Are political parties really indispensable? An overview of the alternatives

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Abstract
Representative democracy is inconceivable without political parties, most scholars seem to agree. Parties are required to recruit political leaders, aggregate demands, organise government and opposition, and mobilise citizens. However, they also close the representative process, reduce citizens' capacity for spontaneous action and impede open-minded deliberation. While parties suffer from public hostility, alternative democratic forms have been conceived and sometimes tried out either in historical regimes or in small-scale experiments: assembly democracy, individual representation, council democracy, referendum democracy, liquid democracy and sortition. Exploring these alternatives with open-mind challenges the path-dependent assumption that parties are indispensable, but also helps to re-appreciate their roles and value. Responding to a call for more dialogue between empirical research on political parties and contemporary democratic theory, this article widens the debate on the necessity of political parties by extending it to new theoretical proposals, and maps it by bringing together insights from both fields.

Keywords
Democracy, political parties, representation, sortition, liquid democracy

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Introduction

James Bryce, British jurist, historian and pioneer of political science, concluded already in 1921 that: 'parties are inevitable. No free large country has been without them. No one has shown how representative government could be worked without them' (Bryce, 1921: I, 134). His insight was echoed two decades later by the American political scientist Elmer Eric Schattschneider: '[M]odern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties' (Schattschneider, 1942: 1). The statement has become received wisdom in the discipline, very often quoted or paraphrased (e.g. Dalton, Farrell and McAllister, 2013: 3; Yanai, 1999; White, 2006: 7-8; Ignazi 2017). However, as we shall see, there are instances of party-less democracy not only to be found in the past[1], but also in the present. Besides, in recent years, political activists and academics have proposed new models such as sortition or delegation via Internet which make it easier to conceive of democratic arrangements without parties. Thus, democracy *is* conceivable without parties. The next question is whether alternative models would be viable and desirable (Wright, 2010). Occasionally, alternative forms of representative government without political parties like corporatism, council democracy or individual representation have been discussed, but usually found wanting and unsuitable for modern democratic polities (Strøm, 2000; Goodin, 2008: 204-223; Kölln, 2015). What is lacking is a systematic overview of the alternatives to parties (including those discussed in political theory but never tried in practice) and of the stakes of the debate – which is precisely what this survey article offers.

The question of the dispensability of parties has more than a purely speculative value. It has empirical as well as normative implications that are often mingled in the ambiguous word 'indispensable'. Does it mean that large-scale democracy would not work without parties? That it would not deliver the same benefits? That it would be less valuable? One aim of this article is to clarify what we mean when we judge parties as 'indispensable'. Empirically, we want to know whether it is true that democracy cannot deliver what we expect from it without parties. Normatively, we want to assess to what extent we should regret the ongoing decline of partisanship (Van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke, 2012) and party legitimacy (Ignazi, 2017), and whether we should actively look for ways of rehabilitating or revitalizing parties (Wolkenstein, 2019b) and partisanship (White and Ypi, 2016; Bonotti 2017). Thus, our article questions certain assumptions considered self-evident in the academic literature on parties.

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[1] For example, it has been argued that there were no parties in the contemporary sense in Athenian democracy (Hansen, 2014), in some indigenous African political systems (Wiredu, 1995: 59) and even in the early days of Western representative governments (Rosenblum, 2008).

Political parties have always been contested (Daalder, 2002; Scarrow, 2002; Rosenblum, 2008), but it is hard to deny that the question of their democratic value is timely. They suffer from a deep deficit of public appreciation (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Ignazi, 2017). Traditional party systems have been destabilized in many countries, with challenger parties sometimes claiming to be 'movements' rather than 'parties'. 'Digital parties' have made their appearance (Gerbaudo, 2018), while many traditional parties try to regain popular support through internal democratization (Katz, 2013; Ignazi, 2020). Finally, the so-called 'populist' rhetoric about a united and homogeneous people can be seen as eroding the support for political pluralism, and as a "revolt against intermediary bodies" (Urbinati, 2015), of which parties are an essential part. According to Peter Mair (2013: 1), the age of party democracy has passed, parties having lost their *centrality*. Even more than that, the very *necessity* of parties is now challenged by some politicians, some citizens, and by alternative models of democracy.

To feed the discussion as to whether a party-less democracy would be viable under contemporary conditions (empirical question) and whether it would be desirable (normative question), we proceed in two steps. We start by quickly reviewing the main functions served by parties in a representative democracy, and the main reproaches that have been addressed to them, bringing together the empirical and the political theory literatures[2]. To know whether parties are dispensable, we need first to be clear about what they usually do or can do, and why these functions may be considered valuable. And then we need to understand why some people are dissatisfied with parties and advocate alternative forms. With a clearer view of their potential and limits, we can introduce alternative arrangements, inquiring whether they would really manage to get rid of parties and what that would entail with regards to these functions. Obviously, we will not be able to go into the detail and full normative appraisal of all existing alternatives to parties. Our aim is rather to offer a general overview of the question, arguments and relevant literature, summarizing existing knowledge, questioning widely held assumptions, introducing recent theoretical proposals and identifying gaps which invite further research.

