

## Notes on the 'Freezing Hypothesis'

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## **Abstract**

It is now 40 years since Lipset and Rokkans heavily influential 'Cleavage Structures...' was first published. Current research has still made little effort to explain why the 'freezing' of party systems these authors observed actually took place. The purpose here is to contribute to this field by elucidating the *individual-level* mechanisms that make party system stability more intelligible. The argument put forward here is that three interrelated factors give us deeper insights into the mechanics of the so called 'freezing process'. Firstly, the 'problem of collective action among potential party-entrepreneurs' makes it puzzling that new political parties emerge at all. Secondly, even if the original collective-action problem somehow is overcome, the 'principal-agent problem' and the 'problem of voter coordination' make it hard for new parties to attract voters. Finally, well-established and powerful competitors have the incentives and instruments to fight newcomers and steer them away from the political arena. I reach the conclusion that it is not surprising at all that Lipset and Rokkan made their empirical observations. Instead, what is really puzzling is why new political parties emerge and gain support at all.

*Key-words:* **Party systems, 'freezing hypothesis', party formation**

*JEL-codes:* **D01, D71, D72, H41**

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

It is now 40 years since Lipsets and Rokkans (1967) influential piece 'Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments: An Introduction' was published. The authors made a fascinating observation: 'The party systems of the 1960s reflect with few but significant exceptions, the cleavage structures of the 1920s... [T]he party alternatives, and in remarkably many cases the party organizations, are older than the majorities of the national electorates'. Three years later, Rose and Urwin (1970: 295) found robust empirical support for these observations: '[T]he electoral strength of most parties in Western nations ... has changed very little from election to election, from decade to decade, or within the lifespan of a generation'. More than 20 years after these observations, Mair (1993: 132) gave support to this by claiming that the electoral balance in the early 1990s was no different from that thirty years ago. In general, Mair maintained, electorates were not more volatile than before. Despite challenges from new parties, most of the early political parties in mature democracies had managed to remain in powerful positions. Quite recently, Golder (2003) confirmed that the pattern of stability, in general, still holds up.<sup>2</sup>

This observation, i.e. the 'freezing of party systems', has been perceived as somewhat puzzling. A vast socioeconomic restructuring took place in most industrial democracies in the period 1920–70, and theories that dominated the social sciences post WW2, i.e. versions of pluralist perspectives, predicted that when society changed and became more differentiated, organisations representing new interests would arise (cf. Truman 1951). Ergo, party systems were hypothesized to evolve in response to social change. This has obviously not been the case. Although the degree of continuity can be debated, stability in European party systems demands an explanation.

However, it seems as if theoretically grounded explanations to Lipset and Rokkan's observations have been scant. Lipset and Rokkan (1967: 30) themselves seemed quite perplexed by their own observations, and actually wrote: 'There are no straightforward answers to these questions'. Peter Mair (1997: 5) has claimed that how and why party systems actually froze into place, and what mechanisms are responsible for producing party-system stability, has not been elaborated upon sufficiently by neither Lipset and Rokkan or their disciples. Matt Golder (2003: 2) puts this even more bluntly: 'Current research has had very little to say about *why* party systems exhibit this type of stability'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the participants at a RATIO-seminar in May 2007, and especially Niclas Berggren and Marcus Box for insightful comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Note that the stability argument is debateable. For example, Hug (2001) found that 361 new parties were founded in 22 democracies since 1945. However, the referred authors are speaking of a general tendency, and here, the stability argument is, relatively speaking, a plausible interpretation of what has been going on. Interesting enough, a more fine-grained view over the party system change that indeed has occurred tells us that electoral systems have an independent effect on the success of new parties, or as Joseph Willey (1998: 667) writes: "The engineering of electoral systems by creating systems with small district magnitudes promises greater stability... of the party systems".

