

A VIABLE SYSTEM MODEL OF POLITICAL PARTIES

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ABSTRACT

Political parties exist in western democracies as a means of reducing variety by formalizing factions and allowing for a more manageable choice for voters. I will be using the system in the United States as an example although comparisons with parliamentary systems will be noted at times.

Political parties correspond to election districts and are nested hierarchies that proceed from the national committee level down through the state and county or municipality committees. The rules that govern them range from the formal, such as the rules established by the Federal Election Commission to the informal and sometimes quirky such as the “we don’t want nobody that nobody sent”. Party discipline applied to office holders is far broader and far looser in the United States than it is in a parliamentary system. Voters usually indicate a party preference when they register to vote although about a third of the electorate now counts itself as ‘independent’. Depending on the state, independents may or may not be restricted to voting in the general election. Joining a political party is as easy as checking a box. In contrast, in parliamentary systems, a minority of voters join a party by paying a subscription fee which allows them to attend the party caucus that nominates candidates for that party. Party discipline is much stricter in the parliamentary system where the leader and his or her advisors determine the position on a vote and an office holder who votes against the position can be expelled from the party unless the special circumstance of the free vote is in force. In the United States, all votes are free votes. Party discipline is enforced by the party whip but the means used is persuasion, augmented by arm-twisting, horse trading and the occasional threat.

The activities of the five systems of the VSM are not evenly distributed throughout the recursion levels and differ depending on whether or not it is a presidential election year and whether or not the party holds the presidency. For example, the party platform appears in System Five at the national and state levels, but aspects may be ignored or repudiated by regions or individual candidates often without heavy consequences. Most System Four activities are concentrated on winning the next election, although some shorter and longer term planning is done and issues are debated for possible inclusion in the platform or for legislative or judicial initiatives. Public relations and strategy also appear here. Systems Three and Three Star adjust resources among activities depending on election cycle calendar and other priorities with System Two coordinating whatever is applicable at the particular recursion level. System One activities include, again depending on the election cycle calendar, voter registration, candidate training, and fund raising. All may involve incumbent officeholders and candidates although the particular campaigns are separate organizations. As well, a number of other actors and organizations active in the political process duplicate some or most of the political party functions.

The VSM analysis will show some strengths and weaknesses of the present system and some possibilities for coordination with like-minded issue groups. Although political parties in the United States are the primary focus, there are implications for the role of political parties in other democracies.

Keywords: Viable System Model, Political Parties

INTRODUCTION

Political parties have been a fixture in the United States and Britain since the late eighteenth and early 19th centuries although the parties themselves and their particular positions have changed. For about the past hundred years, the principle distinction has been along a right/left dimension although regional differences have sometimes been influential. The purpose of politics is governance of a complex system although it often seems to be to gain office and exercise power on behalf of those who supported and elected that party. The party system reduces variety for the voters by giving them a small number of choices around a more or less consistent platform. It also serves as a vehicle for voluntary civic engagement for tens, if not hundreds of thousands of people. For some, one's political party affiliation is almost like a tribal identity.

Officially, parties establish the process by which nominees are selected to run for the party from the local to the national level (although the actual primary elections are run by the states) and then work to elect that nominee in the general election. Primary elections and caucuses perform a filtering process by providing the more engaged voters an opportunity to select the party's nominee. In the United States, joining a party is as simple as checking a box. Voters can then vote in their party's primary election although some states allow independents and/or members of other parties to vote in primaries too. In contrast, in parliamentary systems, joining a party involves paying a subscription in order to participate in selecting the party's nominee. The self-selection of voters in these preliminary rounds can be a strength or a weakness. It is a strength if that means that potential nominees get an opportunity to hone their positions and skills before a more informed group of voters but a weakness if it allows people from a wing of a party, such as the Republican Tea Party or, in the sixties, the anti-Viet Nam War contingent of the Democrats, to choose a more extreme nominee to appeal to its base of primary voters. Such candidates may not be able to appeal to voters in a general election. When people at the extremes of their party are elected it may, and often does, lead to an unwillingness to compromise and gridlock. Holding important budget votes, such as increasing the debt limit, hostage to tangential issues and, in the extreme, shutting down the federal government, damages the domestic economy and international reputation of the United States and makes effective governance very difficult.

