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## Representative versus responsible government

MPIfG working paper, No. 09/8

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Suggested Citation: Mair, Peter (2009) : Representative versus responsible government, MPIfG working paper, No. 09/8

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MPIfG Working Paper 09/8

Peter Mair

**Representative versus Responsible Government**

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anck Institute  
for the Study of Societies

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**Representative versus Responsible Government**

MPIfG Working Paper 09/8  
Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung, Köln  
Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Cologne  
September 2009

MPIfG Working Paper  
ISSN 1864-4341 (Print)  
ISSN 1864-4333 (Internet)

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## **Abstract**

The changing circumstances in which parties compete in contemporary democracies, coupled with the changing circumstances in which governments now govern, have led to a widening of the traditional gap between representative and responsible government. Although it is generally seen as desirable that parties in government are both representative and responsible, these two characteristics are now becoming increasingly incompatible. Prudence and consistency in government, as well as accountability, require conformity to external constraints and legacies. This means more than just answering to public opinion. While these external constraints and legacies have become weightier in recent years, public opinion, in its turn, has become harder and harder for governments to read. Hence we see the growing incompatibility. Meanwhile, because of changes in their organizations and in their relationship with civil society, parties are no longer in a position to bridge or “manage” this gap, or even to persuade voters to accept it as a necessary element in political life. This growing incompatibility is one of the principal sources of the democratic malaise that confronts many Western democracies today.

## **Zusammenfassung**

Die sich wandelnden Rahmenbedingungen für Regierungen und für den Parteienwettbewerb in modernen Demokratien haben zu einer Verbreiterung der traditionellen Kluft zwischen repräsentativem und responsivem Regieren geführt. Obgleich von regierenden Parteien erwartet wird, dass sie sowohl repräsentativ als auch responsiv handeln, lassen sich diese beiden Vorgehensweisen immer schwerer miteinander vereinbaren. Eine umsichtig und nachhaltig handelnde Regierung, die ihrer Rechenschaftspflicht gegenüber dem Bürger nachkommt, darf sich nicht nur an der öffentlichen Meinung orientieren, sondern muss externe Sachzwänge ebenso berücksichtigen wie die Vermächnisse vorhergehender Regierungen – zwei Faktoren, die in den letzten Jahren an Bedeutung gewonnen haben. Hinzu kommt, dass die öffentliche Meinung für Regierungen immer schwieriger zu deuten ist. Aufgrund von strukturellen Veränderungen sowie Veränderungen in ihrem Verhältnis zu den Bürgern sind die Parteien inzwischen nicht mehr in der Lage, die entstandene Kluft zu überbrücken beziehungsweise zu handhaben oder gar ihre Wähler davon zu überzeugen, sie als unverzichtbaren Bestandteil des politischen Lebens zu akzeptieren. Die zunehmende Unvereinbarkeit repräsentativen und responsiven Regierens ist eine der Hauptursachen für die „Politikverdrossenheit“, mit der sich viele westliche Demokratien heute konfrontiert sehen.

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## Introduction

The theme of this paper concerns changes – in political parties, in party systems, and in government-opposition relations. I argue that the traditional gap between responsive and responsible government has become wider and less manageable because of changes in the circumstances in which parties compete, on the one hand, and in which governments govern, on the other. Meanwhile, due to changes in their organizations and in their relationship with civil society, parties are no longer able to bridge this gap or even to persuade voters to accept it as a necessary element in political life. This, I argue, is one of the principal sources of the democratic malaise that confronts many Western democracies today.

The argument concerning changing parties is a familiar one, and one that I have developed already in a number of different publications (e.g., Katz/Mair 1995, 2009; Mair 2005, 2008). For a variety of reasons – linked to social structure, organization and geopolitics, as well as simply the sheer force of attrition – the character of parties and party competition is changing fundamentally. In turn, the character of our democracies is also changing. In brief, parties played two major roles in the development and organization of modern democracies. First, they acted as representatives – articulating interests, aggregating demands, translating collective preferences into distinct policy options, and so on. They linked civil society to the polity and did so from a very strong and well-grounded foundation in society. Parties gave voice to the citizenry. Second, parties governed. They organized and gave coherence to the institutions of government. From their positions in government and in opposition, they sought to build the policy programs that would serve the interests of their supporters and of the wider polity.

