

There Is Life in the Party Yet

An interview with Jan-Werner Müller

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No profession is less trustworthy than politicians, global polls have found. Even bankers and advertising executives inspire more faith, and journalists scarcely perform better. Some think we are better off without them – and technology seems to suggest that this is becoming increasingly feasible. While some populist politicians have embraced the distrust, political philosopher Jan-Werner Müller warns this is fundamentally corrosive for democracy. The key to a healthy democracy is not getting rid of politicians and journalists but building and maintaining an open, creative, and dynamic civil society.

Green European Journal: You have called political parties and the media “democracy’s critical infrastructure”. What do you mean by that?

Jan-Werner Müller: The critical infrastructure of democracy is about basic political rights – the right to assembly, to free speech, to association – and the role that intermediary powers such as political parties and the media have in facilitating their use and, especially, in amplifying their impact. It is like a physical infrastructure in that it is about citizens reaching others and being reached by them.

So how do parties contribute?

Political parties offer a representation of society, especially its underlying conflicts and cleavages. They do not mechanically reproduce something that is already out there; it is a much more dynamic and creative process. Parties, as the political theorist Nancy Rosenblum has put it, consciously stage the conflict. Now, you could argue that social movements do this too; in fact, so do many other actors. The difference is that parties also aim to get hold of the levers of power.

The dynamics are not mutually exclusive – social movements influence and sometimes even become parties – but parties remain more important than we often assume. Many academics, often on the Left, have a strong anti-party attitude. They think that parties are inherently unrepresentative and potentially oligarchic, increasing inequality, and so on. In some countries, many people share this anti-party animus, sometimes justifiably. But modern representative democracy cannot work without proper parties.

What does “proper” mean? Parties should offer pluralism, both internally and externally. Ideally, parties would be regulated to ensure they contain a meaningful level of internal pluralism. Not infinite pluralism, because after all, someone becomes a partisan precisely because they believe in certain principles. But no principle ever applies itself: even with a commitment to a particular understanding of freedom or environmental protection, for instance, there is always more to be discussed in terms of how to apply principles in particular contexts, how different principles coincide, and what kinds of compromises are

acceptable.

The advantage of these processes is that their participants get used to the notion that those who find themselves on the losing side can still accept the outcome. Because the right procedures were undertaken and everybody had a chance to express themselves, they can accept that the other side could be right. Donald Trump's refusal to accept the outcome of the 2020 US presidential election, and what followed, is a reminder of the important role played by losers in a democracy. What's more, internal debates produce new perspectives, bring forward empirical evidence, and allow more people to talk about their lived experiences. None of this can happen in one- person parties.

Many party landscapes have been shaken up in the last decade. Political forces, perhaps most notably the Five Star Movement in Italy, increasingly declare themselves to be movements. What does the rise of movement parties say about democracy today?

The appearance of new actors and institutions is a good thing in principle. Some people like to complain that there are too many old parties, that the system is ossified, and that we are faced with a "crisis of representation". But then again, people also called it a crisis when parties like Podemos or SYRIZA emerged in Spain and Greece, accusing them of being "dangerous insurgents". You start to wonder, what is not a crisis of representation? If nothing changes, it's a crisis, and if something changes, then it's also a crisis. In theory, it is positive if the system is sufficiently open to new political actors. While there has been a certain amount of whining about the decline of people's parties, it is not a sign of anything going wrong with democracy.

However, some so-called movement parties lack internal pluralistic structures and transparency. Some believe in what political sociologist Paolo Gerbaudo refers to as "participationism". This stresses members' active involvement and engagement, especially online, but it is very difficult to assess how decisions are actually made, and what the clicks really mean: it can be unclear what the role of supporters is beyond occasionally clicking on something and going along with what the "great leader" says.

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In other cases, calling yourself a movement is just PR. When Sebastian Kurz refashioned the Austrian People's Party, he called it a movement but it's the same old party, only more subservient to a highly power- conscious leader. Macron's La République En Marche is still a party; there's nothing to justify considering it a movement. Italy's Five Star Movement is probably the most radical attempt to break with both the party form and the professional media (which their figurehead, Beppe Grillo, always denounced as corrupt), yet it increasingly resembles a traditional party. You can find the good or the bad in that, but it confirms that those that make a great fanfare about being movements often end up like conventional parties.

The social bonds that used to tie parties together are not as strong as they used to be. Can the party form still reflect the diversity of modern society?

It is clear that a fundamental set of changes within society will have consequences for parties and party systems, and the general institutional form that parties take. Pining for a return to the 1950s or 1960s, when people's social identities were often more immediately translated into the large people's parties, is not productive. This is not coming back.

Forms of engagement might change and people might not have life-long memberships like they used to, but it would be premature to declare that "there's no life left in the party". If you had told someone 15 years ago that [Jean-Luc Mélenchon's left-wing party] La France Insoumise would gain half a million supporters (though what that means is debatable), or that Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party in the UK would reach half a million members, it would have been hard to believe. People are still willing to join parties and become engaged in one way or another.

