# Making Representations: Modes and Strategies of Political Parties

MICHAEL SAWARD

Department of Politics and International Studies, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK. E-mail: m.j.saward@open.c.uk

This article critically addresses the varied ways in which political parties can be said to represent. Three important ideal-typical modes of party representation are outlined: the popular, the statal, and the reflexive. Arguments are offered for countering the common view that, for example, popular modes are the most democratic, and statal modes the least democratic. Statal modes in particular are often taken to be an indicator of a decline in parties' representative functions; however, shifting modes of party representation often have more to do with strategic choices and contextual pressures than democratic ideals. No one ideal-typical mode is intrinsically more democratic than others. Further, there is evidence that a new mode of party representation, the reflexive, may be emerging; parties may be transforming into something they never were in order to continue to do the things they have always sought to do. Whether democracy is unthinkable save for political parties is no longer the question we need to ask. Rather, we need to ask: what kinds of representative democracy are thinkable? And what forms of party claims, if any, are appropriate to them?

## Introduction

Many recent analyses of political parties cite the assertion that democracy is unthinkable save for political parties, in order to ask whether it is still true, or (less often) if it was ever true. The motivation behind a good deal of that work is concern about the apparently declining ability of parties to provide representation, one of their core functions.

How one approaches this issue depends very much on how 'representation' is understood. The key argument I wish to make is this: to get a clearer view of where parties have come from, and where they may be going, it is helpful to rethink core aspects of our approach to representation as a concept and a practice.

Just how we might best do that I discuss below under the heading of the 'representative claim'. Looking at representation through these altered lenses highlights the fact that the past, present and potential future of representation by parties is not simply a story of rise and decline and an uncertain future, but rather one about different modes of representation. To put the point bluntly: political parties do not so much represent, or fail to represent; rather, on a more fine-grained view of representation, they *claim* to represent. And the claims involved can take – and historically have taken – a variety of forms. No one mode of representative claim-making is *intrinsically* more democratic than another – although one or other may resonate more with dominant conceptions of democracy in specific contexts (I will return to this point briefly later). How parties attempt to negotiate these forms in different circumstances, how they vary the content and presentation of their representative claims in and across different contexts, helps us to clarify the challenges parties face today and into the future. It can also provide us with fruitful ways to consider what sorts of party representative claims are likely to be more resonant, or ultimately successful, in certain contexts, along with how parties can tailor their own images and their portrayals of constituents to their advantage.

Altering the way that we conceptualise and analyse political representation further helps us usefully reframe a range of issues and debates connected to political parties – not all of which are discussed in the prevailing literature, despite their importance. Too often, ideal or proper 'representation' is understood (openly or implicitly) as something done by parties that: (a) are deeply rooted in significant social groups (class or ethnicity, for example); (b) gain strong partisan support from 'their' group; and (c) act as vehicles for that group through a persistent ideology and set of policy proposals. But to take that approach is to generalise and moralise on the basis of one historical, and clearly significant, model of representation, which (generally speaking) characterised western party systems in the immediate post-Second Word War period. If that is taken to be how representation *should* be done – if that is the 'golden age' – then it is little surprise that the present and well-documented problems attending political parties – membership decline, voting decline, decline in partisan support, etc – are taken as core evidence of a crisis of representation, or indeed a crisis of representative democracy. The representative claim framework, as I hope to demonstrate, helps us to resist such generalising and moralising, and to show us that the dynamics of representation, and of representative democracy, can reasonably be interpreted in alternative ways, leading to different conclusions about the problems and prospects of political parties.[1] In exploring these and other issues, ultimately I conclude that the 'thinkability' of different visions of representative democracy – and what roles they might offer for (one or other vision of) parties – is what is really at issue.

What is the shift in interpretation of the idea of representation behind this analysis? I argue that we should not view representation simply as a fact that results from an election – by far the dominant view, in political science and in politics, over a long period up to now – but rather as a process of making *claims* in electoral but also many other contexts. None of us is ever *fully* represented – representation of our interests or identities in politics is always partial. It follows that representative claims – electoral as well as non-electoral ones – are redeemed, if at all, only imperfectly. The simple fact that we elect a candidate to office (which is significant) does not mean they can or will speak for the range of our potential interests and identities.

