


ARTICLE

# How Do Mainstream Parties ‘Become’ Mainstream, and Pariah Parties ‘Become’ Pariahs? Conceptualizing the Processes of Mainstreaming and Pariahing in the Labelling of Political Parties

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## Abstract

How does a political party become ‘mainstream’? And what makes some parties receive arguably the opposite designation – ‘pariah party’? This conceptual article examines the processes by which parties’ mainstream or pariah status must be constructed, negotiated and policed, not only by political scientists in the pursuit of case selection, but by several actors actively involved in the political process, including media actors and political parties themselves. It explains how these actors contribute to these processes of ‘mainstreaming’ and ‘pariahing’, considers their motivations and provides illustrative examples of how such processes take place. As such, the article moves beyond the literature on the ways in which mainstream parties seek to deal with or respond to threats from a variety of pariah parties, instead paying attention to how those parties have been constructed as pariahs in the first place, and how these processes simultaneously contribute to the maintenance of mainstream party identities.

**Keywords:** political parties; mainstream parties; pariah parties; party types; media; mainstreaming

How does a political party become ‘mainstream’? And what stops other parties from receiving this designation? While the term ‘mainstream’ is constantly invoked in the media, in party politics literature and by political actors themselves, it is too often used uncritically and unproblematically. It seems that in the absence of a clear definition, we are assumed to know intuitively what a mainstream party is. Yet the boundaries between ‘mainstream’ parties and ‘non-mainstream’ parties are not automatic. They are constructed, negotiated, maintained and constantly policed, not only by political scientists pursuing concept formation and case selection, but by a series of political actors including media figures and political parties themselves.

This conceptual article seeks to illuminate the *processes* by which political parties are labelled mainstream, and in contrast, how other parties receive the label that is perhaps most explicitly opposed to the mainstream – that of ‘pariah’ (Downs 2012). Commencing from the assumptions that party labels are never fixed or stable and, indeed, are only ever ideal types (Gunther and Diamond 2003), the article critically examines existing definitions of mainstream parties and identifies the often vague and relativist criteria used to define such parties against more ‘exotic’ party types. Using the divide between mainstream parties and pariah parties as a heuristic device, it then introduces and outlines the mirror-image processes of ‘mainstreaming’ and ‘pariahing’. The first, which is somewhat familiar in the party literature, involves the process of portraying or designating a party as legitimate and/or normal, whereas the latter refers to the process by which a party is put outside the ‘region of acceptability’ (Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989) in any given party system and is portrayed as illegitimate and dangerous. The article examines the dynamics of these processes and identifies three of the central participants in such boundary-drawing practices: ostensibly ‘mainstream’ parties, parties already ascribed the pariah tag, and media actors. It explains how each of these contributes to the processes of mainstreaming and pariahing, considers their motivations for doing so, and provides illustrative empirical examples of how such processes unfold. As such, the article moves beyond the literature on the ways in which mainstream parties seek to *deal with* or *respond to* threats from a variety of parties that have been tarnished as pariahs (see e.g. Downs 2001, 2012; Minkenberg 2013; Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Van Spanje 2010, 2018; Van Spanje and Van Der Brug 2007), and instead makes an important contribution by critically investigating how pariah parties are *constructed* as such in the first place, and how these processes simultaneously contribute to the maintenance of mainstream party identities. Critically, it does not just consider such processes as occurring from within or between parties, but acknowledges the important role of media in framing parties in these ways.

There are four compelling reasons for mapping and conceptualizing the processes of mainstreaming and pariahing. First, considering these processes helps to highlight the often contingent and relativist ways by which parties are categorized. Parties only become ‘mainstream’ through specific processes: they do not emerge *sui generis* with their categorical markers intact, but must be construed, labelled and interpreted by a wide range of actors for such labels to ‘stick’. Second, paying attention to these processes reveals that the boundaries between what is ‘mainstream’ and what is a ‘pariah’ are fuzzy, permeable and dynamic. As such, we need to understand that the ‘threshold of acceptability’ (Van Spanje and Van Der Brug 2007: 1023) which divides mainstream and pariah parties from one another is not objectively identifiable, solid or constant. Rather, it is an unfolding political project in which political actors are involved, since they are heavily invested in what is perceived as ‘normal’ in any political system. Third, paying attention to these processes usefully sidesteps the Eurocentric ‘coalition potential’ criteria that, as we shall see, has been central to defining a variety of ‘non-mainstream’ parties. While such criteria make good sense in contexts with proportional representative systems where minority governments and coalitions are the norm, this does not necessarily translate to (often non-European) pluralist/majoritarian systems. Fourth, the wider view provided by reflecting on

mainstreaming and pariahing reveals that political parties are not the only players in such processes. Given the framing and agenda-setting role of the media when it comes to their coverage of political parties, it is important to see such processes not just as defined by parties determining one another's acceptability or coalitionability, but rather as processes with wider political, social and cultural influences that extend beyond the strict party landscape. Ultimately, in making this argument, this article does not seek to add new criteria to the voluminous literature on party definitions, nor to redefine what a mainstream or pariah party 'is', but rather to open up space for critical comparative research into the processes that lead to the construction and maintenance of the boundaries between these categories.