Before we start, let us clarify our terminology. We understand democracy as covering a wide range of political systems where the freedoms of conscience, expression and association are respected and where people exercise some form of popular control over the decision-making process. Hence, to be open-minded, we do not assume *by definition* that elections or parties are

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[2] This responds to a call for a better integration of two literatures (empirical and theoretical) that have largely developed in mutual isolation. See Van Biezen and Saward, 2008.

necessary components of democracy. And we understand parties as political associations competing for political office or influence within political institutions[3]. This distinguishes parties from lobbies or pressure groups, which aim at influencing the decision-making process from the outside, without securing an institutionalised position within it – like a seat or a group in Parliament. Yet this thin definition also leaves open the possibility of having parties in a non-electoral democracy by keeping elections out of the definition – in opposition to dominant definitions (e.g. Sartori, 1976) or the widely held assumption that they are "inexorably linked" (Katz, 1980: xi). To reduce complexity, we bracket differences between types of parties and types of party systems, to consider party democracy as a general form: an ideal-type of representative democracy in which parties play a pivotal role in organizing representation.

The functions and effects of political parties

There are several ways to classify and label the different functions of parties (see van Haute and Sauger, 2018: 581-582), but a broad consensus seems to have formed about the following four functions (Mair, 2013: 89).

Firstly, parties recruit political leaders, office-holders or representatives in legislatures and other political institutions. This recruitment or selection function may be considered valuable for at least two reasons. First, it may increase political competence because parties are usually well-informed about what different people have achieved in other positions and about the skills that are required to be a good officeholder. Compared to the random assignment of people to positions, party selection creates a dynamic where people can prove their worth at lower ladders of power before being nominated for more important responsibilities (Gastil and Wright, 2018: 322). Second, and relatedly, strong parties have the capacity to filter out undesirable candidates, acting as 'gatekeepers' (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

However, this selection function comes at the price of a certain 'closure' of the representative system, excluding valuable candidates for office that are unaligned with existing parties or have failed to win the favours of party leaders. Besides, parties' influence over the selection of office holders in the administration or in supposedly independent institutions like

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[3] Arguably, parties have not always competed for office. In the 17th Century UK, for example, their aim was to coordinate action in the House of Lords, while appointment to office was in the hand of the King. We thank a reviewer for the useful qualification.

constitutional courts may lead to an excess of partisan politicization, often pointed at as "partitocracy" (see De Winter, della Porta and Deschouwer 1996).

Secondly, parties publish election platforms and other political programmes which are supposed to reflect, articulate and aggregate the demands and interests of voters (Dalton, Farrell and McAllister, 2013: 8-9; Epstein, 1967: 12-13; King, 1969: 135-140). This "linkage" function allegedly increases the chance that the government represents the aspirations and interests of its citizens – which is considered the essence of a representative democracy. Empirical studies suggest that parties are indeed usually responsive to voters' demands and opinions (e.g. Andeweg, 2011; Dalton, Farrell and McAllister, 2013; Thomassen and Van Ham, 2014). What is more, the aggregation and articulation of voters' demands and interests into coherent political projects offers other benefits. It encourages the transformation of citizens' private concerns into projects for the whole society (Urbinati, 2006: ch. 1 and 3; White and Ypi, 2016; Bonotti 2017), fostering generality, inclusion and the equal consideration of interests. It secures a certain ideological coherence, a link between enacted policies that would likely be lacking in a party-less democracy (Goodin, 2008: 210-211). With individual representatives acting on their own, different majorities would be able to pass conflicting legislation during a single term in office. Finally, it makes political conflicts more visible and understandable (what we shall call "readability") for voters, who can more clearly see what the main positions and arguments on different issues of public concern are (Rummens, 2012).

However, this process of aggregation and articulation may also generate a form of closure, excluding popular demands which are not taken up by parties – and cannot be "imposed" to them because they are so oligarchical (Michels 2017/1911; Ostrogorski, 1964). This may be beneficial in some cases, for example when anti-democratic or illiberal demands are excluded, but regrettable in other cases, for example when the main parties act like a cartel (Katz and Mair, 1995), deliberately leaving aside some policy issues, at the cost of responsiveness. Furthermore, scholars argue that voters' opinions and demands may be manipulated by media and political elites (e.g. Bawm et al., 2012; Disch, 2011; Gilens, 2005; Holmsberg, 2011), a tendency that might be reduced if representatives did not have to compete for citizens' support. Finally, it has also been argued that dominant parties have become agents of the state, alienated from civil society and betraying their original principles and ideologies for the sake of keeping their power and privileges (Crouch, 2004: 70-77; Mair, 2013: 87). As a result, they would now fail in their linkage function and thereby fragilise democracy (Ignazi 2017).

A third function concerns the formation, organisation and supervision of government and opposition (Hershey, 2006; King, 1969: 45-48; Seiler, 1993: 29-31). This can be considered valuable on several accounts. Without parties endorsing responsibility for a government's actions and inactions, its rule might be either excessively personalised or not transparent enough. In the first scenario, it is the head of the government who attracts all the attention, as can be observed in strong presidential systems, with the risk of charisma becoming more important than ideas. In the second, if power is shared by multiple actors not organised in parties, it might be more difficult for citizens to monitor their representatives and to assign responsibility for failures.

When they are not in government, parties are supposed to organise the opposition. An organised opposition is valuable to keep the government accountable and responsive to its citizens. Mair (2013: 88) suggests that opposition "now increasingly comes from outside conventional party politics", but party-structured opposition still plays an integrative and pacifying function by maintaining political losers on the political stage (Rummens, 2012). It incentivises them to play their role in the opposition and wait for more favourable circumstances rather than boycott representative institutions or take violent action.