The 'representative claim' consists of five key elements – maker, subject, object, referent, and audience. Someone makes the claim (a maker), and they make the claim about someone or something (a subject) standing for something (an object) to a group (an audience). For example, if a politician makes himself the subject who stands for an object, the object is his *idea* of his constituency – 'Above all, these people are angry about crime on our streets, and they want tough action now', for example – rather than the referent, which is all the other things the constituency is, or might be. Audiences might accept representative claims, or they might reject or ignore them. In other words, representation is an ongoing process of making and receiving claims – in, between, and outside electoral cycles. Angela Merkel may claim to represent her constituency, and her country, but equally Bono or Bob Geldof can claim to represent African communities that are caught in poverty due to the nature of international debt; the exiled Dalai Lama can claim to represent the Tibetan people, and Amnesty International can claim to speak for unjustly imprisoned people in various countries. Not all claims are democratically acceptable, of course. We need evidence that claims are not rejected by the would-be constituencies that they invoke.[2] One benefit of this framework is that it invites us to look closely at the impact of a broad range of representative claims, asking how, why and whom they represent (if anyone), without our very *definitions* determining whether or to what extent they constitute cases of representation.

I have offered a fuller account and defence of adopting the representative claim framework elsewhere.[3] The key point is that political representation is a variable, dynamic and competitive process encompassing in principle a range of actors, and not a static and incontestable factual status that some (the elected) possess utterly and others (everyone else) lack utterly. It is also a phenomenon with strong aesthetic and cultural components – would-be representatives present themselves *as* such and such, to a constituency and perhaps a wider audience which itself is characterised (or portrayed) by the claimant in particular, selective ways.

As this brief summary shows, representative claims can (and have) been made, by and about political parties, political leaders, and a variety of other groups and

movements, in a great variety of ways. Our particular focus here is on the use of the representative claim framework to examine political parties and their contribution to that familiar hybrid, representative democracy. Looking at political parties through the lens of the representative claim brings to light the fact that parties need to be creative actors, offering portrayals and enticements to constituents and audiences. Those portrayals and enticements are always subject to dispute, by opposing parties and an array of other political actors. Careful strategic choices (and gambles) need to be made by parties – how do we claim to stand for the interests of this group? Which aspect of their interests do we focus on (and which do we downplay or sideline?). How do we convince them that their primary interests really are what we say they are? What resources can we call on to back up our claims? Crucially, answers to these questions depend a great deal on when and where the claims are made; different resources (technological, political, economic etc) are available, and different strategies thinkable, in different eras and places.

Party representative claims have taken many forms in many countries. The bulk of this article is taken up with a stylized analysis of just three important ideal-typical modes of representative claim-making: the *popular*, the *statal*, and the *reflexive*. I use these three ideal-types as a reasonable short-cut to enable clear hypotheses to be formed. They are intended to capture and order a good deal of historical and institutional complexity, as well as being non-evaluative.

The *popular* mode of claiming representation is characterised by dominant parties claiming to speak as delegates of certain politicised social interests in an electoral context on the basis of a relatively fixed ideology. This modern mode was characteristic of pre-war and immediate post-war western democracy and featured nation-based mass parties.

The *statal* mode of claiming representation is characterised by parties claiming to speak as trustees of depoliticised issue-based positions in electoral and other competitive contexts on the basis of flexible ideologies and policy views. This late-modern mode is characteristic of the period since around the 1980s to the present day, and features 'catch-all' and 'cartel' party forms.

The *reflexive* mode is characterised by party participation in variegated processes of claiming to speak as sympathisers of local and issue-based positions in electoral and a variety of other mediated contexts on the basis of pragmatic and flexible policy programmes, and in co-operation or alliance with other types of movements and groups. There is some evidence that this post-modern mode may become characteristic of the near future, and may feature various embedded and decentred party forms.

A number of initial points of explanation are in order. First, these ideal-types of representative claims overlap with each other in empirical terms. They are conceptually exclusive, although empirically, to some degree, overlapping.

