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CHAPTER

3

Party Systems and Structures of Competition

PETER MAIR

Approaches to the Classification of Party Systems: A Review

The classification and categorization of party systems is by now a long-established art. On the one hand, by noting the number of parties in competition in any given polity, and by taking at least some account of the manner in which these parties interact with one another, it has always been possible to gain a reasonably valuable insight into the ways in which these polities differ from one another. On the other hand, following a more normative imperative, it has also often proved tempting to trace the source of problems of the legitimacy and stability of regimes back to the character of their party systems. For both reasons, an understanding of the nature and character of a country’s party system has always been accorded priority in cross-national comparative analysis, even if the criteria by which party systems are compared has often been subject to debate.1 This chapter begins with a review of the principal existing approaches to the classification of party systems, pointing to both
their limits and possibilities when applied within comparative analysis. It then goes on in the second section to underline the importance of understanding the structure of competition in any given party system, because in many ways the whole notion of a party system is centered on the assumption that there exists a stable structure of competition. Structures of competition can be seen to be either closed (and predictable) or open (and unpredictable), depending on the patterns of alternation in government, the degree of innovation or persistence in processes of government formation, and the range of parties gaining access to government. The emphasis in the third section is on the need to distinguish between processes of electoral change, on the one hand, and changes in party systems and the structures of competition, on the other, a distinction that also allows us to conceive of situations in which electoral change is the consequence rather than the cause of party system change.

The most conventional and frequently adopted criterion for classifying party systems is also the most simple: the number of parties in competition. Moreover, the conventional distinction involved here has also proved appealingly straightforward: that between a two-party system, on the one hand, and a multiparty (i.e., more than two) system, on the other (see Duverger 1954). Nor was this just a casual categorization; on the contrary, it was believed to tap into a more fundamental distinction between more or less stable and consensual democracies, which were those normally associated with the two-party type, as opposed to more or less unstable and conflictual democracies, which were those associated with the multiparty type. Thus, two-party systems, which were typically characteristic of the United Kingdom and the United States and invariably involved single-party government, were assumed to enhance accountability, alternation in government, and moderate, center-seeking competition. Multiparty systems, on the other hand, which usually required coalition administrations and were typically characteristic of countries such as France or Italy, prevented voters from gaining a direct voice in the formation of governments, did not necessarily facilitate alternation in government, and sometimes favored extremist, ideological confrontations between narrowly based political parties. And although this simple association of party system types and political stability and efficacy was later challenged by research into the experiences of some of the smaller European democracies, which boasted both a multiplicity of parties and a strong commitment to consensual government (e.g., Daalder 1983) and thus led some early observers to attempt to elaborate a distinction between “working” multiparty systems (e.g., the Netherlands or Sweden) and “nonworking” or
“immobilist” multiparty systems (e.g., Italy), the core categorization of two-party versus multiparty has nevertheless continued to command a great deal of support within the literature on comparative politics.\(^2\)

This simple distinction is, of course, far from being the only possible approach, and since Duverger a number of attempts have been made to develop more sensitive and discriminating criteria (see Table 3.1).\(^3\) In the conclusion to his classic *Oppositions* volume, for example, Robert Dahl (1966) sought to move away from an almost exclusive concern with simply the numbers of parties and built an alternative classification based around the competitive strategy adopted by the opposing parties, distinguishing between competitive, cooperative, and coalescent strategies, and distinguishing further between opposition in the electoral arena and opposition in the parliamentary arena (see also Laver 1989). This led Dahl to elaborate a fourfold typology, distinguishing between strictly competitive systems, cooperative-competitive systems, coalescent-competitive systems, and strictly coalescent systems. Shortly after this, in what proved subsequently a very influential study, Jean Blondel (1968) developed a typology that took account not only of the numbers of parties in competition but also their relative size (and, in a later refinement, their “place on the ideological spectrum”), distinguishing four types: two-party systems, two-and-a-half-party systems, multiparty systems with a dominant party, and multiparty systems without a dominant party. In practice, however, this new approach did little more than improve the traditional two-party versus multiparty distinction by disaggregating the otherwise overloaded multiparty category. Stein Rokkan’s (1968) contemporaneous attempt to classify the party systems of the smaller European democracies also did little more than disaggregate the multiparty category, in this case by taking account of the likelihood of single-party majorities (akin to Blondel’s dominant party) and the degree to which there was a fragmentation of minority party strengths. Using these criteria, Rokkan developed a threefold distinction involving a “British-German” type system, in which the system was dominated by the competition between two major parties, with a third, minor party also in contention; a “Scandinavian” type system in which one big party regularly confronted a more or less formalized alliance between three or four smaller parties; and an “even” multiparty system in which competition was dominated by three or more parties of equivalent size.