The unique contribution parties offered to the development of modern democracy and to the process of legitimizing democracy was that they combined these crucial two roles into one. That is, the key representative and governing functions of the polity were developed within one agency and within one organization – the party. The same organization that governed the citizenry also gave that citizenry voice, and the same organization that channeled representation also managed the institutions of the polity. This was the key to the legitimation of representative government in democratic political systems. To adopt a more prosaic reference, it was a process in which there were few, if any, principal-agent problems: the principal was the agent.

As I have argued elsewhere, this situation no longer prevails. In contemporary democracies, the two functions that were once combined by party have begun to grow apart, with many of today's parties downplaying, or being forced to downplay, their representative role, and enhancing, or being forced to enhance, their governing role. In other words, as part of the process by which parties moved their centers of gravity from civil society to the state (Katz/Mair 1995), they have also begun to shift from *combining* representative and governmental (procedural or institutional) roles to strengthening their governmental role alone.

Another way of looking at this is to suggest that parties have moved from representing interests of the citizens to the state to representing interests of the state to the citizens. Meanwhile, the representation of the citizens, to the extent that it still occurs at all, is given over to other, nongoverning organizations and practices – to interest groups, social movements, advocacy coalitions, lobbies, the media, self-representation, etc. – that are disconnected from the party system. In this way, representation becomes less and less a function of the activities of partisan political organizations and more and more something that is realized through a contemporary and often depoliticized version of pluralism.

In this way, political parties become more like governors than representatives, at least within the mainstream or core of the party system. Representation itself either moves out of the electoral channel altogether or, when it remains within the electoral channel, becomes the primary preserve of so-called “niche” or “challenger” parties, which may downplay a governing ambition or which may lack a governing capacity (see also Katz/Mair 2008). I will come back later to this last point.

When parties began to focus more attention on their activities within the institutions and on the demands of governing it seemed that they were reaching for a new and potentially sustainable role within the polity. Although this involved downplaying their representative role, it did not appear necessarily to damage their status or standing. Rather, the shift implied the emergence of a new division of labor within the democratic polity, whereby parties would govern, or primarily govern and other agencies would look after the citizens’ representative needs.

This also suited parties for a variety of reasons, two of which are worth emphasizing. In the first place, the steadily growing accessibility to the governing process for more and more parties in the 1970s and 1980s turned the ambition to govern into a much more realistic and manageable goal for more and more party leaders. In much the same way that a professorship appears in the eyes of an emerging academic, holding office in government became part of the conventional career cycle and the focus of ambition for both parties and their leaders. As Borchert (e.g. 2008) shows, this was also an inevitable consequence of political professionalization. Moreover, as resources inside parties shifted from the party on the ground and in the central office to the party in public office, the ambitions of the party in public office were transformed into the ambitions of the party as a whole. For many party leaders, parties were governors or they were nothing.

The second reason why this shift suited parties is because representation as such was becoming more difficult. The decline of the traditional large collective constituencies, the fragmentation of electorates, the particularization of voter preferences, and the volatility of issue preferences and alignment – that whole process which the Dutch refer to as the *ontzuiling* and individualization of cleavage structures – made it more and more difficult for parties to read interests, let alone aggregate them within coherent electoral programs. Indeed, it is hardly surprising that parties found it difficult to maintain their

far-reaching representative role, given that they were operating in a context in which collective identities in general were fragmenting, and in which representation as such was becoming more difficult to realize (Andeweg 2003: 151).

So what do this pattern of party change and the new role of political parties imply for the format and mechanics of the party systems in which these parties compete? The key issue here is that parties can no longer be seen as purposive actors who seek to implement – or prevent the implementation – of a particular program and who do this on behalf of a given electoral constituency. Party government no longer operates in this traditional sense. Even when this can be stipulated, however, it still begs the obvious question: what else remains for party competition and party purpose? If parties cannot compete – whether defensively or aggressively – about representation, on what basis can they compete and seek to acquire a mandate? And how does this affect party systems?