The main downside of having strong parties organising government and opposition is probably the limits it imposes on deliberation[4]. If parties discipline MPs, debates in parliament have no chance of leading to position changes (see Leydet, 2015). They become merely addressed to the electorate. This can help voters make up their mind by being exposed to a restricted yet plural set of competing visions (Manin 1987; Goodin, 2008: 186-203), but it also creates frustration if people have the feeling that elected representatives are incapable of changing their mind or that the opposition is incapable of recognizing a good policy enacted by the majority. Epistemically speaking, the strong incentives to keep to the party line also inhibit collective progress through argumentation and correction of errors.

Fourth and finally, parties mobilise voters in election campaigns and allow them to participate in debates and deliberations, although this mobilisation power seems to have weakened as a result of party dealignment, increasing volatility, declining turnout and diminishing trust in political parties (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002: 262-266; see also Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014). It is especially – but not exclusively – socialist thinkers who have seen value in the mobilising power of parties. Indeed, parties seemed to have an irreplaceable

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[4] We focus here on parliamentary debates. On the broader relationship between parties and deliberation (within parties, parliaments and civil society), see Gherghina and Jacquet, 2022.

capacity to unite the working class around shared goals, to 'discipline' it when needed to achieve a compromise (Przeworski, 1985), and even to promote class-consciousness (Vandamme, 2021). Hence, from a socialist perspective, the creation of a strong party to compete in elections can be seen as the most promising way to empower the "crowds" (Dean, 2016). As Seymour Martin Lipset (1963: 230) put it, the competition between class-based parties in elections is "the democratic translation of the class struggle"[5].

The main negative effect of this mobilisation power is probably the incentive that electoral competition creates for parties to discredit political opponents, attack straw men, or even to demonize some parts of the population when the distinction between legitimate opponents and enemies becomes blurred. This, again, makes reasoned public deliberation more difficult. Thus, the French philosopher Simone Weil (2017/1950) blamed parties for being exclusively concerned with their own growth, "killing in the souls the sense of truth and justice" (33). She cynically added: "If we entrusted the devil with the organisation of public life, he could not imagine anything more ingenious" (43).

These four functions (selection, linkage, organisation of government and opposition, and mobilisation) do not exhaust the valuable roles that parties can play in a diversity of contexts[6], but they are the main ones. They are all functions that parties *could* perform when they are powerful political actors. In some contexts, however, they fail to perform some of these functions: self-appointed candidates à la Donald Trump achieve nomination through primaries and impose their own (not necessarily coherent) political agenda on their party. Besides, it is now clear that contemporary parties have more limited powers compared to the mass parties of the 20th Century (see Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002; Mair, 2013). Nevertheless, these are functions that they can perform and that should feed any discussion on parties' democratic value.

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[5] Not all socialists will value parties in that way. Thus, for example, the German philosopher Michael Jäger used this interpretation to develop a critical Marxist theory of parties. In his view, parties paralyse the class struggle by reducing members of a class to passive voters, separated from political actors representing them via parties. Thus, the parties also separate a public from a private sphere and protect, in the end, the core of the capitalist system (Jäger, 1983: 73-93).

[6] An additional function that they can play in some contexts has to do with their capacity to foster democratic norms by accepting to share power with competitors instead of monopolizing it (for counter-examples, see Wolkenstein, 2020). Besides, when they are inclusive and participatory, they can turn into agents of popular sovereignty "enabling citizens to act through the institutions of the state" (Wolkenstein, 2019a: 349).

Alternative systems: past and present

At least four democratic alternatives to party democracy have been proposed and to some extent tried out in different polities in the past (and some also in the present): assembly democracy, individual representation, council democracy and referendum democracy (see Katz, 1987; Strøm, 2000: 183-189; Kölln, 2015). Depending on the authors, these systems are sometimes meant to do without parties, sometimes to shift parties from the central stage of politics to its margins. Some also regard corporatism as an alternative (e.g. Strøm, 2000: 183-189), but we do not discuss it here as historically it has never been a democratic alternative to party democracy – at best a supplement to it and at worst an authoritarian alternative.

Assembly democracy

In an assembly democracy, all important decisions are taken by a meeting or assembly open to all citizens. It is probably the oldest and simplest form of democracy, to which we spontaneously associate the image of Athens. More recent examples include town-meetings, mostly practiced in New-England in the 17th and 18th Century and still existing nowadays in some US towns (Bryan 2010), or the Landsgemeinde in two Swiss cantons (Schaub, 2012). In all these assemblies, the emphasis is laid on discussion more than adversarial competition for power (Mansbridge, 1980), making parties less necessary if not undesirable.