### What makes a party 'mainstream'?

While the term 'mainstream party' is a mainstay in the political science literature, clear definitions of the term are surprisingly rare. Authors are generally less interested in defining what actually constitutes a mainstream party than they are in using the term to contrast it with other, often more 'exotic', party types. In this sense, mainstream parties function as the 'norm' in binary opposition to an array of eye-catching, attention-grabbing parties. For example, whether implicitly or explicitly, parties ascribed the labels 'single-issue' (Mitra 1988; Mudde 1999), 'niche' (Adams et al. 2006; Meguid 2005; Wagner 2012), 'anti-political establishment' (Abedi 2004; Schedler 1996), 'extremist' (De Vries and Edwards 2009; Lipset and Raab 1971; Mudde 2002; Powell 1986), 'populist' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Van Kessel 2014), 'anti-system' (Capoccia 2002; Sartori 1976; Zulianello 2018) or 'challenger' (De Vries and Hobolt 2020; Hobolt and Tilley 2016) are all defined in one way or another by their decidedly 'non-mainstream' characteristics.<sup>1</sup> They only make sense, definitionally, as antonyms to 'mainstream' parties.

Nevertheless, a few brave authors have attempted to ascribe *some* positive definitional content to mainstream parties. These definitions tend to hinge on either a party's ideological position or its perceived potential to govern. In the former case, Grigore Pop-Eleches (2010: 225–226) equates 'mainstreamness' with ideological moderation, claiming that 'a political party is classified as mainstream if its electoral appeal is based on a recognizable and moderate ideological platform rather than on the personality of its leader and/or extremist rhetoric', and that 'a mainstream party represents an ideological orientation that can be mapped with reasonable accuracy onto the mainstream ideological spectrum of established Western democracies'. Similarly utilizing the ideological spectrum as an indicator of the 'mainstreamness' of a party, but also adding the condition of electoral dominance, Bonnie Meguid (2005: 358) has provided a blunter definition: 'mainstream parties are defined as the electorally dominant actors in the center-left, center, and center-right blocs on the Left–Right political spectrum'.

Other authors have expressed less concern with the ideological profile of a party as mainstream or not, and more with how well it fulfils perceived 'governing potential'. This criterion, set out by Giovanni Sartori (1976), refers to how realistically a party is considered able to govern or form coalitions with other 'mainstream' parties. Using the coterminous concept of 'establishment parties', Amir Abedi (2004)

notes that this criterion involves a party's governing potential as well as its governmental relevance: that is, its actual involvement in a government. As such, Abedi claims that 'establishment parties' are 'all those parties that have participated in government or alternatively those parties that the governing parties regard as suitable partners for government formation ... [or] parties that are willing to cooperate with the main governing parties by joining them in a coalition government' (Abedi 2004: 11).

Yet, in the literatures on 'non-mainstream' parties such as those noted earlier, these explicit criteria of ideological moderation, electoral dominance or governing potential are only sometimes used to clarify the process of distinguishing between a mainstream and a non-mainstream party. For example, the ideological criterion is clear when it comes to differentiating between a mainstream and an extremist party, given that the latter rejects liberal democracy (Lipset and Raab 1971; Mudde 2002), or between a mainstream party and an anti-system party, given that the latter questions the established metapolicies of a political system (Zulianello 2018). Similarly, the electoral dominance criterion is used to differentiate between mainstream and challenger parties: indeed, Catherine De Vries and Sara Hobolt (2020) explicitly note that challenger parties are defined by the fact that they are not 'dominant parties', and that they lack prior government participation. Yet, in other cases, additional criteria are added or used to replace these criteria entirely in order to flesh out the differences between a mainstream party and a non-mainstream party: for example, the difference between a mainstream party and a single-issue party or niche party can revolve around the number of issues the party focuses on (Mitra 1988; Meguid 2005), whereas the difference between a mainstream party and an anti-political establishment party can rely on a party's self-perception of its position in the party system (Abedi 2004; Schedler 1996).

To add to this confusion, political reality often throws some of these neat categorizations into question. For instance, what happens when a populist party becomes a government coalition partner, as with Podemos or the Danish People's Party, or even becomes the governing party, as with Syriza or Fidesz? What about when an anti-political establishment party becomes part of the establishment, as occurred with the 5 Star Movement? Are these parties all suddenly mainstream, whether they seem 'intuitively' mainstream or not? And what happens when a previously centre-right mainstream party adopts a far-right policy platform, as with the Republican Party under Trump? Does it remain mainstream, or does the ideological shift disqualify it from this moniker? These difficult questions reflect the reality that the labels we use for political parties are only ever contingent and temporary, and operate as ideal types: circumstances, party landscapes and parties themselves all change over time. As such, accounting for the processes by which parties move in and out of the mainstream category is a difficult but important task.

### Mainstreaming and pariahing

How, then, can we usefully think through how parties join, or are pushed in and out of, the mainstream category? To elucidate these processes, I utilize the binary set up between mainstream parties and one decidedly 'non-mainstream' party type, 'pariah parties', as a heuristic device to develop the concepts of 'mainstreaming'

and 'pariahing'.<sup>2</sup> The former refers to the process by which parties are brought into the mainstream and designated as legitimate and/or normal; the latter refers to the process by which parties are designated as illegitimate and/or dangerous, thereby delegitimizing them within their party system context and framing them as a threat to democracy (regardless of the accuracy of that branding).

