

What (if anything) makes political parties indispensable?

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Published in *Politics*, online first:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/02633957251327933>

1. Introduction

As early as 1920, the Austrian legal theorist Hans Kelsen (2013/1920: 39) proclaimed with a lot of assurance, at a time when it was not obvious at all: “Only self-deception or hypocrisy could lead one to suppose that democracy is possible without political parties.” This was echoed one year later by James Bryce (1921: I, 134), British jurist, historian and pioneer of political science (“No one has shown how representative government could be worked without [parties]”) and then Elmer Eric Schattschneider (1942: 1) (“modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties”). From then on, 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). So often, actually, that one might be tempted to quote it or take it for granted without questioning it further. Yet, what are the deep reasons why parties would be inevitable or indispensable? The aim of this article is to dig deeper into the exploration of this question, distinguishing practical inevitability from normative indispensability, and to offer a balanced appreciation of parties by looking with an open mind at some of their existing and imagined alternatives. It is important to make sure that we do not accept the received wisdom merely because of path dependency or lack of imagination.

There are instances of party-less democracy to be found in the past. For example, it has been argued that there were no parties in the contemporary sense in Athenian democracy (Hansen, 2014) and in some indigenous African political systems (Wiredu, 1995: 59). Moreover, parties were absent – and despised – in the early days of Western representative governments in the UK, USA and France for example (Rosenblum, 2008). In the more recent past, forms of individual representation and council democracy have tried without much success to build democratic arrangements without parties. Today, party-less parliaments are scarce, but do exist: besides non-partisan legislatures at local levels of government – such as Nebraska, which struggles to keep parties out (Masket and Shor, 2015) – Dag and Carsten Anckar (2000) documented six relatively stable (small) parliamentary democracies without parties¹. 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 more important question is whether alternative models would be viable and desirable, in pluralistic contexts in particular. What may characterize the different examples of party-less democracy is a much lower degree of cultural and political pluralism than commonly exists in contemporary states.

¹ All of them are thinly populated island states in the Pacific, their population ranging (in 2000) from 10,000 (Tuvalu) to 105,000 (Micronesia).

A complete appreciation of the dispensability of parties would require exploring all these alternatives in depth. As this is impossible within the space of an article, we draw on previous research on various alternatives to parties (Lucardie 2013; Lucardie & Vandamme 2022; Vandamme 2024) to pinpoint the most valuable functions that would be jeopardised by attempts to circumvent political parties, in dialogue with recent empirical and theoretical literature. To do so, we draw on three counterfactual models of democracy:

1. Individual representation: a model in which independent candidates compete in elections without the support of parties (Strøm, 2000; Goodin, 2008: 204-223; Kölln, 2015).
2. Lottocracy: a model in which all political representatives are randomly selected or appointed by randomly selected representatives (Bouricius 2013; Guerrero 2024)².
3. Liquid democracy: a model in which voters, through a digital platform, can choose either to vote directly on law proposals or delegate their voting power to area-specific and revocable representatives (or “proxies”) (Blum & Zuber 2016; Valsangiacomo 2021).

These models were selected, to reduce space and complexity, based on a most dissimilar cases approach, because they embody very different logics and are therefore not redundant. It is important, however, to keep in mind that they are not the only conceivable alternatives to party-based representative democracy. We could for example imagine a model in which all decisions would be made through a referendum (Wolff 1998: 34-37), but this seems implausible under contemporary circumstances with the number of decisions to be made and people’s limited time (this is why we selected liquid democracy, which avoids this problem). Another, more plausible version is the semi-direct model typical of Switzerland and several US states, among others, where electoral representation is supplemented with the possibility for citizens to initiate all sorts of referendums (legislative, constitutional, abrogative, recall). This model exists but does not seem to be an alternative to parties since parties simply adapt their strategy and make use of these mechanisms of direct democracy or play their role in referendum campaigns (Sinnott 2002; Welp & Milanese 2018). A potential alternative to parties is the council model, a pyramidal system of representation where small, local primary assemblies send revocable delegates to higher levels of government with an imperative mandate (Lucardie 2013: 78-99; Bookchin 2015; Muldoon 2018; Van Outryve 2024)³. Because historical examples used the workplace as the primary assembly, a form of harmony of interests among workers limited political pluralism. Capture by a single party banning all opposition, as happened with the Soviets, also impeded parties from finding their place in such a system. It therefore remains largely unclear what role parties could play in this model, which would require further study.

² We are aware that this model is an outlier among sortition advocates. Partly because they recognize the value of political parties (or elections), most contemporary advocates of sortition defend a hybrid model mixing partisan elections and sortition (Sutherland 2011; Gastil & Wright 2018; Abizadeh 2021; Sintomer 2023). However, studying this extreme model is more useful in the framework of this article since it helps imagine a democracy without parties and corresponds to the logic of most dissimilar systems.

³ Interestingly, whereas some advocates like Castoriadis saw it as an alternative to parties and elections, others like Lefort saw it as a complement to these traditional representative institutions (see Popp-Madsen 2021).

The article is structured as follows. First, to understand why the question matters and why alternative proposals have been imagined, we start with a review of the main reasons why partisan democracy is sometimes found undesirable. These reasons will be familiar to some readers, but they are worth keeping at the back of one's mind when turning to the more positive assessment of parties that follows in the second section. After this brief recall, we explore in the third section the difficulties of preventing the (re)emergence of parties even in alternative democratic systems and the strategies that have been imagined to limit their power. Then, in sections 4-6, we identify three features that make them *valuable*, in other words: the reasons why we may miss them in a party-less democracy.