Parties, like other human organizations, are systems that continue over time although the individuals that comprise them leave and are replaced. Examining political parties from the perspective of the Viable System Model (Beer, 1979,81,84) may lead to a better understanding of their place in politics and what their relationship with other actors is and might become in the environment of politics. Governance and politics have been a topic of VSM analysis (Espejo, R., Espinosa, A. (2009) Li, J. 2010), Livas, J. (ongoing), Medina, E. (2011) and Stokes, P. (2009) among others but I am unaware of publications specifically oriented toward the topic of political parties.

The Viable System Model

The Viable System Model, or VSM) is a model that describes the necessary functions for an entity to be viable (i.e. survive) in its environment. It must

do something – a product, service or activity – that enables it to get sustenance from its environment (System One), it must coordinate these activities (System Two), it must be able to take executive action on behalf of the whole and alter priorities (System Three) and audit the effectiveness of its choices (System Three Star), it must be able to anticipate the future and act internally and externally to prepare for change (System Four) and it must have an identity or central organizing principle that will guide it in making coherent and purposeful decisions that support its purpose (System Five). The VSM is recursive – that is, it can be repeated at many levels of embedment, jurisdiction or comprehensiveness whether in an authoritative or associational structure. The five systems and the relationships and communications among them and with the environment perform a variety sorting function.

Political parties lend themselves easily to a recursive examination because they operate in a nested jurisdictional structure corresponding to electoral districts. Countries are made up of smaller legal jurisdictions such as states or provinces and states and provinces are made up of counties and/or municipalities with powers and resources allocated accordingly.

The Political Party Environment

The contextual environment of a political party is the public life of that country or region. It includes citizens, voters, issues, movements, laws and regulations, the economic and social life of the country, its natural environment and individuals and groups directly engaged in influencing public policy. New challenges or new perspectives on existing ones emerge here – sometimes as a weak signal and sometimes as a dramatic occurrence. The transactional environment of political parties includes other individuals, organizations and movements that participate directly or substantially in political activities.

Political parties are only one entity in a transactional political environment that includes other actors with which they may be in a relationship that ranges from the collaborative to the adversarial. The parties have more restrictions than these other groups and often have far fewer resources as well. This reduces their ability to damp oscillations in the political environment. These other groups duplicate much of what the parties do including voter registration, candidate recruitment and training and fundraising.

The first is the individual candidate for office and her or his campaign. Officially, parties do not endorse a candidate before the primary although factions within the party certainly make their preferences known unofficially. In the general election, the candidate may take positions at odds with those of the party platform either for personal reasons or, more likely, to appeal to local or regional constituencies. This is another difference with parliamentary systems that enforce a strong party discipline. Candidates who achieve office are accountable only to the voters although they may face a primary challenge if they go too far from the position of a party or anger a powerful faction within it or a billionaire funder. At the national level, the party distributes resources of money, staff and other support among candidates based on their likelihood of winning now or in the future and the party's priorities.

Campaigns often hire their own staffs from the ranks of political professionals who tend to remain within a single party but who hire themselves out for campaigns for office and referenda all across the country. Such people do not have (and often do not value) the local knowledge accumulated by individuals in the state and local parties. Their range of expertise includes everything from statistics and polling to opponent research and 'dark arts'. But, this increasing professionalism also diminishes the role of the local parties that are needed to maintain and build party infrastructure and may lead to a reduction of variety in the process.

Campaigns are sometimes supported by political action committees (PACS) that are able to raise money and purchase advertising and other services with far more flexibility than the regulations governing parties and electoral campaigns. They supposedly cannot but obviously do coordinate with campaigns. They amplify candidate or party positions and often attempt to attenuate or introduce noise and distortion into the messages of the opposing party or its candidates through negative advertising. Sometimes the desired result is not to promote their candidate or issue as much as to discredit the other candidate or the political process and turn off voters so that they will not vote on election day.

