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Cure, Poison or Placebo? The Consequences of Populist and Radical Party Success for Representative Democracy

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ABSTRACT

The spread and success of radical and populist parties has triggered a profound debate on the state of democracy. Not only are these parties described as the outcome of a democratic malaise in which democratic regimes had ceased to integrate, represent and engage all their citizens. At the same time, questions arose as to the consequences of these parties for existing representative democracies. Could radical and populist parties be a (partial) cure to the woes of established democracies? Or would they make the democratic malaise even worse, further poisoning an already sick patient? Could it be that these parties act like a placebo that exists because of the democratic malaise but does not actually change anything except for those who desperately want to believe in an effect? The contributions to this Special Issue address questions of the impact of radical and populist parties on representative democracy. This introduction systematises their findings along party functions and draws broader conclusions.

KEYWORDS: Populist parties, radical parties, representative democracy, party functions

Introduction

In the vast majority of democratic regimes, political parties play a crucial role as mediators between society and the state and parties form, or at least support, governments which temporarily execute the will of the sovereign. Of course, their role varies from country to country depending on the institutional arrangements in place. While their relevance might be less pronounced in (semi-)presidential systems or countries with strong instruments of direct democracy, they constitute the most important actors in more or less all other manifestations of democracy – especially in all Western democracies and those democracies established with this form of representative democracy in mind. Hence, looking at political parties allows us to investigate the state of democracy, which is one of many reasons why party research is at the heart of political science.

Political parties exist in different types and with different ideological and programmatic profiles. Research shows that there has been a certain evolution in both dimensions. As democratic regimes and societies have changed, so have political parties.¹ Starting out as (clientelistic) elite parties, we saw the foundation of class and later mass parties even

before the autocratic backlash leading up to World War II. In the second half of the twentieth century, representative democracy became increasingly common and dominant, especially in the Western world, but also beyond. Simultaneously, party organisations became more professional, and they increasingly focused on electoral strategies rather than on coherent and stable ideologies. However, the emergence of electoralist or even catch-all parties was overshadowed by the programmatic differentiation that was taking place. Above all, caused (though not exclusively) by the diffusion of post-materialist values, formerly frozen party systems shaped by historical cleavages became open to new parties with very different policy agendas. With the additional emergence of cartel parties that cross the line into the state in a problematic manner, parties have been changing massively, and with these changes came discussions about the consequences for different aspects of democracy. It was often assumed that these changes came with negative consequences, especially in the discussion of catch-all parties (Kirchheimer, 1966) and cartel parties (Katz & Mair, 1995) or of the increasing fragmentation of party systems (Dalton, 1996). However, others suggest that the democratic quality or aspects of it has not been affected by party change or even increased due to the evolution of parties (Dalton, Farrell, & McAllister, 2011; Miller et al., 1999; Reiter, 1989).

Unsurprisingly, the recent electoral success of radical and especially populist parties has sparked similar discussions. These parties are neither unified in their ideology or programmatic appeal, nor do they represent a completely new phenomenon. However, the fact that they have gained substantially in electoral support in less than two decades all over the world makes them one of the most important developments in current research on representative democracy. Again, while the majority of scholars identifies them as challengers to democracy (Galston, 2018; Mudde, 2007; Müller, 2016), others argue that their emergence is in part a logical consequence or integral part of democracy or even a potential remedy for a representational gap (Kriesi, 2014; Mouffe, 2000, 2005; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Furthermore, especially populist parties are not characterised as anti-democratic, but as opposed to the liberal model of democracy (Caramani, 2017), which would make them not challengers of democracy but of one specific, albeit dominant model.

It goes without saying that the last few years have brought us a nearly unlimited number of publications – normative and empirical – dealing with populist and radical parties. However, and probably also because it is harder to track and takes some time to manifest themselves, empirical research on the actual consequences for (liberal) democracy beyond electoral behaviour is still scarce. The contributions in this Special Issue of Representation focus on such empirical analyses, covering a broad range of topics and perspectives. While these contributions do not focus exclusively on one party family, radical right populist parties are often in the spotlight as they are empirically the most common type among populist and radical parties. These parties are characterised by their anti-immigration position and nationalism, their populist rhetoric, and their general anti-establishment orientations (Akkerman, de Lange, & Rooduijn, 2016; Betz, 1998; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). At the same time, several of the arguments regarding the impact of radical right populist parties on representative democracy can be easily transferred to populist parties on the left – for example, the idea of filling a representational gap – or radical parties in general – for example, increased party system polarisation. Before summarising the main findings and presenting thoughts on what they mean for the future of democracy in the wake of yet another substantial change to parties and party systems, we