Why focus on this party type, rather than one of the many party types noted earlier? The concept of pariah parties, as developed in the work of William Downs (2001, 2012), is not necessarily more precise or superior to those party types; in fact, one of its potential weaknesses is that it is something of a 'catch-all' category for a series of different party subtypes rather than a clear-cut party type. However, it has two distinct advantages in terms of its utility for thinking through the processes of mainstreaming and pariahing. First, of the range of labels ascribed to 'non-mainstream' parties, it is arguably the most clearly antonymic to mainstream parties, since a pariah cannot simultaneously be part of the mainstream, whereas other party types such as populist, niche or single-issue parties theoretically can be on an ideological or governing-potential criterion.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a pariah is chiefly defined by its position outside the mainstream. Second, the concept of pariah parties foregrounds the dynamism and relativism at play in this labelling and positioning of political parties, which after all, are never definitively 'set', but shift and change, with the boundaries between 'the mainstream' and other categories being relatively porous.<sup>4</sup> Downs argues that the judgement of whether a party does or does not lie outside the mainstream in this regard is not reliant on an 'objective' measure of its ideological positioning or governing potential, but rather how it is perceived and labelled by other parties. Referring to several of the party types mentioned earlier, Downs (2012: 14) argues that what unites them 'is that they receive a common label from the putatively more moderate party establishment: namely, pariah ... In general parlance, a pariah is someone or some group that is an outcast, despised and avoided by the majority. In the lexicon of politics, then, the pariah party is ostensibly an untouchable, beyond the pale of political acceptability.' 'Pariahness' is thus a context-dependent concept, and one that only results via a party being a subject that is 'acted upon' by other political actors: as Downs notes, 'what is important for us here is less the unique properties or programmatic positions of individual parties but their designation by the rest of the party system as unacceptable outsiders' (Downs 2012: 15). A similar argument is made by Joost van Spanje (2010, 2018), who labels parties as pariahs if, and only if, they are ostracized, which he defines as facing systemic refusal of other parties to cooperate with that party. In other words, the 'pariah party' only becomes so through the process of what I refer to here as pariahing.

It is important to note that ideological positioning does not *strictly* come into play here. As Downs comments, 'regardless of the particular kind of programmatic message being promoted by the party in question (e.g. anti-immigration, anti-Semitism, ultranationalism, anticapitalism, euroskepticism, secession), there is at least rhetorical ostracism by the putatively more moderate parties and the labelling of the pariah as 'unclean' for the democracy' (Downs 2012: 15). This decoupling of 'pariahness' from a party's ideological position is productive, although it overlooks an important implication. If the ideological position of a party does not strictly affect a party's status as a pariah (even though that is almost

always the case in practice), then it is theoretically possible that parties not just of the ‘extremes’, but also of more moderate ideological character, can be made into pariah parties. In other words, there is nothing stopping ‘putatively more moderate parties’ (Downs 2012: 15) from trying to portray other ‘putatively more moderate parties’ as pariahs.<sup>5</sup> The dynamic potential of pariahing and mainstreaming is thus ever-present in any multiparty system.

How does pariahing differ from similar terms used in the literature, including exclusion (Kestel and Godmer 2004; Van Spanje and Van Der Brug 2009), demonization (Van Heerden and Van der Brug 2017) or stigmatization (Van Spanje 2018: 204)? The central difference between these terms regards the status of the party being targeted: parties can be excluded or isolated by other parties without them necessarily being deemed pariah parties that are beyond the pale in a democratic system. This exclusion or isolation may simply be a matter of political strategy, whereby one mainstream party will exclude or attempt to isolate other mainstream parties in order to not be seen as cooperating with opponents. In such a case, the party being excluded or isolated may still be viewed as a worthy or legitimate competitor in the mode of Chantal Mouffe’s ‘agnostic pluralism’ (2013) – something that is decidedly not the case when it comes to pariah parties. Instead, the process of ‘pariahing’ refers specifically to setting or shifting the *perception* of a party as a ‘pariah’. In this regard, the term is closer to the notions of demonization or stigmatization, as the aim of these processes is specifically about how a party is seen, and is also context dependent: what is ‘demonic’, ‘evil’ or a ‘pariah’ in one context may differ from another – as Paul Hainsworth (2008: 10) has noted, ‘context – time and place – has consequences for how parties and movements are perceived and conceptualized’ – whereas exclusion and isolation are not necessarily context-dependent processes, but rather more strategic and ‘mechanical’ processes in party politics.

Having explained ‘pariahing’, what about its mirror-image process, ‘mainstreaming’? There are two central usages of the term in the party literature. The first refers to the way that the ideology, policies, discourse or style of populist, extremist or pariah parties are adopted by mainstream political actors. This is usually done in order to compete with or neutralize a potential electoral threat from such parties. For example, Giorel Curran (2004: 38) uses mainstreaming to refer to ‘the incorporation of populist notions into the political mainstream’ and argues that ‘this embrace by mainstream electoral parties of the themes and policies urged by neopopulist parties – including anti-immigration and anti-asylum policies – demonstrates a clear appropriation of populism’s style and content’. Yet, as Tjitske Akkerman et al. (2016a: 6) argue, this process may be more aptly named ‘radicalization’ rather than ‘mainstreaming’, given that it does not see radical parties moderating their stances, but rather mainstream parties moving ideologically or discursively closer to radical parties.<sup>6</sup>

The second usage of the term is more useful for this discussion and represents a clear opposite to the process of pariahing I have laid out. Here, ‘mainstreaming’ is understood as the process of legitimating parties that sit outside the mainstream, and attempting to allow these parties to cross the ‘threshold of acceptability’ (Van Spanje and Van Der Brug 2007: 1023) needed to be seen as legitimate and/or normal. While the ideational outcome of both of these processes may be the

same – the legitimization of previously taboo or non-mainstream ideologies/policies/discourses – the position of the non-mainstream party obviously differs in each. In the first case, mainstream political actors seek to neutralize a non-mainstream party's appeal through appropriation, thus making it irrelevant (see Van Spanje 2018), while in the second case, the non-mainstream party is eventually integrated into (or at least towards) the mainstream, giving it legitimacy, along with ostensibly increased political and electoral purchase.