Another important set of actors are the lobbyists who attempt to educate and influence candidates and office holders through financial or other support. They include representatives of industries who work directly, if unofficially, with legislators and their staffs to write legislation affecting their businesses.

Lobbyists act as channels of campaign contributions of up to tens of millions at the federal level to support candidates friendly to their industries or positions. At the federal level in the United States, lobbyists outnumber the office holders and their staffs that they attempt to influence. This group also includes small and large non-profits (although charitable status imposes strict limitations) advocating for a particular constituent group's interests and labor unions.

Non-profit political organizations, so called 527 groups for their regulatory loophole, that are not connected to a campaign have become much more powerful in the United States since the Supreme Court decided (in *Citizens United*) that corporations were 'persons' entitled to unlimited free speech. Such groups have few regulatory constraints and donors can remain anonymous. The larger ones have budgets rival or exceed those of the national campaigns.

Wealthy individuals and families also exert a great deal of influence through campaign contributions. In the early days of presidential campaigns, such individual backers can and do enable weaker candidates to remain in the race long after they would have been winnowed out through lack of popular support.

Moreover, wealthy individuals can and have decided to run themselves – sometimes in the primaries and sometimes as independents. Their ability to self-fund their own campaigns and their relative freedom from the conventions of political culture make them wild cards. It is also problematic to think that individuals who have been very successful in business (sometimes with the head-start of an inheritance) will be able to transfer their skills and mindset into a very different field and have the breadth of tacit and explicit knowledge to make them good representatives.

Traditional non-partisan non-profit political organizations such as the League of Women Voters now exercise much less influence because their voter registration activities have been curtailed by punitive legislation and because other better resourced organizations have crowded them out. In many ways this is unfortunate as they exercised a non-partisan force for moderation and civility.

Think tanks also may be affiliated with political positions and develop issues and policies outside the glare of publicity. Their involvement may result in previously no-partisan issues like infrastructure becoming polarized.

Finally, the media: radio and television, print and on-line newspapers, blogs and social media works to frame political debates, amplify issues, and in general inform and influence public opinion. They range from the establishment news organizations that, although owned by a relative handful of large corporations, at least maintain the appearance of attempting to cover stories in a non-biased manner to individual pundits and others who make no secret of their preferences and act accordingly.

All of these other actors in the environment operate on a continuum from being honest brokers to lying, distorting and dirty tricks usually with few consequences for bad behavior. They have the capability of distorting the feedback that should be occurring between citizens and politics or amplifying hot button issues to distract from needed attention to problems that might affect their agendas.

What should be the predominant influences from the contextual environment such as climate change and environmental pollution, foreign conflicts and their consequences, a sustainable economy, the economic and social injustice suffered by the less privileged and a humane quality of life for everyone often get drowned out. This can lead to the perception (and probably the reality) that the interests of the whole system and the ordinary concerns of individuals in it count for very little. Turned off voters and low voter turnout are the predictable results.

System One

Most System One activities of a political party from the federal to the local level are geared toward electing their candidates to office and supporting them when in office to advance legislative goals or the party platform. They (and those at System Four) are the only ones directly connected to the outside environment and their ability to take action and receive useful feedback is crucial to their relevance.

They include: voter registration, candidate recruitment, development, exposure and training, volunteer and staff recruitment and training, preparation and distribution of materials and merchandise, IT services,

polling, putting on public events and policy or issue based caucus support. Since many of these activities are geared toward a result on election day, they overlap considerably with System Four activities.

Voter registration necessarily occurs at the local level where a voter has an address in a community. The party does not do this directly as the registration must be filed in a local jurisdiction such as a county but facilitates the process by providing services like a voter registration on-line wizard, materials, rides to a courthouse, help in securing ID and legal help when registration is unfairly restricted.

Candidate recruitment, development, exposure and training occur at every level from city or county council to Congress and the presidency. They are instructed in everything from public speaking to Robert's Rules of Order. Volunteer recruitment parallels this with training in canvassing, phone banking and organizing. The common practice of someone entering politics is to start at the local or state level and move up although wealthy individuals and people who have attained prominence in another field sometimes launch at the federal level. This has the unintended effect of biasing the selection process toward lawyers, political staff and business people who are able to establish their networks and/or fund and support themselves. There are few scientists, engineers, teachers, working class people or union leaders in this pool leading at the federal level to a Congress that lacks diversity of experience.

