Irish Political Studies

ISSN: 0790-7184 (Print) 1743-9078 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fips20

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To cite this article: Rudy B. Andeweg (2019) Peter Mair on representative democracy, Irish Political Studies, 34:2, 145-153, DOI: 10.1080/07907184.2019.1572644

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2019.1572644

Published online: 01 May 2019.

IRISH POLITICAL STUDIES
2019, VOL. 34, NO. 2, 145–153
https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2019.1572644

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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Peter Mair on representative democracy[1,*]

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As parties fail, I argue, so too fails popular democracy. (Mair, 2006b, p. 10)

It is more than 25 years since Dick Katz and Peter Mair presented the first version of their joint paper on the emergence of the cartel party at the ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops in Limerick, in Peter Mair's native Ireland. Published in the maiden issue of the journal *Party Politics* in 1995, this is now one of the most cited papers in political science (3,986 citations according to Google Scholar in November 2018!). That paper is not only an important milestone in Mair's work on party organizations, but it also marks the start of a development in his thinking that links party organization to the functioning of representative democracy more generally. He wrote about representative democracy as a linkage mechanism between the policy preferences of citizens and the policy-making of their elected representatives in an increasingly pessimistic voice. That growing pessimism, and Mair's reasoning behind it, are still relevant today. Although Mair's views evolved gradually, we can discern roughly three phases in this development: the first phase includes the work with Katz on the cartel party and related papers, the second phase contains a series of papers around 2004–2007, and the third phase covers the last years before his untimely death.[2]

Phase I: democracy transformed

In their work on the emergence of the cartel party, Katz and Mair identified three changes: the roots of political parties in civil society are withering, parties are increasingly dependent on the state for resources, and parties converge in terms of their policy positions. Together, these three developments mark the emergence of the cartel party. By now a considerable body of

[1]An earlier version has been published in Dutch in Res Publica vol. 54, 2012.

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literature has developed discussing the cartel party thesis, but less attention has been devoted to the fact that Katz and Mair explicitly associated the cartel party model with a revision of the model of representative democracy. In that revised model,

> Democracy ceases to be seen as a process by which limitations or controls are imposed on the state by civil society. Political leadership needs to be renewed and elections provide a peaceful ritual by which this may be accomplished. Feedback is necessary if rulers are to provide government that is broadly acceptable, and contested elections, which signal public pleasure (or displeasure) with policy and outcomes, provide that feedback. Thus, the state provides contested elections. And since democratically contested elections, at least as currently understood, require political parties, the state also provides (…) political parties. (Katz & Mair, 1995, p. 22)

Thus, in this view of democracy, the people still constitute the principal and parties are the agents, but the principal-agent relationship is no longer based on ex-ante controls or a 'party mandate', but on 'ex-post controls' or 'accountability'. This view of democracy is not so different from contemporaneous analyses by other colleagues (e.g. Manin, 1997), and it marks a transformation of democracy, not necessarily a deterioration. However, the fact that Katz and Mair also described elections in Bagehotian terms as a 'dignified' (read: symbolic) rather than an 'efficient' part of the constitution (1995, p. 22) signals that for them more is at stake than a mere transformation. This is even more clear in 'Political Parties, Popular Legitimacy and Public Privilege' (Mair, 1995). In that paper he uses De Tocqueville's analysis of the French nobility gaining privileges while losing their social purpose to warn that a similar asymmetry lies at the heart of popular disenchantment with political parties: more visible as public-office holders, but less relevant as representative agencies. Surely, the situation is more menacing than a transformation when representative democracy is compared to the *Ancien Régime*!

Phase II: democracy hollowed out

This becomes more clear in the second phase in Mair's thinking on representative democracy, with a series of overlapping papers: 'Democracy Beyond Parties' (Mair, 2005), 'Ruling the Void?' (Mair, 2006a) and two lectures, the Uhlenbeck Lecture at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies (Mair, 2006b), and the Schapiro Memorial lecture (Mair, 2007).

