

*Beyond Parochialism, Toward Generalizations and Comparisons:  
Comments on Jefferson's "Understanding European Party Systems"*

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Kurt Jefferson calls for the utilization in eastern Europe of party system models developed in the western part of the Continent. By doing so, he highlights a fundamental tension that runs throughout the literature on political parties and, for that matter, much of comparative politics: the delicate balance between making generalizations through inductive reasoning and the pursuit of detailed knowledge by way of in-depth study of specific cases.

Professor Jefferson squarely confronts this analytical balancing act. He thoughtfully envelopes his focus on the Czechoslovak case within a stimulating proposal for one means through which to generalize about political parties. While engaged in microanalysis of a party system in a democratizing polity, his sensitivity for generalization takes form in his recommendation to apply western European models in analyzing eastern European party systems, even suggesting we should refer to "European politics" in lieu of the political-geographical prefixes of "west" and "east." Toward such ends, Jefferson illustratively applies Giovanni Sartori's (1990) party systems framework to Czechoslovakia.

Unfortunately, many proposals to balance analytical generality and details of specific cases are destined, ultimately, to remain in dispute. Consensus on this balance probably cannot be reached. Regardless, for those of us interested in the study of parties and party systems, Jefferson's essay provides a useful opportunity to reconsider the problem, this time with an eye on eastern Europe. Given this belief, the following comments reflect upon several of the important issues raised in the article in terms of the appropriateness of his call for the application of western models, the usefulness of comparisons in the analyses of party systems, and where we might make some of the comparisons. In addressing these themes, I first comment on "parochialism" in the study of party systems. Second, a broader critique poses questions about the robustness of models inductively derived from west European party systems. Concerns are raised here about the explanatory power of broad classification schema in lieu of "middle range" theories.

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A related question is then raised about the applicability of analytical frameworks that incorporate assumptions of stability and equilibria to the dynamic context of eastern Europe, thus potentially undercutting their "transportability." Final comments extend the logic of Jefferson's argument by comparing details he mentions about Czechoslovakia to other cases in Europe. Such comparisons make clear my agreement with Jefferson about the need to place analysis of individual party systems within the context of developing generalizable models or frameworks.

### Moving Beyond Parochialism

Recently the *American Review of Politics* devoted an entire issue (Volume 14, Winter 1993) to "Political Parties in a Changing Age." In it, Kay Lawson argues that the study of political parties must move beyond parochialism. Among other things, her concern centers on the dearth of theoretical and analytical linkages between the comparative study of political parties and work on parties in the United States. Despite motivation from interest in another country, Jefferson's article in many respects echoes Lawson's concern for greater theoretical generalizations about all, and not just selected, cases. Both authors wish to prompt party system analysts to think more inclusively about political parties as a comparative phenomena. Each suggests little is to be gained theoretically by studying cases in isolation in eastern Europe, western Europe, the United States, or elsewhere.

Such arguments help provide analytical guidelines as students of political parties are challenged to make sense of eastern Europe's new parties and party systems. Normatively, we positively view the reforms toward liberal democracy and the concomitant increase in political freedoms and protection of human rights. Motivated in part by such views, we wish to know more about the specifics of each eastern European country making the extremely difficult transition from socialism to representative democracy and a market system. Seen from this perspective, analytical sensitivity to specific cases is important. Details wait to be discovered.

The pursuit of descriptively detailed knowledge about these new cases, however, frequently entices analysts away from the goal of generalizability. Excited about the enlargement of the pool of cases available for inclusion, Jefferson's article helps to remind us not to forget the dilemma of better understanding specific cases but within generalizable frameworks. While not using Lawson's term, Jefferson wants us to avoid a parochialism in the analysis of eastern European cases.

His recommendation for avoiding a case or region specific parochialism raises at least two related concerns. First, the application of models

developed from western European party systems possesses the issue, one always sensitive to country specialists, of missing important and unique details. The inductive theorizing that originally produced Sartori's and others' models was *ipso facto* sensitive to context. Country specialists might argue that these frameworks' eastward transportation would, no matter how accurate, uncouple them from their empirical base. Furthermore, a model's parsimonious nature almost by definition makes it appear callous to detail. Second, and related, specialists of eastern Europe, or citizens of these countries themselves, might criticize the models' very "foreignness." Simplistically and overstated, charges of academic or intellectual imperialism might be raised.

Two examples should help illustrate the thrust of this second point. First, like Sartori's (1976) framework, Duverger's (1954) classic work on western European political parties proved seminal in the theoretical development of the literature. One might therefore consider using it to analyze some eastern European party systems. Yet, Duverger demonstrated a pronounced attachment to Anglo-Saxon democracies. His argument that natural pressures channel crosscutting ties toward partisan dualism and that this dualism reflects a natural bifurcated aspect of public opinion appears problematic outside the geographical context from which it was induced. Duverger's analysis unquestionably gave important direction to a general theory of political behavior and the relative autonomy of party systems. However, one appropriately might question how well this framework could be analytically applied to eastern Europe?