However, seeking conceptual clarity is a key motivation behind the use of ideal-types. Second, locating these ideal-types within certain broad historical periods does not confine claim-making of that sort to those periods. Popular, statal and reflexive claims can, in principle, be made at one time by different parties in one country, or indeed by one party at one time in one country. Varied strategies are, in principle, available to parties for the making of claims to be representative of certain groups or interests, and parties can shift among different modes of representative claim. Which mode of claim-making is most appropriate to, or most likely to succeed in, a given context is another matter. And third, to reiterate, none of the three ideal-typical modes of claiming representation is implicitly or intrinsically more democratic than any other. That is not to say that, in a given context, one might not be *experienced* as more democratic than others, or widely felt to be more in tune with dominant ideas of what it means to be democratic.

I move on now to flesh out the popular, statal and reflexive ideal-types of representative claim-making, and to illustrate the key claims I have made about the usefulness of this approach. I shall then examine the competition as representative claimants that parties face today (and are likely to face even more in the future), before making some concluding remarks.

### Ideal-type 1 – Popular claims

I stated above that the *popular* mode of claiming representation is characterised by dominant parties claiming to speak as agents of certain politicised social interests in an electoral context on the basis of a relatively fixed ideology. A modern mode characteristic of pre-war and immediate post-war western democracy, it featured nation-based mass parties.

This mode of claim is popular in the sense that parties position themselves as rooted firmly in pre-existing social cleavages. A key example is the social class cleavages that gave rise, for example, to labour or social democratic parties claiming to speak for the working classes. Parties present themselves, or are presented as, responding to circumstances that are largely outside their control – the deeper class, ethnic or regional structures of their societies. Parties position themselves as vehicles for these societal interests, a positioning that is thinkable because those interests are understood as real and relatively enduring. Parties are 'agents' of those interests,[4] are 'social actors'.[5]

Parties' positioning as social actors was bolstered by mass memberships, high degrees of partisan support, and a rootedness in social and cultural life. For example, European Christian democratic, labour and social democratic parties invariably had strong links with powerful trade unions at local and national levels, and played a strong cultural role even in individuals' social and family lives.

The perception that these underlying interests were relatively enduring and trumped other interests in importance meant that relatively enduring or consistent party ideologies could be forged and maintained – along with ideologies, policy programmes and platforms. Also important to the popular mode of representative claim-making is the central place of elections in 'representative democracy'. Historically, of course, elections have faced competitors as the primary way through which democratic action and democratic choice can be exercised – not least lot selection, which was prominent in classic and even early modern notions of democracy, before fading.[6] And further, the place and the basis of elections is national – rooted in the nation-state as a formally sovereign political, legal and cultural entity.

The dominance of electoral democracy over other potential understandings of democracy and the assumption that parties are, so to speak, bottom-up agents of pre-set social interests, contributes to a sense of parties as rightful representatives, even the *only* type of entity that legitimately could claim to be politically representative. For this reason, parties can make representative claims in the popular mode more or less implicitly. The stronger the social, cultural and historical circumstances supporting a view of parties in elections as *the* vehicles for political representation, the less pressure there need be on party candidates or spokespersons to make their representative claims explicit or open. In a sense, the system and its supporting assumptions do a good deal of the work for parties and their candidates, positioning them in place by default as the primary if not the sole legitimate type of representatives.

So, representative claims by parties made in the popular mode are claims to speak for or to stand for largely pre-existing (class, ethnic, regional) social interests. Presented as arising out of societal interests, parties are seen as vehicles of, products of, and hence almost organically reflective of those pre-set interests. A broader cultural emphasis on class, and politically the primacy of the left–right cleavage that springs from major class interests, facilitates this conception of parties' representative status. Popular representative claim-making, then, reflects perceptions of parties as lacking serious competitors.

Historically, the popular mode of claiming representation was most evident in the period of the rise of mass political parties in the developing democracies of Europe and elsewhere, from the early 20th century to around the immediate post-Second World War period. This ideal-type does not depend on this periodisation, but the link (the derivation) is clear enough. This is widely seen as the period of the rise of the mass political party, and of the period when parties were strongest, most widely supported, and most popular.

The key point here is that representative claims are chosen, and take their particular forms, depending on varied circumstances. Popular mode representative claims are claims that suit a context in which mass parties with strong

partisan support can key into (show their origins in and their reflection of) widely accepted views of relatively fixed societal interests. It is important to note that this mode (or indeed any other mode) of claim-making can persist even when the circumstances that make it potentially efficacious have altered fundamentally. Parties for example may continue to offer popular-mode claims where the social group they claim to represent is more diffuse and less sure of the nature, strength and distinctiveness of its identity, or where organisational features of parties do not support their popular claims – and they may be less successful electorally, and in other ways, as a consequence.