The question of course is whether such democratic practice is scalable[7]. The received wisdom is that it is not feasible in large-scale democracies, where it is impossible for all citizens to meet and discuss together before making decisions. To some – libertarian municipalists for example (see Bookchin, 2015) –, this appears as a reason to rehabilitate lower scales of governance. If, however, one wants to preserve as much as possible the logic of assembly democracy in large-scale democracies, there are three available options: either to articulate local assemblies in a pyramidal structure, with delegates (council democracy), or to restrict the franchise to a selected pool of deliberants (sortition), or to move to online interactions (liquid democracy). These models will be discussed in what follows. Unless one of these paths is taken,

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[7] The same arguably holds for a radical form of assembly democracy – consensus democracy – as practiced in some indigenous African political systems. The consensual spirit of this party-less democratic practice has been defended by the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu (1995), who nonetheless acknowledges its utopian character under contemporary circumstances. What he fails to consider, however, is the bias in favour of the status quo – and the prevailing distribution of advantages – entailed by any supra-majoritarian requirement in collective decision-making (see Schwartzberg, 2014).

it seems hard to see assembly democracy as a genuine alternative to party-based representative democracy rather than a local practice embedded in a representative system.

Individual representation

Representation by individuals without ties to political parties, who are elected by the citizens of a given territory (district, constituency or riding), is often considered the most likely alternative to party democracy (Strøm, 2000: 203; Kölln, 2015; Goodin, 2008: 205-214). It is not only thinkable, as Kölln (2015) shows in her utopian construction of 'Individualcountry', but also observable in the real world. In some European countries, parliaments were elected before parties existed; but because of their very limited franchise they were not very democratic. When the right to vote was extended to a majority of the population, parties had already emerged and played a pivotal role (see for example Duverger, 1951: 1-16). Today, party-less parliaments are rare, but not inexistent: besides non-partisan legislatures at local levels of government – such as Nebraska, which hardly manages to keep parties out (Masket and Shor, 2015) – Dag and Carsten Anckar (2000) describe six relatively stable parliamentary democracies without parties. However, all of them are thinly populated island states in the Pacific, their population ranging (in 2000) from 10,000 (Tuvalu) to 105,000 (Micronesia). Attempts to establish a similar system in larger countries have been less successful. In Libya, Pakistan and Uganda, the 'no party democracy' based on individual representation soon degenerated into dictatorship (Djaziri, 1995; Ziring, 1997: 249-328; Tripp, 2010: 39-57, 193-195).

Even without a thorough comparative analysis of the cases, one could see why individual representation without parties risks becoming authoritarian. In the first place, in the absence of a reduced set of options that parties provide, information costs about the candidates are very high for voters (Kölln, 2015: 605). Hence, the selection of representatives is more likely to be influenced by pressure groups, religious groups, clans or local elites without much transparency, harming the values of public visibility and popular accountability. Successful candidates will need either support from powerful lobbies or be wealthy enough to fund their own campaign. In the second place, as Goodin has argued, legislation in a parliament without parties will be the largely unpredictable outcome of negotiations between individual legislators (2008: 211-214; see also Kölln, 2015), with a loss of policy coherence, transparency, and readability, making it difficult for citizens to assign responsibility for failures. Even if an individual representative sincerely tries to be responsive to her voters and articulate their demands, she lacks the power to implement them in isolation from other representatives. Worse, in backroom deals she may be tempted to

betray her voters in exchange for favours without being found out. Governments risk also being formed in backroom negotiations, or they may be based on clans as in the Pacific Republic of Palau (Veenendaal, 2016). Opposition will probably be weak, because unorganised, or even absent if all individual representatives get their way in some legislations. Mobilisation and integration of voters will be minimal. No wonder this system seems to survive only in small-scale traditional and consensus-oriented societies like the islands in the Pacific (see Anckar, 1999: 20-23). It does not seem suited to pluralistic societies, where consensus usually hides hegemony (Mouffe, 2000). A final point is that in open societies respecting the freedoms of conscience, expression and association, informal parties are likely to emerge spontaneously in parliament – as they did in most early parliaments in Europe – which would make the principle of individual representation unviable in the long run.

Thus, although individual representation protects against the undesirable effects of party discipline and the closure of representation by parties, it seems dubious that it offers an attractive alternative – in pluralistic societies at least[8]. Although some functions of parties can be taken over or become unnecessary (see Kölln, 2015: 607-610), individual representation seems to threaten the representative process by making it less readable, less transparent, and more prone to authoritarian backsliding – both because accountability becomes more difficult and because the opposition is less visible and structured.

Council democracy

Council democracy was a socialist ideal. Disagreements existed among theorists about the role of the councils and their articulation with parties and state structures (see Muldoon, 2018), but the model was advocated as a genuine alternative (rather than corrective) to 'bourgeois democracy' by radical Marxist theorists like the Dutch astronomer Anton Pannekoek (1971/1946) and the German school teacher Otto Rühle (1972/1924). Their theory did not precede and inspire historical practice, but followed it: between 1917 and 1920, revolutionary groups in Russia, Germany and Hungary had set up workers' councils and councils of peasants and soldiers (*sovety* in Russia, *Räte* in Germany) which tried to replace the 'bourgeois parliament' and to establish a Soviet Republic or *Räterepublik* (council republic). The workers' councils would not only replace the management of the factory but also elect delegates (with binding mandate and instant

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[8] On the close connection between respect for pluralism and parties, see Bonotti, 2017.

recall) to a local or regional congress that would take over the functions of local or regional government (Carr, 1966: I, 81-82; Sirianni, 1982: 15-42, 63-94). In 1919, German revolutionaries set up a *Räterepublik* in Bremen, Munich and a few other cities, while Hungarians did the same in Budapest. Before the end of the year, all were defeated by regular and irregular military forces (Kolb, 1978: 326-358; Tökes, 1967: 137-174). The Russian Soviets appeared to be more successful, as they survived the civil war and gave their name to the new state (Soviet Union). Yet in fact they also lost practically all power and served mainly as 'transmission belt' for the Communist party oligarchy that controlled more and more sectors of society and absorbed or banned all other parties. Eventually, the Soviets became territorial rather than functional units; inhabitants of a region had to vote for a list of candidates nominated by the party or its auxiliary organisations (Carr, 1966: I, 136-138).