### **Instrumental and expressive voting**

Before proposing an answer to this question, I will step back a bit from my focus on the party end of the party competition equation and the supply side and look instead at the electoral end of the equation and hence at voting. According to Rose and McAllister (1992: 115), who echo a larger body of literature, there are two ways of looking at voting and of conceiving how voters approach elections and parties – namely, the instrumental view and the expressive view:

The instrumental view of voting is a macro perspective: the main function of an election is the production of government [...] By contrast, the expressive theory of voting is micro-level; the function of an election is to give individuals an opportunity to express their preferences.

Although couched in macro and micro terms, this distinction also implies that the voters themselves have a choice of orientations, or at least that they may differ from one another in terms of their orientations. That is, the voters may either act expressively, as is always assumed to be most clearly the case in second-order elections, for example, where no primary contest is in play; or they can act instrumentally, as is always assumed to be most clearly the case in majoritarian systems, for example, in particular in Westminster elections.

This is not entirely a matter of individual voter choice, of course; it is also driven by the context of the party system, and by the way in which parties supply choices. Thus, as Rose and McAllister (1992: 121) go on to argue, “In the overwhelming majority of democratic political systems, voters *must* act expressively, for there is a multiplicity of parties competing, and there is no simple swing of votes between an In and Out party.”



In other words, some systems, and these would include many of what Lijphart (1999) defines as consensus democracy systems, encourage expressive voting, whereas others – Lijphart’s majoritarian democracies – encourage a more instrumental approach on the part of voters. Stein Rokkan (1970: 93) once made a similar distinction. “In some countries,” he suggested,

elections have had the character of an effective choice among alternative teams of governors, in others they have simply served to express segmental loyalties and to ensure the right of each segment to *some* representation, even if only a single portfolio, in a coalition cabinet.

While this is all well and good, it does beg an additional question: what happens when the form of the parties presented to voters fails to correspond to the prevailing orientations held by voters? In particular, what happens in multiparty contexts when, following Rose and McAllister, voters *must* act expressively, and yet when the parties in this same context no longer offer an expressive capacity? To put it another way, if Rose and McAllister’s distinction between expressive and instrumental voting is to make sense, then the parties themselves are required to fulfill these conditions. Expressive voting requires expressive parties. It requires parties that place a premium, or at least an electoral premium, on their claims to represent. Once the mainstream parties – and these arguments apply primarily if not exclusively to the mainstream – cede the capacity or willingness to be representative, expressive voting cannot make sense. Hence voters will either be induced to shift towards an alternative logic of voting or will find themselves searching around for other parties that can claim to act as representatives. In short, if parties – or some parties – fail to be representative, then voters will be obliged either to shift their orientations or to shift their preferences. The latter option is difficult, of course, but not impossible, given the presence of niche parties (Meguid 2005) and “anti-party system” parties. It is more likely, however, that voters will be inclined to shift their orientations or abstain altogether.

This is the tension that is now beginning to fuel the trend towards *bipolarism* in contemporary party systems. By bipolarism I refer here to the tendency for parties in multiparty systems to group together to offer alternative governments and pre-electoral coalitions, thus giving voters the opportunity to choose between alternative teams of leaders even within the context of fragmented multiparty politics. This growing trend means that parties are now more likely to group together in ways that allow multiparty elections to become decisive for the formation of governments. This also means that greater scope can be afforded to instrumental voting even within otherwise uncongenial arenas. Italy is the most obvious example of such a transformation, but the trend towards bipolarism – often in fits and starts, and also sometimes with reversals – has also been evident in Germany, Austria, and France. Moreover, many of the new third- and fourth-wave democracies in Europe, beginning in Greece, Portugal and Spain, and moving more recently to Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland, are also often bipolar in character, whether through two-party systems or through bipolar multiparty systems. Thirty years ago, bipolar systems were relatively rare; today, they are emerging as one of the

dominant forms of party system. Yet it is also important to underscore the fact that in many cases these bipolar systems are not simply two-party systems. Rather, competition ensues between two alternating and sometimes shifting coalitions, through which elections become decisive for government formation even within the context of increasingly fragmented multiparty politics.