Much work has already been devoted to typologizing the different functions that parties empirically perform in existing democracies or used to perform when they were more powerful (Epstein, 1967; Sartori, 1976; Mair, 2013: 89; Dalton, Farrell and McAllister, 2013; van Haute and Sauger, 2018: 581-582), yet this is not our aim here. Several of these functions could be taken up by other actors or institutions in alternative political systems. For example, the policy-responsive linkage function of parties, usually considered key in an electoral democracy (Lawson, 1980; Dalton, Farrell and McAllister, 2013), may not be necessary in a lottocracy where it is the random selection of a diversity of profiles that is supposed to secure the representation of citizens' interests and aspirations. Hence, our focus will be on functions that 1) parties are still able to perform⁴, 2) seem particularly valuable, and 3) seem unlikely to be appropriately taken up or made unnecessary under alternative arrangements. While most of the recent attention in the normative literature has been on the value of partisanship (Chapman 2021: 285), i.e. the value of people "associating and acting politically in coordination with others" through parties (White & Ypi 2016: 209), our focus will be on the goods that parties may deliver from a more systemic perspective.

Before we start, let us finally clarify our terminology. We understand democracy as covering a wide range of political systems where people exercise some form of popular control over the decision-making process and where the freedoms of conscience, expression and association are respected. Hence, to be open-minded, we do not assume *by definition* that elections or parties are necessary components of democracy. Besides, we understand parties as political associations seeking political influence through the coordination of political representatives. This can be achieved by agreeing on a programme and competing for political office (in electoral democracies) or by forming stable alliances once in power (in non-electoral systems). This voluntarily thin definition distinguishes parties from lobbies or pressure groups, which aim at *influencing* representatives and rallying them behind some particular causes, but do not *coalesce* them. 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), we want to leave open the possibility of having parties without elections (as could happen in a lottocratic model) or elections without parties (as in individual representation). To reduce complexity, we bracket differences between types of parties and

⁴ Which does not mean that all parties *actually* perform these functions. There is debate among party scholars about the functions still currently performed by parties. Some functions such as social integration, socialization and education seem to belong to parties' golden age, and not anymore to a time of "parties without partisans" (Dalton & Wattenberg 2002; Mair 2013). However, even this golden age should be nuanced, since the mythical model of the mass party was not as dominant as is sometimes believed (Scarow 2015: chap. 3).

party systems and focus our comparison on ideal types of democratic regimes with or without parties. This is a theoretical exercise and although we believe that it is valuable, we are aware of its speculative nature and of the limited strength of the conclusion that can be drawn from it.

2. What's wrong with parties?

It is now common knowledge that political parties have always been normatively contested (Scarrow, 2002; Rosenblum, 2008). Historically, the main grievance was that they would dangerously divide the population by promoting private, factional interests at the expense of the general or public interest (Sartori, 1976; Scarrow, 2002; Rosenblum, 2008). Nowadays, this criticism that Kelsen (2013/1920) had already refuted more than a hundred years ago, has lost most of its past strength. We have gained a better appreciation of the political value of pluralism and regulated conflict (Muirhead 2014). In societies accepting the fact and value of political disagreement, the absence of pluralism appears more dangerous than the risk of parties dividing the population. Furthermore, it has become more common to see parties as offering competing interpretations of the common good or public interest instead of merely promoting sectional interests (White & Ypi, 2016; Bonotti 2017), although these interpretations of the common good always run the risk of being based on hidden private interests.

A more solid grievance against parties, nowadays, points to their tendency to pursue *partisan* interests at the expense of the public interest. Even when the project they stand for aims at the public interest, and is therefore not purely private, it has been argued that dominant parties have become agents of the state, alienated from civil society and betraying their proclaimed principles and ideologies for the sake of keeping their power and privileges (Crouch, 2004: 70-77; Mair, 2013: 87), which is what we call here *partisan* interests. In other words, they would be more motivated by the benefits linked with access to positions of power (more money for the party, better wages for party leaders if they become ministers, more jobs for party members and staff) than by the promotion and implementation of the party ideology. If and when parties do so, they risk failing in their function of serving as the link between citizens' aspirations and policy-making because they become more willing to give up the promotion of these aspirations in order to stay in power and keep these benefits. And because this representative linkage function is essential for the quality of democratic representation in an electoral democracy, democracy will as a result degenerate (Ignazi 2017).

Party dominance in electoral democracies also generates a form of 'closure' of the representative system. The monopoly over empowered representation⁵ enjoyed by parties results in the exclusion of popular demands which are not taken up by parties – and cannot be “imposed” from the inside by committed citizens because parties tend to become very hierarchical (Michels 2017/1911; Ostrogorski 1964) even nowadays (though maybe to a lesser extent than before), and even when they claim to democratise internally (Cross & Pilet 2015: 173; Ignazi 2020: 12-13). This gatekeeping power may be beneficial in some cases, for example when anti-democratic or illiberal demands are excluded (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018), but

⁵ To be distinguished from more spontaneous and non-institutionalized forms of representation, by associations typically (see Montanaro 2012).

regrettable in other cases, for example when the main parties act like a cartel (Katz & Mair, 1995), deliberately leaving aside some policy issues, at the cost of responsiveness.