Because of the dominance of the Communist party over the Russian Soviets, both Pannekoek and Rühle ended up advocating workers' councils without parties (Pannekoek, 1972: 111-117; Rühle, 1972: 71-72). Besides, if one takes an orthodox Marxist perspective, there would be no need for an adversarial competition between different groups in a workers' democracy, as all workers share similar interests. The workers' party can be a way to promote socialism under bourgeois democracy, but parties may not be necessary any more once bourgeois democracy has been overcome. Hence, for lack of consideration of legitimate dissent and of the value of political pluralism in Marxist thought, the absence of parties in council democracy risks turning into a one-party democracy, with the consequences that are now familiar to us. If, on the contrary, room is left for dissent among workers and councils, parties are likely to spontaneously emerge, once again. Therefore, it is unclear how council democracy could be presented as an attractive alternative to party democracy, because its historical advocates simply failed to take political disagreements seriously (Muldoon, 2018: 12).

In addition to this, council democracy was conceived at a time when most citizens were working in factories. It therefore made some sense[9] to imagine a political system whose primary unit would be the firm, and where national decisions would be made by delegates of these smaller units. This is unconceivable nowadays, as people's professional occupations are extremely diverse, and considering the number of self-employed and unemployed people. Firms cannot be the basis of political representation anymore. Furthermore, citizens may see

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[9] Although, as already pointed out by Karl Kautsky, council democracy already suffered from a lack of inclusion, leaving aside all those who were not actively engaged in paid work in a firm, in addition to the bourgeoisie (Muldoon, 2018: 11).

themselves better represented by political projects having little to do with their interests *qua* workers.

However, there are two aspects of council democracy that can still inspire an alternative conception of democracy nowadays: workplace democracy on the one hand, and on the other hand the pyramidal delegation model of representation – built on municipalities instead of firms as primary political units (Bookchin 2015) – with recall mechanisms. Yet these do not really challenge the existence of parties at the state level. Besides, any plausible contemporary rehabilitation of council democracy would have to consider the need for legitimate opposition mechanisms more seriously if we do not want it to degenerate into oligarchy and dictatorship as historical experiences did. And in this respect, a credible socialist alternative to multipartyism is still lacking.

Referendum democracy

Referendum democracy has rarely been advocated as a genuine alternative to party democracy but more often as a supplement to it. The model that comes the closest to an alternative, historically, might be the one imagined by Jacobins and Neo-Jacobin Radicals in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century who proposed primary assemblies of all citizens (in small territorial units) that would be able to elect and recall members of parliament and to veto all legislation passed by parliament through a referendum (Lucardie, 2014: 63-74). Inspired by Rousseau, they did not generally favour political parties – few people did, at the time. They failed to realise their projects in France and Germany, but were more successful in Switzerland after 1848. The relatively moderate Swiss Radicals managed to introduce an obligatory constitutional referendum (in 1848), an optional legislative referendum (in 1874) and the popular initiative (in 1891). Even if only 3% of the laws passed by parliament between 1874 and 1994 were rejected by the people, the abrogative referendum hangs like a sword of Damocles above parliament and may affect it indirectly (Kriesi, 1995: 88-89, 98-99).

However, political parties have not disappeared in Switzerland; on the contrary, they have multiplied. Parties recruit political leaders and officials, they articulate and aggregate demands and organise government and opposition. Yet their influence seems more modest than in other European countries (Kriesi, 1995: 131; see also Katz, 1987: 20). Their programmes may be overruled by the people, in a legislative referendum or popular initiative. Coalitions are formed according to a 'magic formula' agreed on in 1959, without negotiations about a government programme (Kriesi, 1995: 207-215). As all major parties are represented in the federal

government, opposition is organised mainly outside parliament, by political movements, pressure groups and citizen groups as well as more radical political parties (Kriesi, 1995: 215-216).

Another example of a (moderate) referendum democracy might be California. According to specialist Jack Citrin, since 1978 'all major policy decisions in California have been settled by a popular vote or a threat of such a vote' (Citrin, 2009: 7). Political parties exist, but their influence seems rather limited[10]. Candidates for public office are selected through a voter-nomination primary election, 'without regard to the political party preference disclosed by the candidate or voter' (Government of California, no date, Article 2, Section 5). The government of the state is organised basically by the governor, who is endorsed rather than recruited by a party and elected directly by the people – and he can be recalled by the people, too (Government of California, no date, Article 5, Section 2; Article 2, Section 13-19).

In the eyes of purists and extreme democrats, California and Switzerland may be seen as not going far enough. We could imagine restricting further the role of parties and elections. The problem, however, is that a fully direct democracy, nowadays, would be extremely time-consuming and demanding for citizens who would need to find the time to get informed on all issues of public policy. This is probably why we do not find serious and fully articulated proposals of the sort (see nonetheless Wolff, 1998: 34-37). However, there is one theoretical proposal which intends to address this limitation, by combining direct legislation by the people with optional representation: liquid democracy, which we will discuss in the next section.