will outline the most important functions political parties have in representative democracy and how these are fulfilled or affected by radical and populist parties. These functions will help us to assess and systematise questions of whether the recent electoral success of populist and radical parties actually has any positive effect on democracy – curing specific problems – or whether these parties primarily endanger representative democracy by poisoning it from within. There is however also a third option: current democracies could be much more resilient than their earlier incarnations, which could prevent any substantial effect of populist and radical parties. Sticking to the medical metaphor, they could constitute a mere placebo in terms of effectiveness.

Party Functions in Representative Democracy

In recent decades, political parties have come under increasing pressure – especially, members of the traditional party families such as Social Democrats or (Christian) Conservatives. Public trust in parties is rather low, and many authors identify a very problematic ‘decline of political parties’ (see, for instance, Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; LaPalombara, 2007; Lawson & Merkl, 1988). When Schmitter (1997, p. 9) reflects on other collective actors in civil society and the intermediating role of parties between society and state, he even argues that ‘there is no longer any a priori reason to suppose that political parties should be privileged or predominant in this regard’. It is clear that we have witnessed substantive changes of parties, party systems and citizen-party relationships. From an empirical perspective, however, it seems both doubtful that these changes generally lead to negative consequences for democracy (Giebler, Lacewell, Regel, & Werner, 2018) or that parties no longer fulfil core functions in democracies today. It is possible that this is actually more a matter of party adaption than party decline (similar, Dalton et al., 2011, Ch. 9).

Thinking about parties in terms of their functions in (democratic) political systems and as societal actors not only has a very long tradition,² but also allows us to identify changes over time and to evaluate the performance of parties (LaPalombara & Anderson, 1992, p. 400). Since the different studies in this Special Issue aim to broaden our knowledge of the consequences for democracy of populist and radical parties’ success, using a party function perspective proves to be very fruitful. Political parties are at the core of representative democracy, their democratic functions give meaning to elections and connect society to the state. Moreover, applying the idea of party functions links the contributions very well with the conceptual party literature and studies focusing on political parties in the analysis of the so-called ‘crisis of democracy’.

Another way to conceptualise the role of parties would be to rely on the idea of linkages – as, e.g., introduced by Lawson (1980) and revised by Römmele, Farrell, and Ignazi (2005) or Dalton et al. (2011). In fact, using ‘functions’ or ‘linkages’ as core terminology does not lead to too many differences in terms of the roles and tasks assigned to political parties. However, they differ greatly in characterising how these different roles and tasks relate to each other. Linkages are defined as a dynamic and sequential system in which one step relates to the next – basically building a chain of representation. Such an approach must be based on a large number of assumptions, is empirically quite demanding and benefits from a long-term perspective, which is difficult to fulfil when analysing the

effect of particularly populist parties. Hence, we stick to the simplified notion of party functions.

As mentioned above, the literature is full of attempts to create the definitive list of functions that parties have to fulfil to make the democratic system work. All of these lists share the idea that if parties do not or only insufficiently fulfil these function, representative democracy would be severely inhibited. Many of these lists of functions reflect the respective authors' understanding of democracy and, thus, what is important for democracy to work as well as decisions on how specific the individual tasks should be prescribed.³

Neumann (1969), for instance, defines four major functions that comprise the selection of leaders, acting as a mediator between the individual and the community to 'organize the chaotic public will', 'educating the private citizen to political responsibility' in order to foster the will formation of citizens and organise interest aggregation, and, finally, linking government and public opinion. LaPalombara and Anderson (1992) break down a very similar set of general functions to leadership recruitment, government formation and ruling, shaping political identity and promoting interest aggregation, as well as the mobilisation of citizens and the integration of individuals into the political regime. Other authors extend this list to a set of functions that are more fine grained and specific. Almond (1960) works with two sets of functions: Input functions focus on the relationship between parties and society and include political socialisation and recruitment, interest articulation, interest aggregation and political communication. Output functions focus on the state and contain rule-making, rule application and rule adjudication. Gunther and Diamond (2001) summarise the output functions as forming and sustaining governments, which includes Almond's output functions, but also shows the importance of government stability. At the same time, they offer a more extensive and precise list of functions that make parties cooperate with society. These include interest aggregation and issue structuring to bring societal demands into the political process. Parties are tasked to nominate candidates for elections and organise electoral mobilisation as an important part of making democratic elections meaningful. Furthermore, broader tasks are societal representation and social integration, which are important for connecting both individuals and societal groups to democratic systems.

