



When Parties Fail

Emerging
Alternative
Organizations

Edited by Kay Lawson
and Peter H. Merkl

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CONTENTS

PART I. INTRODUCTION

1. Alternative Organizations: Environmental, Supplementary,
Communitarian, and Antiauthoritarian
KAY LAWSON AND PETER H. MERKL 3
2. When Linkage Fails
KAY LAWSON 13

PART II. ENVIRONMENTALIST ORGANIZATIONS

3. The Challenge of the Greens to the West German Party System
DONALD SCHOONMAKER 41
4. The Swedish Five-Party Syndrome and the Environmentalists
EVERT VEDUNG 76
5. The Italian Radicals: New Wine in an Old Bottle
ANGELO PANEBIANCO 110
6. Civic Action Groups in Switzerland: Challenge to Political
Parties?
ROBERT C. A. SORENSEN 137
7. Community Groups as Alternative Political Organizations
in Chicago
RAFFAELLA Y. NANETTI 170
8. Sanrizuka: A Case of Violent Protest in a Multiparty State
DAVID E. APTER 196

PART III. SUPPLEMENTARY ORGANIZATIONS

9. The Social Democratic Party in Britain: Protest or New
Political Tendency?
GEOFFREY PRIDHAM 229
10. The Defeat of All Parties: The Danish Folketing Election,
1973
MOGENS N. PEDERSEN 257

11. Parties and Political Action Committees in American Politics FRANK J. SORAUF	282
PART IV. COMMUNITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS	
12. The Failure of Israel's Labor Party and the Emergence of Gush Emunim MYRON J. ARONOFF	309
13. When Parties Fail: Ethnic Protest in Britain in the 1970s PETER PULZER	338
14. The National Democratic Party of Alabama and Party Failure in America HANES WALTON, JR.	365
15. Stealing Congress's Thunder: The Rise to Power of a Communist Movement in South India RONALD J. HERRING	389
PART V. ANTIAUTHORITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS	
16. The Limits of Organization and Enthusiasm: The Double Failure of the Solidarity Movement and the Polish United Workers' Party ZVI GITELMAN	421
17. Independents and Independence: Challenges to One-Party Domination in Taiwan LIANG-SHING FAN AND FRANK B. FEIGERT	447
18. Political Party Failures and Political Responses in Ghana JON KRAUS	464
PART VI. MAJOR PARTIES DO NOT ALWAYS FAIL	
19. When Parties Refuse to Fail: The Case of France FRANK L. WILSON	503
20. Do Parties Persist or Fail? The Big Trade-off Facing Organizations RICHARD ROSE AND THOMAS T. MACKIE	533

CONTENTS	vii
PART VII. CONCLUSIONS	
21. The Challengers and the Party Systems	
PETER H. MERKL	561
Notes on Contributors	589
Index	593

PART I

Introduction

Alternative Organizations: Environmental, Supple- mentary, Communitarian, and Antiauthoritarian

KAY LAWSON AND
PETER H. MERKL

The phenomenon of major party decline, often remarked in the context of the American political system, is becoming increasingly apparent in other political systems as well. All over the world, single-issue movements are forming, special interest groups are assuming party-like status, and minor parties are winning startling overnight victories as hitherto dominant parties lose the confidence of their electorates.

Contemporary scholarship has, however, only begun to document this development. As yet we know very little about the causes of major party decline. We do not know if major parties are failing because they are ideologically out of touch with their electorates, poorly organized, underfinanced, badly led, nonaccountable, corrupt, overwhelmed by unethical or fanatical competition, unable to rule effectively, or some combination of these factors. And we have very little data to substantiate or refute any of the propositions implicit in these speculations.

We know even less about the organizations that are emerging to take the place of declining major parties. It may be that the institution of party is gradually disappearing, slowly being replaced by new political structures more suitable for the economic and technological realities of twenty-first-century politics. But little has been done to explore the political organizations that are emerging—to distinguish altogether new forms of organization from those that are simply new manifestations of familiar forms of assemblage, or to separate apparently permanent additions to the political arena from those that are merely epiphenomenal. Ecological and antinuclear issue groups, ad hoc coalitions, “flash” parties, neighborhood committees, and religious movements abound, but we have little idea

which circumstances produce which forms of alternative organization, for what purposes, and for what duration.

