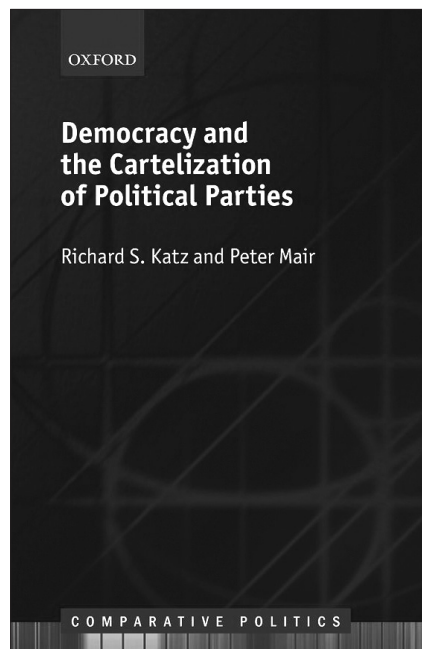


Richard S. Katz / Peter Mair: Democracy and the Cartelization of Political Parties

Reviewed by Emily Ford

Democracy and the Cartelization of Political Parties (2018) provides a well-reasoned and in-depth case for the cartel party model, and yet fails to convincingly bring the theory up-to-date. Katz is currently chair of the Department of Political Science at John Hopkins University and Mair was a professor at the European University Institute in Florence until his death in 2011. Their thesis is this: in order to maintain their position in the face of declining political participation, parties take part in a kind of implicit collusion, in which they limit interparty competition, finance themselves using state resources, and focus increasingly on managerial competency rather than policy. The cartelization theory was originally proposed in the 1990s, but this volume constitutes the first book-length discussion of it, and as such it expands the authors' thesis, addresses criticisms which have been directed at it and offers a coherent and well-structured argumentation for their claim that large political parties in advanced democracies have become cartelized. The authors are careful to base their model on empirical findings, and as such they include a significant amount of clearly-presented data and examples from within Europe and the USA. This sets the volume squarely within the field of comparative politics. However, the cartel party model was first proposed three decades ago, and despite a final chapter which deals with the current rise of populism, the theory is perhaps on the cusp of becoming less pertinent to today's political reality, as the proposed political cartels begin to disintegrate.

After a comprehensive introductory chapter, which provides a clear and relatively detailed overview, the core of the book begins by charting the evolution of political parties. From elite parties of the 19th century, through mass parties, catch-all parties and on to cartel parties, this development is explained as a response to significant social and historical changes. Cartel parties are not the end-point of a linear progression, but rather, just like other party types before them, an adaptation to social and political changes, and thus will also be superseded by a new type of party system. The cartel thesis was born from a data-gathering project in the 1990s, during which Katz and Mair noticed two major developments, which they argue have continued and indeed become more marked to this day (22). Firstly, parties have been moving increasingly closer to the state. An increase in legislative constraints and state financing draws the parties towards the government and therefore away from the citizens they are meant to represent. Secondly, the locus of power within



parties has been shifting towards the party in government, and away from the party on the ground and the party as organisation. These three “faces” of the parties, as the authors term it, exist in an uneasy conflict, with varying degrees of autonomy and importance (54). With mediatisation and the increased need for funds and expertise that it brings with it, parties have become increasingly professionalised. The authors also note a corresponding increase in political careerism (76).

The central argument of the cartelization thesis is that political parties are becoming more similar – differences between them need to be minimised in order to produce the effects of cartel-like behaviour. This is driven in part by increased legislation, for example with regards to funding, campaigning and media appearances. All parties have to follow the same rules and

thus begin to act in more similar ways. Katz and Mair state that parties were originally exogenous to the state and represented the demands of the electorate, but now they (collectively) have become a state-funded and -controlled institution (114). As is repeatedly pointed out, the regulation concerning their organisation and funding is passed by the government, which the parties themselves run. Politicians may not share a party, but they do share a profession and thus in order to pass beneficial legislation for their parties and themselves they need the support of other parties. This therefore encourages cartelization.

Katz and Mair suggest that a further cause of increasing similarity between parties is the passing of responsibility for various policy areas, including the economy, on to supranational or non-partisan organisations such as the EU, the World Bank, the WTO, the courts and private companies through privatisation. Issues which were once political become the sole responsibility of experts and technocrats, which leaves little space for ideology and policy (93). As is demonstrated by various data, the policies of mainstream parties have converged, with a much narrower choice on offer to voters (85). This shifts the focus of campaigns on to a comparison of managerial competence rather than political or ideological differences (82). The authors offer further evidence of this by showing that parties are much less selective with regards to their coalition partners, and will enter into coalitions which would have traditionally been unthinkable. The competition that remains between them is merely for show, and thus, worryingly, “democracy is hollowed out” (28). Ultimately, in a cartel system the effects of (inadvertent) collusion and cooperation significantly diminish the difference between win-

ning and losing an election and between being in and out of government (147). Thus the parties face lower risk, and need not be as responsive to voters. Interestingly, the authors go on to argue that the characteristics of a cartelized party system are not hugely dissimilar to the characteristics of the consensus democracy model, and yet the former is seen as a threat to democracy whilst the latter is seen as a valid, if imperfect, democratic form (148). Katz and Mair perceive the main similarities as being a delegation of responsibility by parties, a lack of power from voters, and a blurred distinction between parties which have won in elections and parties which have lost.