In the first phase, democracy was changing, not declining because political parties were adapting, not weakening. But in this second phase, Mair explicitly corrected his earlier 'optimism' about party change: 'This now seems far too sanguine an interpretation' (Mair, 2006a, p. 50): Political parties are failing rather than adapting, and 'As parties fail, I argue, so too fails popular democracy' (Mair, 2006b, p. 10). In this phase he developed a distinction between

popular democracy (which is about representing the people) and constitutional democracy which is not clearly defined, but seems to be a combination of checks and balances and government not by, but for the people (Mair, 2006b, p. 9). Mair argued that political parties used to link popular and constitutional democracy. By abandoning their representative role parties no longer do that. As a result, public debate on democracy has become 'an attempt to redefine democracy in the absence of the demos' (Mair, 2006b, p. 9).

'Democracy without a demos' is a phrase that will remind many of debates on the democratic deficit in the European Union. Indeed, it is particularly in this phase that Mair started to look at the relationship between European integration and the evolution of democracy, which later was developed further in work with among others Jacques Thomassen (e.g. Mair & Thomassen, 2010). The problem of EU democracy is not a separate theme in Mair's view: the failure of political parties to link popular democracy and constitutional democracy underlies both the widespread disenchantment with the EU and the malaise of national democracy: in his view euroscepticism is merely part of a wider 'polity scepticsm' (Mair, 2006b). Both at the national and at the EU level, the withdrawal of parties from popular democracy means that their role in constitutional democracy lacks legitimacy. Therefore 'It probably cannot succeed in the long term' (Mair, 2006b, p. 31), and we are witnessing 'the hollowing of Western Democracy' (Mair, 2006a).

Phase IIIA democracy Redeemed …

In the third phase, in Mair's last writings on representative democracy, two new arguments emerge. In one of them, he drew attention to a tendency towards bipolarism in many party systems. He does so most clearly in 'The Challenge to Party Government' (Mair, 2008) and in 'Is Governing Becoming More Contentious?' (Mair, 2011a). In more and more countries, political parties seem to cluster together into two blocs. Using measures developed with Bartolini for interbloc volatility (Bartolini & Mair, 1990), Mair showed how the divide between the governing bloc and the opposition bloc is becoming more important for voter movements, at least in absolute terms. Bipolarism used to be exceptional, but it is now the rule in Europe. Only five countries: Belgium, The Netherlands, Luxembourg, Finland, Switzerland are exceptional in not following this bipolarizing trend (Mair 2011a, 79).

In itself, this is good news. If parties are no longer sociologically or ideologically distinct from each other, voters can no longer vote prospectively on the basis of the parties' programmes and the only option left is to vote retrospectively on the basis of the parties' past performances. But for such accountability to work, voters must be able to throw the rascals out which is only possible

in a two-party system, or at least in a bipolar party system. As Mair acknowledges,

> This [bipolarization] 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. (2009, p. 9)

But then Mair goes on to reject bipolarization as a solution for the hollowing of representative democracy. The reason for that rejection is simple: Mair has never come round to the idea that accountability can completely replace mandate:

> To be sure, there is a choice between the competing teams of leaders and, given the growing evidence of bipolarity, that particular choice is becoming more sharply defined. But there is less and less choice in policy terms, suggesting that political competition is drifting towards an opposition of form rather than of content. (2008, p. 227)

Phase IIIB … or democracy beyond repair

This, I think, is debatable, but Mair offered a stronger reason to be concerned about the future of representative democracy. In a 2009 paper for the Max Planck Gesellschaft he replaced his distinction between popular and constitutional democracy with a clearer and more powerful distinction between representative and responsible government. Representative government is government that is responsive to public opinion. Responsible government is government that is prudent and consistent, that meets the country's international obligations etc. The two are increasingly incompatible: the individualization of civil society makes it more and more difficult for parties to read public opinion. And even if they can read public opinion, more and more external constraints and the weight of the legacies of past policy making force parties to ignore public opinion. Note that the cartel party is now absent from this latest analysis. It only plays a role in the sense that cartel parties are unable to appeal to party loyalty to persuade voters to accept that the party could not keep its promises because it was forced to act responsibly.