Preliminary conclusions

What are the lessons that can already be drawn from the historical experiences reviewed here? It seems that most alternatives to party democracy that were tried in the past either cannot work in large-scale polities – assembly democracy in particular – or degenerated sooner or later into authoritarian regimes – council democracy and individual representation without parties. Among these alternatives, those who survived are practiced in relatively small or strongly homogeneous polities. Only referendum democracy seems to work fairly well in relatively large and heterogeneous polities like California and Switzerland, but it has not done away with political parties – at least not completely. The question is whether the relative marginalisation of parties in these polities generates more benefits than losses. This question goes beyond the scope of

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[10] In other contexts, it has been argued that they could play an important advocacy and mobilising role in referendum campaigns (Sinnott, 2002).

this article. However, we can contribute to this larger debate by pointing out that such arrangement does not seem to impede parties from performing their key functions. What it does is mainly reducing their grip on the decision-making process, spreading the agenda-setting power to more actors. This entails gains in participatory opportunities for citizens and possibly in responsiveness, but also losses in legislative coherence and organized accountability.

Liquid democracy and sortition: alternative systems for the future?

In recent years two interesting models have been proposed to replace party democracy that have not been tried out yet, at least not in any large-scale polity: sortition-based democracy (sometimes also called 'lottocracy') and 'liquid' or 'delegative'[11] democracy.

Liquid democracy

In a liquid democracy, policy decisions are taken either by citizens directly or by delegates or proxies appointed by them to vote on a certain issue or policy area (Ford, 2002; Blum and Zuber, 2016). Participants can cast or delegate their vote through an online platform such as LiquidFeedback (Kling et al., 2015). A voter can revoke her delegation at any time – hence the 'liquid' nature of the process. Moreover, delegation is a transitive process, i.e. a delegate can transfer her voting weight to a third participant, who can delegate it again to a fourth, and so on. And at voting time, proxies' votes are weighted depending on the number of delegations they have received.

According to its advocates, liquid democracy 'combines the best elements of direct and representative democracy' and 'encourages widespread direct participation in a democratic organization, without unduly burdening or disenfranchising those members who, for lack of time, interest, or knowledge, would prefer to take a more passive role' (Ford, 2002: 1). On the one hand, citizens can initiate proposals and mobilise support for them, as well as vote on any proposal that is on the agenda – as in an assembly democracy or a radical referendum democracy. On the other hand, citizens can delegate their vote to other citizens on any issue or policy area they do not feel concerned or knowledgeable about. And they have full freedom in the choice of their 'representatives': in some cases, a citizen will delegate her vote to a policy-area expert – with expected epistemic benefits for the whole community (Blum and Zuber, 2016:

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[11] We shall not use the expression 'delegative' democracy to avoid confusion with the quite different phenomenon that Guillermo O'Donell (1994) diagnosed in Latin America.

167-169) – or a representative of a pressure group or association she feels affinity with; in other cases she might prefer a friend or relative she trusts.

Liquid democracy has not been tried out by any polity, apart from a few experiments in public consultation – for instance in a county in northern Germany, where the county council (*Kreistag*) decided to put successful initiatives generated by LiquidFeedback on its agenda (Behrens, 2014). It has also been applied within a few organisations, in particular the German Pirate Party (*Piratenpartei*), which adopted the LiquidFeedback software application to facilitate collective deliberation and decision-making among its members. By 2015, it had been used by 14,000 out of 24,000 registered party members. Scholars from the University of Koblenz have investigated the use of liquid democracy in the party between 2010 and 2013 (Kling et al., 2015). Their analysis of the voting behaviour of the users shows that delegations tended to accumulate in the hands of a small number of 'super-voters' over time, but that the latter agreed with the majority of the voters on most issues. In other words, an informal elite emerged but it remained responsive to the rank-and-file (or congruent by chance).

Even if one considers these experiments halfway successful, one may question if liquid democracy could replace party democracy in a large-scale political system. In fact, even some ardent advocates of liquid democracy warn against this idea (Nitsche, 2014). Among the benefits provided by parties that would be lost, legislative coherence and readability would probably be the main ones, as any policy proposal gathering a majority of votes would be adopted, whatever its compatibility with other policies enacted. To address this concern, Blum and Zuber (2016: 181) have suggested restricting liquid democracy to the legislative function and having an elected executive reviewing laws "in terms of financial viability and overall consistency". Yet if the executive is confined to such subordinated role, without the ability to take public responsibility for collective decisions, there would also be a lack of structured accountability. Admittedly, all elected officials being subject to instant recall[12], they would probably care about the opinion of their voters and be highly responsive, but if things are going wrong in the polity, it would likely be difficult to assign responsibility for what would appear as a collective failure. Hence there is a risk of collective rule turning into a "black box" (Rummens, 2012: 38; 2016: 135), at least for the less informed citizens.

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[12] Which raises other types of concerns such as instability, short-termism and lack of deliberative freedom, discussed in Vandamme, 2020.