Obviously, there are substantive overlaps between the different representations of functions that parties are supposed to fulfil in democracies. More importantly, and this is indeed common to all these accounts, the functions described are seen as crucial for the working of representative democracies. In the majority of democracies, voters elect parties, Members of Parliament are organised in parties and heads of government are party leaders. Thus, it is vital how parties connect to citizens, for instance through mobilisation and interest aggregation, and to the state, through representation and government formation. In other words, political parties are crucial for the input as well as output dimension of the democratic process. When looking at this from the level of political systems, the relevance of fulfilling these functions – and, hence, of political parties – can be emphasised, for example, by referring to the concept of embedded democracy with its different internal regimes (Merkel, 2004). If there is no proper electoral competition, insufficient political participation, unequal societal representation and social inclusion or if governments do not have the capacities to govern, democracies become defective democracies. Consequently, when we think about the emergence or increased electoral success of new party types – always at the cost of other parties, since elections

are a zero-sum game – the question arises as to whether the new parties fulfil the functions in the same way as the old parties.

Party Functions and Populist and Radical Parties

As this Special Issue is particularly interested in whether and how populist and radical parties have changed representative democracies, both this introduction and the contributions focus on the following functions: electoral mobilisation, interest aggregation and issue structuring, societal representation, societal integration and government formation.⁴ This overview must both limit itself to and focus on some core functions of political parties. For interested readers, there are more comprehensive discussions, e.g., on the general impact of populist radical right parties (Mudde, 2007; Muis & Immerzeel, 2017) or the radical left (Chiocchetti, 2016; March, 2012). However, these functions are not only present in many of the lists presented above but are also at the heart of democracy and party research as well as research on electoral behaviour. Moreover, if parties would fail to fulfil any of these functions, a political system would – if any other than the most minimal definition of democracy is applied – no longer qualify as fully democratic.

As far as electoral mobilisation is concerned, there is a strong theoretical argument that populist parties can actually bring new voters to the ballot box. Since populist discourse targets those who are dissatisfied with the existing institutional setup and party supply, the argument is that populist parties are able to mobilise disillusioned and apathetic citizens who have disengaged themselves from mainstream politics and no longer participate (Canovan, 1999). There is some empirical evidence for this argument (e.g., Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014; Spruyt, Keppens, & Van Droogenbroeck, 2016), but other studies find no or only very small effects (Huber & Ruth, 2017; Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Immerzeel & Pickup, 2015). Moreover, since these parties often polarise public discourse (Pappas, 2012), it also seems plausible that increased mobilisation of former non-voters could be a consequence of mobilisation against populist and radical parties.

Similarly, there is already evidence that these parties restructure the political space by bringing forward previously secondary issues. In particular, there are studies on how radical right populist parties affect the programmes of mainstream parties, e.g., in terms of immigration (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020), Euroscepticism (Lefkofridi & Horvath, 2012) or welfare chauvinism (Röth, Afonso, & Spies, 2018), which directly speak to how societal conflicts are present within the party system. We also know that the resulting changes are an outcome of interrelated processes of changing popular demands, new parties' strategies to gain a share of voting success, and established parties' strategies to remain dominant (de Vries & Hobolt, 2020, p. 4). Thus, radical right populist parties might not only have fulfilled the function of interest aggregation for a hitherto unrepresented issue directly but also indirectly by encouraging mainstream parties to take positions on these issues. In terms of interest aggregation, we might, thus, assume that there is an improved situation. However, the same process could be seen as a negative development because other conflicts could be marginalised by mere agenda-setting. Thinking about radical right and right-wing populist parties, it seems that the latter are able to win broader electoral support based on this restructured issue space. Moreover, there is still uncertainty to which degree radical and populist parties affect issue structuring beyond their core issues.