Materials development and distribution also occurs at all levels of recursion from campaign flyers distributed at the door to national television advertising spots. Merchandise may include campaign t-shirts for volunteers and items to be given away or sold at a small profit such as t-shirts, pins, buttons and bumper stickers.

IT services in System One include preparation and updating of supporter and voter lists and micro-targeting of voters. Depending on whether or not it's a presidential year, this may be more or less coordinated with the campaign at the federal level. Polling is expensive so it is usually confined to federal or statewide office.

Events take place at all levels too from the county barbeque to a national (and usually much more expensive) dinner with the candidates. There is a

great deal of autonomy here as what fits with one locale would not be popular with another.

Policy and caucus support stems from System Five and happens mainly at the federal level although states can and do place more or less emphasis on regional issues. At the local level, it might include information sessions on legislative changes or initiatives and constituent services.

System Two

System Two's purpose is to prevent oscillation and to facilitate compliance with System Three directives that may be internally generated or external legal requirements. It includes record keeping, especially with regard to donations and financial protocols, adherence to federal and state election law and the "we don't want nobody that nobody sent" informal conventions that have mostly gone out of style or at least gotten much more subtle. Most of System Two's requirements are handed down from at least the state level although cities may have their own special rules. House style and adherence to the campaign messages may also have a presence here.

Some requirements such as security (no one left alone in the office at night and cyber security) accessibility (all offices must accommodate wheel chairs) and health (all perishable food must be refrigerated after one hour) are common to other organizations.

Among the risks that System Two tries to mitigate is the mismatch between detailed legal requirements that are carried out by professional staff in most settings and the work of less sophisticated volunteers and candidates who are not legal or IT professionals and may not realize when they are making mistakes.

System Three

System Three's primary job is to set priorities and allocate resources among competing campaigns and budget/time resources – essentially managing the here and now. They communicate with the System one units through two main channels: the command channel that has to do with legal requirements and executive decisions and the resource bargaining channel that establishes a resource budget and accountability format for supported activities. They

implement policies such as the ‘fifty state strategy’ or concentrating on swing states and seats deemed to be most winnable or some combination of them. The legal staff resides here along with other decision makers who may and often do have roles in Systems Four and Five.

System Three Star addresses accountability questions that are either periodic or episodic. Its main job is to mop up the variety that is not covered by routine arrangements. System Three Star may also be activated after a setback or when expectations were not met.

System Four

System Four’s role is to focus on the near, mid and long term future. Much of political party activity is directed toward the near term next election or elections. Fund raising, candidate development, advertising, public relations, short and long term strategy, using new and emerging technologies and policy development options are System Four efforts. Trying to anticipate what their next moves should be and is performed by engaging in market research and assembling focus groups. The weakness here is that most of these probes reveal opinions that have already been formed but not how people would react to new possibilities. Because of a focus on elections, long and medium term planning usually takes a back seat. Ironically, the perpetual campaign environment that has new office holders primed to begin fundraising for the next election within days of taking office reduces the capacity for broad based or long-term thinking. In practical terms, it is difficult to prepare for even the most predictable changes such as trends in weather patterns, the work environment, demographics and technologies.

Fund raising is a huge activity and gets more attention than any of the System One activities with which it shares considerable overlap. Parties compete with their candidates, with their other levels and with like-minded groups for large and small donations.

Advertising and public relations attempt to put the best foot forward for their own candidates and sometimes, used in a negative way, to discredit opponents and their policies. They often, due to channel capacity limitations, run the risk of over-simplifying or confusing voters. After all, how much can be said in a fifteen second commercial? This is unfortunate because there are not good alternatives to get a substantial hearing for complex issues.