Another problem related to parties' dominance in the political system is a loss of impartiality in institutions where this virtue is valuable. Parties' influence over the selection of office holders in the administration or supposedly independent institutions like constitutional courts may lead to an excess of partisan politicisation, often pointed at as "partitocracy" (De Winter, Della Porta & Deschouwer 1996; see Kelsen 2013/1920: 83 for an early warning). It is probably naïve to expect pure impartiality from civil servants or constitutional judges, who like every other human being are partly moved by personal values. Nevertheless, even if full impartiality is unachievable, the willingness to act or judge impartially – and the freedom to do so – might be valuable. And it remains true that the spheres of administration and justice derive part of their value and perceived legitimacy from their independence from the partisan logic (see Rosanvallon 2008). Hence, although there is undeniably value in the democratic control of the administration, typically, an excess of partisan politicisation of these supposedly independent institutions can be seen as regrettable. Partisan control is not the only possible form of democratic control (Bagg 2024).

Finally, some aspects of the partisan logic can be in tension with the value of deliberation⁶. The first one is party discipline. Party cohesion is instrumental to democracy in promoting parties' completion of their electoral mandate and facilitating popular accountability (Müller 2000). Voters need to know what to expect from the party they empower. However, this comes at a cost: if party discipline is strong, debates in parliament have almost no chance of leading to position changes. They become merely addressed to the electorate (Leydet 2015). This can help voters make up their minds by staging major political conflicts (Rummens 2012) and exposing citizens to a plurality of visions and principled justifications (White & Ypi 2016), but it also creates frustration if people have the feeling that elected representatives are incapable of changing their minds or that the opposition is incapable of recognizing a good policy enacted by the majority. Epistemically speaking, the strong incentives to hold to the party line also fail to take advantage of the internal diversity of views and experiences within party groups (Bhatia 2020). The latter aspect could be compensated to some extent by greater intra-party deliberation (Invernizzi-Acetti & Wolkenstein 2017; Bhatia 2020: 268-270; Gherghina & Jacquet 2023: 497-499), but this would require a break with the dominant, plebiscitary form of intra-party democracy (Wolkenstein 2019). In any case, it would not address the broader lack of deliberative exchange *between parties*, which may inhibit collective progress through argumentation and correction of errors (Leydet 2015).

In addition to this, the logic of electoral competition creates incentives for parties to discredit political opponents, attack straw men, or even demonize some parts of the population when the distinction between legitimate opponents and enemies becomes blurred. This plebiscitary rhetoric, again, makes reasoned public deliberation more difficult and spills over to the public sphere. The dynamic of mutual discrediting between parties creates polarization

⁶ We focus here on the effects of partisanship on deliberation in parliaments and within the broader public sphere. For a broader perspective on political parties and deliberation studying how and why parties make use of deliberative procedures internally and externally, see Gherghina & Jacquet 2023; Gherghina 2025.

(in particular in two-party systems), ossifies political identities⁷ and impedes the development of a public culture of reason-based political discussion (Guerrero 2024: chap. 4). Thus, the French philosopher Simone Weil (2017/1940) blamed parties for being exclusively concerned with their own growth, “killing in the souls the sense of truth and justice” (33). She added: “If we entrusted the devil with the organisation of public life, he could not imagine anything more ingenious” (43). This criticism is probably excessive but it makes a valid point: an excess of partisan attachment⁸ can also have deleterious effects on citizens’ capacity for open-minded deliberation.

In sum, there is no need to go as far as Simone Weil to see the limits of a democratic process dominated by nonideal political parties. These should be weighed against the benefits offered by parties, which we can better appreciate through a thought experiment: would we be better off without them? Before answering it, however, it is important to understand why it is difficult to imagine a democracy keeping parties away. Thus, we start with some considerations on the *practical* difficulty of avoiding parties, to distinguish them from the *normative* reasons to appreciate them in the subsequent sections.

3. Are parties practically inevitable?

The grievances against parties recalled above explain why some citizens and theorists dream of a democracy without parties, or at least a democracy in which parties would play a (much) more limited role. The former and more radical option, however, faces a challenge: the fact that parties are the spontaneous outcome of citizens wanting to join forces to influence political processes. As Kelsen (2013/1920: 38) put it, the party “brings like-minded individuals together in order to secure them actual influence in shaping public affairs”. It is first and foremost because parties give a massive advantage to groups seeking political influence that they have arisen in virtually all large-scale democracies⁹. And for the same reason, they might spontaneously re-emerge in an alternative democratic arrangement where they would initially have no role to play.

Consider the example of lottocracy, a democratic system fully based on the random selection of political representatives (Burnheim 1985; Bouricius 2013; Guerrero 2024). Most theorists advocating this kind of system excluding elections have remained largely silent about the place of parties within it, partly because their work remained at a rather high level of abstraction. Bouricius, who has the merit of having developed (partly with David Schecter) a concrete proposal while considering the place of parties, suggests replacing the elected legislature with six different types of bodies exercising different functions, all randomly selected, with varying terms in office yet frequent rotation (Bouricius and Schecter, 2013; Bouricius, 2013). At first sight, there seems to be no place for political parties in this kind of scheme doing away with elections¹⁰ since legislative power is exercised by randomly selected

⁷ One virtue of multi-partyism is probably its capacity to make political identities more fluid by making it less costly to regularly change party identification.

⁸ To be contrasted with the noble ideal of partisanship defended by White & Ypi 2016 or Bonotti 2017.

⁹ As Müller (2000) puts it, they reduce transaction costs and solve collective action problems.

¹⁰ By contrast, proposals to combine elections and sortition, for example through a hybrid form of bicameralism, usually acknowledge some value for parties (see Sutherland 2011; Gastil & Wright 2018).

citizens while executive officers are appointed and evaluated by other citizen bodies. These executive officers 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 represented by the Agenda Councils (suggesting topics), Interest Panels (drafting bills), Review Panels (reviewing bills) and finally the Policy Juries (voting on bills). Governments turn into Administration and are formed by the Executive Hiring Panels. Hence, parties do not seem required for the system to function.