### Ideal-type 2 – Statal claims

I noted earlier that the *statal*[7] mode of claiming representation is characterised by parties claiming to speak as trustees of issue-based positions in electoral and other competitive contexts on the basis of flexible ideologies and policy views. This late-modern mode is characteristic of the period since around the 1980s to the present day, and features 'catch-all' and 'cartel' party forms.

Statal representative claims are made on a quite different basis to those characteristic of the popular ideal-type. Popular claims seek to reflect and to reinforce a perception that parties represent because they are rooted in and derived from enduring societal groupings. In that respect, they have a 'bottom-up' character, the ultimate form of which is that the government represents the people. Statal claims may be offered as, or presented as, bottom-up claims, but that appearance will often not mesh with a reality of their being more top-down – both (a) emphasising (through practice rather than rhetoric) the performance of state functions, such as the staffing and operating of government, and (b) in a broader sense representing the state to the people via crafted depictions of national interests and aspirations.

Regarding the statal mode of representative claim-making *as* an issue of representation marks a departure from much analysis of political parties and representation – and it matters that it does. In their wide-ranging review of trends over several decades, Bartolini and Mair for example write that: 'What we witness is a shift in the balance of party functions from the combined representative and procedural roles that were characteristic of the mass party in the so-called golden age to a more exclusively procedural function'.[8] The core concern here is that parties may be 'losing their capacity as agents of representation',[9] even while procedural (or institutional or governmental) roles are maintained or enhanced.

A central point to note here is that government–people representation is nested within another, more abstract mode, namely state–nation representation. A political party or parties who form a *government* may claim to represent *the people*; that is one option. They may also – and potentially at the same time – 'move up a level'

and claim to speak *as the state*, for *the nation*. State and nation are more abstract entities, but their symbolic and cultural power as the basis of representative claims may be no less for all that. It may be the case, for example, that parties are no longer rooted deeply in, or deriving strong and consistent partisan support from, relatively settled societal groups. But that does not mean that they are no longer representing. The representative claims that they tend to make, or which are best enabled, are simply different from those that are characteristic of a different mode of claiming. In their claims – their presentation of themselves and the portrayals of constituents and nation that they offer – they may simply have 'moved up a level'.

I shall now expand briefly on further key features of statal claims. Parties, in this mode, are 'state actors',[10] more a vehicle for presenting the state to society than vice versa. Their ideologies are more flexible, and more changeable, than is the case under the popular mode. There is more scope for making claims to represent people and groups not previously part of that party's constituency or focus, for example for conservative parties of the right to construct a portrayal of working class voter aspirations in order to try to appeal to that group of voters. In the light of these features, statal representative claim-making can be a highly strategic and calculated matter, involving, for example, party strategists asking themselves: 'what image of these people, who don't normally vote for us, can we offer to them? Can we offer a future picture of themselves, under our government, which may compel them towards supporting us?'

The statal mode also involves much more *staging* of *explicit* claims to represent. The making of representative claims involves performance, and many issues of 'presentation of self' and depiction of others are wrapped up in claim-making.[11] There are no more 'captive' constituencies of, for example, large numbers of party members or reliable class or ethnicity-based partisan voters. Audiences need to be wooed, rather than assumed; messages need to be packaged and targeted with care. And representative claims *need* to be quite explicit; background culture and habit and circumstance will not make the claims *for* a party, they need to put out their stall and make it clear that they seek support from a range of potential constituencies. Parties cannot rely on a generalised assumption that they are representative, that they perform that function by virtue of their very existence. Rather, they must generate, promote and encourage the view that they can, and they will, represent.

Further, where the popular mode of claim-making involved an implicit notion that parties operated hermetically within one nation, the statal mode involves the need for parties to assert their national credentials. They might find it advantageous strategically to claim to represent selected interests outside the boundaries of the nation-state as well, for example the wider region ('Europe'), indigenous peoples, or the interests of women internationally. And their claim-making will occur in a competitive context. Many groups that are not parties will be active

politically, claiming to speak for a wide array of interests and people, both within the nation and more widely. A number of such groups may have memberships that outstrip those of major parties, such as key environmental and animal welfare groups.