Strategic planning and issue development address both content and means. Statisticians, media buying strategists, cyber-security experts, and others work to formulate scenarios and develop means to exploit or counter them. Sometimes parties make arrangements with outside groups such as think tanks to do analysis and float possibilities. This gives them cover to examine issues and ideas that are not part of the party platform in the case of controversial topics or ones that are remote possibilities.

Some research and development and risk analysis is done but most of that function is drawn from academia or farmed out. Parties have never been fond of open-ended public discussions and group processes, preferring to delegate them to consultants. This is partly because they like to keep the variety at a manageable level and partly because they are vulnerable to agent provocateurs working for the opposition. That is unfortunate in that it makes it difficult to discern patterns and to see common variables that may have indirect and unintended effects. Few wish to risk, especially given 'gotcha' journalism and hacking of emails, entertaining any positions they cannot defend in simple terms.

System Five

System Five has two functions: to balance attention to the present and future and to fulfill the identity and coherence function where what counts as normative behavior is a focus. To a great extent, this is published in the party platform although platforms are often broad and non-controversial so as to accommodate all the candidates in a 'big tent'. It may be developed at state party meetings and sent forward or at the national level by the respective Republican and Democratic National Committees. The process is often slow moving because of a need to consult widely and hold back from staking out ground that would not be defensible in jurisdictions that are more liberal or more conservative than average.

At the national level, and sometimes at the state level, the parties employ paid staff to set the tone, maintain contact with other levels and build up information.

Parties must continually reproduce themselves to replace lost members so some System Five activities are autopoietic in nature. However they must be aware of small 'p' politics and avoid the tendency of cliques and

unrepresentative groups to put their own interests ahead of the whole and turn off voters and constituents.

Party history, including its more successful or more notorious office holders has a place here too although a former officeholder deemed to have been successful is often claimed by both sides of a controversy. Personalities can dominate in System Five although that tends to be most pronounced at local levels where the individuals are known.

There is little evidence that the balancing function between present/near term and future/mid to long term gets sufficient attention. What balancing is done seems to be ad hoc – or explored by political theorists.

Analysis

The viability and well-being of political parties as currently constituted is at risk. This is not good news for their democracies. They do not deploy requisite variety and do not have the channel capacity to do so. Large donors and special interests that are not committed to the interests of the whole have far too much influence and are accountable only to themselves.

Parties move more slowly than events due to the government's primarily nineteenth century structures (Leonard, 2010) and distortions due to gerrymandering and voter suppression. Campaigns are so expensive that it is difficult for candidates to avoid being beholden to special interests. Too much emphasis is put on squeaky wheels and shiny objects, thanks partially to the media, and public debate is dumbed down. Sound bite communications and polarizing and politicizing issues and questions that should be of common interest such as infrastructure means that actions are delayed at great human and financial cost.

Requisite variety

The poles of right and left in politics do not have requisite variety even within their own parameters and it is sometimes difficult to see where each party's model of the country and their role in it overlaps. Some of this is due to the fact that the United States is a large and complex country made up of people from many cultures and with regions that differ widely in terms of history, values, climate, population density, industry and wealth – to say nothing of liberal and conservative concentrations. But much of it is due to

distorted communications and to opposing whatever the other party or its elected officials attempt to accomplish as a matter of principle.

It is difficult for parties or governments to deploy sufficient channel capacity under these circumstances but is made more so by obfuscation. For example, climate change is real but there are powerful forces in whose interests it is to deny it and they have both elected and unelected spokespeople pushing that view. Racism is alive and well but difficult to address at the hearts and minds level. Inequality is a problem with real wages stagnant or declining for the middle and working classes but there are powerful voices saying that if people are poor or not getting ahead, it is their own fault and that any help creates a culture of dependency. 'Culture wars' are amplified as an existential and religious crisis although there is little evidence that people's personal beliefs and actions have much influence on anyone who doesn't share their views and often catch others in the crossfire. Of course, political parties cannot be expected to solve these problems but they could do more to encourage broader discussion of important issues and promote increased understanding.