In 'Bini Smaghi and the Parties', Mair (2011b) used the fallout of the financial crisis in Ireland to illustrate the widening gap between being responsive and acting responsibly. The Italian economist Lorenzo Bini Smaghi was the member of the Executive Board of the European Central Bank who forced the Irish political parties to put their financial obligations above electoral considerations. Other examples are not difficult to find: Iceland reluctantly meeting its financial obligations to the UK and the Netherlands

caused by the Icesave bank's collapse in 2008 despite two refusals by Iceland's president Grimsson to sign the relevant bills, and despite two rejections by Iceland's citizens of the compensations in referendums; Greek Prime Minister Tsipras calling a referendum to reject the EU bail-out programme in 2015, only to accept an even harsher austerity programme barely a week later. Such incidents can now be seen retrospectively as further illustrations of Mair's diagnosis of a growing incompatibility of responsiveness and responsibility.

This is just a brief and sketchy account of the three phases in Mair's thinking about representative democracy. There are other interesting differences between the phases, such as his treatment of populism. In the first phase, the rise of the populist right was regarded as the natural sequel to the cartel party, in a kind of dialectic development (Katz & Mair, 1995, pp. 23–24). In the second phase populism is not only a characteristic of new parties on the right, but of all parties, including the established parties (most notably Blair's New Labour) (Mair, 2002). In the third phase, Mair sees a bifurcation of the party system, with the established parties acting responsibly, but not responsively, and the populist parties acting responsively, but not responsibly (Mair, 2009, pp. 16–17).

But the most important aspect of the three phase development is that with each phase Mair grew more pessimistic about the future of representative democracy. If in the first phase he saw representative democracy as being transformed, in the second phase he saw it being hollowed out. In the third phase, this hollowing out was confirmed, but it was now seen as a process from which there is no turning back: '(…) we have a situation in which the malaise is pathological rather than conditional' (Mair, 2009, p. 17).

Pessimism challenged

At first sight, the gradual evolution of Mair's thinking about representative democracy until his final diagnosis that individualization and globalization pull the established political parties into opposite directions is convincing. As always in Mair's work, his arguments are persuasive, and his presentation is seductive. But for the sake of argument, and more than that, let me also mention two points of criticism: about the interpretation of the evidence, and about the underlying assumptions.

I do not dispute Peter's evidence of party change and of changes in civil society, but I do not always agree with his interpretations of that evidence. Is, for example, declining turnout evidence of parties' weakened roots in civil society, of 'citizens (…) heading for the exits of the national political arena' as Mair argues (2006a, 44)? In most countries, the long-term decline in turnout is hardly dramatic (Franklin, 2004). Moreover, measured across several consecutive elections, the group of hardcore non-voters is not very big (e.g. Sigelman et al. 1984; Marsh, 1991). Voters have a great variety of

motives for voting or non-voting. What we see emerging is that more voters make a deliberate decision to participate or to abstain on the basis of what is at stake and of what is on offer. The distinction between 'first order' and 'second order elections', originally developed for elections to the EU Parliament (Reiff & Schmitt, 1980), is a powerful one, and not all elections are 'second-order' – not all elections are merely 'dignified' parts of the constitution.

It is even less clear why increasing volatility and ticket splitting point to disengagement of citizens: 'Inconsistency goes hand in hand with indifference', says Mair (2006a, 38). But does changing one's party preference really forebode a withdrawal from political engagement, or is volatility a sign of voters who, finally liberated from their subcultural shackles, begin to make their own choice on the basis of programmes or performance rather than identity (e.g. Rose & McAllister, 1986)? That would be a strengthening rather than a weakening of democracy, would it not?

And while it is true that parties have moved closer to each other ideologically, is it not an exaggeration to say that 'As party programmes become more similar (…) there is a shrinkage in the degree to which electoral outcomes can determine government actions' (Katz & Mair, 1995, p. 22), or that 'the representation of the citizens, to the extent that it occurs at all, is given over to other, nongoverning organizations and practices (…) that are disconnected from the party system' (Mair, 2009, p. 6). Perhaps with the help of increasingly popular voter aid applications, voters are still able to distinguish between parties and the differences between parties are still translated into government policy (Dalton, Farrell, & McAllister, 2011).