The statal ideal-type is a mode of representative claim-making that is not confined to one era. Like the others, it can and has been attempted in varied contexts. How successful it may have been as a strategy will depend on many factors, not least its appropriateness to its time and place. Nevertheless, this mode corresponds to a range of assessments of parties in western countries in the period from around the late 1970s or early 1980s to the present day. This is the era of the 'catch-all' party – which seeks support outside its traditional base – and later the 'cartel' party, which is largely state rather than supporter funded, and identifies more with the state, and indeed in some cases other major parties, than with supporter groups.[12]

Statal claims are facilitated by varied broad trends evident in this historical period. The rapid development of media technologies, first television and now the web, facilitates varied, targeted and staged claim-making to diverse audiences. A decline in the clarity of boundaries between social classes – and concomitant trends towards individualisation – fosters a need for parties to reach out to potential new, and for them unusual, supporters. Voters are more educated than ever before, which can make them harder to convince and, as a consequence, potentially more cynical about the political process generally and parties in particular; so they need to be tempted to support a party in ever-more varied, imaginative and persistent ways.

However, it is not simply a case of parties making statal claims having to work harder just to stay in the same place. Statal claims arose in a context of opportunity for parties, as well as challenges. They may need to stage more carefully what they could once take more for granted, but the staging techniques available have sometimes brought new generations of supporters to their fold. It may be, in the words of Schmitter, that these shifts lead to the conclusion that 'parties are not what they once were',[13] but that does not necessarily mean that they are *less* than they once were. Their representative claims are different.

### Ideal-type 3 – Reflexive claims

The *reflexive* mode of claiming representation is characterised by party participation in variegated processes of claiming to speak as sympathisers of local and issue-based positions in electoral and a variety of other mediated contexts on the basis of pragmatic and flexible policy programmes. There is some evidence that elements and signs of this post-modern mode, featuring embedded and decentred party forms, may be emergent in a number of countries today.

According to this ideal-type, representative claims are made by parties presenting themselves as embedded in, and speaking for, a plurality of societal interests. Those interests are neither perceived as, nor presented by parties as, permanent. Parties present themselves as a type of listening organisation that forges alliances around specific value-driven goals with local movements and groups and special-interest groups, and base their representative claims on the sense of authentic connectedness that this evokes. The intention behind the claims is to represent varied and shifting groups to the state and in the state.

Policy in the reflexive mode is deliberated over with statistically representative groups and the local and national issue-based groups that parties seek to forge alliances with. Indeed, parties present themselves as operating at the centre of a 'deliberative democracy'.[14] General values may be put forward, but these do not add up to an 'ideology'; more often they are procedural values, and above all the values of deliberation and consultation, rather than values that predefine the contours of policy. Ideologies, if they are worthy of the name, are flexible and responsive to new ideas, interests and arguments. Parties operating in this mode are strongly aware of their need to demonstrate their attachment, their rootedness, in communities and their concerns, but again they do not confine themselves to one community or one set of interests. They present themselves as open to influence by existing and new interests, and seek to back this up through decentralised internal organisation, allowing a good deal of autonomy to local figures to influence their agendas.

Parties in this mode may use the rhetoric of the 'open party' – they are open to people, ideas and new influences, and procedurally open to debate and to changing their minds. Representative claims are made explicitly (because no potential constituency or audience can be taken for granted), but less is claimed – claims are based on specific issues and procedural styles. There is no captive audience, only a shifting one, variously expanding and contracting. Policy proposals are made shorter-term.

Reflexive representative claims also involve parties taking a reflexive attitude towards national and other jurisdictional boundaries. Claiming to represent the interests of people within a country may entail claiming to represent many outside it too – or indeed non-citizen residents and temporary residents. The basis of some claims is cross-national or multi-jurisdictional. Parties still, of course, compete in national and local elections. But they do so – they make claims – in ways that explicitly recognise the legitimacy of claims and claimants of non-candidates of many kinds, and offer to foster elements of direct, participative or deliberative democracy to include stakeholders and ordinary citizens in governmental decision-making. Parties operating by reflexive claims seek to embed themselves in plural communities, seeking authorisations and a sense of authentic connection. They may well forge electoral alliances whereby, for example,

environmental or human rights or small business bodies effectively run campaigns alongside, or in alliance with, the party.