The main possibility for a positive contribution of populist and radical parties for democracy has been discussed in the area of societal representation. The main assumption is that populist parties represent the grievances of ‘the ones left behind’, the dissatisfied and disenfranchised (Canovan, 1999; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014). Indeed, previous research has shown that those who are termed ‘losers of globalisation’ have a higher tendency to vote for and, thus, seek representation from radical right populist parties (Kriesi et al., 2012). Where mainstream governments tend to adopt the discourse of the wealthy (Elsässer, Hense, & Schäfer, 2018), populist parties can fill the representational gap by focusing on the interests of the poor (Scantamburlo, 2019). However, representation does not end with policy offers during electoral campaigns. Any judgement on how populist and radical parties fulfil this function must include a much broader conceptualisation. These and related issues were intensely discussed in an earlier Special Issue of Representation (see Werner & Giebler, 2019).

Such a comprehensive perspective is also closely related to the idea of political parties’ social integration function. Parties should ‘enable citizens to participate effectively in the political process and, if successful in that task, to feel that they have a vested interest in its perpetuation’ (Gunther & Diamond, 2001, p. 8). A positive impact of populist and radical parties would therefore be defined as an increase in feelings of external efficacy and satisfaction with the democratic process or an affective bond with politics (Mouffe, 2005). Again, existing empirical research does not provide conclusive results. For the Netherlands, Rooduijn, van der Brug, and de Lange (2016) show that populist party success actually fuels discontent, while in Austria there are indications that FPÖ voters felt increasingly heard by politicians and, hence, felt more effective (Fallend, 2012). Other studies find that increased electoral success of populist and radical parties lowers the levels of public protest (Hutter, 2014), while there is mixed evidence on whether or not they affect racist violence (Jäckle & König, 2017; Ravndal, 2018).

In terms of forming and sustaining governments, populist parties indeed come into the position of fulfilling this task by participating in government coalitions. The empirical research in this area has so far focused on the reasons for mainstream parties to accept populist parties as coalition partners (e.g., de Lange, 2008, 2012) or investigated the effect of individual instances of populist parties in power (e.g., Heinisch, 2003). At the same time, however, their impact depends very much on how other parties deal with these new contenders (Van Spanje, 2018). Maintaining a *cordon sanitaire* will make it more difficult to form a government, while considering these parties to be potential partners is an additional option with the risk of ideologically polarised governments. We do not know much, however, about larger patterns of whether and how populist parties – their mere existence or their increasing success – change the general processes of coalition building, of sustaining governments or their governing effectiveness.

Although this Special Issue cannot answer all of these questions, its contributions provide a systematic analysis for some of them. Moreover, the contributions use different methodological approaches and consider a variety of countries and cases – often even providing a longitudinal perspective. As the following section summarising the main results will show, the different studies enrich our understanding of the effects of populist and radical parties. Moreover, and this is the intention of this Special Issue, we also hope that it will shift the debate even more towards the outcome of party success and party behaviour.

Key Findings of This Special Issue

In their article ‘Populist Attitudes and Political Engagement: Ugly, Bad, and Sometimes Good?’, Ardag, Castanho Silva, Thomeczek, Bandlow-Raffalski, and Littvay (2019) investigate the claim that populist parties can be a positive force for representative democracy if they mobilise previously apathetic voters with the help of populist rhetoric. The argument is that if these parties bring non-voters to the ballot box, the overall pool of voters who are represented and actively involved in political decision-making increases. If populist parties mobilise a previously un-mobilised part of the electorate, they directly contribute to the democratic system by increasing social integration. The latter should also lead to a greater sense of external efficacy.

Using three experiments conducted in the USA and in Germany, the authors show that this hopeful logic does not fully work in empirical settings. When the authors activate respondents’ populist attitudes via experimental treatments, they find no change in their intention to participate in the democratic process. Thus, populist parties are very unlikely to fulfil the function of bringing new voters into the system. On a more positive note, the authors also find that populist attitudes are not associated with supporting violent expressions of political preferences. In summary, Ardag et al. find no discernible effect of populism on *electoral mobilisation*. However, they also do not find a negative effect on *social integration*.

Krause and Giebler (2019) focus on the effect of radical right populist parties on the issue structuring in their article ‘Shifting Welfare Policy Positions: The Impact of Radical Right Populist Party Success Beyond Migration Politics’. Using data from 18 Western European countries, they show that the success of radical right populist parties has led to left-wing parties adopting more pro-welfare positions. The argument is that radical right populist parties pushed these parties to adopt more extreme positions (again) as their respective core electorate share similar and more leftist welfare state preferences. Given the general neo-liberal shift regarding welfare state politics in the late 1990s (Giddens, 2013), Krause and Giebler’s findings suggest that radical right populist parties have brought about a broader positional supply on the socio-economic dimension of political competition. By forcing left-wing parties to take up more distinct positions, they have thus positively influenced the general *aggregation of interests and structuring of policy issue*.