Going back to the idea of critical infrastructure, do political systems need to think harder about regulating parties to maintain healthy, pluralistic democracies?

A lot starts with party financing. Europeans like to turn up their noses at the United States because spending 14 billion dollars on federal election campaigns is so obscene. But looking closely at how different European countries regulate their own systems, from a normative point of view, it is not much better. The numbers are smaller but there is still inequality, unfairness, and dark money. Think about how tax deductions mean that the poor effectively subsidise the political preferences of the wealthy. My suggestion – following the lead of a number of academics and politicians – is that everyone should have a voucher of equal worth to spend on democracy's critical infrastructure.

What is the role of the media, particularly traditional media, in political life?

Media systems operate differently, so not all critical infrastructures are the same. In the UK, the BBC is of course different from a highly commercialised infrastructure, which is again different from the media landscapes in countries where pluralism has been drastically reduced, such as Hungary and, to some extent, Poland. That said, one of journalism's primary obligations is to inform citizens about the representations offered by political parties and, to a degree, to judge these.

Beyond that, there is nothing inherently wrong with journalists or media institutions taking a stance. We tend to forget that many socialist parties used to have their own newspapers, and many leaders emerged not from the trade union movement but out of journalism. Taking a stance doesn't mean inventing falsehoods like Fox News in the US but interpreting and reporting on the world from a particular point of view. As long as everybody roughly knows what they're getting, where it's coming from, and why it looks the way it does, there's nothing wrong with that. There is still plenty of room for regulation – in terms of not inciting violence, not spreading misinformation or disinformation, and not denigrating certain groups (in the way right-wing populists do) – that can coexist with an open system that brings out the creative and dynamic dimension of democracy much more clearly than today.

Unlike traditional media, social media offers a direct connection between users and politicians, pundits, and influencers. How does social media change our democratic politics?

Social media is still mediated, just in very untransparent ways. It may seem like a direct relation, which encourages the conclusion that there is an affinity between social media and populism, but this directness is an illusion. Social media companies, like traditional media, are intermediaries – they are also part of the critical infrastructure of our democracies.

Of course, social media companies are the first to say that they are only in the business of “connecting people”, that they take no stance, and that deleting the account of the president of the United States makes them very uncomfortable. But social media technology, just like physical infrastructure, could be set up in different ways. The business models and the underlying algorithms which influence how these systems work can have highly pernicious effects on democratic debate. Currently, they are black boxes. While total transparency is an illusion, researchers must be able to understand these systems to assess their likely effects and what could, and should, be changed.

At the same time, I am reluctant to say that social media is bound to be harmful to democracy. It brings creativity and openness, and there is a lot to be said about the access it offers. It also allows self-appointed representatives to hit upon issues that would otherwise be overlooked.

#MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter could only have grown in the way they did through social media.

The hard question is moving from having more representations out there through social media to structured debate. With parties and traditional media, we know roughly how debate works: exchanging claims, pushing back, saying when an attack is unjust, and so forth. This kind of structured debate is much more difficult on social media.

The question about the link between media technologies and democracy was also raised during previous media revolutions. In the 1930s, the philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin famously argued that just as cinema had replaced the traditional actor with the film star, the traditional politician had been replaced by the dictator. I would reject any technological determinism, but questions about the link between social media and democracy are legitimate.

What do you make of the growing calls for democratic innovations such as citizens' assemblies?

Citizens' assemblies are especially useful where there is reason to believe that parties will make poor decisions or none at all. When it comes to shrinking the size of parliament or changing the electoral system, parties may be reluctant to take decisions against their interests, so different forms of decision-making make sense. To take two examples from Ireland, the 2016 to 2017 Citizens' Assembly and the 2018 referendum on abortion also show how collective decisions that have a strong ethical element but don't require great expertise can be tackled effectively through comprehensive debate.

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However, some want to go much further and replace party politics altogether. This is another sign of the anti-party impetus, and I have two major reservations. First, democracy depends on losers knowing what to do. When a party-political struggle is lost, the party uses the time until the next election to mobilise more people and refine its arguments before trying again. If randomly selected citizens make a decision, it is unclear how that decision could be revised. What should the losers do, and which institutions could they draw on to strengthen their side? Some hard-nosed political scientists argue that elections happen in the shadow of civil war. Thankfully, this is not the case in Europe today. The purpose of elections remains to show the relative strength of different groups in society in a peaceful way. Parties remain particularly good at this, but that function disappears with groups of randomly selected citizens.

Second, the evidence on participation and citizens' assemblies is not clear cut. Some findings show that they further benefit the advantaged. Yes, the selection criteria can be tweaked, and it is not true that only the privileged will show up, but any form that moves away from traditional parties does tend to privilege well-educated, well-off people with more time and resources. Citizens' assemblies might have a place, but they are no replacement for party politics.



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