Weberian ideal-types, of course, are not designed to be accurate representations of particular realities. Rather, they are abstractions designed to represent general, and in some cases emergent, sets of institutional properties and patterns. The ideal-types of party representation set out here are no exception. Nonetheless, to be (useful) ideal-types, they must offer some discernible purchase on realities; a distinctive, illuminating empirical force. This issue arises especially with regard to the reflexive mode of party representation. I have implied that there is evidence that this mode is emergent. Evidence for this claim can, I would argue, be gleaned from a number of developments.

1. Explicit attention is being paid by a number of major parties in western democracies to voter disengagement, and in many cases to the threat to representative democracy that it is understood to pose. For example, Gordon Brown's government in the UK has set in train a process of exploring new democratic institutions, outside parties, with some potential to re-engage voters.[15] In the Netherlands, direct democracy in the form of the national policy referendum has been high on the political agenda in recent years. In short, there is evidence of exploration of more decentralised, fine-grained modes of representation by parties – even where parties may not be beneficiaries.

2. There is a great deal of recognition, across the countries of Europe and elsewhere, of a growing interdependence between nations on a regional and global level. As part of that, there is recognition by parties and their leaders that the function of 'political representation' cannot always be confined realistically to processes and institutions located clearly within nation-states. The European Union itself, of course, is one highly significant and complex manifestation of such recognition. Acceptance of representative roles (among other roles) played by UN institutions and international courts, on the part of national parties, is increasingly common. One aspect of the reflexive mode is party recognition of the issue of the porousness of national boundaries, and the interdependence of different territorial and functional bodies, all of which can make certain claims to be representative.

3. In recent years, a number of political scientists and others have been charting a series of trends in contemporary states, all of which suggest that state functions and styles are shifting in fundamental ways. Some write of the 'hollowing out of the state', suggesting that state functions are going up (to regional bodies), down (to devolved and local bodies) and out (to the private and voluntary sectors, for example through

privatisation and competitive tendering).[16] Others have focused on the rise of functional policy networks, and the significance of variegated processes of 'governance' within and beyond the more formal confines of government.[17] Among other things, such developments offer challenges to parties as the necessarily central actors in political change, and as purveyors of singular and enduring ideologies offering overarching visions of state-led change.

In general terms, the reflexive mode of party representation may be less familiar as a pointer to historical or contemporary practice than popular and statal modes. Arguably, however, some key elements associated with it are becoming more evident in a number of countries and contexts. There are factors that encourage parties to adopt reflexive modes: their desire for success, and therefore their need to adapt to new circumstances, and therefore in turn their need for flexible responses to trends towards individualisation, globalisation, increased social and territorial mobility, 'identity' rather than class politics, technological advances, the decline of traditional ideologies, and so on.

These brief comments suggest that we may be living through a moment of transition from one party mode (the statal) to another (the reflexive). I do not want to overstate this point; at some level, modes of representation are always in transition, and the evidence for particular trends is complex and contested.[18]

Would parties that claim to be representative in this way still be *parties*? I would argue that they will, and would appeal to Sartori's baseline definition of a function that is performed by political parties but not systematically by other organisations – the offering of candidates in democratic elections.[19] The basis on which those candidates are put up – the nature of the representative claims made by and for them – can vary enormously from one mode of representation to another; again, the representative claim framework stresses precisely representation as an economy of tenuous claims rather than a set of undisputed facts.

### Taking stock

I have offered three outline ideal-types of representative claims made by political parties. The ideal-types are recognisable as generalisations of certain ways parties operated – and the contexts in which they operated – in different historical eras in Europe, North America and Australasia in particular. They are not primarily periodisations; rather, they are modes of representative claim-making, with attendant assumptions about the place, roles and potential of parties. Parties, for example, may claim to be representative in implicit or explicit ways; in staged or taken-for-granted ways; in top-down or bottom-up ways; in electoral contexts or extra-electoral contexts; in ways pertaining to the nation-state only, or to cross-national interests as well.