<sup>3</sup> The picture is perhaps more complex than the Mair and Golder quotes acknowledge. But they do point out something important: this is a relatively under-theorized area, and my contribution is that I approach it with somewhat new theoretical tools that have been used to explain states and events in other empirical fields. Of course I am not saying that there have not been attempts to explain party system stability. However, most existing alternatives a structural bias, often claiming that that party systems are very complex structures and that they can only be understood in terms of the historical development of the

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the field by elucidating important mechanisms which can enhance our understanding as to why party systems in mature democracies tend to be so stable. The approach I propose is simple enough. Instead of asking why party systems have been so surprisingly stable, it is analytically fruitful to rephrase the question and ask: Why are new parties so seldom formed, and if formed, why do they have such a hard time attracting sufficient electoral support to gain representation? By producing good answers to these questions, firmly grounded in the principles of methodological individualism and assumptions about strategic behaviour, I argue that an understanding of the mechanisms that underlie the 'freezing' of party systems is enhanced. As it turns out, I conclude that it is actually not at all puzzling that party systems have remained stable for such a long period of time. Rather, it is the emergence of new parties that is puzzling indeed.

### **Explaining party-system stability**

In the following I will remain true to a research program committed to principles of methodological individualism; the basic assumptions of rational choice, and a mechanism-based approach to explain states and events (cf. Kiser and Hechter 1998; Hedström and Swedberg 1996, 1997). I argue that three complementary factors enhance our understanding of the mechanisms producing the 'freezing' of party systems, namely:

- The problem of collective action among potential party-entrepreneurs.
- The problem of getting voters to vote for new parties.
- The problem of having well-established, powerful competitors.

#### *The problem of collective action among potential party-entrepreneurs*

As Olson (1971: 15) wrote, the provision of public or collective goods is the function of organizations generally. Hence, political parties undoubtedly display the characteristics of collective goods. In the case of *new* political parties this means that people can benefit from the new party's efforts without contributing to its formation or without even voting for it in public elections. Once the political party has been formed, the activist's effort automatically becomes available for other groups of people. This is so because parties can influence the production of a range of collective goods that are decided in elected assemblies. All policies that political parties can force through, influence or veto affect society in one way or another. This way of conceiving political parties is inspired by Michael Lavers (1997: 71) term 'political services':

The notion of political services includes the direct provision of public goods but in addition encompasses the provision of more general political regimes that facilitate the production of public as well as other goods and services that might otherwise be available only suboptimally [...] The outcome is the resolution of collective action problems as a result of the provision of what I am referring to here as 'political services'.

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democratization of political systems. What I am saying here is that such structural explanations are unsatisfying, and that the stability can be made more intelligible with the instruments I apply here.

This argument can be traced back to several scholars in the rational-choice genre. For instance, it is implicit in Gordon Tullocks (1971: 917) reasoning when he writes: ‘When [the voter] casts his vote in the public market, he is producing a public good’. Similar lines of argument are found in Downs (1957: 137), Olson (1971: 15), McCulloch (1990: 499) and Whiteley *et al* (1994: 80).

The fact that political parties are suppliers of collective goods has broad theoretical implications (cf. Frohlich and Oppenheimer 1970: 105), partly because individuals who form political parties solve a collective-action problem. This makes it hardly surprising that every new potential political organization does not materialize, or as Olson (1971: 2) put it:

Unless the number of individuals is quite small, or unless there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest, rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interest.

Why is this the case? Well, because all potential party entrepreneurs who wish that a new political party is formed face a situation resembling an N-person prisoner’s dilemma (see also Nownes and Neeley 1996).

**Figure 1. The Paradox of Participation.**

		Other dissatisfied citizens	
		Form a new party	Refrain from forming a new party
The individual dissatisfied citizen	Engages in the project of forming a new party	<i>Prefers second most</i> (2)	<i>Prefers the least</i> (4)
	Refrains from the project of forming a new party	<i>Prefers the most</i> (1)	<i>Prefers the second least</i> (3)

Figure 1 illustrates the conflict between individual and collective rationality. It helps us understand why not all potential political parties are materialized, even though there might be a widespread public dissatisfaction with existing political parties. The individual dissatisfied potential party-entrepreneur is assumed to reason like this: ‘No matter if I engage in the project of forming a new political party or not, either one of two things will happen. Either enough other dissatisfied people will form a new party, or not enough of them will do this. If the first thing happens, I will be able to reap the fruits from the efforts of party entrepreneurs without having to invest (and risk) my money, time, energy and social status. If the second thing happens, my investments in the party formation project would be wasted.’ So, to paraphrase Jon Elster (1989: 126), it is better for the whole group if some

individuals organize the new party, but best for each potential party-entrepreneur to refrain from this strategy.

