or by the efforts to make the best possible use of information and knowledge available, these theories make competition unnecessary. If all facts were known this state of affairs would leave no space for an activity called political competition which would already have achieved its task. The activities that we normally understand as competition activities (political advertising, criticism of adversaries, militantism, etc.) are irrelevant under 'equilibrium' conditions. The postulates which are at the root of such conditions assume the existence of the state of affairs that the process and dynamics of competition should actually realize (von Hayek, 1949, 1975). In so doing, they make the actual process of competition immaterial, as they are based on a set of conditions in which their own conclusion is already implicitly incorporated. The limitations of formal models,

therefore, do not derive primarily from the fact that their postulates establish conditions which evidently contrast with the known objective facts, which do not exist and cannot be achieved by any known means. They derive from the fact that such postulates conceal the very process of information-spreading, unknown fact discovery and opinion formation which is itself the function of competitive interaction in politics.

In politics, cooperation and negotiation – that is, collusive interactions – between political leaders are the rule; competitive interactions are a small island in the big sea of collusion. Normative approaches which assimilate too much competition with democracy, which overemphasize the role of competition in producing responsiveness, overlook all this. Only when a theory of the inherently collusive pushes of politics is clearly spelled out, can competition be considered as its own antidote. In fact, some of the collusive tendencies are inherent and often beneficial to the political process and, in any case, they cannot be avoided. Others could be justified in terms of tradeoffs with other values that democracy is meant to uphold. Others belong to neither of these cases and could possibly be avoided with adequate institutional choices. In order to understand which proportion of collusion can actually be reduced to the advantage of the third parties, we cannot start from formal theories which define the set of best conditions. Competition is a minor part of the democratic process – a minor part which is highly valuable when compared with its absence, but which is totally inadequate to describe political interaction if isolated from the rest. We would value it much more if we were aware of how much is due to such a totally imperfect and intermittent type of interaction. Paraphrasing Gaetano Mosca's famous point about military rule, the real question is not why parties sometimes collude, but why they do not do so all the time.

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