A second, more contemporary, example of sensitivities involved in making generalizations based upon "foreign" models might be seen in how German unification affected democratic East Germany's nascent party system. Many eastern Germans resent the manner in which the West German party system ultimately supplanted the emerging party system in democratic East Germany. While analytical frameworks are not actual party systems, the question is would the same type of resentment, however well founded, be created in academic and other circles by the application of western European models to the east? Even if the models fit the empirical evidence well, at what cost do we neglect to consider indigenous models?

### **Beyond Classification: Usefulness of Western Models**

Assuming we somehow can adequately address these questions, moving beyond analytical parochialism still requires one to ask if the models inductively derived from western European are insightful enough to be employed

as Jefferson wishes? While a full critique of these models is obviously beyond this essay's limits, I would like to raise several issues.

First, most models of western European party systems unfortunately emphasize classification. For example, Sartori's (1990) theoretical framework, which Jefferson analytically applies to the Czechoslovak case, remains just that—a classification schema. Jefferson's use of it helps clarify the Czechoslovakian system. I nevertheless question the framework's explanatory robustness. Here I fully agree with Graham (1993, 37): "The main relevance . . . is that a formal schema of party systems, or of the historical origins of those systems, does not serve political science if it restricts our interest merely to exercises of classification. . . ."

Second, classification frameworks say little about why and how party systems change. Few western European-derived models, and certainly not Sartori's, go very far in explaining change, either in party systems or in the larger political systems of which they are a part. To take an example Jefferson intended for other uses, the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly voted on 25 November 1992 to dissolve itself, and divide the state into two. Such a decision, effectively ending one party system and prompting the creation of two new ones, produced party system change. While substantively interesting, the application of Sartori's "polarized pluralism" typology to Czechoslovakia does not lead us to question and generalize about such change: Why would political parties play a central role in promoting the dissolution of a political system? Why do parties serve as agents of change? Classification schema of western European party systems like Sartori's are not what analytically prompt the raising of such "Why?" questions.

To his credit, Jefferson hints about concern for Sartori's typology, mentioning he will apply it to Czechoslovakia "despite its shortcomings." His primary reservation, however, appears to be its nonapplicability to ethnic cleavages and not its shortcomings in explaining change. Such ethnic cleavages were clearly at the heart of the change in the Czechoslovak party system. To my way of thinking, Jefferson himself signals a potentially fatal problem in the transferability of this particular model.

Questions about such models' usefulness in analyzing political change logically lead to another question: "Change toward what?" Jefferson's interest, stated in the introduction, in "these new systems' capabilities and abilities to find some level of political stability" reveals a fundamental assumption—that party systems inevitably move toward some sort of equilibrium. Is the concept of equilibrium borrowed from the physical and biological sciences appropriately applied to the study of party systems? Do analytical models of western European party systems permit us adequately to address the pre-equilibrium dynamics of new party systems? I hold doubts

about the explanatory robustness of the type of models Jefferson has in mind within the dynamic context of eastern Europe. Equilibrium-based social choice modelling might prove more beneficial in this regard than Sartori's framework (see for example Downs 1957; Laver 1989; Shepsle 1991).

Analytical focus on equilibria in party systems raises other questions about the broader goals of research on party systems inspired by western European models. If Jefferson's advice were taken, we would require additional reflection upon what are the most important questions to ask about political parties. Some work jumps between questioning parties as causal agents and parties as outcomes, even frequently flip-flopping analytically within the same essay. (Compare, for example, Jefferson's concern for the development and transformation of party systems—reflected in the larger body of literature treating parties as the object of explanation—and, for example, his later categorization of parties as causal agents in arguing that "the polarized pluralism within the party system" was one reason for Czechoslovakia's split.) The complexity of political parties undoubtedly drives such analytical pragmatism. The consequence of such attempts at inclusiveness, however, too frequently has left generalizability in the form of classification schema.

This complex nature of political parties dictates broadly framed analysis. Nevertheless, since parties and party systems obviously reflect societal cleavages as well as acting as causal agents on them, theorists must be ever vigilant that explanatory foci remain clear. Meaningful contributions to the understanding of party systems need to deconstruct party and party system behavior into manageable analytical components. More than just typologies and other classification schema, theories useful for transport to eastern Europe should prompt questions about "how party systems function in detail in such situations as general elections, legislature debates, internal and external crises, and the choice of high officers . . ." and ". . . how they maintain themselves over long periods of time" (Graham 1993, 37). Hypotheses generated by middle range theory should help avoid the analytical morass of a complex world of politics, sociology, and economics and the place of parties in relation to them. Middle range theories and the hypotheses they generate, not typologies, comprise the strength of our understanding of west European parties and party systems. In this regard, Jefferson's call for the study of "European party systems" is *apropos*. As his call is heeded, however, we should only pack analytical strengths and leave the weaknesses home.