Nevertheless, Bouricius himself does not exclude the formation of parties under such a democratic arrangement. As he rightly points out, "parties have organized across the globe under nonelectoral regimes, even when outlawed" (Bouricius 2019: 14). Hence, one might expect such political associations to emerge in a lottocracy as well. This scenario would be particularly likely with long terms in office in the different lottocratic institutions. In the Agenda Council and Policy Juries, in particular, participants would face high incentives to build stable coalitions to further their political goals, and to recruit political allies in other bodies. Thus, there would be fertile ground for the (re-)emergence of parties in a lottocracy as well.

However, in such a system, it is possible to try to limit the influence of parties by having short mandates and frequent rotation (Owen & Smith 2018; Bouricius 2019)¹¹ or single-issue legislative bodies (Guerrero 2024). Short mandates making the coalition of representatives more difficult to sustain, the only way to create stable political associations would be to act ex-ante, within civil society, creating political groups and identities with the aim of achieving representation and facilitating joint efforts in the randomly selected panels and juries) (see Bouricius 2019: 314; Burnheim 1985: 162). This, however, would bring these parties or quasi-parties closer to advocacy groups. Single-issue legislatures, as recommended by Guerrero (2024) would only aggravate the marginalisation of parties since the very idea of an encompassing political platform would lose sense.

Consider now the example of a "liquid democracy", where citizens could choose either to legislate directly (online) or to be represented by "proxies" of their choice on different issues. Blum & Zuber (2016: 178), in their plea for this alternative democratic model, have argued that parties, in a liquid democracy, would be "superfluous since members of the community either participate directly or delegate their votes on the basis of individual relationships with their delegate." Consider, however, the incentives faced by people seeking political influence in this system. They can act as advocacy groups promoting some policy orientations and trying to influence voters legislating directly. Yet they will gain efficacy only if they manage to build a coalition between different advocacy groups and individual representatives (or "proxies") (see Valsangiacomo 2021). In turn, it will be much easier for voters to delegate their voting power to wider platforms such as parties than to identify and monitor different representatives on different policy issues. Parties present the immense advantage of "taking all of the vast array of individual issues and packaging them together in more or less sensible ways" (Elliott 2023: 168), thereby easing citizens' task of identifying representatives congruent with their general values and aims. Thus, under liquid democracy, representation would likely become more fragmented (because parties' monopoly over institutionalized representation is broken), it

¹¹ Guerrero (2024: 150), in contrast, imagines three-year mandates.

would be easier for citizens to bypass parties and initiate direct legislation, but parties are still likely to play a role.

As these two examples show, there are ways to make political associations more unstable, less powerful, and to reduce the influence of parties on the political process. Individual representation, in contrast, does not contain a way of limiting parties' influence. It exists or has existed in polities where a party system has not emerged yet but it cannot prevent the apparition of parties unless it forbids candidates to run under a party platform. This, however, would be democratically suspect, because the freedom to join forces, to see oneself as part of a group of citizens committed to the same values, and to act in coordination, is an important component of any form of democracy. Hence, we can identify a first sense in which political parties can be considered inevitable. They are, to some extent, inevitable in being the result of the freedoms of thought and association without which democracy is unthinkable

However, what is certainly not inevitable is the dominance of parties in a democratic political system. In the same way as party systems are created by electoral rules, the power of parties is shaped by the constitutional rules regulating the representative process. Hence, one can easily imagine a democracy where parties would exist but where the rules of the political game would substantially limit their power and influence. This would likely be the case in a lottocracy and to a lesser extent in a liquid democracy, where quasi-parties would actually come closer to advocacy groups, as explained above.

The next question, then, is whether it would be desirable to significantly limit the power and influence of parties. To appreciate the value of parties, we need to pursue our inquiry further. In what follows, we have identified three particularly valuable functions and associated goods that might be lacking in the main alternatives to party-structured democracies, i.e., lottocracy, liquid democracy and individual representation (elections without parties): ideological framing of political conflicts, structuring of the political process, strengthening political opposition and making it visible. These may not be the *only* valuable functions of parties¹², but they appear to us as the *most valuable* ones – and they would be threatened by the limited role played by parties in these alternative models. This, at least, is the tentative conclusion derived from our reading of the literature and from the thought experiment projecting us into different forms of party-less democracy.

4. Parties allow for ideological mobilisation

In the absence of parties structuring political conflicts and decisions, there is a more important risk to see political processes operating on non-ideological bases. Ideology is understood here not in the pejorative sense of a power-distorted set of beliefs (Geuss 2008: 52) or a closed system of thought meant to justify the status quo (Ricoeur 1997), but in the sense of a set of ideas reflecting an understanding and an evaluation of the existing world and of its alternatives. The value of parties, in this respect, comes from the fact that they have the capacity

¹² For example, it is often unclear how the executive branch would be organized and controlled in the alternative democratic models we discuss. One could make the case that parties play a valuable role in controlling the administration and securing continuity between legislation and execution. This, however, is more a practical concern than a strong normative consideration in favor of parties.

to make ideological debates centre stage, while mobilising and politicising citizens around these ideologies (Disch 2021).