This also suggests that we can begin to speak of a functional and *systemic* response to party change, and indeed this is the first conclusion of this paper: when parties become less expressive – less oriented to representation – it seems that they become more inclined to present themselves to voters as governors and to ask to be judged as governors. This means that they must organize competition in such a way as to offer choices between Ins and Outs and to give voters the opportunity to use elections to “throw the rascals out.”

If an emphasis on representation and expressiveness encourages *prospective* voting, an emphasis on a more instrumental orientation may therefore be seen to encourage *retrospective* voting – judging the incumbents on how well they have performed and on how well they have managed the polity and judging the opposition in terms of how much better or worse they might have done had they been in office (see also Andeweg 2003). When individual parties compete, it might well be in terms of what they offer for the future; when alternative governments compete, they are more likely to talk about how they have, or might have, performed in the past.

Thus, it does seem that we can speak of the emergence of a new balance in contemporary party systems. Parties have downplayed their claim to representation and have thereby placed less reliance on expressive and prospective voting. Instead, they have begun to emphasize their capacity as good governors, administrators, and managers of the polity. In so doing, they have learned to forge alternative and competing electoral coalitions through which a more instrumental voting can be facilitated even within a multiparty context. Parties may have changed, but they also have adapted to a new electoral logic by reshaping the structures of competition that define their party systems. To paraphrase Tony Blair, political parties – mainstream political parties – have become committed to “what works.” This is what informs their modes of competition and the choices they offer voters.

This is all well and good. The argument might also stop here – leaving us with a new rough and ready equilibrium that is more in tune with the new roles of parties and the new patterns of competition. As a result, there would be no need to talk of a democratic malaise or of a crisis of legitimacy. In this new order, politics and party competition would be different, but not necessarily less effective or less legitimate. In practice, however, as I will go on to argue in the remaining part of the paper, this new equilibrium is far from stable and is confronted with two major sources of strain.

## Legitimacy and responsibility

In the first place, the equilibrium is strained by the problem of legitimacy. The capacity of parties to govern, in particular their capacity to justify or legitimize their claim to govern, depends at least in part on their capacity to represent. They might well be able to represent without governing,<sup>1</sup> but they have difficulty when they seek to govern without representing. This point was already argued by Giovanni Sartori (2005 [1967]: 29) more than forty years ago in his discussion on the centrality of so-called expressive functions to parties:

If we have the party as a recruiter, it is because we want “representative” leadership, that is, because we are interested in a mechanism of recruitment that fulfills the expressive function. Supposing that parties do not secure representative leadership [...] then why should we have recourse to party recruitment? Surely the answer is not that parties remain the best means of qualitative selection. Qualitatively speaking, the party channel has often produced very poor leadership.

In other words, if parties lack representative legitimacy, then it is difficult to justify their acquisition of a governing role or to argue against passing the whole business of governing directly to the judges, regulatory agencies, and the like. Without representation, it is difficult to make the case for privileging parties above administrators and experts, however effective they might be at managing government.

The second source of strain in the equilibrium is more immediate and more tangible, and it is this which brings me to the notion of responsibility. It is a commonplace to note that all democratic governments have always had to maintain a balance between demands for responsiveness, on the one hand, and demands for responsibility, on the other; in other words, echoing Scharpf (1999), all governments have had to maintain a balance between democracy and efficiency. Today, however, in the new circumstances of party politics, the tension between these two demands has increased, and it is becoming more and more difficult to reconcile them. Moreover, and this is where I come to the core of my argument: not only are the demands for responsiveness and the demands for responsibility increasingly at odds with one another, but the parties’ capacity to reconcile and resolve the growing tension between them has also been undermined. In other words, the tension itself is becoming steadily more acute, while the means of handling that tension are steadily waning. It is here that we find the basis of the contemporary crises of governance and democracy.