To be clear, while the party types of 'mainstream' and 'pariah' parties that I draw upon here may conceptually be binary categories, the processes of mainstreaming and pariahing are not. Rather, they should be seen as existing on a spectrum, across which parties can move depending on a number of contextual factors over time. Here parties can be more or less mainstreamed depending on how acceptable and/or legitimate they are seen on one hand, or more or less pariahed, depending on how dangerous and/or illegitimate they are seen on the other. As noted earlier, this reflects the dynamism at play in processes of party labelling.

### Who is responsible for 'mainstreaming' and 'pariahing'?

The question that must be asked, then, is who are the central agents in the processes of mainstreaming and pariahing? Previous related work has tended primarily to consider the role of mainstream parties, focusing on how they deal with the challenge of populist/extremist/nativist parties. Here, I contend that there are actually at least three important actors in these processes: parties that are already widely perceived as mainstream; parties that are already perceived as being pariahs (or at least existing outside the mainstream); and media actors. Each of these plays an important role in either policing, reinforcing or reworking the mainstream or pariah status of a party, as illustrated in Table 1, which summarizes the techniques these actors use. In this section, I explain each of these roles, consider the motivations behind these actors' participation in such processes, and provide brief empirical examples to illustrate these processes. These examples – which are instrumental (Stake 1995) and descriptive (Gerring 2004), and thus aimed at supporting theory-building around these processes – are drawn from Western Europe, the US and Australia, and were selected on the basis of them being 'typical' cases, in that they are descriptively representative of processes of mainstreaming and pariahing taking place across a wider universe of cases across Western liberal democracies (Seawright

**Table 1.** Techniques Used in the Processes of Mainstreaming and Pariahing

Actor	Mainstreaming techniques	Pariahing techniques
Mainstream parties	Characterizing another party as legitimate and/or normal	Characterizing another party as illegitimate and/or dangerous
Pariah parties	Presenting themselves as a legitimate and/or normal party	Presenting themselves as edgy, dangerous or vastly different to mainstream parties
Media actors	Covering a party as legitimate and/or normal	Covering a party as illegitimate and/or dangerous

and Gerring 2008: 297–299). Moreover, I have selected cases that readers will likely be familiar with from the broader comparative literature on mainstream and pariah parties, in order to maximize the efficacy and salience of the examples in illustrating these processes.

### **Mainstreaming**

#### *Mainstream parties*

In the process of mainstreaming, mainstream parties can seek to present another party in a more legitimate light, thus using their status as a ‘normal’ party to confer a similar status on previously shunned parties. This can be done for a variety of reasons. The most obvious of these is that a previously pariahed party may be needed to form a coalition or minority government (Bale 2003), along the lines of the coalition-potential criterion noted earlier. In such cases, there is little to be gained from continuing to portray a party as untouchable or beyond the pale, as the realpolitik of political arithmetic can overtake ideological or reputational considerations. An example of this is the relationship between the ‘mainstream’ Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) and the populist radical right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ). While the major parties in Austria traditionally treated the FPÖ as something of a pariah, preferring grand coalitions to cooperating with such an ‘unacceptable’ party for several decades, this eventually broke down due to the increasing popularity of the FPÖ, and the ÖVP dropped its pariahing stance, eventually bringing the party somewhat into the mainstream by forming a coalition government with it in 2000–5 and again in 2017–19. Reinhard Heinisch et al. argue that there is ‘one major explanation’ for the ÖVP mainstreaming the FPÖ in this case: ‘it deemed its very existence under threat and felt it had to react outside the bounds of accustomed mainstream behaviour’ as a result (Heinisch et al. 2021: 87).

Another potential reason for the mainstreaming – or at least the beginnings of such a process – of a previously shunned party is that a mainstream party may wish to seek to appeal to voters of said party. In such cases, the continued pariahing of a party is risky for the mainstream party, given that such a portrayal can have the effect of demonizing its supporters. This is particularly counterproductive when an anti-elite message is core to that party’s appeal, as in the case of populist parties. As such, portraying such a party as more mainstream – or at least acknowledging that its values are legitimate and mainstream – can serve as a potential strategy for courting its voters. An illustrative example of this process from the UK is that of former Prime Minister David Cameron’s repositioning of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), or at very least its voters. In 2006, Cameron had called UKIP ‘a bunch of fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists’ (in Taylor 2006). However, in 2015 he changed his tune, telling UKIP voters that his Conservative Party understood their concerns, that the party had ‘heard the message loud and clear about the thing you want changed’, particularly around immigration, and pleading with UKIP voters to ‘come with us, come home’ (in Osborn 2015). At its most extreme, this process can see mainstream parties adopting policies previously associated with pariah parties, often claiming that they are ‘legitimate concerns’ – what Van Spanje (2018) characterizes as ‘parrot party’ behaviour, given that the mainstream party essentially mimics, or ‘parrots’, the pariah party’s platform in an attempt to rob it of its outsider appeal.