No matter what other dissatisfied citizens do, it is in the individual dissatisfied citizen's self-interest to refrain from the strategy of party formation. Non-participation is therefore the 'dominant strategy' for all dissatisfied citizens that wish to see a party challenge the already established ones. Hence, the problem of collective action is a first obstacle to the 'de-freezing' of party systems and it helps us understand why only few of all potential new parties materialize.

*The problem of getting voters to vote for new parties*

If the collective action problem somehow is overcome – i.e. if a party entrepreneur, for whatever reason, steps forward and solves the paradox of participation – the party entrepreneur faces the difficult problem of attracting voters to his or her new party. This is the second obstacle for newcomers. To understand why newcomers might have a particularly large threshold for attracting voters, it is useful to revisit two different theoretical arguments based on: (1) the 'principal-agent theory' and (2) the 'problem of voter coordination'.

The representative political system is characterized by citizens choosing between representatives, i.e. people who are to represent them in parliament. Delegation is necessary in large-scale political systems, and it has become increasingly popular to conceive of this relationship between the electorate and politicians as a 'principal-agent' relationship (cf. Strom *et al* 2003). In accordance with economic reasoning, citizens are assumed to save time and costs by 'employing' politicians to act as their agents. Rather than participating actively in politics, they delegate the power to vote and make decisions for them to elected representatives. Citizens employ politicians to channel and carry through their political demands.

In theory, this is an ideal division of labour. In practice, however, there are intricate principal-agent problems inherent to this system. The most important for the purposes at hand is the problems of *asymmetric information* and *moral hazard*. The principal (voter) who hires the agent (representative) does not have full knowledge about the agents' motivations. Of course, this problem is severely exacerbated when the voter is considering whether to vote for an established party or for the first time cast a vote on a genuinely new political party. Before choosing the new alternative, the individual voter has to ask her- or himself: 'Is this newcomer *really* going to act in my interest, or does he have a hidden agenda (personal or other) that I do not know about?' It is only natural to expect principal-agent problems to be larger in the relation between the electorate and newcomer compared to that between the voter and some already established politician.

But if the principal-agent problem is overcome (i.e. that the newcomer actually credibly signals trustworthiness and honest intentions to the electorate), the 'problem of voter coordination' materializes as an additional threshold. This dimension of the new parties'

problems rests on two premises: voters prefer to influence the outcome of elections and they formulate expectations about how other voters will behave before choosing a party. Ergo, elections can be seen as coordination games amongst strategic voters. In order to show that these premises constitute a problem for new parties, we need to take a detour through Duvergers (1954) 'law': majority systems tend to produce fewer political parties than do proportional ones (cf. Farrell 1997: 50). Here, Duverger distinguished between the 'mechanical effect' and the 'psychological effect'. The mechanical effect stems from deviations from proportionality caused by the electoral system in the translation of votes into seats. In a party system that is strictly proportional each participating party gets the same percentage of seats as it receives of the vote. The less proportional the electoral system is, the more the distribution of seats will differ from the distribution of the votes. Almost all electoral systems have some effective thresholds that obstruct minor parties from gaining seats.