Let me restate this argument more carefully, beginning with the notion of *responsibility*. Responsibility is itself a difficult term and has been used in very different ways in the various bodies of political science literature. For Sartori (1976: 18–24), for example, as

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1 As they do in the European Parliament, for example – see Mair and Thomassen (forthcoming 2010), who examine some of the issues raised in this paper within the context of the European Union.

well as for many of the U.S. advocates of the “responsible party model” in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g., APSA 1950), responsibility essentially boils down to accountability. Political actors, their parties, and their governments give account to parliament and/or to the people and are in this sense accountable and thereby responsible. For Downs (1957: 105), by contrast, responsibility implies predictability and consistency: a party is responsible “if its policies in one period are consistent with its actions (or statements) in the preceding period” and hence “the absence of responsibility means party behaviour cannot be predicted by consistently projecting what parties have done previously.” Parties with strong and consistent social roots, for example, or those which are bound by a strict ideology are more likely to be responsible in this Downsian sense. For Rieselbach (1977: 8–10), who proposes responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability as three standards against which the U.S. Congress – or any legislature – might be evaluated, responsibility implies efficiency and effectiveness:

[A] responsible institution provides reasonably successful policies to resolve the major problems it is faced with. The emphasis of the responsibility criterion is on speed, efficiency, and, of course, success.

None of these definitions is entirely satisfactory, in that none pays sufficient attention to a more conventional notion of responsibility which implies that a responsible person is one who acts within the bounds of accepted practice, who follows known legal and procedural rules and conventions, and who thereby acts from a sense of duty. This is the conventional sense in which, for example, we speak of a responsible parent or a responsible teacher or a responsible journalist. It is something we also associate with professionalism, and in this more conventional sense it implies the opposite of recklessness. Indeed, in political life in particular, as well as in the commercial world, it may also be counterposed to corruption. It is this meaning which is implied when, for example, it is expected that a political actor “lives up to her responsibilities,” and it is also this meaning which – quite exceptionally – is highlighted by Anthony Birch (1964) in his classic study of the British constitution. For Birch, responsibility implies not only responsiveness and accountability – the two notions highlighted by the U.S. advocates of the “responsible party model,” for example – but also “prudence and consistency on the part of those taking decisions.” As Birch goes on to emphasize, this latter meaning evokes notions of duty and of moral responsibility. Here, too, it is contrasted with reckless or inconsistent decision-making.

Taking Birch on board, then, we are confronted with three distinct concepts, each of which is in some way associated with the broader notion of responsibility. The first is responsiveness, whereby political leaders or governments listen to and then respond to the demands of citizens and groups. This may also be associated with the traditional understanding of party government and party democracy, in which parties and their leaders acquire a mandate through elections and go on to implement the chosen policies while in government. In Andeweg’s (2003) terms, this involves representation *ex ante* and obviously builds on the expressive function of parties.

The second concept is accountability, whereby political leaders or governments are held to account by parliaments or by voters. The judgment of these citizens or parliaments may be based on evaluations of how responsive the leaders have been and on how well they have acted as delegates or agents of the bodies or principals carrying out the evaluation; or it may reflect a “trustee” type of relationship, in which the leaders make their own judgments and are subsequently evaluated on their performance. Either way, both judgments involve *ex-post* evaluation and, as I have argued above, following Andeweg (2003), this seems to have become more important as traditional *ex-ante* representation – responsiveness – becomes more difficult to realize. In other words, there is a potential trade-off between responsiveness and accountability, with a weakening of the former being compensated by a greater emphasis on the latter; or, in Scharpf’s (1999) terms, with the failings of input-oriented legitimacy being compensated by a greater reliance on output-oriented legitimacy.