Clearly, the environment in which parties claim to be representative influences the types of claims that are made, and that are likely to be successful (which is not to say that parties themselves cannot sometimes manipulate the environment to suit them). A key feature of that environment is just how many serious competitors parties have when it comes to claiming to represent varied constituencies and audiences. Many observers have rightly noted that the environment today – and, projecting forward, in the likely medium-term future – is more competitive than ever before in the historical life of parties. There are competitors with respect to who makes representative claims – NGOs, and citizens themselves, for example, make more effective, prominent and constant representative claims than previously. The character of the claims varies too. For example, cultural identity claims can be troubling for parties who (unless they are explicitly regional or ethnicity-based parties) seek to encompass and 'bundle' a wide set of citizen interests.

Strongly moral or religious claims can likewise be troubling given the need for parties to be prepared to compromise, internally and with other parties, in the pragmatic name of the consistent maintenance of government.[20]

What I have sought to do is to stress that democratic representation is not something that parties used to (be able to) do, and that they no longer do. To argue that is to over-generalise on the basis of one mode of representative claim-making – broadly speaking the one I have called the popular mode. It is also to take representation as exhausted in electoral results, which it clearly is not – no group or person can ever fully represent, and many different groups and people (elected and otherwise) are capable of mounting convincing representative claims, not least in largely free and democratic systems. And further, it is to assume that 'representative democracy' takes a much more fixed, non-negotiable form than in fact it can.

By the same token, the circumstances that encourage statal or reflexive rather than popular representative claim-making by parties do not necessarily add up to a picture that is less democratic. It can, rather, be differently democratic: a style of democratic practice which, for example, does not afford a strong privilege to electoral modes of participation over a variety of others, and which does not privilege or require a particular party form. It is understandable that the statal mode of party representation may be seen as less democratic, certainly in comparison to the popular mode. Party scholars tend to see it that way, amid concern that the statal mode coincides with what they see as a sharp decline in 'representational' functions of parties, since parties have fewer grassroots members, are more reliant on the state for funding, are detached from class and other societal interests, and so on. Representative democracy, in its classical definitions, is supposed to be about representing the people to the state, and not the other way around. However, nationalism and the consolidation of linguistically and otherwise culturally

homogeneous nation-states also went hand-in-glove with the development of modern representative democracy, providing one of its core conditions of possibility. Hence, the phenomenon of statal parties (claiming to be) speaking for the nation has democratic resonances too. Likewise, centralisation of power within the state and state initiative-taking has also, historically, been associated with democracy. The development of the welfare state in post-Second World War western Europe, and the New Deal in the United States, are examples of the expansion and deployment of state power, driven by party ideology, and defended through theories of fairness, equality and opportunity which resonate deeply with democratic principles. Resonances of one or other mode with democracy are, in sum, historically contingent; this is the primary reason for my argument that there is no intrinsic democratic ranking we can apply to the three different modes of representation.

Is democracy unthinkable save for political parties, today? Maybe it was, in the era when democracy was characterised by the dominance of popular representative claims by parties. But in the democracy-to-come[21] – which by definition will grow from seeds already germinated – it may not be. As democracy is rethought and remade, perhaps party forms and the necessity of parties deserve rethinking (and a number of parties are facing up to some of the key challenges of responsiveness and decentralisation, for example).[22] Parties may become 'mutants' or 'hybrids'[23] to the point where they are no longer recognised as parties as such. Parties which edge towards claiming to be representative primarily in reflexive mode have already gone some way down that road. In the end, whether democracy is unthinkable save for political parties is no longer the question we need to ask. Rather, we need to ask: what kinds of representative democracy are thinkable? And what forms of party claims, if any, are appropriate to them?

## References and Notes

1. One part of the present task is to bring key aspects of democratic theory – and especially reconceptualisations of political representation – to bear on the analysis of political parties. Democratic theorists and students of political parties have all too often operated in mutual isolation, arguably to the detriment of the work of both. For an extended analysis of this mutual disregard, the reasons behind it, and some other ways in which it might be addressed, see I. van Biezen and M. Saward (2008) Democratic theorists and party scholars: why they don't talk to each other, and why they should. *Perspectives on Politics*, **6**(1), 21–35.
2. M. Saward (2008) Authorisation and authenticity: representation and the unelected. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, forthcoming.
3. M. Saward (2006) The representative claim. *Contemporary Political Theory*, **5**, 297–318.
4. I. van Biezen (2003) The place of parties in contemporary democracies. *West European Politics*, **26**, 171–184, p. 172.