With the notable exception of Dahl, therefore, these early classifications have all remained closely tied to an emphasis on the numbers of parties, albeit sometimes supplemented by attention to the relative electoral weights of
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<td></td>
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Parties involved. In this sense, they can also be related to the importance attached to party numbers—or to the “format” of the party system—in the more comprehensive typology that was later developed by Sartori (1976, 117-323). Although Sartori’s approach emphasized the relevance of party numbers, it also went far beyond this by including a second principal criterion that had previously been largely disregarded, that is, the ideological distance separating the parties in the system. Sartori’s typology, which was explicitly concerned with the interactions between the parties in any given system—what Sartori refers to as the “mechanics” of the system—and was therefore explicitly concerned with differential patterns of competition, drew on the combination of these two criteria. Party systems could therefore be classified according to the number of parties in the system, in which there was a
distinction between formats with two parties, those with up to some five parties (limited pluralism) and those with some six parties or more (extreme pluralism); and according to the ideological distance separating the extreme parties in the system, which would either be small ("moderate") or large ("polarized"). The two criteria were not wholly independent, however, in that Sartori also argued that the format of the system, that is, the number of parties, contained mechanical predispositions (i.e., it could affect the degree of polarization), such that extreme pluralism could lead to polarization. The combination of both criteria then yielded three principal types of party system—two-party systems, characterized by an evidently limited format and a small ideological distance (e.g., the United Kingdom); moderate pluralism, characterized by limited pluralism and a relatively small ideological distance (e.g., Denmark); and, which was the most important for the typology, polarized pluralism, characterized by extreme pluralism and a large ideological distance (e.g., Italy in the 1960s and 1970s, and Chile prior to the 1973 coup). In addition, Sartori also allowed for the existence of a "predominant-party system," a system in which one particular party, such as, most notably, Congress in India or the Liberal Democrats in Japan, consistently (i.e., over at least four legislatures) won a majority of parliamentary seats. Although this is a useful category, it nevertheless fits rather uneasily into Sartori's framework, because it is defined by wholly different, ad hoc, criteria, such that a predominant-party system can by definition coexist with every possible category of party numbers (i.e., it can develop within a context of a formerly two-party system, a system of limited pluralism, and a system of extreme pluralism) and, at least theoretically, with every possible spread of the ideological distance.

There are a number of reasons why Sartori's typology can be regarded as the most important of those briefly reviewed here. In the first place, it is the most comprehensive of all the available typologies, in terms of the care with which it is developed, as well as in terms of the way in which it is applied to empirical cases. Second, notwithstanding the continued appeal of the simple two-party/multiparty distinction, it has subsequently been employed in a variety of sophisticated national and cross-national studies, yielding a degree of insight into the functioning of party systems that is simply incomparably better than that developed by any of the alternative typologies (e.g., Bartolini 1984; Bille 1990). Third, as noted, it is explicitly concerned with patterns of competition and with the interactions between parties, and in this sense it is much more directly concerned with the functioning of the party system itself.
Finally, it underlines the influence exerted by systemic properties, and by the party system, on electoral behavior and electoral outcomes. Unlike any of the other typologies, it therefore allows the party system to operate as an independent variable, constraining or even directing electoral preferences. This last aspect is particularly important in this context, and I will return to it at a later stage.

At the same time, however, and almost 20 years after the publication of Sartori’s seminal volume, questions can be raised regarding the continued utility and discriminating capacity of the typology, not least because of what is now a potential overcrowding in the “moderate pluralism” category and a virtual emptying of the alternative types. For example, and this criticism can also be leveled against the traditional Duverger classification, it is now relatively difficult to find an unequivocal example of a real two-party system. The United States, which is often cited as a classic two-party model, might better be described as a “four-party” system, in which a presidential two-party system coexists with a separate congressional two-party system, or even as having 50 two-party systems, each functioning separately in each of the 50 states (e.g., Katz and Kolodny 1994). New Zealand, which also offered a classic example of two-partyism, is currently experiencing a strong pressure toward fragmentation, which is likely to be even further accentuated by the recent adoption of a proportional electoral formula. The United Kingdom, which was also always seen as the paramount case of a two-party system, currently, albeit perhaps temporarily, fulfills Sartori’s conditions for a predominant-party system. Against this, of course, it might be argued that a number of the Latin American systems, and particularly Costa Rica and Venezuela, are now moving more closely toward a two-party model, which could restore the relevance of the category as a whole.

At the other extreme, and particularly given the recent decline and/or eclipse of traditional Communist parties, it has also become difficult to find an unambiguous example of polarized pluralism. Sartori’s criteria for this latter system had been very carefully elaborated (1976, 131-73), but depended crucially on there being a “maximum spread of [ideological] opinion” (1976, 135), bilateral oppositions (1976, 134), and hence, necessarily so, on there being a relevant antisystem party, a party that “undermines the legitimacy of the regime it opposes” (1976, 133), at each end of the political spectrum. It follows from this that should either of these antisystem alternatives become irrelevant or disappear, there would then occur an inevitable attenuation of
the spread of opinion and thus a reduction in the degree of polarization, so
forcing the case out of the category. This is now certainly the case in France,
for example, where the fading antisystem party of the left, the PCF, was
sufficiently legitimated to be admitted to government office in 1981, and in
Italy, where the PCI divided into the unequivocally moderate PDS and the
smaller, more radical but certainly no longer antisystem alternative of the RC.
In addition, with the advent of the AD-MSI to office in the Berlusconi
government of 1994, Italy can also be seen to have shed its antisystem
alternative of the right. This is not to suggest that antisystem oppositions have
everywhere ceased to exist; on the contrary, despite the eclipse of the tradi-
tional antisystem parties of the Communist and Fascist variety, a number of
European party systems are now confronted with the rise of new parties,
particularly on the right, which might well be seen as antisystem in orienta-
tion, such as the National Front in France, the Flemish Block in Belgium, and
possibly also the now-transformed Liberal party in Austria (Betz 1994; Ignazi
1992, 1994; Mudde 1995). But even if these parties do reflect an extreme of
opinion on the right-wing side of the political spectrum, they tend not to be
counter-balanced by an equivalent antisystem extreme on the left, and hence,
by definition, the poles are no longer "two poles apart" (Sartori 1976, 135).
In short, if two-party systems in a strict sense are hard to find, and if examples
of polarized pluralism are also thin on the ground, then, perforce, most
systems tend to crowd into the category of moderate pluralism, which clearly
reduces the discriminating power of the typology.

