

# What holds a democracy together – political parties, or the party system itself?

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*Political parties and party systems are generally regarded as essential in a democracy. But is it the health of the parties themselves that is vital, or a strong party system? **Fernando Casal Bértoa** looks at the relationship between the institutionalisation of parties and party systems in 64 European regimes since 1848. He concludes that the health of the system itself is the crucial element – a finding with major implications for democracy promotion.*



A Podemos rally in Valencia, January 2015. Photo: [La Veu del País Valencià](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Who hasn't heard that [democracy is in crisis](#)? Election after election, we see people participate less and extremist political parties on the rise. The most recent example is in [Georgia](#), where during this month's legislative elections half of the country's electorate decide to stay at home and a far-right pro-Russian Eurosceptic party ([The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia](#)) managed to gain its first seats in parliament.

Meanwhile, traditionally stable party systems are collapsing. Traditional parties are challenged and in many cases displaced by totally new political formations, making the polity more fragmented, volatility and unstable. [Spain](#) and [Greece](#) constitute, perhaps, the clearest examples. And political parties themselves are in [crisis](#). It is not only that parties have lost members and voters, but – more importantly – they are considered to be among the most [corrupt](#) and [untrustworthy](#) institutions.

Given this state of political turmoil, we need to reignite the debate about what helps democracies to survive and, in particular, to what extent political parties and/or party systems have helped to avoid the collapse of democratic regimes.

## Why is the party system good for democracy?

Traditionally, both [academics](#) and [practitioners](#) have considered the institutionalisation of both political parties and party systems as a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for a solid democracy. This institutionalisation is said to

contribute to democratic survival by making states more governable, accountable and representative, as well as enhancing their legitimacy. It allows for “regulated” conflict resolution. Last, but not least, it keeps demagoguery and populism at bay.

Furthermore, scholars believe the institutionalisation of political parties themselves makes a democracy more responsive and provides for a better link between citizens and the state. When it does not take place (as in post-communist Europe) or a process of de-institutionalisation takes place (as in Western Europe), citizens may become increasingly frustrated with the (democratic) system, leading not only to high levels of social dissatisfaction (such as mass demonstrations) and political disengagement (low turnout), but also to the growth of populist parties and demagogic leaders who threaten the survival of the regime. For all these reasons, and as Elmer Eric Schattschneider put it 75 years ago – summarising what became the consensus on the topic – [“modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties”](#).

## Is it about parties, party systems or both?

Despite the unanimous agreement on the importance of both party and party system institutionalisation for the survival of democracy, it was only very recently put to the test. In an [article](#) for West European Politics, I examined the relationship between institutionalisation and democracy in 64 European political regimes since 1848. **What I found is that it is not the institutionalisation of political parties but the institutionalisation of *party systems as a whole* that has had a positive effect on a democracy’s prospects of survival.** In particular, and contrary to what most scholars and practitioners take for granted, I found no relationship between a weaker institutionalisation of parties and democratic collapse (see Table 1). Not only there have been countries where democracy collapsed despite highly institutionalised parties (e.g. inter-war Finland, as well as the Hellenic and First Austrian Republics), in most post-communist countries democracy has survived despite the presence of very weakly institutionalised political parties (mainly in Georgia, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia).

**Table 1: Cross-tabulations of PI and democratic collapses/survivals in different 'democratisation' periods**

[Edit](#)

Time period	Collapses	Survivals
1897-1914	n/a	4 (75)
1917-1940	8 (62.5)	7 (71.4)
1945-1973	3 (66.7)	8 (87.5)
1974-1988	0	5 (80)
1989-2015	2 (0)	20 (30)
Total	15 (53.8)	44 (56.8)

Showing 1 to 6 of 6 entries

Note: The % of regimes with institutionalised political parties is shown in parentheses

Conversely, looking at the degree of systemic institutionalisation in countries where democracy survived and in countries where it collapsed clearly shows that institutionalised party systems are even more important for democracy that was traditionally thought (see Table 2). Indeed, an institutionalised party system can be considered

sufficient for the survival of its democratic regime – since with only one exception in the history of democratic Europe (the First Austrian Republic, 1920-1932), democracy never collapsed in countries where party systems achieved a certain “minimum” degree of institutionalisation.

However – and contrary to the established wisdom – this is not to say that a democracy cannot survive without an institutionalised party system. In fact, up to ten post-communist democracies (e.g. Latvia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland) have not collapsed despite having weaker institutionalised party systems (PSI).

**Table 2: Cross-tabulations of PSI and democratic collapses/survivals in different 'democratisation' periods**

[Edit](#)

Time period	Collapses	Survivals
1897-1914	3 (0)	5 (100)
1917-1940	10 (10)	7 (85.7)
1945-1973	4 (0)	8 (100)
1974-1988	0	5 (80)
1989-2015	2 (0)	20 (45)
Total	19 (5.3)	45 (71.1)

Showing 1 to 6 of 6 entries

Note: The % of institutionalised party systems is shown in parentheses

What scholars, politicians, and practitioners should bear in mind, though, is that a continuous lack of PSI puts democracy in peril. In fact, the party systems of 18 of the 19 countries where democracy collapsed were very weakly institutionalised.

## The carrot and stick of democracy promotion

Although we should be cautious about generalising on the basis of these results, which apply only to Europe, these findings have important implications in terms of how democracy should be promoted. The whole concept of ‘democratic assistance’ should be approached with a view to favouring party systems rather than merely parties, as has usually been the case. In particular, any “carrot” offered to political parties by international organisations, governments or party foundations should be conditional on the “stick” of improving their relationships with other parties within the country. As [Kurt Sontheimer](#) noted almost 30 years ago, “[the stability of the party system \[rather than the parties\] is the really decisive factor for the stability of the whole system in all democratic systems](#)”.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.*

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