Finally, we have learned almost nothing about why major parties sometimes survive even when threatened by powerful alternative organizations, nor why others are able to revive after a period of crisis and decline. The elasticity and staying power of some parties despite difficult conditions and aggressive challenges from other groups have been as surprising as the rapid decline and fall of others seemingly well protected and unthreatened by serious competition.

When Parties Fail is a collection of case studies designed to address these questions and fill this gap in our knowledge and understanding of contemporary political organizations. In eighteen cases the authors consider both the conditions associated with major party failure and the nature of an alternative organization that has emerged: its relationship to the existing party structure, its own internal structure, its social composition, its goals and ideological foundations, how its program and activities differ from those of the conventional parties, what evidence there may be of its successful appeal, and its prospects for further development.

Our primary emphasis is on the new organizations, but only as they form in the present context of major party failure. Parties have failed before, and new organizations have emerged to take their places, but normally such developments are country-specific and can be readily explained in terms of local histories of political decline and renewal. Today, however, the phenomenon is of wider dimensions, and it is clearly worthwhile to bring together studies of its various manifestations, to look for patterns, and to identify that which is unique.

Yet what does it mean for a party to fail? Although nearly all our authors concurred that major parties are faltering, and that it was time to give the new parties and movements attempting to take their place the systematic attention called for in the design of this book, they found themselves less able to agree on where exactly to post "failure" on the slope of major party decline. Should it be, as most believed, at the point where major parties are no longer able to perform the functions commonly assigned them in the society in question, e.g., structuring the electoral process, representing and aggregating all significant group interests, organizing government and formulating policy? Or should it be, as Richard Rose and Tom Mackie argue, only at the point where a major party disappears altogether and no comparable successor party forms to take its place? Or should it be someplace in between? Furthermore, how long must the signs of major party decrepitude endure for observers to be sure that an organization really has failed? If there are signs of major party reform and re-

vitalization during the period when the organization is not carrying out its appointed tasks in the expected way and is in danger of being replaced by alternative groups, is it fair to speak of failure—especially if those efforts at renewal eventually pay off? Frank Wilson, using the example of France during the 1970s, sees this as the very antithesis of failure; Rose and Mackie would clearly agree; others would not. Our solution to this lack of agreement was a simple one: we asked each author to include his own definition of party failure early in the chapter. As indicated, nearly all, including the editors, decided that major parties fail when they do not perform the functions they are expected to perform in their own society; that they may eventually be able to resume work at earlier or higher levels of proficiency does not change the fact of their having failed in the past. On the other hand, there was unanimous agreement, often indicated in comments in the individual chapters, that the Rose/Mackie and Wilson perspectives on party failure also have merit, especially as documented by those authors. In short, tempting though it may have been to command our international team of authors to march to exactly the same tune, dressed in exactly the same analytical garb, we decided that accommodating this minor difference of opinion would be more likely to help us get to our destination: the best possible understanding of a complex phenomenon.

It is complex, as becomes even more clear when we turn away from the failing major parties to their would-be surrogates. Dissatisfaction with the world's major parties is widespread, but the exact nature of that discontent, and the action it prompts the disaffected to take, vary widely. This diversity, and the relatively recent formation of most of the alternative organizations discussed by our authors, make categorization risky and the assignment of labels probably premature. While acknowledging that this is so, we have nevertheless found it convenient and heuristically productive to assign each of the organizations studied here to one of four types: Environmentalist, Supplementary, Communitarian, and Antiauthoritarian. Although our categories are tentative, and one or two of the groups could conceivably be shifted from one category to another, we have been reassured by the authors' own satisfaction with the typology we have imposed, and the conviction of each that his own group has been properly assigned. We turn now to an examination of each of these in turn.