The third concept, following Birch, is responsibility in the narrower and more formalized sense of the term, whereby leaders and governments are expected to act prudently and consistently and to follow accepted procedural norms and practices. This also means living up to the commitments that have been entered into by their predecessors in office and abiding by agreements that these predecessors have made with other governments and institutions. In other words, responsibility involves an acceptance that, in certain areas and in certain procedures, the leaders’ hands will be tied. Of course, the hands may also be eventually loosened and the leader may break with established traditions and practices – but even in these cases, to act responsibly means to effect changes according to accepted procedures and to avoid random, reckless, or illegal decision-making. In terms of procedures, responsible government is therefore “good” government.

So how do these three notions fit together? The first two obviously fit together in the sense that the declining representative capacity of parties leads to greater emphasis on retrospective accountability than on prospective mandates. Indeed, regardless of whether the parties in government are standing in relation to parliament and the voters as accountable trustees or as responsive delegates, there is a clear and relatively unambiguous principal-agent relationship involved (Strøm et al. 2003). The parties in government are the agent, and voters – whether acting directly or through parliament – are the principal.

The relationship of both concepts with responsibility is much more problematic. In this case, there is not a single, more or less straightforward principal that the parties in government meet when dealing with the voters or the parliament, but rather a host of different and sometimes contradictory principals constituted by the many veto and semi-veto players who now surround government in its dispersed multi-level institutional setting: the central banks, the courts, the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the WTO, the United Nations and its various offshoots, and so on. Parties in government are also evidently accountable to these sometime principals, and it is when these

governing parties continue to respect the rulings and procedures laid down by these institutions that we can speak of them being consistent, prudent, and responsible.

Hence the key difference is not between prospective responsiveness and retrospective accountability, which governments can try to square in any case, but between both of these forms of control, each with the same basic principal, on the one hand, and the problem of responsibility with its host of different and sometimes competing principals, on the other. This is where the key incompatibilities also lie, with the demands of responsiveness – to voters and to parliament – proving particularly difficult to reconcile with the demands of responsibility.

This is also an old problem and is closely linked to Dahl's (1956) traditional distinction between populist and Madisonian democracy, as well as to the more common contemporary distinction between efficient and democratic government (e.g., Scharpf 1999). So why should this tension now be a matter of greater concern?

### **Responsiveness and responsibility: A growing tension**

There are four factors in particular that are important here. First and as already discussed above, governments are now finding it increasingly difficult to be responsive to voters and to electoral opinion simply in the sense that they are finding it increasingly difficult to read and aggregate preferences and to persuade voters to align behind their policies. This is partly because they have withdrawn from civil society and are therefore out of touch with electoral demands, and partly because they now maintain smaller and increasingly unrepresentative party memberships and thereby lack mechanisms for steering communication upward through the party organization. Moreover, the parties have often severed their ties with the major mass organizations in civil society, organizations which in any case are themselves less able to communicate with the wider citizenry. Hence, parties lack access to that particular channel of communication. It is not party change alone that is relevant here; mass electoral opinion has also become more fragmented and volatile, with the result that fewer and fewer stable landmarks exist around which the parties can orient themselves. As Russell Hardin (2000) has argued, the general decline in the importance of left-right economic competition and the general growth of a host of often unrelated complex issues together preclude the organization of politics along a single simple dimension. Even if parties in government were in a position to respond to popular demands, they would find it difficult to do so because they would find it difficult to know what those demands actually were (see also Thomassen 1994). In short, the tension becomes more acute simply because it has become more difficult for parties to be responsive.