Admittedly, not all parties provide this good. Strongly personalised parties, for example, which have become quite frequent (Kefford & McDonnell 2018; Lefebvre 2022) may mobilise more based on their leader's charisma than on ideological convictions. And when party competition is insufficient, when parties form cartels and do not really need to recruit new supporters, they may converge ideologically, dilute their initial ideology, and fail to deliver this (and other) good(s) (Katz & Mair 1995; Mair 2013; Elliott 2023: chap. 6). The latter tendency may be increased by a combination of macro-economic constraints, supranational economic constraints and ideological hegemony leading mainstream parties towards ideological convergence (Lupu 2015; Spoon & Klüver 2019). Furthermore, parties can also be the transmission belt of ideologies in the negative sense of the word. Nevertheless, when there is party pluralism and competition, and when challenger parties can bring new issues to the front stage, an ideological battle is produced that 1) reduces the risk of seeing a dominant, distorting ideology impose itself as the only valid one, and 2) allows parties challenging the status quo to mobilise citizens around an alternative, emancipatory ideology¹³.

To appreciate the value of this ideological function, let us consider first the counter-example of 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). In some European countries, parliaments were elected in this way before parties existed (although with very limited franchise). Today, some small and relatively homogeneous polities operate in a similar way.

The first problem with individual representation arises at election time. Because the electoral offer is not structured along party lines, the selection process becomes much more personalised. Candidates may be chosen for their ideas, but also more simply because they are famous or influential public figures. This happens as well in party-based democracies but to a lesser extent. The problem is strengthened, under individual representation, by high information costs about the candidates resulting from the absence of a reduced set of options (Kölln, 2015: 605). This gives famous people a decisive hedge, whatever the relevance of the reason why they are famous. They may be Tik-Tok stars or religious leaders for example. Alternatively, to be successful, candidates will need either support from powerful lobbies or be wealthy enough to fund their own campaign¹⁴. Hence, it is more their reputation and wealth than their ideas that are likely to be decisive. As a result, democracy loses in terms of ideological confrontation and mobilisation. What is lost, to an important extent at least, is the confrontation between political *projects* grounded on a critical diagnosis of the existing order and evidence-based policy proposals. Elections are – *pace* Schumpeter – in our opinion not meant to simply select managers, but also to shape public deliberation about political projects. Hence, candidates should defend their projects and demonstrate their willingness and ability to carry out these

¹³ Thus, even if not *all* parties deliver this important good, a democracy with parties allows this good to be delivered.

¹⁴ As Bernard Manin (1997: 144) noticed, the apparition of parties and their taking charge of financing electoral campaigns (instead of candidates themselves) was key in reducing the aristocratic character of elections.

projects. In that respect, parties ideally perform what could be called an *ideological function* by structuring political choices and conflicts around competing projects based on different ideologies. This should at least be seen as valuable by anyone who believes that dominant social structures should be changed. From this viewpoint, politics is not reducible to the management of public resources. It is about fighting injustices and improving people's living conditions. From this perspective, collective deliberations about competing projects are central and should be the main concern at election time.

With representation by lot, we avoid the additional problem of individual representation highlighted above (besides the ideological loss): the bias in favour of the famous and or wealthy candidates. In terms of selection bias, representation by lot outperforms all its alternatives, especially when random selection is stratified – although some social categories are more likely to accept the mission than others (Jacquet 2017). Nevertheless, one could argue that there is still an ideological loss compared with party-centred elections, because the selection of representatives is entirely depoliticised. It does not matter whether selected representatives have any project for the political community. They can be entirely uninterested in politics and have no particular awareness of injustices – although these traits probably make them less likely to accept the mission. One could certainly expect these randomly selected representatives to become more politicised during their mandate, and to join forces around ideological projects. Nevertheless, because representatives 1) are selected whatever their degree of politicisation and 2) do not need to mobilise citizens around a particular political project, the political process in a lottocracy would likely be impoverished in terms of ideological confrontation compared with a party democracy. Some might see this as an improvement, facilitating open-minded deliberation about the common good (Guerrero 2024). This is an important argument in favour of randomly selected assemblies. However, it is important to keep in mind that this deliberative benefit comes at a cost. We believe that this may explain why radical democrats tend to favour a mix of partisan democracy and sortition over pure lottocratic representation (Mouffe 2018: 56, 69; Sintomer 2023: 247). Partisan democracy allows the most politicised among us to take the initiative and challenge the status quo by constructing an alternative political discourse uniting citizens around a shared goal.

A valuable by-product of this ideological mobilization is that when they present encompassing projects to citizens¹⁵, parties also invite them to think beyond their particular concerns and embrace a broader view on political issues (Urbinati 2006; White & Ypi 2016; Bonotti 2017). Given that this property of parties comes from their aggregative nature, or the fact that they are not single-issue interest groups, the clearer contrast is with single-issue lottocratic legislatures where citizens, if they form political judgments at all (see below), would only do so on single issues. Things would be partly similar in a liquid democracy, where citizens would have the freedom to be represented by different individuals or groups in different policy areas. Such an arrangement would not prevent citizens from taking a wide view and choosing representatives (called “proxies”) based on that. As argued above, parties might form and offer full-package representation. Nevertheless, the incentives would be different than in a party democracy. There is a high risk that, in a liquid democracy, precisely because they can be

¹⁵ Which, again, happens only when parties are built on ideological bases and not merely in support of a charismatic leader.

represented by anyone and do not need to choose a particular project, many people might delegate their political power to persons they know and trust to act as proxies and to build political judgments in their stead rather than develop personal and broader political judgments.