5. P. Mair (2006) Ruling the void? The hollowing of western democracy. *New Left Review*, **42**, 25–51, p. 45.

6. See the extensive analysis in B. Manin (1997) *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

7. The word 'statal' is unfamiliar to contemporary Anglo-Saxon ears. The OED defines it as 'Of or pertaining to a State (of the US or other federation), as distinguished from *national*'. I offer it rather as referring to matters of or pertaining to the state in the Weberian sense of that set of organisations that together claim the monopoly of legitimate force in a given territory. The term is used here rather than 'state' simply because it makes this ideal-type a grammatical equivalent of the other two – popular and reflexive.

8. S. Bartolini and P. Mair (2001) Challenges to contemporary political parties. In: L. Diamond and R. Gunther (eds) *Political Parties and Democracy* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 327–344, p. 336.

9. I. van Biezen (2003) The place of parties in contemporary democracies. *West European Politics*, **26**, 171–184, p. 182.

10. P. Mair (2006) Ruling the void? The hollowing of western democracy. *New Left Review*, **42**, 25–51, p. 45.

11. R. F. Fenno, Jr. (2003) *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (New York: Longman). E. Goffman (1990) [1959] *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin).

12. See the discussion in R. S. Katz and P. Mair (1995) Changing models of party organisation and party democracy: the emergence of the cartel party. *Party Politics*, **1**, 5–28.

13. P. C. Schmitter (2001) Parties are not what they once were, in L. Diamond and R. Gunther (eds) *Political Parties and Democracy* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press).

14. For varied perspectives on deliberative democracy and accounts of the rise of this perspective in contemporary democratic theory, see J. S. Fishkin and P. Laslett (eds) (2003) *Debating Deliberative Democracy* (London: Blackwell); M. Saward (ed.) (2000) *Democratic Innovation: Deliberation, Representation and Association* (London: Routledge).

15. P. Toynbee (2007) Brown's promises of people power open a Pandora's box. *The Guardian*, 4 September.

16. It is not clear, however, that this process results in states being less powerful, rather than differently powerful. See M. Saward (1997) In search of the hollow crown. In: P. Weller, H. Bakvis and R. A. W. Rhodes (eds) *The Hollow Crown* (London: Macmillan).

17. See for example J. Newman (ed.) (2005) *Remaking Governance* (Bristol: The Policy Press).

18. A loose periodisation is implied by the way in which I have presented the three modes of representation. A much fuller analysis might entertain the overarching idea that historical movements among these, and perhaps other, modes are pendular, that is (for example) that more societal modes (such as the popular and the reflexive, on a broad interpretation) tend to give way to

more statal ones, and vice versa. Parties do seek to keep ahead of trends, and to seek competitive advantage in their representative claim-making in so doing. Naturally enough, they might look to cultivate their structures, and their images, in societal modes when state modes are both predominant and under pressure.

19. Cited in S. Bartolini and P. Mair (2001) Challenges to contemporary political parties. In: L. Diamond and R. Gunther (eds) *Political Parties and Democracy* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 327–344, p. 330.

20. See the analysis of Mair for comments on competitors to political parties with respect to representation. P. Mair (2006) Ruling the void? The hollowing of western democracy. *New Left Review*, **42**, 25–51.

21. J. Derrida (2004) The last of the rogue states: the 'democracy to come'. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, **103**, 323–341.

22. See C. Fieschi (2007) How British parties lost our favour. *Parliamentary Affairs*, **60**, 143–152.

23. P. C. Schmitter (2001) Parties are not what they once were. In: L. Diamond and R. Gunther (eds) *Political Parties and Democracy* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press).

### About the Author

**Michael Saward** is Professor of Politics at the Open University. In addition to a number of journal articles on representation and democracy, he is the author of *Democracy* (Polity, 2003) and editor of *Democratic Innovation* (Routledge, 2000). He is currently engaged in an Open University-led six-country project on Enacting European Citizenship, supported by the EU's Framework Programme 7.