Structural Issues

The Constitution and laws of the United States include a number of legacy provisions that distort political life and affect political parties. The president is not elected directly but through an Electoral College that allocates votes by (mostly) the popular vote total within each state. This can and had led to a person becoming president who did not win the popular vote. It has also led to campaigns that focus on 'swing states' with the result that some votes are more powerful than others and parties and candidates efforts are concentrated in their direction.

Because the state legislatures in most states determine the boundaries of Congressional districts after every ten-year census, there is an advantage for the party in power in that state to draw these boundaries to their own advantage leading to a situation that strongly favors incumbents. The resulting districts often would not pass muster as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. This has the result of making some votes more valuable than others. State legislatures may also work to restrict voter participation through instruments such as strict voter ID laws that have a disproportionate effect on city residents, minorities, students and retired people.

Financing Campaigns

Well-intended laws and regulations to govern campaign spending have had, if anything, the opposite effect and made who is contributing what to whom less transparent through the clever use of loopholes. Parties are a less important part of the process because they are more constrained. Wealthy groups and individuals also distort the selection process – allowing candidates, especially for the nomination for president, continue in the race with negligible public support.

The prevalence of money as a factor of success also means that office holders, once they are elected, not only can be beholden to those who funded their campaigns but also must spend a great deal of their time raising money for the next round of elections rather than working on legislative responses to significant long term challenges.

Squeaky Wheels and Shiny Objects

There is an old saying applied to establishment media – they don't tell you what to think but they do tell you what to think about. Parties are drawn into this situation commenting at length on exceptional cases, trumped up controversies and real and contrived scandal. More complex questions and implications are pushed off the stage. There is little advantage and perhaps some disadvantage to parties going against the tide. Individual candidates may pursue the broader issue track but it is also likely to be more rewarding to attend to the squeaking wheels. This is not always a bad thing: damage from fracking, bureaucratic Catch-22's and discriminatory practices may remain unnoticed without such attention.

Conclusions

The current situation often rewards counter-productive behavior such as avoiding painful decisions and kicking issues down the road. Political parties do perform, both officially and unofficially, important functions, especially as they are accountable to a broader range of interests than most others in the political environment. But, their redesign for the 21st century will be a difficult job; especially if the rest of the political environment continues as it is at present. The state of campaign finance, gerrymandering and voter suppression activities discourage democratic competition among ideas and candidates and tilt the parties toward their respective bases. This, in turn,

discourages many voters and leads to electing people who represent a narrower and narrower proportion of the public. The use of the VSM could be helpful to amplify the parties' sense of identity and their internal and external relations. It might also guide them to push for legislative reform that would increase the legitimacy of the process.

In the context of the VSM, the glaring absence of a robust System Four leaves the parties and the government ill-equipped to handle medium and long-term issues. It is necessary to compensate for – not reinforce – the short termism fostered by the two (Congress), four (the Presidency) and six (the Senate) year election cycles at the federal level and the off year elections in various states.

This results in too small a distinction between the activities and ethos of System Five and of System Three and blurs the focus of audit function at Three Star. Too often the 'shiny objects' that Systems One and Four respond to become a matter of identity rather than pragmatism and leave System Five's role of providing vision and coherence unmet. With coherence, it becomes more possible to take unpopular decisions and blend them with a bigger picture that can be presented as necessary and positive.

There is much more that could be done with a VSM analysis, including linking various measures to a real-time reporting system. A few of them might be:

- making better connections among System One activities at the same and different levels of recursion so that efforts could be combined and silos avoided,
- improving intelligence gathering in the environment in System One and System Four,
- providing structured opportunities for volunteers to share and document their experiences through self-assessments of both logistical and political aspects of campaigns in Systems One through Three.
- supporting activities with IT social media and other templates at a System Two level,
- facing channel capacity/variety challenges head-on in all Systems
- separating System Five from Systems Three and Four so that the balance between Systems Three and Four can be directly addressed,
- even though the same individuals will be active in all Systems, keeping clear distinctions among them in discussions.

All of these would be helpful to parties to punch above their weight in a political environment where their resources are less than those of most others. But, as for now, the challenges of ‘Governing the Anthropocene’ and responding to the larger public and natural environment challenges are more difficult than they need to be.

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