Party Systems and
the Structure of Competition

That said, Sartori's approach remains particularly useful and important in
that unlike the alternative approaches, it helps to focus attention directly on
what is perhaps the most important aspect of party systems, and on what
distinguishes most clearly between different party systems: the structure of
interparty competition and, especially, the competition for government. To be
sure, it might be argued that this is in fact the core variable underlying each
of the other established classifications of party systems. Duverger's (1954)
classic distinction between two-party systems and multiparty systems, for
example, is ostensibly based on the numbers of parties in competition, but it
can also be seen as differentiating systems in which two major parties compete with one another over the question of which will form a (single-party) government from those in which government usually involves some form of shifting coalition. In a similar vein, Rokkan’s (1968) distinction between the British-German type (“1 vs. 1 + 1”), the Scandinavian type (“1 vs. 3-4”), and the even multiparty type (“1 vs. 1 vs. 1 + 2-3”), although ostensibly “purely numerical,” is really an attempt to tap into the different patterns of coalition formation. But although some notion of the competition for government may well have informed these earlier classifications, they certainly did not confront the issue directly. Indeed, among alternative approaches, it is really only Dahl’s (1966) distinctions that come anywhere close to addressing the question of government formation as a key defining feature, even though this is secondary to the more central question of identifying differences in party strategies in different competitive arenas.

Building from Sartori, then, how might differential patterns in the competition for government be understood? Three related factors are relevant here. First, there is the question of the prevailing pattern of alternation in government in any given party system, and the extent to which this is either wholesale, partial, or even nonexistent. Second, there is the question of the stability or consistency of the governing alternatives, and the extent to which innovative formulas are adopted. Finally, there is the simple question of who governs, and the extent to which access to government is either open to a wide range of diverse parties or limited to a smaller subset of parties. Let us now look at each of these factors in turn.

*Alternation in Government*

There are three conceivable patterns of alternation that can be considered here. The first and most obvious pattern might be termed *wholesale alternation*, in which a set of incumbents is wholly displaced by a former opposition. In other words, all of the parties in government at time \( t \) are removed from office and are replaced at time \( t + 1 \) by a new government made up of a party or coalition of parties that were previously in opposition. The British case offers the most obvious example of such wholesale alternation, with a single-party Labour government being replaced by a single-party Conservative government, or vice versa. A similar pattern has been evident in New Zealand, with the alternation between Labour and the National party. But although the
classic two-party model offers the most obvious examples of wholesale alternation, the pattern can also be seen in more fragmented systems. In Norway, for example, wholesale alternation has regularly ensued on the basis of shifts between a single-party Labour government, on the one hand, and a multiparty bourgeois coalition, on the other, reflecting a pattern of competition similar to that which developed in Costa Rica in the 1960s and 1970s. More unusually, the recent French experience has witnessed wholesale alternation between competing coalitions, with the Socialists and various left-wing allies, including the PCF, alternating with a coalition of the RPR and UDF. This latter case is quite exceptional, however, in that even in fragmented systems, as was the case over extended periods of time in Ireland, Norway, and Sweden, and as was also the case in Japan in 1993, wholesale alternation usually involves at least one single-party alternative.

The second pattern, which is more common in fragmented systems, is partial alternation, in which a newly incumbent government includes at least one party that also formed part of the previous government. Germany provides the most obvious example here, in that all of the governments that have held office since 1969 have included the small FDP as a junior coalition partner, with the role of senior partner alternating sporadically between the SPD and the CDU-CSU. The Dutch system also approximates this pattern, with the CDA and, prior to 1977, the KVP tending to persist in office, albeit with alternating coalition partners. Indeed, the major contrast between the German and Dutch patterns of alternation is simply that in the Dutch case, it has tended to be the biggest party that has remained in government, whereas it is usually the smaller party in the German case. Similar enduring patterns of partial alternation, albeit without involving such pronounced long-term continuity of one particular partner in office, can be seen in Belgium, Finland, and Luxembourg. However, the most striking example of partial alternation was that provided by the Italian case throughout most of the postwar period, with the DC holding office continually from 1946 to 1994, occasionally as a minority single-party government, and more often as the senior partner in a relatively variable multiparty coalition. In this sense, the Italian case also approximates to that of the Netherlands, the major difference being that prior to 1977, the core KVP was more often than not in a minority within the governing coalition, as was also the case with the CDA in 1981-1982.

The third pattern also borders closely on the Italian experience and is marked by a complete absence of alternation, or by nonalternation, in which
the same party or parties remains in exclusive control of government over an extended period of time, being displaced neither wholly nor partially. Switzerland offers the clearest example of nonalternation over time, with the same four-party coalition holding office since 1959. A similar pattern of nonalternation clearly also characterizes what Sartori defined as predominant-party systems, as in the case of Japan from 1955 to 1993, with the Liberal Democrats holding office almost consistently alone over this 40-year period; in India, where the Congress party held continuous office until its first defeat in 1977; and in Mexico, where the PRI has held the dominant position since the 1920s.

_Innovation and Familiarity_

Party systems differ not only in their patterns of alternation but also in the degree to which the alternative governing formulas (i.e., the combinations of parties in government) are either familiar or innovative (see also Franklin and Mackie 1983). In the British case, for example, familiarity is everything, and no new governing formula has been experimented with since the broad coalition that held office during World War II. The formulas were also familiar and hence very predictable over a long period in the Irish case, with governments being made up of either Fianna Fáil, on the one hand, or a coalition of all the remaining parties, on the other, as well as in Germany, which has experimented with no new formula since the advent to office for the first time of the SPD-FDP coalition in 1969. Notwithstanding the German case, however, it is in systems of partial alternation that the greatest scope exists for innovation. In Italy, for example, despite the long-term dominance of the DC, there has been frequent experimentation with new coalition alliances. In the Netherlands, despite the continuity in office of the KVP and, later, the CDA, innovation has also been particularly marked, with differing and novel combinations of parties succeeding one another in office with remarkable frequency. It is important to note here that although innovative formulas are obviously involved when the party or parties concerned have never previously held office, they can also be deemed to occur even when the parties have governed before but never in that particular alliance. In the Irish case, for example, the first ever coalition between Fianna Fáil and Labour, which took office in 1993, can be defined as innovative, even though each of the parties involved had already had long experiences of government; similarly, both the ÖVP and SPÖ single-party governments in Austria (taking office for the first
time in 1966 and 1970, respectively) can be treated as innovative, despite the fact that both parties had previously governed together in coalition.