### *Pariah parties*

Perhaps the most obvious and well-documented process by which the mainstreaming of a pariah party takes place is when a pariah party attempts to present itself as legitimate and mainstream as a way of broadening its political appeal and maximizing votes. This is precisely what Akkerman et al. (2016a: 7) speak of when they define mainstreaming as ‘a process in which radical parties change to become more like mainstream parties’. There is obviously something of a trade-off here, as such a move potentially sheds the ‘shock tactics’ and anti-establishment bona fides associated with being a pariah party and which are also effective for garnering media attention. However, these tactics can be less effective for winning votes and can hinder a pariah party’s attempts to be accepted into the mainstream by other institutional players. Indicators of this mainstreaming from pariah parties can include a moderation of core positions, an expansion of a party’s issue agenda, a break with controversial and extreme members, and a shift in the party’s communication strategy (Akkerman et al. 2016a: 10).

The clearest example of a pariah party seeking to shed its status and move into the mainstream in recent years is that of the French Front National under Marine Le Pen, and particularly her *dédiabolisation* strategy, ‘of which the main goal is to detoxify the party’s reputation’ (Ivaldi 2016: 226). Here, Le Pen sought to draw a line between her father’s and her own eras of the party in several key ways: by disassociating the party from its Holocaust-denying and overtly racist past, by shifting from an ethno-cultural to a ‘more acceptable’ civic-nationalist agenda when it came to targeting minorities, through a ‘technocratization’ of the party in terms of seeking expert advice and addressing a wider range of policy issues, and through a wider professionalization of the party in terms of its personnel (Ivaldi 2016: 236–239). Indeed, Le Pen went so far as to expel her father from the party in 2015 for his Vichy-sympathetic comments and renamed the party *Rassemblement National* in 2018 in an attempt to rebrand it as a more acceptable mainstream party with a wider social agenda (Surel 2019). This process has arguably been quite successful, with the party enjoying a higher vote share across different levels of government than it had previously achieved.

### *Media actors*

Media actors can also play a significant role in shifting the perception of pariah parties, often working in concert with the activities of both mainstream and pariah parties. One way that media can ‘mainstream’ a pariah party is merely through coverage from a well-regarded media source such as ‘newspapers of record’ like *The Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or through television channels such as the BBC or CNN – all sources widely considered authoritative and relatively non-partisan in their coverage. While of course their coverage of a pariah party may be critical, the mere act of giving it airtime or prominent space in a newspaper acknowledges the party as worthy of coverage, no matter the tone of the reporting. This can help legitimate the party because its concerns are presented as real and worthy of serious attention. In their study of how two very different television networks – CNN and Fox News – covered the Tea Party in the US in the early 2010s, Matt Guardino and Dean Snyder (2012: 537) argue that the ‘two key commercial cable channels depicted the Tea Party as a movement with

authentic grievances and policy ideas that are worth taking seriously. In effect, both these outlets, despite their real differences, operated to mainstream the Tea Party as a representative social force, as a political constituency, and as a source of policy ideas.’ While the Tea Party is obviously not a political party (although it had affiliations with the Republican Party), one can see echoes of the same mainstreaming process in debates about how legacy media should cover pariah parties – particularly those on the populist radical right and far right – across the globe in recent years (Murphy and Devine 2020; Schmidt 2020).

Partisan media sources also play an important role in mainstreaming processes. While mere coverage – positive or negative – from ‘non-partisan’ media sources may confer legitimacy in the sense that what is being covered by such sources is what matters, partisan sources often actively campaign to present pariah parties as representing the legitimate interests of ‘the people’, thus attempting to portray them as part of the mainstream. While the Republican Party cannot in any way be considered a pariah party, it is impossible to ignore the role of Fox News in legitimizing the ‘Trumpification’ of the party. Elsewhere, newspapers such as Austria’s *Die Krone* ran a consistently positive line on the FPÖ in the 1990s, as did the *Daily Express* for UKIP (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 114–115). And although certainly not part of ‘mainstream’ media, even more partisan sources such as the far-right websites Breitbart and FDesouche have provided unceasingly positive coverage of shunned parties in order to portray them as voices of the ‘real’ people (Moffitt 2019).

Finally, commercial media can also play a significant, albeit indirect, role in the mainstreaming of pariah parties. A number of previously spurned figures associated with pariah parties have been able to parlay their political careers into successful television careers, which has subsequently helped rehabilitate their public profiles and re-establish them as approachable, ‘normal’ and legitimate. A key example here is Australia’s Pauline Hanson, who after facing a prison sentence for electoral fraud (later overturned) and seeing her various parties (One Nation and Pauline Hanson’s United Australia Party) portrayed as pariah parties and disappear into the political wilderness in the early 2000s, appeared on the Australian reality television shows *Dancing With the Stars* and *The Celebrity Apprentice* and became a fixture as a talking head on breakfast television shows over several years (Moffitt 2016: 84). This functioned to normalize and soften Hanson’s image and provide her with a great deal of free publicity, and in 2016, One Nation and Hanson made a return to the federal political stage, attracting 4.3% of the Australia-wide primary vote in the Senate, and having four senators (including Hanson) elected.