Whether it is desirable or not, it is not clear that liquid democracy would really do away with political parties. If proxies want to gain influence, attract votes and weigh on collective decisions, they are likely to form political alliances which would soon evolve into political parties or functional equivalents offering attractive articulated projects for the polity (as admitted to some extent by Ford, 2002: 10; see also Valsangiacomo 2021). What would change, however, under liquid democracy, is the monopoly that parties currently enjoy over institutionalised representation[13]. The radical openness of liquid representation to any individual candidate or interest group would likely level the playing field between parties and interest groups (Valsangiacomo, 2021). This could bring about some benefits, in terms of responsiveness for example, but issue-specialization would also reduce the incentives to offer wide and coherent projects speaking to the whole community which make up part of the value of parties.

It may be more plausible to see liquid democracy as an interesting transformation of (rather than an alternative to) existing representative democracies. This is for example what Hélène Landemore (2020) seems to have in mind when advocating a form of liquid democracy. Rather than a full, Internet-based alternative to representative democracy, she suggests opening up representation to citizens' input. The main idea she takes from liquid democracy is that citizens should be free to choose either to participate in collective decision-making or to trust other people (fellow citizens, in her mind) to do it for them. Against the gatekeeping role of parties presented above, *openness* is the keyword in her alternative framework. Hence, according to this model, we should make sure to provide wide and diverse *opportunities* for participation, while leaving it up to citizens to decide whether to seize them or to trust representatives. One example she gives is crowdsourcing, or the possibility to make comments and suggestions on a law proposal posted online. This was practiced in the failed attempt at collectively drafting a new Icelandic Constitution in 2010-2013 (Landemore, 2020: ch. 7).

Therefore, liquid democracy might help to bypass parties by opening new avenues for the expression of popular sovereignty, but not necessarily to get rid of parties – unless it is combined with representation through sortition, the other idea defended by Landemore (among others).

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[13] "Institutionalised", because non-partisan representation occurs within civil society through "self-appointed representatives" (see Montanaro 2012).

Democracy through sortition

Sortition is another story. It is not a recent invention. Already 2400 years ago the ancient Athenians had constructed a machine, the *klèroterion*, which distributed political offices by lot to citizens who had put in a piece of bronze with their name on it (Buchstein, 2009: 30-34; Hansen, 1991: 181). The allotted officials prepared, executed and checked the decisions taken by the popular assembly. They were expected to reach impartial and rational decisions rather than represent the people in the modern sense of the word (Dowlen, 2008: 226; see also Hansen, 1991: 84, 236). In recent times, a different idea of representation emerged as a result of the refinement of statistical techniques and their application in social science, opinion polling and market research (Sintomer, 2007: 104-108, 110-111). A random sample of a certain size taken from a population was considered to represent that population, in a passive or descriptive way: a 'representative sample'. From there, the idea emerged to refine opinion polling by selecting a few hundred people at random to discuss a certain topic and give their opinion after listening to experts and politicians (Fishkin and Farrar, 2005). Broadly similar experiments were conducted under different names: citizen assemblies, citizen juries, citizen panels, consensus conferences, mini-publics, policy juries, planning cells, and so forth (see for an overview Lucardie, 2014: 143-148; also Buchstein, 2009: 385-390; Sintomer, 2007: 101-132). Most of them seemed to result in fairly high-quality deliberation and increased knowledge and understanding among the participants (Lucardie, 2014: 147-148).

While most of these experiments had at best a modest impact on policy decisions, they did provide ammunition for reformers and utopian thinkers who began to advocate sortition as an alternative form of representation. Reformers usually proposed a combination of both selection methods, in the form of a hybrid bicameral system with one elected and one randomly selected chamber (Lucardie, 2014: 126-134). Yet more relevant to our purpose are the radical proposals to do away with elections altogether (Burnheim, 1985; Bouricius, 2013; Hennig, 2019)[14]. Here we focus on Bouricius' model (partly developed with David Schecter) which has the merit of being very concrete from an institutional viewpoint[15]. He suggests replacing the elected legislature by six different types of bodies, all randomly selected, with varying terms in office

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[14] We could have included Guerrero (2014), yet that article makes the case for sortition without fully spelling out the way it should be institutionalized and whether there would still be room for parties and elections. Landemore (2020) is also open to the possibility of a representative system without elections.

[15] And because Burnheim's proposal comes associated with a more radical dismantling of the State, from a socialist perspective – an option we do not consider in this article.

yet frequent rotation: an Agenda Council which suggests topics for new bills; Interest Panels which draft bills about particular issues; Review Panels which amend and review the draft bills; Policy Juries which vote for or against the bills; Rules Councils which decide on procedures; and an Oversight Council which evaluates implementation of the laws (Bouricius and Schecter, 2013; Bouricius, 2013). Membership in the councils and panels would be voluntary, except for the Policy Juries which have to be representative of the entire population. Executive officers (called Administrators by Bouricius and Schecter) might be elected or appointed by yet another randomly selected citizen body, the Executive Hiring Panel, and evaluated by a Performance Review Panel and possibly recalled by an Accountability Jury (Bouricius and Schecter, 2014; Bouricius 2019: 330-331).