Which Parties Govern?

The third factor involved here concerns the range of parties that gain access to government. Although not all possible parties can be expected to win a share of office, even with frequent alternation, party systems can nevertheless be distinguished in terms of the degree to which access to office is widely or narrowly dispersed. In other words, party systems can be distinguished in terms of whether all relevant parties eventually cross the threshold of government, as is more or less the case in the Netherlands, for example, or whether governing remains the privilege of just a limited subset of parties, as was the case in postwar Italy. Knowing the range of parties with access to office therefore allows us to distinguish between these latter cases, which otherwise tend to coincide in terms of both of the other criteria indicated above. That is, although both the Netherlands and Italy are similar in the sense of their pattern of partial alternation, in terms of the longevity in office of a core center party, and in terms of their resort to innovative formulas, they are nevertheless strikingly dissimilar when it comes to the range of parties gaining access to office. This particular distinction may also be related to what Sartori defines as polarized pluralism, which, as noted above, required the presence of antisytem parties at each end of the political spectrum, such parties being defined in part as those that were out of competition for government, thus forcing governments to be formed across the span of the center. Here, also, the concern is with whether certain parties are excluded as unacceptable partners in office. Where this criterion differs from that used in the definition of polarized pluralism, however, is that the question of whether such parties are genuinely and objectively antisytem, which has always been a point of dispute in the interpretations and criticisms of Sartori's model, becomes irrelevant. Rather, what matters is whether there are parties that are treated, in practice, as "outsiders" and that are regarded by the other parties in the system as unacceptable allies. In this sense, "antisystemness," like beauty, here lies in the eyes of the beholder. It is difficult, for example, to determine whether the Danish Progress party is genuinely antisytem; on the other hand, it is relatively easy to see that this party has been regarded by its potential allies as an outsider and, up to now, has always languished in opposition (unlike, say, the more ostensibly antisytem PCF in France).
Closed or Open?

The combination of these three criteria yields a fairly broad-brush distinction between two contrasting patterns in the structure of party competition (see Table 3.2). On the one hand, the structure of party competition can be relatively closed, and hence highly predictable, with little or no change over time in the range of governing alternatives or in the pattern of alternation, and with new parties and/or outsider parties finding it virtually impossible to break through the threshold of government. The British and New Zealand cases have afforded perhaps the best examples of such closed systems, with each being persistently characterized by wholesale alternation, by a complete absence of innovative formulae, and by the presence of just two governing, and governable, parties. On the other hand, the structure of party competition can prove relatively open, and hence quite unpredictable, with differing patterns of alternation, with frequent shifts in the make-up of the governing alternatives, and with new parties gaining relatively easy access to office. The postwar Dutch pattern comes quite close to this form, in that new parties have been relatively easily incorporated into government (such as DS 70 in 1971 and D 66 and the PPR in 1973) and in that innovative formulas have been adopted in almost half of the new governments formed since 1951. Where the Dutch system deviates from a wholly open pattern, however, is in the long-term presence in government of the KVP and, later, the CDA, and in the fact that alternation has always been partial. In this sense, at least prior to 1993 when the first ever “secular” government was formed, there was always a certain element of predictability involved, and to this extent the structure of competition was at least partially closed. Denmark in the postwar period also comes quite close to an open pattern, having experiences of both partial and wholesale alternation, having frequently adopted innovative formulas (almost one-third of all postwar governments), and having also proved to be relatively open to new parties, such as in 1982, when the Center Democrats and the Christian People’s party were first admitted to government. On the other hand, even Denmark can be seen as partially closed and somewhat predictable as a result of the persistent exclusion from office of the Progress party and the Socialist People’s party.

These examples also underline the extent to which the development of a closed structure of competition owes much to the strategies of the established parties, and in particular, their unwillingness to experiment with innovative formulas and their reluctance to admit new parties into government (Franklin
TABLE 3.2 Structure of Party Competition and the Pattern of Alternation in Government

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Structure of Competition Is</th>
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<td>Pattern of alternation in government</td>
<td>Wholesale alternation or nonalternation</td>
<td>Partial alternation</td>
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<td>Types of governing formulas</td>
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<td>Netherlands</td>
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<td></td>
<td>New Zealand, to mid-1990s</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Japan, 1955-1993</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ireland, 1948-1989</td>
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and Mackie 1983). In some instances, of course, the parties may feel themselves genuinely constrained in this respect, in that any new governing options might require the bridging of what are believed to be ineluctable divides in policy and/or ideology. The structure of competition may therefore be very predictable, and hence closed, as a result of the distances that separate the relevant parties along any one of a variety of different dimensions of competition. Such arguments might well have been used by Christian Democratic leaders in Italy, for example, to justify the persistent exclusion of the Communist party from office, and might equally be cited by a number of different party leaderships in Denmark to justify the persistent exclusion of the Progress party. In other instances, however, it is obvious that the maintenance of familiar and closed patterns of competition simply constitutes a strategy of self-preservation on the part of the established parties. In Ireland, for example, the long-term refusal of the dominant Fianna Fáil party to even consider entering a coalition, a refusal that contributed substantially to the closure of competition in Ireland (see below), was clearly designed to maintain its status as the only party capable of offering single-party government and was thus intended to maintain its electoral credibility. A similar sense of self-preservation can be seen to characterize the long-term reluctance of the two major British parties to consider the possibilities of coalition with the smaller Liberal party, even though Labour did come strikingly close to such a path-breaking option
during the Lib-Lab Pact in the late 1970s. To be sure, there are real limits on the capacity, and willingness, of the established parties to maintain a closed structure of competition. New parties might emerge that have to be taken on board, particular party leaders may have their own agendas and priorities, external crises might develop that force the adoption of new strategies, and so on; nonetheless, any explanation of the degree of closure of any given structure of competition must necessarily focus particular attention on the strategies of the parties themselves.