## **Pariahing**

### *Mainstream parties*

In the extant literature on pariah parties, there is an understanding that the pariah status of a party is conferred primarily by other (mainstream) parties in the electoral system. As Downs notes, what makes parties pariahs is not necessarily their ideological platform or policies, but rather ‘their designation by the rest of the party system as unacceptable outsiders’ which practically can take the form of ‘signed agreements or campaign pledges to refuse alliances with branded parties,

initiation of legal proceedings against them, denial of participation in publicly broadcasted debates, and rhetorical treatment casting the parties as incompatible with liberal democracy' (Downs 2012: 15). In other words, whether a party is designated as a pariah comes down to how mainstream parties decide to treat it. The same can be seen in the definitions of the broad assortment of 'anti-' parties discussed earlier in this article, whereby a party's *koalitionsfähig* is key to understanding its 'non-mainstreamness' – a characteristic which of course is determined by the 'mainstream' parties, as they are the ones with the power to determine who they may consider forming coalitions with.

So, what is the strategic advantage for mainstream parties in 'pariahing' other parties? In many ways, the process functions to reinforce and 'prove' the mainstream credentials of the former. Given that the hazy trait of 'mainstreamness' cannot be objectively proven, the practice of drawing boundaries – in terms of both the construction, delineation and maintenance of the divide between the categories of mainstream and pariah – is key to maintaining a *perception* of being mainstream. Who is inside or outside these categories matters to those on both sides of the divide. This, of course, is unsurprising. We know from the seminal work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, that any identity is reliant on a 'constitutive outside': an identity that is excluded, and thus stands as an antagonistic 'Other', against which the central identity can be contrasted. This goes for political parties as well: the identity of being 'mainstream' makes no sense if there are also not others who are excluded from that category. On a more practical level, the underlying goal of pariahing other parties – and in the process, reinforcing oneself as mainstream – is obviously the maximization of vote share, as being perceived as a 'normal' party is usually a prerequisite to being taken seriously by a large portion of the voting public.

It is also important to note that this process is not purely about party self-interest. The pariahing of certain parties by mainstream parties can be an important bulwark against genuinely extreme, racist or illiberal parties whose platforms should be resisted, and the process can thus play a role in protecting the liberal democratic norms of a given polity. The most obvious and familiar examples of this are the cordons sanitaires erected by mainstream parties against Vlaams Belang/Blok in Belgium (Downs 2012; Pauwels 2011), by several parties in Sweden against the Sweden Democrats (Heinze 2018), and more recently the cordon sanitaire erected by pro-EU groups against the Identity and Democracy group in the European Parliament (Wax et al. 2019).<sup>7</sup>

Yet it is important to note that pariahing by mainstream parties is not always directed at the 'usual suspects'. As I have argued, the mainstream/pariah divide does not necessarily rely on ideological characteristics, and as a result, pariahing can also be directed towards parties whose programmes are relatively moderate. A telling example of this from the Australian context is the persistent attempts by the two major parties, Liberal and Labor, to pariah the third party of the Australian party system, the Greens. Despite having an ideological profile similar to other established Green parties in the developed world – a post-material left party, balancing environmentalism with socialist and social-democratic tendencies within the party (Fredman 2013; Jackson 2016; Miragliotta 2006, 2013) – the party has been accused of extremism by both major parties. On the centre right, the

Liberal Party has claimed that ‘the commonalities between contemporary Green politics and old-fashioned fascism and Nazism are chilling’, accused Green voters of being ‘true fanatics’ who are guilty of ‘zealotry’ and ‘fundamentalism’, and stated ‘that this is the kind of crypto-fascist politics we do not want in this country’ (Sinodinos in Australia Senate 2003: 17000–17002). The Greens have also been accused of being communists in disguise, with the deputy prime minister at the time calling them ‘extremists’ and claiming that ‘they are watermelons, many of them – green on the outside and very, very, very red on the inside’ (Anderson in Blenkin 2004). And despite the Labor Party entering formal alliances with the Greens at state and federal levels at different points in the 2010s, the Greens have still weathered pariahing attacks from the centre left, with the former general secretary and senator of the party, Sam Dastyari, calling them ‘extremists not unlike One Nation’ (in Haise 2012). While the effects of pariahing the party have arguably not been long-lasting, given that the Greens have received between 8% and 13% of the national vote over the past decade and have cemented their status as the third party of Australian politics, such attacks have continued in an attempt to discredit the party.

### *Pariah parties*

Although it may appear counter-intuitive – and perhaps even like electoral suicide – for a pariah party to participate in its own ‘pariahing’, this is also an available tactic for parties who wish to present themselves as the antithesis of mainstream parties. Here, a party can portray itself as truly edgy and dangerous, and seek to promote its pariah status and the lack of mainstream party cooperation as ‘proof’ of its authenticity and dedication to its ideological mission. Although this is obviously rather rare, we can look to Mattia Zulianello’s (2018) work on anti-system parties for examples. Here Zulianello refers to how a party may choose to deliberately ‘radically disembed’ itself from a political system ‘in order to underline its own differentiation in the competitive market as well as to distance itself from the “system”’ (Zulianello 2018: 665). He refers to the examples of the FPÖ when it shifted leaders from Haider to Strache, the Dutch Party for Freedom when it withdrew support from the first Rutte cabinet in 2012, and the secessionist-era Italian Northern League as examples. While this process ‘is relatively rare because the acquisition of systemic integration normally has important consequences for the credibility of a party as a (potential) governing actor’ (Zulianello 2018: 665), we can see in each of these examples concerted efforts by the pariah party to distance itself not only from the ideological values of the mainstream, but also to present itself as a pariah in order to (somewhat ironically) avoid being ‘tainted’ by the perceived corruption, decadence or out-of-touch nature of mainstream parties.