ENVIRONMENTALIST ORGANIZATIONS

The environmentalist organizations are the organizations formed in response to today's "New Politics." They have an agenda which includes

not only protection of the physical environment but change in the political environment as well. They address such issues as peace, feminism, and participatory decisionmaking, in addition to the more familiar environmental issues of toxic waste, acid rain, and destruction of the biosphere. They are determined to leave behind what seem to them the outdated class or communitarian struggles of the dominant parties. Their leaders and members see the older parties as stubbornly irrelevant, dangerously out of touch with problems that cry out for political solutions. These organizations are characterized by the determination of their members to take direct, personal action in the struggle to bring about change. Traditional party structures are not democratic enough for their tastes; they have sought to establish more egalitarian procedures by assuring that meetings will be open to everyone, that no one will assume the role of "leader" for more than a brief period of time, and that all points of view will be fully discussed.

Six environmentalist organizations are discussed in this volume. To begin with, Donald Schoonmaker discusses one of the world's best-known alternative groups, the Green party of West Germany, and shows us how the rise of an ecological and neutralist movement is now presenting the German voter with zero-sum lifestyle and symbolic issues and attracting enough support to disrupt the established patterns of that nation's post-war party system. A similar agenda, and a similar threat, has been offered by the Swedish Environmentalist party since it emerged in 1981 to threaten the basic bipolarity of Swedish five-party politics. Evert Vedung explains why this party's actual vote in the 1982 elections fell far short of early polls and why it is, at least for the time being, no longer a serious challenge to a system that has been a model of stability for several decades.

In the next essay, Angelo Panebianco examines the Italian Radical party, which was revived from decades of slumber by its decision to address the salient new issues—a decision that enabled it to play a role as a meaningful alternative in that nation's electoral panoply of parties for the first time in its postwar history. This party has maximized its impact on the Italian political system by taking up the environmentalist issues one by one, all but converting itself into a single-issue pressure group for each campaign.

In the next three essays, the authors show us what happens when the environmentalist alternative organizations take the form of activist groups rather than parties, and operate on the local scene rather than in national electoral politics. Robert Sorensen explains how citizen action groups in the Swiss cities of Basel and Zurich use protests, propaganda campaigns, and direct lobbying to fight for "life-style" environmental issues, disdaining both party politics and the use of violence as means to

achieve their ends. In a different context, Raffaella Nanetti traces the role a coalition of neighborhood organizations has played not only in pursuit of similar goals but also in hastening the decline and fall of the last dominant metropolitan political party machine in the United States, the Democratic party of Chicago. In the process she discusses the conditions in which this new form of political organization is likely to prosper and its potential for institutionalization as a permanent alternative to the old-fashioned party machine. As a final example of the extraordinary power of nonmaterial motives to shape political activism outside the normal party structures, David Apter reviews the rise of the Sanrizuka movement in Japan, a group that emerged when the Japanese government displaced two hundred farm families in order to build a large inland airport, causing not only the farmers but propeace, antinuclear, anti-United States and environmentalist forces to band together in a citizens' participation movement which neither the ruling Liberal Democratic party nor the opposition Communist and Socialist parties have been able to contain or placate.

SUPPLEMENTARY ORGANIZATIONS

The organizations that fall into this second category have, for the most part, more familiar agendas. The issues that matter to them are issues that have appeared on other people's political agendas since time immemorial, such as how to lower taxes or how to assure adequate government attention to the needs of a particular group in the body politic. What characterizes these groups is not their conviction that the issues they address are new, nor that they themselves constitute a community sharply distinct from all others (see the following section), but simply their belief that at the present time there is no way to compel the existing parties to pay adequate attention to them. They seek supplementary representation, and in order to acquire it they create their own new organizations. Three examples of alternative organizations formed out of the impulse to achieve supplementary representation are presented here.

