

BOOK REVIEW

## Do Parties Still Represent? An Analysis of the Representativeness of Political Parties in Western Democracies

Edited by Knut Heidar and Bram Wauters. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018. 186p. £120.00

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Political representation has been challenged by the crisis of party democracy. Western European countries have witnessed a growing detachment from parties, as shown by declining levels of party membership, partisan attachments and trust in political parties. Parallel to these trends, societal transformations have challenged the traditional role that parties play in the circuit of political representation. Indeed, the parties' failure to ensure linkage functions is endangered not only by the atomization of society, but also by globalization and the growing diffusion of digital technologies.

The recent volume edited by Knut Heidar and Bram Wauters, *Do Parties Still Represent?*, has the merit to push the debate on the 'party crisis' one step forward by linking two strands of research, namely the literature on party change and the research on political representation. Moreover, the contributions provide new and original data on party membership mostly based on members' surveys collected over several decades. Anyone with experience of empirical research on political parties, especially party organizations, is aware of just how difficult it is to collect this kind of data. But this book stands out not only for its use of hard-to-find or unexplored data, but also for systematically examining key indicators and dimensions related to the representativeness of political parties.

Knut Heidar and Bram Wauters are both experts in the field of political parties, namely party organizations and party membership, with a vast amount of works focusing in particular on how political parties have changed in the last decades, especially with regard to the 'party on the ground'. This edited volume, which includes case-studies from eight advanced democracies, focuses on the analysis of party membership (its composition and evolution), on the one hand, and on the consequences of (declining) party membership, namely its impact in terms of political representation, on the other hand. From this viewpoint, the contributions examine two distinct dimensions, one related to demographic representativeness, and the other associated with substantial representation, i.e. whether parties still reflect the attitudes and opinions of party voters.

This edited book is structured in 10 chapters. After a literature review and the theoretical framework outlined in the first chapter, country experts present up-to-date analyses of party membership in six Western European countries, plus Australia and Canada. This produces a

range of cases that strengthens the comparative focus of the book and allows the editors to move beyond the insights of the case studies chapter.

Before examining the main findings of the book, it is worth noting that not all countries included in the book show the same trends in terms of evolution of party membership. Some have experienced increasing levels of party membership (e.g. Great Britain), while others present mixed evolutions. However, declining party membership continues to be the trend in most of the countries.

The first important finding of the volume is that parties are not representative of their electorates in descriptive terms. Indeed, women, young people and the lower educated are underrepresented in all countries and in virtually all parties when party members are compared with both the electorate at large and the specific party electorate. Unfortunately, the contributions cannot provide systematic evidence on other characteristics of party members, but it is interesting to note that members belonging to specific organizations (religious associations or trade unions) tend to be overrepresented in political parties. This seems to suggest that there is a strong link between political activism and citizens' mobilization through membership organizations, but the mechanisms behind this are not clear.

Another goal of the volume is to assess whether declining membership figures over time mean that the parties have a lower descriptive representative capacity. From this viewpoint, the findings come as a surprise because there is no evidence of an increasing descriptive gap. This means that that the overall pattern is one of stability.

As far as substantial or attitudinal representativeness is concerned, the general picture is that party members reflect the opinions of their votes quite well, despite their low level of representativeness in descriptive terms. This confirms that there is no deterministic association between descriptive and substantial representation, a finding that can also be found in other empirical studies. The editors speculate in their comparative concluding remarks that electoral incentives are an important mechanism that may boost the representativeness capacity of parties in attitudinal terms. In other words, it is because of their vote-seeking nature that most parties need to look at the preferences of the electorate in order to avoid a failure of the electoral market and the successful entrance of new actors in electoral competition.

Some country chapters also provide findings with regard to other dimensions of political representation, such as candidate selection, the composition of parliaments or trust in political parties. Here again it is not possible to find a strict association between declining membership figures and a failure of political representation. It is true that candidate selection and party activism is highly skewed towards those members with higher resources, but this is to be expected given the professionalization of politics and political parties in particular.

The general findings seem to question the debate about the alleged 'party crisis'. From this viewpoint, the authors claim that 'party organizations in Western democracies still do their main linkage job' (p. 176). The other side of the coin is that in the European political space there is still little room for non-partisan actors as key instruments to ensure political representation. Despite some trends towards stronger candidate-centred politics or more inputs from non-partisan actors, linkages through party organizations remain the main means of ensuring the 'normal' functioning of political representation.

*Do Parties Still Represent?* is certainly an important work, which marshals a great deal of data that allow the authors to uncover neglected aspects related to party politics and political representation. But the contributions could have gone a little further in their analysis by taking into account new trends that are emerging in terms of party membership and citizens' mobilization. The first is the emergence of 'multi-speed membership', a concept elaborated by Susan Scarrow to identify the increasing differentiation of members' integration within party organizations. From this viewpoint, while the authors look at the demand side of party activism, they too readily discount the potential impact that the type of supply can exert on the degree of representativeness. In addition, some chapters could further explore the impact that the increasing use of new ICT

and the adoption of party primaries (to select candidates or party leaders) may have in the linkage function performed by party organizations. Finally, because the book was published in 2018, it would have been interesting to cover and examine in greater detail the impact of the Great Recession and the emergence and success of new populist parties, one of the most discussed phenomena in contemporary politics. This leads to a broader theoretical discussion on the ways these new patterns of party politics are transforming standard conceptualizations of political representation. But these are new areas that research in the field should try to address in the future.

*Do Parties Still Represent?* is a well-written book and is a valuable contribution to the political party literature. Heidar and Wauters' edited volume deserves praise as it will be read not only by specialists but, more importantly, by a much wider audience with a general interest in political representation and the functioning of representative democracies. Overall, this excellent book presents a very interesting and extensive analysis on the challenges political parties face and offers fruitful ground for further research.