It is also worth acknowledging that not all parties are interested in moving towards the mainstream to extend their electoral appeal. Indeed, they may not actually be particularly interested in gaining a greater vote share at all, and instead may seek to intensify their pariah status through ideological radicalization. A good example here is the path of UKIP following the 2016 resignation of Nigel Farage. Rather than seeking to extend its Eurosceptic electoral appeal in a post-Brexit referendum UK, UKIP essentially pariahed itself by actively courting the far right, with then-leader Gerard Batten appointing co-founder and former leader of the

English Defence League, Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (also known as Tommy Robinson), as an adviser, taking the party in an explicitly anti-Islamic direction (Klein and Pirro 2020). This drew the rebuke of Farage and several other former leaders of the party, with Farage quitting the party, claiming that it was ‘obsessed with Islam’, and had been dragged ‘away from an electoral party into a party of street activism’ (Farage in Morris 2018).

### *Media actors*

Finally, and perhaps unsurprisingly, media actors play a significant role in the pariahing of parties, given that they often set the frames through which parties are labelled as mainstream or otherwise (Strömbäck and Van Aelst 2013). This can be done in two key ways: reinforcing the existing pariah status of a party by critically covering, condemning or portraying the party as beyond the pale of decency and acceptability; or by otherwise characterizing a party initially considered mainstream as illegitimate and/or dangerous, thus seeking to shift perceptions of that party.

In the first strategy, (mainstream) media actors often work in concert with mainstream parties to police the boundaries between mainstream and pariah. This has been most evident in the cases where cordons sanitaires have been erected against pariah parties. Here, the cordons sanitaires are not only maintained and enforced by mainstream parties as noted above in terms of not cooperating or refusing to deal with the party, but also by the media, in that the party is repeatedly and consistently portrayed as dangerous, and purposefully ignored or denied media coverage.<sup>8</sup> The work of Léonie de Jonge (2018, 2020) on the *cordon sanitaire médiatique* in francophone Belgium is instructive here: in this context, there is such a strong agreement among the media to not offer direct access or a platform to the far right that this agreement has been formalized by the body that regulates electronic media in the country, and became legally binding in 2011 (De Jonge 2018: 197). De Jonge notes that the combination of this *cordon sanitaire médiatique* with a political cordon sanitaire in Wallonia has led to something of an ‘airtight’ cordon overall, ensuring far and populist radical right parties in the region have not been able to break through on a discursive nor on an electoral level (2020: 13).

In the second strategy, there is a sustained attempt to shift a party out of the mainstream category and into the pariah category by the media. The presumed goal here is to present a party as genuinely problematic and dangerous, and thus cut into a party’s vote. A prominent recent example of this is the UK media’s coverage of the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn. In their study of journalistic representations of Corbyn and Labour in the British press in 2015, Bart Cammaerts et al. argue that the press engaged in ‘blatantly delegitimising and demonising’ Corbyn (Cammaerts et al. 2017: 2) by, among other things, ignoring and distorting his voice, using ridicule, scorn and personal attacks, associating him with terrorists, presenting him as a Communist who hated Britain, and as ‘a dangerous, even sinister individual’ (2017: 11). The authors suggest that although the media is allegedly supposed to fulfil a monitorial ‘watchdog’ role in democracies, the UK press’s treatment of Corbyn and the Labour Party ‘amounted more to what we could characterize as an *attackdog* journalism’ in which the press engaged in ‘an ideological crusade against Corbyn and what he stands for’ (Cammaerts et al. 2017: 12). Overall, they conclude that ‘by positioning the leader of the largest opposition

party in the United Kingdom as a deviant enemy, rather than a legitimate political actor, the British media has acted in an undemocratic manner' (Cammaerts et al. 2017: 16). Given the direction in which Corbyn sought to take the party, what was clear here was a concerted effort – interestingly, across the board of the (otherwise ideologically varied) media sampled in their study – to shift the perception of the Labour Party from a mainstream party to one that has tipped over into the pariah category.<sup>9</sup>

### Concluding remarks

This article has sought to develop the concepts of mainstreaming and pariahing as a way of making sense of the ways that some political parties are portrayed or designated as legitimate and/or normal, whereas others are portrayed as illegitimate and/or dangerous. Using the divide between 'mainstream' and 'pariah' parties as a heuristic tool to conceptualize and explain these processes, it has shown that parties themselves are not the only political actors involved in mainstreaming and pariahing, but that the media also should be taken into account in this regard. It has provided empirical illustrative examples of these processes at play across several Western liberal democracies. Overall, it has shown that while existing definitions of 'mainstream' and 'pariah' parties are useful, we must also remain critically aware of the processes by which those labels are applied, shift and dynamically change over time.

In light of this, there are a number of ways forward in terms of practically utilizing the concepts of mainstreaming and pariahing in future research. The first would be as a method of tracking the ways in which parties shift in and out of these categories: while comparative political scientists are often good at stringently applying definitions, we are less skilled at making sense of why, where and how those definitions change, or acknowledging that grey zone in between such ideal types. Tracking these processes – whether in the case of long-standing parties whose status changes over time, or in the case of new parties, whose 'label' may not be instantly set when they arrive on the political scene – would be of great interest, both empirically and theoretically. A second possibility would be to analyse the interplay between media and party politics when it comes to these processes: for example, do certain media outlets and party types work in concert to mainstream or pariah other parties, or are they at odds with one another? Are these links explicit, do they differ across countries, and for what reasons? A third possibility would be to analyse how these processes operate differently across different political systems: for example, do mainstreaming and pariahing look substantially different in proportional representative systems versus majoritarian systems, or in multiparty systems versus two-party systems? Exploring these contextual differences would be highly illuminating in terms of making sense of the roles of the above-noted actors in these processes.

