Citizens, politicians, and party cartellization: Political representation and state failure in post-industrial democracies

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Abstract. This paper critiques what can be interpreted as an application of the literature on state failure in current political economy and political science to the changing role of political parties in advanced post-industrial democracies, Katz and Mair’s theory of cartel parties. It develops an alternative set of hypotheses about the dynamics of parties and party systems with the objective to clarify empirical terms according to which rival propositions can be tested. Specifically, the paper rejects three propositions in the theory of cartel parties and advances the following alternatives. First, party leaders are not divorced from their members and voting constituencies, but become ever more sensitive to their preferences. Second, inter-party cooperation generates a prisoner’s dilemma in the competitive arena that ultimately prevents the emergence of cartels. Ideological convergence of rival parties has causes external to the competitive arena, not internal to it. Third, conventional parties cannot marginalize or coopt new challengers, but must adjust to their demands and electoral appeals. The age of cartel parties, if it ever existed, is not at its beginning, but its end.

Introduction

The idea of ‘state failure’ has provided the dominant new interpretive framework to characterize politics in the advanced post-industrial democracies of the 1980s and 1990s. The intellectual proponents of state failure theory cite rising unemployment, slowing economic growth and increasing social inequality as indications of a weakening capacity of democratic polities to manage social change and act on citizens’ preferences. What is worse, according to such analysts the main cause of these unsatisfactory outcomes is the opportunistic conduct of politicians and bureaucrats who exploit or rewrite the rules of the political game so as to suit their selfish interests in the acquisition and maintenance of wealth and power. In the language of state failure theory, the citizens as democratic ‘principals’ have ever less control over what are nominally their ‘agents’ in electoral political office or in the professional career bureaucracy.

Since political parties are an essential and indispensable component of contemporary democracy, theorists of state failure have laid much of the responsibility for the declining effectiveness of political systems at their door-
steps. These charges have given rise to a chorus of voices complaining about the irreversible entrenchment of a ‘political class’ recruited primarily from the parties whose main operatives are intent on pursuing their own personal material or organizational interests rather than those of their electoral constituencies in society at large.\footnote{1} Political leaders, such voices conclude, are ‘out of touch’ with their voters and attend only to their own advancement. Moreover, these voices blame the cynicism about democracy that public opinion polls detect among citizens in contemporary democracies on the increasingly self-centered strategies of politicians.

In this paper, I wish to argue that the state failure interpretation of party organization and competition lacks adequate micro-foundations of political action that would accurately characterize the relations between voters, elected politicians, and appointed government officials within the institutional constraints set by democratic constitutions, party systems, and bureaucracy. It therefore remains unclear why politicians are supposed to become increasingly independent from their electoral constituencies. Given the analytical weakness of the micro-foundations implied by a ‘state-centered’ analysis of politicians’ changing strategies, I advance a more society-centered set of hypotheses stipulating how new political-economic challenges, mediated by the institutions of democracy, may yield new organizational forms and competitive strategies of parties in post-industrial democracies.

I take my cues from Donald Wittman’s (1995) penetrating analysis of the ‘state failure’ literature, as it applies to a variety of aspects of modern political governance relations. His message is loud and clear: ‘State failure’ arguments usually assume that politicians and/or bureaucrats operate in a \textit{monopoly situation} in which constituencies and voters have no option to ‘exit’ and therefore are also incapable of mobilizing more than feeble ‘voice’. Societal constituencies and voters, as the principals of the democratic game, helplessly stand by and watch how their purported agents skim off ‘rents’ derived from their unchecked powers. Wittman persuasively shows, however, that monopoly conditions rarely prevail in contemporary politics and that agents’ rents are seriously squeezed by the competitive openness of the political market place. Wittman discusses an impressively broad menu of theorems and applications of state failure theories to prove his point, but he does not address the governance of political parties and party system competition. I would presume his choice of subjects heavily relies on the context of American politics where according to many, but not all observers parties play a comparatively feeble role in the process of interest aggregation and authoritative decision making.\footnote{2} With this article I would like to take a step toward filling this lacunae in Wittman’s critique of ‘state failure’ interpretations and confront that literature in the area of party politics with an eye to empirical developments in