In a lottocratic arrangement, this risk of deference to others is aggravated. Given that randomly selected representatives do not need popular support to act, they would not have to appeal to citizens' judgments at all. Hence, epistemically speaking, there would be a deep division between the citizens who are selected for a political task and who would need to develop their political judgments in interaction with their peers, and the non-participating citizens who would likely remain in a very passive position (Rummens & Geenens 2023), with very low incentives to form reflexive judgments about the options considered by decision-makers. And even in a hybrid system combining representation by lot and mechanisms of direct democracy to provide non-selected citizens more agency, the latter would be only invited to express themselves on single issues, in a referendum typically, not to build comprehensive visions of the public good or of a just society. Hence, there seems to be an important value in the invitation sent to *all* citizens to choose a project for the whole political community. And in the absence of party competition for power, this value will likely be threatened as well.

Finally, besides the construction of political identities, the ideological function of parties also matters in the legislative process. As pointed out by Robert Goodin in a seminal article, the structuring of the legislative process around parties secures a form of ideological coherence, a link between the diversity of enacted policies that would likely be lacking in a party-less democracy (Goodin, 2008: 210-211). Legislation in a parliament without parties will be the largely unpredictable outcome of negotiations between individual legislators (Goodin 2008: 211-214; see also Kölln, 2015), making it harder for citizens to understand what is going on and who defends what – a problem revealing another important value of parties, to which we now turn.

5. Parties structure the political process

In addition to making conflicts and mobilisation around competing projects based on different ideologies central to electoral and legislative processes (the ideological function), parties provide the important good of structuring political processes in a way that makes them readable for citizens¹⁶. The presence of parties highly reduces the complexity of political processes (Manin 1987; 2017; Rummens 2012; Elliott 2023: chap. 6). They do so, first, by reducing the number of players. Although party members may disagree on many issues, parties are usually able to secure some cohesion and consistency in the decisions of their members. For citizens, this means that the plurality of political actors – and the “Who defends what?” question – can more easily be apprehended. They can take it for granted that parties will usually act cohesively, and in a way that can be predicted based on their ideology. This makes politics much easier to read than if citizens had to follow the uncoordinated actions of individual

¹⁶ It has also been argued that parties structure political conflicts in a way that makes them more peaceful, less violent (Rosenblum 2008: chap. 3; Muirhead 2014; Fossum 2018). Here we focus on another aspect of their structuring capacity, as we do not want to claim that alternative arrangements such as liquid democracy or lottocracy would be more violent as a result of being less structured by parties.

representatives acting in unpredictable ways, as under individual representation, or to monitor a diversity of proxies representing them on different issues, as in liquid democracy.

Second, when decisions are made by the Parliament or government, they can quite easily be attributed to a party or coalition of parties that is known to have the lead during a given legislature. Under individual representation, lottocracy or liquid democracy, majorities would be changing from one vote to the other. To be sure, this happens within party democracy as well, in cases of minority government, but it is quite exceptional and still more readable than highly liquid majorities. For citizens, again, it makes the legislative process much more readable. At the end of a legislature, it is easier to know who can be held accountable for what decisions. Admittedly, many of us are poorly informed about passed legislation and insufficiently equipped for meaningful retrospective voting (Achen & Bartels 2017). Yet the point is only that following the legislative process would be *even more* difficult and less likely in political arrangements without stable parties.

Consider the legislative process in a lottocracy. With short terms and frequent rotation, citizens would have no idea about the identity of their representatives. Without stable parties, they would not know the main lines of conflict within the legislative assembly (or assemblies). Thus, they would only have access to the final verdict (what kind of legislation has passed), possibly with a public statement of the main arguments pro and con¹⁷. The process by which a given law ends up being endorsed would remain largely obscure, which would reduce citizens' capacity to appreciate – and thereby control – the work of their representatives. Work in single-issue legislatures à la Guerrero might be easier to follow, but their multiplication would likely make the whole legislative process less readable.

Defenders of lottocracy might argue that monitoring the majority in power and keeping it accountable is so hard to achieve in electoral democracies (see Achen & Bartels 2017) that we would be better off in a system that does not rely on this unrealistic expectation. With randomly selected representatives, one could argue that monitoring and accountability would be less necessary, because the random process would be more likely to select what Jane Mansbridge (2003) called “gyroscopic” representatives, who would be “collectively disposed to act in constituents' interests because random selection tends to produce an assembly that, if large enough, is descriptively representative of them” (Abizadeh 2021). As a result, citizens would have more reasons to be trustworthy and the need to monitor representatives would be lower. Empirically, it might be true that stratified random selection produces a better congruence between citizens and representatives than elections. However, taking this for granted would be very dangerous. One should not trust a political process requiring citizens to blindly defer to their representatives (Lafont 2020). Some degree of popular control over the process, and means to hold decision-makers accountable seem necessary under any democratic arrangement. Lottocrats can respond to this by adding mechanisms of popular initiative and referendums allowing to correct or complement the work of randomly selected representatives (Landemore 2020: 134-138). However, only a subset of the population is likely to seize the

¹⁷ An interesting additional question, on which we remain agnostic, is whether such an institutional requirement to justify decisions in a lottocracy could suffice to fully replace the public justification function that White & Ypi (2016: 70-71) assign to parties. What might be lacking is not so much public justifications as such but the broader societal project justifying particular decisions, as suggested by Goodin (2008: 211-214).

opportunity to initiate legislation or to repeal a law. It is from the perspective of passive citizens, more particularly, that the political process might become less readable and more alienating (Elliott 2023). From their perspective at least, the structuring capacity of parties seems quite helpful: it allows citizens who do not participate in the decision-making process to have better access to knowledge about who defends what and who is accountable for what¹⁸.