A final potential direction involves taking one more, perhaps surprising, actor into account in considering processes of mainstreaming and pariahing: ourselves, as party scholars and political scientists more broadly. Here, it is worth analysing and reflecting on our own role in these processes, through how we choose to define and conceptualize parties, and how and where we locate them along the

mainstream/pariah or other divides, whether in our own work, in our media outreach, or in expert surveys. This is particularly the case when we are faced with the aforementioned new parties on the electoral stage: definitional skirmishes about the categorization of parties such as the 5 Star Movement and Podemos that have emerged in recent years are proof of this (see Bickerton and Accetti 2018; Pirro 2018; Vittori 2017). More so, unwittingly or not, we are also sometimes guilty of imposing our own criteria and frameworks on parties that have undergone substantial ideological or contextual change. For instance, how do we categorize an openly illiberal party like Fidesz in Hungary, with a supermajority on the national level and majorities on the county level across the country? It is clearly where the 'mainstream' is in Hungary, for better or worse, but does that make it a mainstream party in our (comparative) eyes? This is not to say that there is anything wrong with labelling, sorting and conceptualizing party types; indeed, without this kind of work, comparative studies would be nigh-impossible and our discipline might even be redundant. However, at the same time, we cannot pretend that this is a precise or purely objective activity, since our determinations and decisions play a role in how such parties are perceived. We are involved in mainstreaming and pariahing parties and, as such, there is something of an 'observer effect' that takes place in the study of party politics. In physics, the observer effect refers to the theory that just by observing a phenomenon, one has an impact on it. Therefore, for us, by observing and labelling political parties, we ineluctably play a role in changing the perception of the party. By acknowledging and exploring mainstreaming and pariahing as dynamic processes that involve multiple actors both in and outside the strict party landscape, as well as taking account of these processes' multidirectional and dynamic natures, we can move somewhat closer towards critical awareness of the power of the categories utilized when speaking or writing about and analysing political parties.

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## Notes

1 It is important to note that these categories are not exhaustive; nor are they mutually exclusive. A populist party, for example, might also be an anti-system and challenger party, and as this article elucidates, additionally a pariah party.

2 To be clear from the outset: 'mainstream parties' and 'pariah parties' do not comprehensively or exhaustively capture all types of parties in contemporary party systems. Green parties, for example, are not generally considered mainstream as per the dimensions discussed earlier – they are not always ideologically moderate, nor govern, nor are 'multi-issue' parties. But they are also not (often) pariah parties. However, the point of this article is not to provide new definitions of 'mainstream' and 'pariah' parties – rather, it uses the divide between these party types, which after all, are only 'ideal types' that we utilize in order to categorize and make sense of a wide range of political parties with divergent and complex characteristics, as a heuristic device to think through the *processes* by which parties can move in and out of these opposed categories. To return to the example of Green parties – while they may not 'be' mainstream or pariah parties, they can certainly be subject to the *processes* of mainstreaming and pariahing, as noted in the Australian example in this article.

3 It is important to note that in practice, the mainstream/pariah binary divide is contextual, and often only makes clear sense in a national context. For example, Fidesz is clearly a 'mainstream party' in the context of Hungarian party politics, given its electoral dominance and its reshifting of what is considered 'mainstream' there (Minkenberg 2013: 21). However, internationally, it is a pariah of sorts, with constant threats of sanctions from the European Union and demonization of the party from non-governmental and transnational organizations (Batory 2016).

4 This porosity is not particularly surprising: the literature on the radical right in Europe has shown that ostensible pariah parties have been able to cross over into the mainstream (Bale 2003; Minkenberg 2013: 5; Rooduijn et al. 2014; Rydgren 2005), while Downs made clear from the outset that 'pariah status is not a fixed constant' (Downs 2012: 18).

5 Overlooking this implication betrays a relatively circular logic when it comes to identifying pariah parties in the party literature. Downs (2001, 2012) and others who have used the term in empirical work (Geys et al. 2006; Minkenberg 2013) have tended to focus exclusively on extremist and/or populist radical right parties. In other words, these parties are often seen as pariahs *because* they are extremist/radical/populist, which in turn makes them pariahs. There is little exploration of how these parties become pariahs, with the pariah status being somewhat taken for granted.

6 Downs (2012) refers to this process as 'co-option'.

7 It is worth noting that there is a difference between cases in which 'the mainstream' *in toto* attempts to pariah a party, as in the cordons sanitaires mentioned above, and when *parts* of the ideological spectrum perceived as 'mainstream' seek to pariah a party, such as centre-right parties attempting to pariah communist parties. Pariahing will of course likely be more effective and lasting in the former case, given that it involves actors across the ideological spectrum.

8 For a discussion of how demonization of a party in the media can affect its legitimacy and party support, see Van Spanje and Azrout (2018).

9 This is not to argue that the Labour Party was ever in genuine danger of 'becoming' a pariah party. It would take far more concerted and long-term efforts to shift the status of one of the major two parties in a parliamentary system. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the media's target was Corbyn's leadership and direction of the party under him, given that Labour under Keir Starmer has since been treated as a 'normal' party once again.

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