However, the psychological effect is the mechanism that underlies the 'problem of voter coordination' and that therefore constitutes a problem for new parties. The psychological effect assumes that voters are aware of the workings of the mechanical effect: voters form expectations about which parties other voters will vote for. If the voter does not expect that enough other voters will support the newly formed party to pass the effective electoral threshold, the voter expects that his or her vote for the new party will be wasted on it. Having the goal of influencing the outcome of the election, the individual voter will therefore abandon the new alternative and turn to a more established alternative. Without credible signals about how strong the new party actually might be, potential new party voters will be insecure about how widespread the support for the new party is, and hence – *ceteris paribus* – form the expectation that new parties will not get enough votes. Therefore, they will abstain from it.<sup>4</sup>

Golder (2003: 23) develops this line of reasoning and suggests an interesting explanation to party system stability by drawing on the tools from evolutionary game theory. He shows how voters become coordinated on a set of established parties over time, and hence, path dependent processes makes it harder for them to switch 'paths' and coordinate on some newcomer party: 'Once an equilibrium is reached, it is extremely difficult for voters to individually switch their support to a new party. Thus it is not sufficient for new parties to be preferred by large number of people for it to achieve success. There are significant coordination problems to overcome as well'.

#### *The problem of having well established and powerful competitors*

As if these two obstacles – 'the collective action problem among potential party entrepreneurs' and 'the problem of getting voters to vote for new parties' – were not enough: there is a third, perhaps the most important, factor that is forceful when it comes to pushing

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<sup>4</sup> Golder (2003) uses a similar explanation to party system by drawing on the tools from evolutionary game theory. He shows how voters become coordinated on a set of established parties over time, and hence, path dependent processes makes it harder for them to switch 'paths' and coordinate on some newcomer party.

new parties to the periphery of the political landscape. Because the market for votes is a zero-sum game, political parties already established in parliaments do not – *ceteris paribus* – wish to see any new competitors at all.

This argument is a recurrent theme in the literature on ‘cartel parties’. Established parties are said to have formed a cartel on the market for votes to exploit the resources provided by the state, and at the same time exclude newcomers from representation in parliaments (cf. Detterbeck 2005; Blyth and Katz 2005; Katz and Mair 1995). In fact, Lipset and Rokkan (1967: 61) own attempt to explain the freezing process resembles the cartel-argument. They underscored how important it is to note what took place when democracy began to consolidate through the introduction of universal suffrage. The party organizations had to adapt to this new situation and transform into mass party organizations in order to connect with the electorate and hence be able to catch as many votes as possible. These parties – the ‘original’ or ‘early’ players in the evolving party systems – constituted an oligopoly in the market for votes, where well-demarked groups of voters were tied to each party respectively. This, of course, gave them an important headstart vis-à-vis all potential future challengers.

At the same time as bonds of loyalty developed between specific parties and specific demarcated groups of voters, the ‘early players’ got hold on useful instruments to guarantee their seats in the respective parliaments. In fact, they got the great advantage of constructing and controlling the rules of the game that structure the possibilities for newcomers to enter publicly elected assemblies. The importance for establish parties to able to adjust the rules concerning the electoral system and other types institutions like public party finance cannot be overestimated if we want to explain party system stability (cf. Lipset and Rokkan 1967: 30; Boix 1999). As Geddes (1995) concludes, political institutions often reflect the interests of those who devised them.

This way of analysing party-system stability is related to a strand in the economic literature which deals with why it is the case that newly formed firms often have a hard time to establish themselves in pre-existing markets for goods or services. The ‘early players’, i.e. the parties that originally got established in the formative years of party systems, got what the economic literature has dubbed a ‘first-mover advantage’ (cf. Rajshree and Michael 2001). The position as first movers allowed them to use strategies such as ‘entry deterrence’ (cf. Schmalensee 1978) and institutionally devise different ‘barriers to entry’ (cf. Demsetz 1982) to increase the costs for newcomers to compete for votes (see also Mueller 1997).