In our first example, Geoffrey Pridham shows how Britain's two major parties have moved closer to their "class cores," and how this has had the effect of persuading some of their more moderate members that they can no longer be adequately represented by existing parties. This phenomenon has been particularly marked on the left, where leading representatives of Labour's moderate wing have formed a new organization to supplement the choices open to the British voter. The Social Democratic party has sometimes been deliberately vague about the exact issue content of its program, but its criticisms of the far left and far right place it determinedly in

the British political center and make it thereby a new natural ally of the Liberal party.

By way of contrast, Denmark has produced a supplementary party with a much more specific agenda: the Progress party was formed to offer an alternative to those who were frustrated by what seemed to them to be the excessive and intransigent commitment of the major parties to programs of social reform that came at too great expense to the taxpaying middle class. Mogens Pedersen is not certain that this is a case of major party "failure" but describes the part this taxpayers' movement played, under the dynamic leadership of Mogens Glistrup, in bringing about the Danish electoral earthquake of 1973, when the five major parties in the nation each lost between one-fourth and one-half their previous strength in Parliament.

In the United States, the failure of the major parties to protect and advance certain values and interests with the fervor their proponents believe they deserve has come in a period of general party decline and post Watergate campaign finance reforms that have combined to suggest that here those in need of supplementary representation would do best to form not a new party but a new kind of group, the political action committee. Frank Sorauf describes the PACs, "organizations that collect and spend resources (usually cash) to influence election outcomes" and that some now believe threaten to take the place of American parties altogether.

COMMUNITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

Communitarian responses to party neglect are not a new phenomenon: party politics has never successfully aggregated the interests of every religious, racial, ethnic, or caste community in any nation and the nonaggregated have often been ready and willing to form separate political movements to battle for their rights. In periods of major party decline, it is to be expected that communitarian alternative organizations will be both more plentiful and more persistent. Four authors treat a total of six such groups in Part IV of this book.

To begin with, Myron Aronoff provides a semiotic/phenomenological analysis of the Israeli religious sect Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), a politico-religious group organized to struggle for literal fulfillment of biblical promise, with particular emphasis on widening the extent of Israel's territorial domain. Next is Peter Pulzer's study of three British communitarian groups. The Scottish Nationalist party and the Welsh Plaid Cymru both formed on nationalist grounds, whereas the National Front is based on race (or, one might prefer to say, on racism).

Of all the communitarian groups included in this book, the National Democratic party of Alabama has perhaps been the most successful in accomplishing its goals, although the party itself has, not unrelatedly, suffered considerable losses in membership and support. Hanes Walton shows us how this party helped black Alabamans take a meaningful role in their state's and nation's politics for the first time, even when battled at every step of the way by one of the nation's most bitterly resistant white supremacist state parties. Dramatic shifts in national racial attitudes and reforms of the electoral system worked to the new party's benefit.

Finally, as Ronald Herring clearly demonstrates, an important component in the success of the Communist party in the Indian state of Kerala has been its strong support from communities degraded in both social and economic terms by the fusion of a dominant caste-class system. Formed by splinter left factions within the Congress party movement, the success of the Communists electorally in Kerala suggests reasons for exceptions to the general rule of Congress hegemony—despite programmatic failures—in most of India.

ANTIAUTHORITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS

Where others focus on a limited range of issues or the interests of a particular group, the antiauthoritarians direct their attention to “the masses,” to the rights and interests of the people at large, especially when these are denied by the selfish rule of a narrow elite. It is not surprising that all three of our antiauthoritarian cases have made their appearance in hegemonic party systems heavily backed by (and in one case eventually replaced by) military leadership. What is perhaps surprising is the role that military leadership has played in encouraging the development of the alternative organization in the third case, that of Ghana.

In his study of the Polish Solidarity movement, Zvi Gitelman examines the failure of the Polish United Workers' party, despite its seeming monopoly of power, and the rise of Solidarity to its dramatic climax, noting that the declaration of martial law of December 1981 appears to have been as much a coup against the party as against Solidarity, by then greatly weakened not only by government repression but by its own uncertainty about the kind of alternative it wished to offer: one limited to strong and independent trade unionism or one that offered the Polish people a full populist agenda.