Katsanidou and Reinl (2020) investigate the role of policy in the relationship between radical right populist parties and their voters, utilising the unique situation of two elections in one year in their article ‘Populists in Government: Voter Defection and Party Resilience’. They analyse voter defection from Greek populist parties in the context of the national elections in January and September 2015, noting that while policy positions played a role for whether or not voters defected from the left-wing populist SYRIZA, the most important aspect was whether or not they believed that the then party leader had fought for them and had tried everything to implement electoral pledges. This suggests that there is evidence for the idea that policy – and thus *interest aggregation* – is not necessarily the only aspects that connects radical right populist parties and their voters. Rather, this connection seems emotionally driven (see also Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, 2017), which does not correspond to any of democratic party functions usually discussed in the literature. At the same time, when thinking about *social*

integration, one could at least argue that there is a positive effect, which is not based on policy outcomes but on evaluations of how politicians have acted in the political process.

With regard to the function of parties in *forming and sustaining governments*, in her article 'Do Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in the Legislature Affect Representation in Government? A Cross-National Analysis' Best (2019) investigates whether the presence of a radical right populist party inhibits this function among all parties in the system. In analysing election and party data from 14 Western democracies, Best finds that the presence of radical right populist parties reduces the size of governments, even increasing the likelihood of minority governments. One might argue that this at least increases the potential for *societal representation*, since more actors have access to power – also in terms of negotiating power. Since radical right populist parties increase parliamentary fragmentation, they also contribute to government fragmentation and ideological diversity in government. Best concludes that these parties negatively impact important predictors for stable governments. However, it seems that this is due more to the mere fact that another party is represented in the system than to their specific ideological profile or discursive style.

Finally, two contributions to this Special Issue deal with the effect of populist and radical parties on liberal representative democracy on the systemic level. Rama Caamaño and Casal Bértoa's (2019) article 'Are Anti-Political-Establishment Parties a Peril for European Democracy? A Longitudinal Study from 1950 till 2017' takes a comprehensive look at the impact of all anti-establishment parties, be they radical right populist or related types, on liberal democracy in general. Using an index of measures for electoral, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian aspects of democracy, they show that successful anti-establishment parties lead to a diminished quality of liberal democracy at the aggregate level. This finding confirms the arguments that these parties are a poison for democracy, since the lower democratic quality can be attributed to the electoral strength of radical and populist parties. Future studies must shed more lights on the exact mechanisms behind this effect. However, the authors clearly show a negative effect on *social integration* in democratic systems.

Paxton (2019), on the other hand, finds renewed evidence that these parties often have little systemic effect in his article 'Towards a Populist Local Democracy? The Consequences of Populist Radical Right Local Government Leadership in Western Europe'. He investigates whether populist parties put their money where their mouth is and enact reforms that increase the direct sovereignty of the people while reducing the representative part of democracy. Focusing on the local level in three countries, Paxton shows that while their rhetoric tends to have a strong executive-people impetus, in the cases studied there is more or less no practical impact of these parties on the rules of the representative system. However, right-wing populists running local governments tend to redefine the 'people' in a more nativist way, and this becomes more pronounced the higher the level of local autonomy. In terms of party functions, *societal representation* and *the structuring of issues* seem to be focused more on aspects of the host ideologies, nationalism and racism, than on populism.

Cure, Poison or Placebo?

With this Special Issue, we set out to find new and more comprehensive answers to the question of whether populist and radical parties are necessarily bad for liberal representative

democracy, whether they could possibly have no effect or even make a positive contribution. To this end, we collected six contributions analysing the potential consequences in different contexts, over different time periods and with different empirical and methodological approaches. Focusing on a set of core functions of political parties in both narrower and broader interpretations, the contributions leave us – maybe not surprisingly given the diversity of theoretical arguments in the literature – with a mixed picture.

If one goes through the party functions discussed in the contributions one by one, this Special Issue provides no evidence that populist parties and populist rhetoric provides a cure for decreasing levels of electoral mobilisation. This is further evidence that one of the often ascribed positive effects of these new parties – especially in normative theory – is a myth or, at least, not generalisable.