Second, in seeking to act responsibly – that is, in trying to do what they are expected to do as governments and in trying to meet the everyday responsibilities of office – governments now find themselves more and more constrained by other agencies and institutions. In other words, the range of principals who oblige governments to behave in a particular way and who define the terms of reference of responsibility has expanded enormously. This is a growing problem in that the Europeanization and internationalization of policy parameters, reflected in what Ruggie (1997) and Scharpf (2000) treat as “the decline of embedded liberalism,” oblige governments to be accountable to an increasing number of principals, many of whom are not located within the domestic realm and most of whom are difficult to control. By disembedding liberalism, globalization in general and Europeanization in particular create many new principals to whom governments must act responsibly. This also makes it even more difficult for voters to see or understand the rationale behind certain decisions, which also provokes tensions. In a similar argument addressed to patterns of delegation in parliamentary democracies, Kaare Strøm (2003: 60) points out that external political constraints can get in the way of representative politics by prohibiting certain forms of agency or by “forcing agents into behaviour that neither they nor their [own domestic] principals would have freely chosen.” Even though governments might be willing to heed their voters’ demands – if they could read them properly – they may well be limited in doing so by having “other constitutionally prescribed roles to play.” This is not a new problem, to be sure, but it has become weightier and more serious. This means that we are dealing with voter demands that are not so easily understood by parties in government, as well as with governments that are not always in a position to respond to those that they do understand.

There is also a *third* cumulating factor at work here, which was originally highlighted by Richard Rose (1990) some time ago and which concerns the constraints imposed by the legacies inherited by governments. As Rose argued, most of what governments do is a function of what they have inherited rather than what they have chosen. In the mid-1980s, for example, the then radical Thatcher government was still maintaining and funding 207 of the 227 programs that it had inherited from the previous Labour regime (many of which had also been inherited by Labour) and, after six years in office, it had initiated just 28 new programs. In terms of the total program cost to the government in 1985, less than 6 percent of expenditure was occupied by newly created programs (Rose 1990: 279–280). In acting “responsibly,” governments are therefore not only limited by their own domestic constitutional constraints and by the growing weight of international constitutional constraints – deriving from the EU or Council of Europe in the European case, and from the UN and the international legal system more globally – but also by the weight of prior policy commitments, a weight which, by definition, grows heavier year by year.<sup>2</sup> As Paul Pierson (2000: 480) points out, political actors, who would normally be expected to place a premium on short-term interests,

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2 For an extensive discussion of these cumulating problems in application to the German case, see Streeck (2006, 2007).

can make beneficial long-term bargains if they can “tie their hands” (or those of their successors), increasing the confidence of other participants that agreements will not be exploited. Institutions can be designed to disable discretion, making commitments credible and therefore lengthening the relevant time horizons for all concerned.

But while this is well and good for the actors who strike these bargains in the first place, the commitments they make inevitably serve to constrain those who follow them. This is true for the European treaties from Rome to Lisbon, as well as for the Kyoto protocols and the WTO accords. Indeed, with time, the inherited weight of these prior commitments has grown enormously, and the room for discretionary maneuver available to any one government at any one time has become correspondingly curtailed.

In his discussion of responsible government in the British case, Birch (1964: 170) emphasizes the familiar point that responsiveness and responsibility are both generally seen as desirable, although they are not always compatible. This is also my main point here. Not only are these features of party government sometimes incompatible, they are also *increasingly* incompatible, in that prudence and consistency, as well as accountability, requires conformity to external constraints and legacies and not just to public opinion. These external constraints and legacies have become weightier in recent years, while public opinion, in its turn, has become harder and harder to read. This is the growing imbalance.

The fourth factor that I wish to emphasize here is that, in the past, the traditional (and lesser) incompatibility between responsiveness and responsibility could often be bridged or “managed” by parties who were able to persuade voters on side through partisan campaigns and appeals to partisan loyalty; this is less easily conceivable today. The incompatibility has always troubled parties, of course, and many party governments in the past have been quick to cite difficult circumstances, inauspicious developments, or simple misjudgments in order to justify the evasion of election commitments or the renegeing on promises. In addition, parties could also sometimes pull their voters with them through the change of direction by appealing to popular loyalty and trust. In contemporary circumstances, however, this option is no longer effectively available. Parties have almost no members to help mobilize public opinion and have an ever-shrinking number of strong partisan identifiers within the electorate who might take them at their word. They rarely control the means of political communication and have to rely on others for their persuasive capacities. Moreover, as is now well attested, political parties are by far the least trusted institution within modern democracies. For all of these reasons, their mobilization capacities are now almost nonexistent.