This would certainly be lacking under individual representation and representation by lot. Under liquid democracy, things are a bit different since citizens can know who represents them on different issues and keep a lot of control through the constant possibility of recall. However, in this form of government, two specific factors are likely to reduce the readability of the political process. One is the significant multiplication of political actors resulting from the possibility of being represented by different people on different issues. The second is the extreme complexity of the voting procedure since law projects are ratified both by representatives, who have unequal voting power (proportional to how many people they represent) and citizens who have preserved their voting power.

A final point is that the structuring of political divisions and staging of the main lines of political conflict achieved through limited party competition in the media have another beneficial effect: they arguably help citizens build their own political judgments (Rummens 2012). When dividing lines and positions are clearer, it is much easier to *take part*, choose a side, and thereby form political judgments. Without this reduction of complexity, even more citizens might become alienated by a process they do not understand than is already the case.

6. Parties strengthen the opposition and make it visible

Finally, one should not neglect the value of parties for democratic opposition. We have already highlighted the fact that forming a party provides a decisive advantage in the access to positions of power. Yet the party is also essential to the losing side. Again, the main contrast is with individual representation. In such an arrangement, the extreme fragmentation of the opposition is dangerous in that it reduces the breaks on authoritarian backsliding. Individual representatives face a problem of collective action, and their allegiance to the government can more easily be bought in exchange for some favours or compromises. In the extreme case, opposition could even be absent if all individual representatives get their way in some legislations. Although firm conclusions cannot be drawn from some unsuccessful examples, attempts to establish such a system of individual representation in large countries such as Libya, Pakistan and Uganda soon degenerated into dictatorship (Djaziri, 1995; Ziring, 1997: 249-328; Tripp, 2010: 39-57, 193-195). This system seems to have survived only in small-scale traditional and consensus-oriented societies like the islands in the Pacific mentioned above (see Anckar, 1999: 20-23). It does not seem suited to pluralistic societies, where consensus usually hides ideological hegemony (Mouffe, 2000).

¹⁸ This is not meant to minimise the difficulty and loss of readability created by the multiplication of actors and unaccountable institutions in contemporary democracies, which arguably make accountability increasingly difficult (Papadopoulos 2013). However, there is no reason to believe that things would be better in an alternative political system (as opposed to “under different background circumstances”).

In the absence of parties, political opposition will be not only fragmented but also unstable. In a liquid democracy or in a lottocracy, as mentioned above, majorities will likely change from one issue to the other. The key difference between these systems and the traditional party one is that the distribution of preferences is upset for each new decision. In a liquid democracy, representation is disaggregated, as people can have different representatives on different issues. In a lottocracy, frequent rotation will prevent the formation of strong parties disciplining their members. As a result, allotted representatives can vote in full conscience (without a party line to defend) on every issue, join the majority on one and the opposition on the other. In some respect, this is highly valuable: it means that representatives are freed from the anti-deliberative effect of party discipline, that they can judge each issue on the merits of the case. The problem arises when one considers the legislative process from an outsider perspective. It would be hard to know what is going on – and even more so under single-issue legislation. People whose preferences are frequently defeated in Parliament could develop a strong feeling of non-representation. And as Peter Mair (2013: 138-139) pointed out in the context of the European Union, when opposition within institutions does not seem available, opposition more easily turns into an anti-system attitude. In contrast, traditional parliaments give high visibility to the opposition and keep losers on the political stage (Rummens 2012), providing all those whose preferences are defeated the opportunity to stay in the game and to support opposition parties in the next election with the hope that the latter might constitute a majority after the next election.

This being said, we do not mean to overestimate the extent to which party-based democracies manage to keep losers in the game. Opposition to the system (versus within the system) is widespread in most electoral democracies. And it is an empirical question whether, in the long run, the fluctuating majorities offered by lottocratic or liquid representation would generate more satisfaction with the system than electoral alternation. What seems difficult to deny, however, is that the presence of strong parties strengthens the opposition by giving it more visibility and more power to resist authoritarian backsliding.

7. Lessons and conclusion

The thought experiment of imagining democratic arrangements without parties is speculative in nature and imposes modesty about the conclusions that can be derived from it. However, two main lessons can be drawn. The first is that arrangements entirely without parties are conceivable in theory, but in practice parties or quasi-parties (sharing some but not all traits of traditional parties) are likely to resurface. This is both because they provide a massive advantage to groups seeking political influence and because the only way to avoid their formation is to sacrifice the important democratic freedoms of thought and association. As a result, any system of individual representation will be unstable in pluralist societies. The practical inevitability of parties, however, leaves open the question of their value, as well as the place and importance that they should have in our political systems. Alternative forms of representation such as liquid democracy or lottocracy, for example, offer ways of highly weakening the power of parties and bring them closer to advocacy groups whose main aim is to influence public opinion.

The second lesson is that there would be a high cost involved in attempting to minimize parties' influence through political reforms – in pluralistic societies in particular. A single article does not offer the space to form all-things-considered judgments about different alternatives to party-based democracy. This article therefore does not tell us whether lottocracy or liquid democracy would be overall desirable or whether they are superior to existing regimes. To reach such a judgment, one would have to balance the losses identified in this article with the benefits offered by these alternative systems. What we have offered, however, is some arguments to put on each side of the balance when considering these alternatives. Thus, section 2 pointed at some undesirable effects of parties: their tendency to focus on partisan interests (extracting benefits for the party and its leaders from positions of power) at the expense of their linkage functions, the relative closure of the representative system that they produce, the partisan politicisation of independent institutions that they encourage, and the obstacles to open-minded deliberation formed by party discipline and the plebiscitary rhetoric they tend to use to serve their partisan ends. Because these criticisms are well-known, we spent more time developing the arguments in favour of parties, in sections 4-6.