Liang-shing Fan and Frank Feigert discuss the Taiwan Independence Movement and Tangwai [Those Outside the Party], two Taiwanese movements challenging the dominance of that nation's political system by the

Kuomintang and by “mainlanders,” i.e., those who came uninvited to the island with Chiang Kai-Shek. Fan and Feigert analyze the emergence of these two movements as indicative of the “inability of the existing party system to accommodate to stress, internal and external.”

The People’s Defense Committees of Ghana have been brought to life by a different kind of military leadership, one determined to establish not only more efficient and more honest, but also more popular, government than that new nation has known either before or after independence. Jon Kraus carefully traces the ambiguities these groups must operate within: established by nonconstitutional leadership, denied legal status, opposed by a powerful array of special interests, and yet somehow still expected to save the Ghanaian people from the evil effects of the very force that keeps their progenitor in office: the arbitrary and authoritarian exercise of power.

MAJOR PARTIES DO NOT ALWAYS FAIL

As the above cases make clear, major party failure in this era of general party decline is seldom absolute. The major parties are visibly weaker, are losing votes, and sometimes even lose power, either to other parties in the legislative arena or to other groups in the political system—but so far they have not given up altogether (with the possible exceptions—among our cases—of the Daley machine in Chicago and the white supremacist Democrats in Alabama). They remain very much on the scene, and no study of the related phenomena of major party decline and the formation of alternative organizations would be complete without an examination of the durability of some major parties in this period of stress. Two essays—one a case study and the other an exploration of the fortunes of numerous parties over time—help us make such an examination.

The case Frank Wilson studies is France. Despite successive challenges from a variety of alternative political organizations in the 1960s and 1970s, the French party system has “refused to fail”—the activities of the parties, and the electoral response to those activities, continue to shape the course of French politics. The parties may change dramatically (as in the recent rise of the National Front and decline of the Communist party), but nonparty alternative organizations have little impact. Wilson identifies five factors that make major parties “better able to resist the challenges of alternative groups and organizational decay.”

In the broadest study of our collection, Richard Rose and Tom Mackie use electoral results from the national beginnings of nineteen Western nations to explore the conditions under which individual political parties are

likely to persist intact or with marginal adaptation, to undergo structural adaptation producing new parties more or less strongly identified with their defunct progenitors, or to disappear altogether. As noted earlier, these authors use a more rigorous definition of party failure than that found in the other essays—for Rose and Mackie, a party “fails” only if it disappears entirely. This approach permits them to offer a useful reminder that what sometimes appears to be a case of party failure may be merely a marginal modification or a structural change in which a party adapts, sacrificing something in organizational continuity for the sake of expected benefits. Of the parties they examine, the median party is one that persists with marginal modifications; only 23 percent disappear completely and 33 percent persist completely intact.

THE BROADER VIEW: LINKAGE AND PARTY SYSTEMS

We begin and end this volume with two essays of our own, in which we attempt not only to provide an overview but also to evaluate the meaning this present proliferation of stronger alternative organizations has for internal systems of linkage between citizen and state and for the overall nature of party systems. In the first, Kay Lawson examines the cases for evidence that major party decline is related to a failure of linkage, and that the degree of success attained by the alternative organizations is owing to the degree to which they fill the linkage void left by the major parties. Her case-by-case analysis leads to unexpected findings, as she discovers distinctly different answers for the four kinds of alternative organizations included in this book. These results prompt her to a further elaboration of linkage theory, a recognition that linkage is possible without political organizations, and a concluding argument that democratic linkage is not.

Peter Merkl questions the impact made by the emergence of these new organizations on different established party systems. He points out that when dissidents find it necessary to form new organizations rather than merely switch loyalties, there is a strong suggestion that not merely individual parties, but whole party systems, may have failed. On the other hand, the new groups are unlikely to have sufficient strength to effectuate significant change in the systems they repudiate. Also proceeding case by case, Merkl offers a close examination of the varying impact alternative organizations have on different kinds of party systems, and concludes with a provocative discussion of the possible wider use of what we may call an alternative to alternative organizations: the initiative and referendum.