In contrast, several contributions indicate that populist and radical parties affect interest aggregation and issue structuring. However, they seem to do so indirectly, as their competitors adapt their policy offers in response to election results. For radical right populist parties this even applies to the socio-economic dimension of political competition, i.e., beyond their core policy issues. In terms of direct effects, findings are inconclusive. It seems that their connection to voters is more emotional and less outcome-oriented, which circumvents the logic of interest representation at least to a certain degree. At the same time, this Special Issue provides evidence that, on the local level, the parties' host ideologies play a more important role for issue structuring than providing more popular sovereignty. All in all, there seem to be some positive effects in fulfilling this function but the effect is partly indirect and competition-induced.

Unsurprisingly, due to the presence of right-wing populist parties, societal representation is shifted to a more nativist perspective. Since modern democracies are heterogeneous – albeit to varying degrees – this shift can never be described as a cure. The necessity to include more parties in governing coalitions and the increasing number of minority governments could lead to more societal representation but this will be very situational.

Social integration also suffers substantively. This becomes especially obvious when considering the impact of populist and radical parties on the overall quality of (liberal) democracy. For their own voters, we also see evidence that citizens stick to their vote choice for a populist party if they perceive the party leaders to have done everything they could to implement electoral pledges – even if they have been unsuccessful. Yet, populism does not seem to be associated with a positive attitude towards political violence.

Finally, the emergence and increasing success of these parties has a significant effect on forming and sustaining governments. With an increasing number of coalition partners and greater ideological fragmentation, government stability is likely to be negatively affected. As discussed above, more parties involved in decision-making presents more obstacles to agreement, but if an agreement is reached it should be more representative. Most importantly, though, the effect seems to be mainly a logical consequence of party system fragmentation rather than a result of the success of a specific party family.

Where does this leave us? On the one hand, the list of (potential) party functions shows that there is more work to be done if we want to fully investigate the impact of populist and radical parties on liberal and representative democracy. Moreover, although we have compiled six studies in this Special Issue, analysing further countries and applying different research approaches could affect our conclusions. Much of the research has focused on

the central policy issues of these parties and how they influenced interest aggregation and issue structuring, but their influence goes beyond immigration and nativism. At the same time, there seems to be less indication that populist demands are served to the same degree as policy preferences linked to the respective host ideologies. Since, all in all, inconclusive findings prevail, we would like to encourage future research to make very systematic comparisons between actors on the left and right as well as between populist and radical parties. In this Special Issue, too, parties' function to select leaders has not been touched upon and we eschewed the more complex approach of investigating parties' linkage functions. Nevertheless, we hope that this Special Issue can serve as further inspiration for putting more of the theoretical arguments about populist and radical parties' effect on democracy to the test.

We conclude by stating that populist and radical parties are not a placebo. They have an effect on representative democracy. Even if some effects are not as negative as expected or even have the chance to address some of the problems and challenges of current democratic systems, in most cases these parties are poisoning democracy. Normatively, even if they would provide a cure to certain democratic malaises, this might still be too high a price to pay – at least, for liberal democracies and pluralist societies, as countries like Hungary or Poland, but also Brazil or the USA show.

Notes

1. There are many excellent overviews describing and discussing political parties and their development over time. For example, the volume edited by Diamond and Gunther (2001) provides exhaustive conceptual and historical work which is supplemented by very informative country and regional studies.
2. For an excellent and concise overview of classical perspectives on party functions, e.g., covering Weber, Duverger and others, we refer to Simon (2003).
3. Conceptually as well as normatively, representative democracy might also be designed without political parties. Some scholars argue that certain functions could also be fulfilled by other societal actors (e.g., Schmitter, 1997). Empirically, we would still argue that this is not the case in the vast majority of democracies and that even in countries in which parties are traditionally quite weak, e.g., in the USA, their actions have been and still are decisive for the quality of democracy.
4. Unfortunately, this Special Issue does not include a study of how populist and radical parties affect the recruitment and nomination of candidates and political leaders – either by looking at the practises of these party families or by examining whether competing parties change their strategies as a result of party system transformation. Since recruitment and nomination is clearly a core function of political parties, this limits our conclusions below to a certain degree. Hence, we look forward to future studies focusing on this function, which seems to be somewhat neglected in the current debates beyond this Special Issue.

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