Leaving such contested interpretations aside, Mair's pessimism seems based on his insistence that political representation should focus on programmes rather than performance and on two related assumptions, one explicit, the other implicit. The explicit assumption is that the only viable form of democracy is one in which political parties take centre stage. The famous Schattschneider quote, that 'political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties' (1942, p. 1) surfaces in many of Mair's publications:

> Without parties, and still following Schattschneider, we would then be left with no real democracy and no real system of representative government; or with what continues to be called democracy, but which would be redefined so as to downgrade or even exclude the popular component – since it is this popular component that depends so closely on party. (2006b, p. 12)

Dalton et al. argue that Mair is overinterpreting Schattschneider, that he is even putting Schattschneider on his head (2011, p. 13). That may be an overstatement on their part, but it should be reiterated that the notion that parties cannot be missed is not more than an assumption, Schattschneider quote or

not; it is not a tested hypothesis. At the time of the introduction of universal suffrage, the resulting increase in scale caused widespread pessimism about the viability of representative democracy. Unforeseen by many, a new form of elite-mass linkage – political parties, provided a solution for that increase in scale. The current weakening of political parties gives rise to a revival of that pessimism, as if other forms of elite-mass linkage are not only unforeseen at this moment, but also unthinkable.

Not only did Mair explicitly espouse a very party-centred view of democracy, but implicitly he also has a very European-centred view of political parties. It is a common complaint among European political scientists that many of our concepts and theoretical notions, about party identification, political representation, executive-legislative relations, etc. were developed in and for a very exceptional political system: that of the US. But with political parties it seems to be the other way around. Duverger, Rokkan, and Sartori conceptualized political parties in and for Europe. However, European political parties may well be exceptional, with their origins in social cleavages, their emphasis on ideology rather than patronage as a mobilizing device, the dominance of the 'mass party type' as the organizational principle, etc. These are very different animals compared to the parties of the Americas, of Asia, and of Africa (Blondel & Inoguchi, 2012, pp. 1–11).

In the cartel party paper, Katz and Mair still criticize those who see only a weakening of parties on the grounds that they look at the developments with Duverger's mass party as their point of reference:

> Many recent discussions of the decline of party are predicated on the assumption that the Duverger/socialist mass-party model is the only model for parties. We contend that this assumption is misconceived, that the mass-party model is only one, temporally limited and contingent model, and that it is necessary to differentiate notions of adaptation and change from notions of decline or failure. (1995, p. 5)

But in his later work, this is exactly what Mair does himself: the erosion of the sociological and ideological distinctiveness of parties is argued to result in a failure of parties to represent, and this in turn hollows out democracy. This implies that the mass party indeed sets the standard for Mair. Moreover, Mair paints a rosy picture of the era of the mass party. For him, it was a kind of Golden age of representative democracy. This is evident in passages such as the following: 'Previously, and probably through to at least the 1970s, conventional politics was seen to belong to the citizen, and something in which the citizen could, and often did, participate' (2006a, 44), Others would perhaps see that era as characterized by elite directed participation, by top-down mobilization, not by truly participatory democracy.

Mair's work on the evolution of representative democracy sets a standard. Terms such as 'the cartel party' and 'representative v. responsible government'

will be part of the standard vocabulary of comparative politics for years to come. His eventual pessimism about the future of representative democracy is also shared by many. It is because of my disagreement with some of Mair's interpretations of the evidence and with his dismissal of political representation based on accountability, and because I feel that his assumptions about the indispensability of political parties of the 'mass-party' type have biased his conclusions that, while I share many of Mair's concerns about the evolution of representative democracy, I do not share his pessimism. From a scholarly, but especially from a societal perspective, it is important that we continue this debate, even if we have to do so without the scholar who has contributed so much to it.

Notes

1. An earlier version has been published in Dutch in Res Publica vol. 54, 2012.
2. Identifying the relevant publications to trace Mair's views is not as straightforward as this sentence makes it appear. First, there is the complication of coauthors, in this period most notably the longtime partnership with Katz. If I attribute ideas to Mair that were actually initiated by his coauthor, I can only apologize. Second, there is the complication of posthumous publications completed by others (e.g. Mair, 2013), or coauthored with others (e.g. Katz & Mair, 2018). These I largely ignored.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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