Among the diversity of functions that parties usually perform in electoral democracies, some (such as the recruiting or policy-responsive linking functions) might be taken over by other institutions or other types of actors. Yet some goods provided by political parties may be highly valuable and unique. They make debates on competing projects based on different ideologies centre stage, allowing to mobilise and politicise citizens around a positive ideology. Their public confrontation invites citizens to form political judgments about general societal projects instead of focusing on their particular problems and private demands. Parties make it easier for citizens to follow political processes and understand what is going on, thereby reducing political alienation by facilitating popular control and accountability. Finally, they give more visibility to the opposition, keeping it in the game, and allowing it more strength to resist authoritarian backsliding. The associated losses in alternative democratic models significantly reducing parties' influence (which, we insist, are only one side of the picture) are summarized in table 1 below.

	Direct effects on parties	Effects on ideological function	Effects on structuring function	Effects on opposition function
Individual representation	Selection of candidates haphazard Unstable coalitions in Parliament	Elections more personalised, less programmatic	Deliberations, negotiations and votes less readable Accountability complicated	Opposition weakened because more scattered and fluid
Lottocracy	No competition for political office Short mandates and rotation make stable coalition-building more difficult Single-issue legislatures make	Selection of lowly politicised representatives No ideological mobilisation No appeal to citizens' judgments	Deliberations, negotiations and votes less readable Accountability complicated	Opposition weakened because more scattered and fluid

	parties less useful than advocacy groups			
Liquid democracy	Parties lose their monopoly over representation Parties compete with single-issue representatives	Loss of ideological coherence in legislation Reduced incentive for citizens to form broad political judgments	Deliberations, negotiations and votes less readable Highly increased complexity Monitoring of representatives more difficult Accountability complicated	Opposition weakened because more scattered and fluid

Table 1: Summary of the effects of alternative democratic models on parties and their valuable functions

This being said, we would like to conclude with three qualifications of our arguments in favour of parties. First of all, parties deliver their goods only under specific conditions. The first condition is their being centred around a political project instead of a single person (as increasingly happens in a diversity of contexts (Kefford & McDonnell 2018; Lefebvre 2022)). The second is that the project should be clear to citizens and encompassing (not single-issue), which is not always the case with new parties. The third is their being forced to compete with each other (instead of forming cartels), facing the risk of being challenged by outsiders, and having strong incentives to mobilise new supporters (Elliott 2023: chap. 6). And a fourth condition might be to have lasting parties, against a contemporary tendency to form new parties for a specific election or a few ones and dissolve them afterward to create a (seemingly) new structure. Some degree of stability – sometimes threatened by the apparition of new challenger parties and the decline of traditional parties – is valuable both to preserve a clear ideological identity and to clearly structure the political game.

A second qualification is that existing party forms should not be taken as the only possible one or the most desirable one. It has been argued, for example, that some forms of intra-party democracy could help parties become more internally deliberative, more open to input by party members, thereby restoring their capacity to act as vehicles of popular sovereignty (see Wolkenstein 2019; White & Ypi 2020). Surely, there is room for experimentation and improvements along these lines although recent attempts at democratising parties have not proven very successful so far, often remaining largely controlled by party elites (Cross & Pilet 2015: 173; Ignazi 2020: 12-13). Besides, whatever the merits of intra-partisan democratisation, other types of reforms would be necessary to address the other problems diagnosed in section 2: the partisan politicisation of independent institutions, on the one hand, and parties as obstacles to deliberation, on the other hand.

Finally, while liquid democracy and lottocracy may not necessarily seem attractive as full-blown alternatives to party-based electoral democracy, they could complement it and help to improve its democratic quality. It is plausible to believe that parties are necessary (or at least valuable) but insufficient to realize democratic self-government (Geissel 2023: 108). The institutionalisation of an assembly selected by lot in the legislative system alongside a party-structured one might, for example, increase the overall deliberativeness of the legislative

process¹⁹. And making participatory tools such as the rights of initiative, recall and popular referendums more accessible to citizens could be a way of institutionalising, in a party democracy, two key ideas of liquid democracy. Firstly, citizens should have the freedom to either trust their representatives or decide to legislate directly on some issues they deem particularly important (see Landemore 2020). Secondly, they should have the right to revoke the mandates they confer to representatives in cases of major distrust. Alternatively, this article could be read as an invitation to advocates of alternative democratic models (including council democracy and other alternatives not discussed here) to take parties more seriously and see how they can be integrated and reconfigured in these alternative models, as some colleagues have started doing (Sutherland 2011; Gastil & Wright 2018; Valsangiacomo 2021). Thus, even if parties are indispensable to a large extent, they need not monopolize the political process or keep the historically situated form that they have tended to take.

Acknowledgments:

For their helpful remarks and suggestions about earlier drafts, the authors thank Nicolas Arens, Terry Bouricius, Audrey Brennan, Sergiu Gherghina, Thomas Legein, Amaël Maskens, John Pitseys, Nathalie Schiffino, Chiara Valsangiacomo, Emilie van Haute, Virginie Van Ingelgom, the anonymous reviewers, as well as diverse audiences at Université libre de Bruxelles and UCLouvain.

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¹⁹ Gastil & Wright (2018), for example, argue among other things that a hybrid form of bicameralism (one elected, on randomly selected chamber) strikes the right balance between partisan and deliberative politics. See also Abizadeh 2021, who defends a broadly similar system, and Sutherland 2011 who defends a more original system where parties play an advocacy role but a randomly selected assembly makes decisions.

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