The final chapter offers a discussion of the result of cartelization, namely the rise of what the authors term the “anti-party-system party”. These populist parties (on both the left and the right) aim to break up the arrangement between the established parties (151). Populism sees the actions of cartel parties as being aggressively self-interested, whereas Katz and Mair describe them as being defensive, protective measures against threats to their privilege. Due to the dialectical nature of party evolution, Katz and Mair predicted in the 1990s – before populist parties were as significant a force as they are today – that cartel parties would give rise to their antithesis. The rise in populism cannot be explained by short-term triggers such as the 2008 financial crisis or increasing immigration, but must instead be seen as a piece within a long process of historical change. They argue that current governments cannot fulfil the inconsistent expectations of their electorate: they have to balance the electorate’s goals with the bureaucrats’ techniques, and resolve the conflict between liberal individualism and the notion of a united nation with a single interest. Thus voters turn to populist parties, which seem to offer a genuinely different alternative.

Katz and Mair conclude with the statement that it is unclear whether democracy is truly in danger, but that current events could logically lead to that conclusion. They very briefly propose a three-pronged solution: more responsibility to be taken on by politicians, a more inclusive political community, and more realistic expectations of government amongst the populace. They admit, however, that this is extremely unlikely to happen and instead advocate waiting for the next type of party system, which will arise as an as-yet-unknown synthesis of current political circumstances.

This volume is a substantial and clearly-argued expansion of Katz and Mair’s previous theory in the on-going debate about the state of democracy. As a whole, the book is moderate and considered in tone. Katz and Mair reject calling the current state of democracy a “crisis”, remarking that people have been worried about a crisis of democracy for the past 40 years. Party systems are seen within a sweeping historical arc, and the dialectical conception of party development gives assurance that things will change – although in what direction remains unclear. That being said, the authors do speak of democracy being hollowed out and facing peril, and their conclusion is certainly disheartening – in a cartelized system, self-interested, colluding parties become state-mouthpieces whilst abandoning their duties to the electorate. Their brief mention of some potential but highly improbable solutions does not offer the reader much hope.

Although the book as a whole is very clear and readable, the central terms “cartel”, “conspiracy” and “collusion” could be more consistently used. On occasion, it is unclear whether the authors intend to

imply that the parties are part of a deliberate conspiracy, or whether they mean (as is usually, but not always, the case) that a cartelized party system simply *produces the effects* of collusion, without covert coordination. Furthermore, their discussion of the term “cartel” within economics muddies its meaning in their work even further. They describe, within economics, the blurring between oligopoly and cartel, and then argue that parties are similarly oligopolistic, but this fails to sufficiently clarify or justify their use of the term (132). Their choice of analogy between the cartelization of political parties and professional sports teams, however, is expedient. In sport leagues, a cartel develops to carefully manage competition on the field (analogous to elections) in order to ensure a particular division of revenue (government resources and positions) between the club owners (politicians).

In spite of the book’s clear and cogent form, doubts may arise as to the continued relevance of its content. Perhaps Katz and Mair have tried to apply their model too widely, and have stretched it beyond both its temporal and political limits. It is certainly not a given that empirical findings, the first of which were recorded in the 1960s, remain valid to this day, even if the authors have included more current data in this volume. To take an example, the data included to illustrate the convergence of parties’ manifestos only extends to 2005 (86-87). Excluding the most recent thirteen years of manifestos ignores an increasing polarisation in politics, which, incidentally, has not only occurred in minority and alternative parties as Katz and Mair suggest, but has also taken hold within mainstream parties. The most obvious examples of this would be Trump within the Republican Party and, in the UK, Corbyn shifting the Labour Party to the left.

Furthermore, the authors are careful to highlight the utility and limitations of the cartel party system as a theoretical model, reiterating that no model completely matches reality, but it may have also been fruitful for them to refine the scope of its suitability. It would seem that it applies more readily to consensus/consociational rather than majoritarian democracies, to borrow Lijphart’s distinction made in “Patterns of Democracy”. The theory of cartelization is an overwhelmingly negative take on political parties. Thus, although the authors themselves do not draw this distinction, their theory is more disparaging and critical towards consensus democracies – whether or not this was the authors’ intention.

Intergenerational justice is clearly not the focus of this book, and the authors do not make much reference to young people. Indeed, when they do it is to say that many young party members join only to further their own political career and as such contribute to political careerism and by extension cartelization. This is overly cynical, and ignores the positive role young people can play in shaping politics. Furthermore, the question remains as to whether the cartelization model is truly still the most fitting model for the political sphere in which young people find themselves today. The rise of populism is not only confined to marginal parties, but is finding its way into the mainstream. Perhaps the new synthesis that the authors predicted is already taking shape, and bruising or indeed breaking the cartel in the process. As younger and new generations come of age, their political world will no longer be shaped by a cartel of parties as was the case in the 2000s, but instead by new forms of parties.

Undoubtedly, this book is a worthy contribution to the study of

comparative politics and provides a comprehensive discussion of the cartelization model – a theory of significant influence. There is certainly benefit to be found in the methodical and orderly way in which Katz and Mair take the reader through their theses, though more could have been done to bring the model up-to-date and assess future developments. The book is to be recommended as a

robust discussion of social pressures on political parties, the ways in which they adapt to these and the state of democracy during the past few decades – if not right up to today.

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