Closed structures of competition are also clearly characteristic of traditional two-party systems as well as, of course, of those systems that have experienced a real absence of alternation over time, such as Japan, the Stormont regime in Northern Ireland, Mexico, Singapore, or Switzerland. Conversely, openness, and a lack of predictability, tend to characterize more fragmented systems that experience partial alternation, and especially where there is no large, core party of government. Moreover, because closure necessarily requires the development of stable norms and conventions in the patterns of competition and in the processes of government formation, it is also clearly a function of time and, most crucially, is not something that can be seen to characterize newly emerging party “systems.”

Indeed, what is most striking about new party systems, such as those that are currently emerging in post-Communist Europe, for example, is precisely their lack of closure and hence their lack of systemness, with systemness here understood to be the set of “patterned interactions” (Sartori 1976, 43, emphasis added) between the parties. Not only is the format of these new systems highly unstable, in that the parties as organizations are often inchoate and loosely constructed, but so too are the modes of competition and the nature of cross-party alliances and coalitions, a feature that also continues to characterize even many of the older party systems of Latin America. Seen from this perspective, the long-term process by which party systems may eventually become consolidated can also be seen as a long-term process by which the structure of competition becomes increasingly closed and predictable. Thus, although a more closed and predictable structure might well develop in a number of the post-Communist democracies in the next decade or so, this will, by definition, necessarily involve a relatively lengthy process. Just such a long-term process of structural consolidation might now be seen to be reaching fruition in the relatively recently democratized Portuguese and Spanish systems, as well as in some of the Latin American systems, with perhaps the most notable examples being seen in the drift toward two-partyism in Costa Rica.
Party Systems and Electoral Outcomes

The degree of closure therefore varies, being least pronounced in newly emerging party systems and being most pronounced in established systems in which there is little or no innovation in the processes of government formation and in which new parties rarely if ever break through the governing threshold. What is also important about this notion is that it immediately allows us to move away from the conventional idea that party system change is largely, if not exclusively, a function of, or even a synonym for, electoral change, and it affords a conception of changes in party systems that may owe their origin to other factors. For although party system stability/change and electoral stability/change may certainly be related to one another, they are nevertheless far from being mutually equivalent. Electoral alignments might shift, for example, even in quite a dramatic way, without necessarily impinging significantly on the structure of competition, and hence without necessarily altering the character of the party system itself. Conversely, the structure of party competition and hence the nature of the party system itself might suddenly be transformed, even without any significant prior electoral flux.

In Denmark, for example, the 1973 election witnessed one of the most substantial electoral shifts to have ever occurred in postwar Europe, resulting in an immediate doubling of the number of parties represented in Parliament. Prior to 1973, a total of five parties had been represented in the Danish Folketing, together accounting for some 93 percent of the total vote. As a result of the 1973 election, five new parties won representation, and the total vote won by the previously represented parties fell to less than 65 percent. This was a massive shift by any standards, and because the new entrants to the Parliament included both the long-established Communist party as well as the newly formed right-wing Progress party, it also resulted in a major increase in the level of polarization. In practice, however, it is certainly possible to question whether this change had any real systemic effect. To be sure, a new
government had to be formed, which in fact was a minority, single-party Liberal government, the first such to take office since 1945. On the other hand, this novel government was then succeeded by a Social Democratic minority government, which was precisely the same form of government that had held office prior to the 1973 earthquake election, and then eventually by a center-right coalition, which was differently composed but otherwise essentially similar to the various other center-right coalitions that had governed Denmark in the early 1950s and late 1960s. To be sure, the increased fragmentation and the greater degree of polarization made governing more difficult after 1973—for a long time, no government won majority status in Parliament (although such a status had also been quite exceptional even prior to 1973), governments tended to collapse more frequently than before, and there was now a greater resort to elections, although this had also been not uncommon prior to 1973; moreover, as noted above, new parties had eventually to be accommodated into government, although the Progress party has not yet been accorded that privilege. But the question still remains as to whether this massive shift in electoral preferences has had any real effect whatsoever on the structure of party competition and on the party system itself. Denmark is now, but always has been, quite innovative in terms of governing formulas; it is now, and always has been, reasonably open to new parties coming into government; and now, as before, it experiences both wholesale and partial alternation in government on a regular basis. It had once, and still maintains, a relatively open structure of competition and hence a relatively unconstrained party system, and, in these terms at least, 1973 does not appear to have made any significant difference.\textsuperscript{12} The Italian case in 1994 might also offer a useful example, even though uncertainty still remains as to whether a genuine transformation of the party system is under way.\textsuperscript{13} On the face of it, there is no other established Western party system that has undergone such a profound change. At the electoral level, for example, following decades of relative stability, the 1994 contest resulted in a level of volatility of some 37.2 percent, which is not only the highest figure recorded in Italian history but, even more strikingly, is substantially higher than that recorded in almost any election held in Western Europe between 1885 and 1989.\textsuperscript{14} In terms of format, the system has also been totally transformed, with the emergence of new parties and the reconstitution of established parties leading to a situation in which virtually none of the parties currently represented in the new 1994 Parliament was represented under the same name or in the same form as recently as 1987. Finally, it can also be
argued that there has also been a major change in the level of polarization, as a result of the transformation of the PCI into the PDS, on the one hand, and the transformation of the MSI into the AN and their incorporation into government, on the other, which, at least in Sartori's sense of the term, leaves Italy now with no relevant "antisystem" party. These are certainly profound changes. The most relevant question, however, is whether these changes will have any long-term effect on the structure of competition. The structure of competition in the old party system was certainly clear. Governments were formed from out of the center, were dominated by the DC, and involved shifting alliances with partial alternation across the center-left and center-right while excluding both the extreme left (PCI) and extreme right (MSI). Any fundamental change in this pattern would now require governments to be formed almost exclusively from the left or right (creating the potential for wholesale alternation), would require the incorporation (or disappearance) of the extremes, and, in this new bipolar world, would marginalize the independent position of the center. With the formation of the right-wing Berlusconi government in 1994, it certainly seemed possible that just such a pattern might emerge. Perhaps ironically, however, it quickly became clear that the new alliance was unable to maintain either its coherence or its majority and that any consolidation of its position would require the approval and incorporation of the now-reduced center, as represented by the successor to the DC, the PPI. At the same time, the PPI itself was divided, being particularly reluctant to share power with the old extreme right, the AN, and with some sections preferring to incorporate, or ally with, the new center-left, as represented by the PDS. As of now, of course, it is too soon to suggest what future patterns or alignments might yet emerge, and in this sense the structure of competition might be regarded as quite open and unpredictable, which, at least in the short term, does represent a fundamental change. Moreover, should the center split into left and right, as currently appears to be the pattern, then a wholly new bipolar structure might develop, and this would certainly transform the Italian party system. But should an independent center reconstitute itself, and should it prove capable of taking full advantage of its pivotal position by playing left against right in a way that would allow it to construct a broad alliance across the center, then, despite the different actors and their different weights in the system, it might well re-create more or less the same structure of competition as had prevailed prior to the 1990s (Bartolini and D'Alimonte 1995). As in Denmark, therefore, but more markedly so, massive shifts at the level of the electorate and at the level of the format of the party system could yet end up
in a party system that reflected more continuity than change. The possibility certainly exists.