At first sight, there seems to be no place for political parties in this kind of schemes doing away with elections[16] – and this has sometimes been considered as counting in favour of sortition (see for example Burnheim 1985: 101, 116). Public officials will be selected by lot, except for the executive officers, who will have no incentive to present themselves as partisan given the administrative nature of their task and the fact that they can be recalled if not consensual enough. Citizens' demands and interests are articulated and aggregated by the Agenda Councils, Interest Panels, Review Panels and finally the Policy Juries. Governments turn into Administration and are formed by the Executive Hiring Panels. Nevertheless, Bouricius does not exclude the formation of parties under such democratic arrangement. As he rightly points out, "parties have organized across the globe under nonelectoral regimes, even when outlawed". Hence, one might expect such political associations to emerge and to "aim to influence the general public, who would form the minipublics" (Bouricius, 2019: 314; see also Burnheim 1985: 162). This, however, would bring them closer to pressure groups than parties in the usual sense, as they would not so much compete for access to political offices as for influence on public opinion.

Therefore, a democracy working exclusively through sortition and appointments would be a genuine alternative to parties as we know them. Several benefits of parties would likely be lacking in such configuration. First, the recruitment of the executive would be deprived from the inside knowledge of parties who know particularly well what different people have achieved at

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[16] By contrast, proposals to combine elections and sortition, for example through a hybrid form of bicameralism, usually recognise some value for parties. See for example Sutherland, 2011 (who reserves parties to an advocacy role); Gastil and Wright, 2018 (who want to combine electoral competition structured by parties and deliberation among lay citizens).

lower levels of government. And one can worry about the kind of backdoor pressures that could influence choices in the body in charge of appointing the executive – at the cost of transparency and widespread accountability. This problem is less salient, however, if the head of the executive becomes the chief administrator rather than the centre of political power. Second, the whole legislative process might be more difficult to follow for citizens, given its complexity, the absence of clear competing programmes and the possible lack of coherence in the different bills garnering temporary majority support. Third and relatedly, there would be less room for organized opposition, as majorities would likely differ from one body to the other and fluctuate due to the frequent rotation among the allotted bodies. It would be less clear who is in power and who is not, and those who fail to get their preferences recognized would be left hoping to see enough of them selected later. Opposition would then likely take the more anarchical form of street protests and lobbying in order to attract the public's attention to some neglected causes. Finally, civil society associations could take over the mobilising function of parties. Mobilisation would in any case be less necessary as much more people would have a genuine chance to be selected for a political task and hence people might be expected to be better prepared to that end (through education in particular)[17]. Yet, from a socialist perspective in particular (see above), one could still see a loss in the transfer of political power from the most mobilised and aware among the population – what used to be called the *avant-garde* – to ordinary and possibly depoliticized citizens (see Vandamme 2021)[18].

In sum, there would be clear losses entailed by the disappearance or radical transformation of parties. Yet radical advocates of sortition will argue that the benefits in terms of political equality, openness, responsiveness or deliberation will compensate for these losses. Once again, it is beyond the scope of this survey article to offer an all-things-considered judgment about this (for interesting insights, see Gastil and Wright, 2018: 322-323; Bouricius, 2019: 314-319; Landemore, 2020: 145-149). What we add to this larger discussion is a focus on the transformation of the role parties play in such alternative configurations and on the losses that would likely emerge from their marginalization.

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[17] There is however an important degree of uncertainty as to whether most citizens would accept the missions for which they have been selected. If acceptance is not mandatory, mobilisation might still be important to avoid having a class of passive citizens ruled by the more educated and engaged.

[18] Not all socialists will endorse such view, though, some being more egalitarian or less elitist than others.

Conclusion

The answer to our central question must necessarily be qualified. In theory, parties are not indispensable to democracy – whether fully direct or representative. As this article has shown, we can imagine forms of collective decision-making where the key functions usually performed by parties would be either unnecessary or taken over by other political actors. In practice, parties do not seem indispensable either – at least under conditions of low pluralism. There are, historically and nowadays, instances of party-less democracy.

Yet undeniably Bryce, Schattschneider and the received wisdom have a point, too. Whereas party democracy has proven to be a relatively stable system in many countries, its alternatives have been much less successful so far. When applied to large-scale polities, the systems of individual representation and council democracy sooner or later (usually sooner) degenerated into repressive authoritarian regimes. Moderate referendum democracy turned out more stable, but only in combination with (weak) party democracy. Moreover, under most alternative arrangements, parties or functional equivalents are likely to remain or re-emerge spontaneously if they are not forbidden, given the organisational advantage that they provide to any social group seeking influence. Hence, whether or not they are *normatively* indispensable, they might be *practically* indispensable for political actors seeking political success. In this sense, they might be unavoidable, to a certain extent – or at least unavoidable in regimes that value and protect the freedoms of thought, expression, and association.

Among the different alternatives reviewed in this article, the most plausible in a large-scale and pluralistic polity are moderate referendum democracy, liquid democracy and democracy through sortition. As we argued, they are unlikely to make parties disappear, but they would probably see them evolve, become closer to lobbies, and play a more marginal role. This comes with some losses, usually in terms of readability of the decision-making process as well as structured accountability and visible opposition. What remains to be assessed is whether the gains generated by reducing the role of parties compensate for the losses. And the question arises whether there are no other (as yet unknown) shortcomings of these alternative systems that would make them unattractive in all-things considered judgments. This article was not meant to provide such judgments, but to widen our imagination when considering the importance of parties. Ultimately, it could lead us to reappreciate their value and hence pay more attention to possible ways of reinvigorating them. Yet what we should not do is to assume that they are practically and normatively indispensable without having seriously considered alternative possibilities.

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