## The challenge to representative government

Thus we arrive at the present crisis: the constraints on government have become much greater, the ability to respond to voters has been much curtailed, and the parties' capacity to use their political and organizational resources to bridge or even manage the resulting gap has become severely limited. The consequences for representative government are therefore likely to be very severe, even though to explore these fully is beyond the scope of this brief paper. I will therefore conclude with a number of propositions or speculations deriving from this diagnosis, each of which has potentially far-reaching implications.

First, and most obviously, it is clear that the task of governing the modern has become extremely complex, time-consuming, and demanding, and is something that does not afford much room for partisan mobilization either as a core activity or even on the side. It therefore follows that parties that are busy governing are busier as governments than they are as parties. If they are busy as parties, then either someone else is governing – through the displacement of the real decision-making power – or they are governing badly. This is a problem for the parties as well as for democracy.

Second, because parties are busy governing, because governing demands so much of them, and because there is so little room for partisanship in this governing process, much of what they do is depoliticized. To paraphrase Engels' classic observation,<sup>3</sup> parties become busy with the administration of things. This in itself leads to a paradox which eats away at their standing: the more the parties depoliticize policy-making, the more they are obliged to justify their choices – this is so because these choices, being depoliticized, are no longer self-evident choices for their supporters and voters; yet, the more parties depoliticize, particularly within contemporary circumstances, the more difficult it becomes – *as a party* – to justify these choices.

Third, since much of what keeps parties in contemporary European governments busy is Europe itself – negotiating, understanding, transposing – and since Europe has become a very large part of the administration of things, when there is opposition from outside the governing circles it is very likely to take on a Euroskeptic hue. To mobilize against the government in this sense is also to mobilize against Europe, since Europe is, par excellence, the business of government. In other words, I suggest that there is a close link between Euroskepticism and a more generalized polity-skepticism (Mair 2007). This is not only damaging for Europe, but also impacts negatively on national democracy.

Fourth, there are signs that the growing gap between responsiveness and responsibility and the declining capacity of parties to bridge or manage that gap is leading to the *bifurcation* of a number of party systems and to a new form of opposition (Katz/Mair 2008).

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3 “die Überführung der politischen Regierung über Menschen in eine Verwaltung von Dingen [...]”

In these systems, governing capacity and vocation becomes the property of one more or less closely bounded group of political parties. These are parties that are clearly within the mainstream or “core” (Smith 1989) of the party system and that may be able to offer voters a choice of government. If there are alternative teams of leaders presented on election day, it is from this group of parties that they will come. Therefore, these are also the parties that can offer opportunities for instrumental voting. In contrast, representation or expression, or the provision of voice to the people, when it doesn’t move wholly outside the system, becomes the property of a second group of parties, and it is these parties that constitute the new opposition. These latter parties are often characterized by a strong populist rhetoric. They rarely govern and also downplay office-seeking motives. On the rare occasions when they do govern, they sometimes have severe problems in squaring their original emphasis on representation and their original role as a voice of the people with the constraints imposed by governing and by compromising with coalition partners. Moreover, though not the same as the anti-system parties identified by Sartori (1976: 138–140), they share with those parties a tendency towards “semi-responsible” or “irresponsible” opposition as well as towards a “politics of outbidding.” In other words, there is a growing bifurcation in European party systems between parties which claim to represent but don’t govern and those which govern but no longer represent.

Fifth, and finally, the growing gap between responsiveness and responsibility – or between what citizens might like governments to do and what governments are obliged to do – and the declining capacity of parties to bridge or manage that gap, lies at the heart of the disaffection and malaise that now suffuses democracy. This also echoes Jean Leca’s (1996) conclusion that there is a growing separation between the world of public opinion, on the one hand, and the world of problem-solving, on the other. Governments solve problems, and hence parties in government solve problems, but they do so at an increasing remove from public opinion.

Seen in this way, and framed as the growing and potentially unbridgeable gap between responsive government and responsible government, we have a situation in which the malaise is pathological rather than conditional.

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