Question marks also hang over the real extent of change in the Canadian party system, notwithstanding the electoral earthquake of 1993. In this case, as in Italy, the level of volatility rose to an unprecedented high of 42 percent, almost five times that of the average level of volatility recorded in the 1970s and 1980s. The consequences were also very far reaching, with the once powerful Conservative party being reduced to just 16 percent of the vote (its lowest share since 1949) and, even more strikingly, to just 2 seats (as against 169 in the previous election), and with two new parties, the Reform party and Bloc Québécois, winning substantial representation in Parliament, the first parties outside the mainstream to do so since the effective demise of Social Credit in the mid-1970s. Moreover, precisely because these two new parties are so evidently regional in character, they may also signal a potentially enduring shift in electoral alignments. This is substantial change by any standard. At the same time, however, there is also one striking continuity, in that the Liberal party, the traditional opponent of, and alternative to, the Conservatives, is now back in government with a powerful majority, and thus at least for now, and in terms of the patterns of alternation, the degree of innovation, and the extent of access to government of new parties, Canada remains as it has been for decades. At one level, the system has certainly changed: The Liberals now confront two major opposition parties instead of just one, and a regional divide has now erupted onto the federal stage in a manner that clearly damages Canada's prospects of maintaining its familiar, British style pattern of wholesale alternation in the future. Nevertheless, and much as in the Italian case, it is precisely because this potential for change still remains to be realized that it is as yet impossible to speak of any fundamental transformation in the structure of competition.

Finally, the Irish case offers a completely contrasting example (Mair 1987, 1993). Lacking a strong cleavage structure, and being characterized by quite marked institutional continuity, the party system had been stabilized largely by a very rigid structure of competition, in which the governments taking office for most of the postwar period were formed by either Fianna Fáil, on the one hand, or by a sometimes motley coalition of Fianna Fáil's opponents (principally Fine Gael and the Labour party), on the other. Indeed, in the more recent period, these alternatives also replaced one another in office with remarkable regularity, with each election from 1973 to 1987 resulting in a wholesale alternation in office. This enduring structure of competition had
two principal effects. In the first place, it provided Fianna Fáil with one of the major foundations for its appeal, in that the party reaped a major electoral advantage from the fact that it was the only party that had the potential to provide single-party government, and for this reason, for example, it deliberately and very publicly eschewed the idea of coalescing with any other party, preferring to go into opposition on those occasions when it could not command a working majority. Second, this structure of competition helped to prevent Labour, the third party in the system, from mobilizing any independent and potentially realigning strategy. Indeed, the party was almost perpetually constrained by the choice of either languishing in opposition, or, regardless of the policy problems involved, joining with Fine Gael as the junior partner in a non-Fianna Fáil coalition. No other option was available. In 1989, however, all of this changed when for a variety of reasons, including the short-term ambition of the then party leader, Fianna Fáil performed an about-face and decided to enter coalition with a recently formed, right-wing liberal party, the Progressive Democrats (Laver and Arkins 1990). Four years later, following the collapse of that first experiment, the party formed a new coalition, this time with the Labour party. The result of both decisions was an effective transformation of the party system, with Fianna Fáil’s coalition with the Progressive Democrats effectively undermining the foundations on which the postwar party system had been structured, and with its coalition with Labour then more or less destroying those old foundations in their entirety. Prior to 1989, the Irish party system had been structured around a bipolar pattern of competition—Fianna Fáil versus the rest. In entering coalition with a new, and ostensibly nonaligned party, Fianna Fáil had damaged the integrity of the first of those two poles. Later, by entering coalition with one of its traditional opponents, with one of “the rest,” it forced the second pole to collapse. There was, in short, nothing that remained of the old order. But what is perhaps the most striking feature of this transformation was the fact that at least initially, and in contrast to the Danish, Italian, and Canadian cases, it occurred in a context on relatively little electoral change. The level of volatility in the 1989 election was just 7.8, which was below the postwar average in Ireland (Mair 1993, 164), with most of this being accounted for by the sharp drop in support for the Progressive Democrats since their first successful outing in 1987. Elsewhere in the system, and among the established parties, support for Fianna Fáil rose from 44.1 to 44.2 percent, support for Fine Gael rose from 27.1 to 29.3 percent, and support for Labour rose from 6.4 to 9.5 percent. Substantial
electoral continuities therefore accompanied what was clearly to become a fundamental transformation of the party system.