When the ‘freezing process’ is analyzed with these concepts from the economic literature, i.e. ‘cartels’, ‘first-mover advantage’, ‘entry deterrence’ and ‘barriers to entry’, it is clear that explanations to party system stability ought to be placed in the ‘actor-centred historical institutionalist’ tradition (see Thelen 1999). Here, the concept ‘path dependence’ is often used to understand the mechanisms underlying stability, continuity and inertia. Paul Pierson (2000: 81) illustrates processes of ‘path dependence’ nicely. He notes that power structures



tend to be stable and hard to alter as a result of 'early players' who get control over a political arena and, 'achieve a position of influence first, and are able to use that position to consolidate their hold on a particular "political space" ... [G]etting there first often confers very substantial advantages in politics'. Path-dependent processes kick in as a consequence of the rational behaviour of powerful early players, and these processes make original parties stronger as time passes by. Success fosters success, and so, early players improve their number of members (who contribute monetary and personnel resources), they gain experience and tactical skills for each electoral campaign, and they develop important contacts with mass media and important interest groups, which further strengthens their comparative advantage vis-à-vis potential challengers.

To understand the 'freezing process' in this way is to embrace the insight that the rational behaviour of established parties is a significant explanation to why newcomers have a small room for manoeuvre and a hard time to enter parliaments. This is the way in which Mair (1983, 1997) attempts to make the freezing of party systems intelligible: it is the established parties ability to *adapt* to challengers and changing circumstances, and their ability to *control* the political agenda that make newcomers so disadvantaged on the market for votes. This insight turns the causal relationship of structurally oriented theories around: it is not the electorate or the 'class structure' that decides the activities of political parties and the design of party systems, but rather, the political parties decide what sorts of political conflicts are allowed on the public political agenda.

Three influential scholars – Schattschneider, Schumpeter and Sartori – have developed concepts that are useful for analyses that wish to explain how and why established party organizations are able to hold back new competitors. All three criticize structural theories and turn the relationship between independent and dependent variables around: politicians and political parties are analyzed as independent variables, a society's conflict structure as the dependent. Firstly, Schattschneider (1960: 66, 69, 102) developed the concept 'mobilization of bias' to underscore that we ought not to analyze political parties as organizational mirrors of what political conflicts exist between social classes in a given society. Instead, political parties need to be analyzed as active subjects with the ability to manipulate public opinion so that they themselves are favoured and potential challengers that wish to bring new issues up to public debate are pushed to the periphery. Secondly, Schumpeter (1976: 270) used the concept 'the manufactured will' to capture the same phenomenon, that politicians actively can affect and mould the public opinion to their own benefit. Thirdly, Sartori (1969: 84f) launched the concept 'translation handling' to show how political parties always are actively occupied with translating some of many possible conflicts in society onto the *public* political agenda, hence deliberately toning down other conflicts and keeping them away from the political debate.

## Concluding remarks

Surely, most students of parties and party systems have read, or have otherwise been in contact with, Lipset and Rokkans' (1967) classic. It is however notable that it first and foremost has become famous for its empirical observations on party-system stability rather than its original theoretical contributions. Still today, we do not have a convincing, comprehensive and theoretically grounded explanation of party-system stability (cf. Golder 2003; Mair 1997).

The purpose of this research note has been to enhance our understanding in this regard by elucidating *individual-level* mechanisms that underlie the freezing process. Committed to a research program that adheres to the principles of methodological individualism, the assumptions of rational choice, and a mechanism-based approach, I have argued that taken together, three interrelated factors give us deeper understanding of the mechanics underlying the freezing process. Firstly 'the problem of collective action' makes it hard for every potential political organization to materialize, and so, not all interest groups that wish parliamentary representation do form political parties. Secondly, 'the principal-agent problem' and the 'problem of voter coordination' make it hard for new political parties – if their initial collective-action problem is somehow overcome – to gain voter support. Thirdly, and perhaps most important, because the competition for votes is a zero-sum game, well-established and powerful competitors have both the incentives and the instruments to fight newcomers and keep them away from the political arena. Indeed, this third factor is the explanation that Lipset and Rokkan themselves elaborate upon.

My concluding argument is that it is not at all surprising that Lipset and Rokkan found such remarkable party system stability. Instead – and this is a fact that the literature that expects party systems to evolve in response to social change does not handle all too well – the genuinely puzzling fact is why the 361 political parties that have been founded since 1945 (Hug 2001) have been (a) formed in the first place and (b) gained support at all.

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