What we see here, then, are one instance in which substantial electoral change does not appear to have led to significant party system change (Denmark); one instance in which there has been a major change in the party system change notwithstanding prior electoral stability (Ireland); and two instances in which, despite extraordinary electoral flux, question marks still remain as to whether a new type of party system might develop (Italy and Canada). Each of these instances therefore underlines the need to separate out the notion of party system stability/change, on the one hand, and electoral stability/change, on the other.

Not only that, however, for what may be most interesting about the separation of these two processes, and about the recognition that change in party systems may be due to factors other than electoral change—factors such as changes in elite behavior, in party strategy, in the patterns of competition, or whatever—is that it also allows us to reverse the conventional chain of influence and to probe the extent to which party system stability (or change) may itself lead to electoral stability (or change), rather than simply the other way around.

Electoral alignments are, of course, stabilized by a variety of factors, of which the cleavage structure is perhaps the most important (Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Bartolini and Mair 1990). At the same time, however, the long-term stabilization of electorates should not be seen simply as a function of the ties that bind distinct social groups (Catholics, workers, farmers, etc.) to parties or to blocs of parties. To be sure, social structure has certainly proved to be an important stabilizing element, especially in countries with strong social cleavages or subcultures, such as Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden. But if social structure were the only freezing agent, then we would certainly have witnessed much greater change in European electoral alignments in the 1970s and 1980s than has actually been the case. The fact is that many of the old traditional parties in Europe remain alive and kicking despite the widespread weakening of religious and class identities, and despite the long-term processes of individualization.

There are in fact a variety of factors involved here, with party systems and electoral alignments being also frozen by the constraints imposed by institutional structures such as the electoral system, and by the organizational efforts of the parties themselves (Bartolini and Mair 1990). What is most relevant in this context, however, is that one additional freezing agent may well be the
constraints imposed by the structure of party competition and by its relationship to processes of government formation. A closed structure of competition clearly constrains voter preferences, in that it limits the choice of governing options in a way that is similar to the limits on the choice of parties in nonfragmented systems. A closed structure of competition therefore also clearly enhances party system stability and, indeed, helps to ensure that party systems generate their own momentum and thus freeze into place. In short, the stabilization of party systems is at least partly a function of the consolidation of a given structure of competition.

What this also implies, of course, and perhaps most interestingly, is that a change in that structure may then act to destabilize the party system. In Italy, for example, the basis for a wholesale change in electoral preferences in 1992 and 1994 was at least partially laid by the legitimation of the PDS, which undermined the terms of reference by which Italian party competition had been structured since the late 1940s. Italian voters, as well as the Italian parties themselves, had long been constrained by the belief that there was no alternative to a Christian Democratic-dominated government. And once such an alternative finally did emerge through the transformation of the unacceptable PCI into the highly acceptable PDS, this particular anchor was cut loose, and voters began to shift in relatively great numbers. In Ireland also, following decades in which there had been no major changes in the electoral balance of the party system, the long-term basis for stability was finally undermined in 1989 when the dominant party, Fianna Fáil, decided for the first time ever to enter a coalition with another party. Prior to then, as noted above, party competition had been structured around the opposition between Fianna Fáil, on the one side, and all of the smaller parties, on the other, and this had severely constrained and stabilized voter preferences. From 1989 onward, however, when these constraints were removed, the potential for change was greatly enhanced, and hence although the level of volatility prior to Fianna Fáil’s first coalition was relatively muted, the subsequent election witnessed a major upsurge in volatility that resulted in a doubling of the Labour vote to the highest level ever recorded—the result, quite simply, of the removal of what had been up to then the most powerful constraint on electoral mobility.

This is perhaps a roundabout way of saying that the structure of competition, and the structure of competition for government in particular, may impose a major constraint on voter choice and hence may act to stabilize electoral alignments. In this sense, voters are not simply expressing preferences for individual parties; rather, albeit not always to the same degree in
different party systems, and this in itself is an important source of cross-national (and cross-institutional) variance, they are also expressing preferences for potential governments. And in much the same way that a shift in the range of parties on offer can act to undermine established preferences, 17 so too can a shift in the range of governing options, and hence a shift in the structure of competition, act to undermine established preferences and promote instability.

Just such a process might now be seen to be developing in many of the established party systems in Western Europe, in that the evidence suggests that we are now witnessing a major shift in the traditional patterns of government formation (Mair, 1995). There are two trends that are relevant here, each of which suggests that formerly closed structures of competition might now begin to open and hence might well promote greater electoral uncertainty in the future. In the first place, the past two decades have seen the opening up of government to an increasingly wide range of political parties. In other words, we have seen almost every established and substantial party in Western Europe winning at least one period in government, with the result that governing, even if only sporadically, is an increasingly standard experience for most parties. There remain nongoverning exceptions, of course, which include, first, the so-called new politics parties of the left, the Greens and the new left, most of which have gained access to office, if at all, only at the subnational level; second, the parties of the extreme right, many of which have begun to flourish in a number of Western democracies only in the past decade, and almost all of which have been excluded from government; and third, the “die-hard” opposition parties—the Italian PCI, which now no longer exists but has been transformed into the eminently coalitional PDS (which actually joined a coalition government for one day in April 1993), and the British Liberal party, which although substantial in terms of electoral strength is nevertheless marginal in parliamentary terms. These few and relatively marginal exceptions apart, however, the opening up of government to more and more parties clearly has significant implications for the structures of competition in these established party systems.

Second, a related impression of developments at the level of government suggests that party systems are increasingly characterized by a gradual broadening of the range of coalition alternatives. In Germany, for example, all possible two-party coalitions between the three main parties have proved possible both in principle and in practice; in the Netherlands, each of the four main parties has by now coalesced with each of the others at various stages during the past 10 years; in Ireland, Labour has now had recent experience of
joining governments with both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, whereas both Labour and Fine Gael have most recently been joined in coalition by the Democratic left; in Austria in the past 10 years the SPÖ has formed governments with both the FPÖ and the ÖVP; in Belgium, the Socialists, Liberals, and Christians have all recently worked with one another, and also, on occasion, with the Volksunie and the Rassemblement Walloon; even in Sweden, where a sharp two-bloc structure of competition has existed since the late 1950s, the run-up to the 1994 election witnessed a lengthy discussion of a possible coalition between the Social Democrats and the Liberals. The sense, therefore, is one of growing promiscuity in the process of coalition formation, which is also likely to affect structures of competition within party systems.

Should these trends continue, then, it is certainly possible that we might yet witness the progressive destruction of traditional patterns of party competition, with formerly closed patterns increasingly giving way to a style that is at once more open and less predictable, a development that has already become apparent in the 1990s in both Ireland and Italy. The result is likely to be the removal of one major constraint on voter choice and the potential, at least, for a significant destabilization of established electoral alignments. Other constraints on electoral mobility still remain, of course, including both institutional inertia and the cleavage structure itself, but should this particular anchor now begin to shift, and should structures of competition begin to open up, then, it will certainly enhance the scope of uncertainty.

Notes

1. For an overview of some recent cross-national studies in the field, and in addition to the various comparative and national studies that are cited elsewhere in this chapter, see, for example, Gallagher, Laver, and Mair (1995), Lawson and Merkl (1988), Mair and Smith (1990), Randall (1988), Ware (1987, 1996), and Wolinetz (1988).

2. See, for example, Almond, Powell, and Mundell (1993, 117-20), where this traditional distinction is recast as one of "majoritarian" versus multiparty systems; see also the influential study by Lijphart (1984) where one of the key distinctions between majoritarian and consensus democracies is defined as that between a two-party system and a multiparty system.

3. The approaches reviewed here are also summarized in the chapters included in Mair (1990, 285-349).


5. The exception would be those systems that might be categorized as predominant-party systems, which, as noted above, do not easily fit into the criteria adopted for the typology as a whole.

6. In 1994, for the first time since the advent of full democracy, a government was formed in the Netherlands without the CDA/religious mainstream.
7. It is in this sense that closure also involves what Schattschneider (1960, 69, and passim) has termed the mobilization of bias, with the emphasis on particular conflicts and on distinct alternatives acting to preserve the interests of the various protagonists.

8. See Sartori (1994, 37): "When the electorate takes for granted a given set of political routes and alternatives very much as drivers take for granted a given system of highways, then a party system has reached the stage of structural consolidation qua system."

9. See Sartori (1994, 181, fn. 7); the lack of structuring is also reflected in the persistently high levels of electoral volatility that are strikingly and substantially higher than those occurring in the relatively structured West European systems (Coppedge 1992).

10. As noted, it is also probably least pronounced in the legislative electoral arena in presidential systems, notwithstanding any strong structuring that might be evident in the presidential electoral arena in these same systems.

11. See, for example, Rose and Urwin (1970), whose analysis of persistence and change "in party systems" was almost exclusively devoted to an analysis of persistence and change in patterns of electoral support. For an earlier discussion of this problem, see Mair (1989, 271-3).


14. The index of volatility measures the net aggregate shift in votes from one election to the next and is the equivalent of the total aggregate gains of all winning parties or the total aggregate losses of all losing parties (see Pedersen 1983). The average volatility in postwar Europe has been less than 9 percent, and apart from the 1994 election in Italy, only four other European elections in the past century have exceeded 35 percent: Germany in 1919 (47.5 percent), France in 1945 (36.4 percent), and Greece in 1950 (47.0 percent) and 1951 (45.1 percent)—see Bartolini and D'Alimonte (1995, 443-4); on electoral stability in Europe more generally, see Bartolini and Mair (1990).

15. For analyses of recent developments in the Canadian party system, see Bakvis (1988, 1991), Curti (1994), and MacIvor (1995).

16. This argument therefore echoes that by Bakvis (1988, 263), who seeks to explain the Canadian paradox of party system stability in the context of weakly anchored electoral alignments by pointing to the existence of "a more generalized loyalty to the party system as a whole." A similar argument might also be advanced for Ireland (see above), and perhaps even for the United States.

17. Note, for example, the strong relationship between the number of parties in competition, on the one hand, and the degree of electoral volatility, on the other (see Pedersen 1983, 48-55; Bartolini and Mair 1990, 130-45).