### Beyond Specifics, Toward Comparisons

Research on democratic change in eastern Europe too frequently assumes the existence of little theory about party systems upon which to build. Given the details of new cases, many conjecture a need to begin afresh analytically. Additionally, in attempts to undercut the logic of generalization, some researchers emphasize the social science community's failure to predict the coming of eastern Europe's democratic revolutions. While these cases clearly require the forging of new paths in descriptive analysis, this does not mean earlier theorizing about party systems should be neglected. The argument to use models developed in western Europe for the analysis of east European party systems suggests not beginning completely anew.

Nevertheless, Jefferson himself occasionally laps into parochialism, analytically speaking, in his discussions of European transitions from authoritarianism to liberal democracy. In making the case for broader based generalizations, he says "The transformation of East and Central Europe's party systems from a virtually nonexistent system, in which a one-party dominated model controlled all aspects of government, to a pluralistic, competitive electoral system now compels us to train students of democratic party politics in a more broad-gauged understanding of all European states." Such a statement seems to suggest that we are analytically at a new beginning point. Consistent with his general argument, shouldn't we apply existing theoretical frameworks induced from Europe's past transitions? Shouldn't we build upon the large volume of previous research on transitions to democracy in general and the role of political parties in particular (on the former see Vanhanen 1990)? In terms of parties and party systems, for example, the very title of Richard Gunther's (1980) *Public Policy in a No-Party State* and the subtitle of Gunther, Sani & Shabad's (1988) *Spain After Franco: The Making of a Competitive Party System* suggests that, at least in the case of Spain, past work might assist to generalize about the emergence of competitive party systems.

In the spirit of Jefferson's broader concerns, comparison of earlier research to cases of contemporary change could prompt important questioning about party systems. As an example, many transitions to democracy in southern Europe and other places in the 1970s and 1980s were from the political right while countries in eastern Europe moved from authoritarianism on the left to pluralistic democracy. Does this direction matter? Does it affect the nature and identity of the subsequent party systems in the new democracies? Bringing in comparisons of political reforms in other European

countries might yield additional insight of a generalizable nature about the dynamic changes currently in progress in eastern European party systems.

Such comparisons can point to where specifics-oriented analysts have much to contribute in terms of generalizations, particularly within the development of inductive theory. Staying with examples from southern Europe, some interesting parallels exist with respect to some specifics found in Jefferson's analysis of Czechoslovakia. Its anti-system parties—the separatist advocating Slovak National Party (SNS) and the devolution oriented Movement for Self-Governing Democracy-Society for Moravia and Silesia (HDS)—sound similar in some respects to the Basque National Party (PNV) and Catalonia's Convergence & Union (CiU), as well as the separatist *Herri Batasuna*. Jefferson's comments about the "counter-opposition" role the CPCz played following the 1990 elections suggest similarities with the Italian Communist Party's (CPI) position in the 1950s and 1960s. And, comparison would give a broader European perspective to his concern about the fragmentation of the Czechoslovak party system of 1990-92. Fourteen parties achieved parliamentary representation in Czechoslovakia during this time. Also, as part of a developing democracy, the Spanish party system has enjoyed remarkable success in terms of stability and other criteria. Thirteen different parties nevertheless gained representation in the Congress of Deputies after the 1989 election and eleven parties after the 1993 election, the fifth and sixth general elections held in this relatively new European democracy (Lancaster 1994).

Comparison of such case specific details frequently prompts analytical generalization. In the example immediately above, the issue is not the number of parties, as Jefferson correctly points out, but the stabilization of new democracies, the nature of the governmental majority, and the ideological polarization of the major political actors and their parties. This highlights the advantages of analytically looking west. Jefferson's discussion of the failure of Czechoslovakia's highly ideological party system with its centripetal forces and the German and Spanish breakdowns of democracy in the 1930s shows how comparisons of specifics can lead to important questions of a more generalizable nature. The rise of Naziism and all that it entailed, the violence of the Spanish civil war, and the final split of Czechoslovakia all have much in common: the destruction of a political system. (Fortunately, the divorce in Czechoslovakia was peaceful.) Such comparison should, among other things, move us to better understand this process of democratic breakdown (see Linz 1978).

Besides helping explain disequilibria in party systems, the German and Spanish cases might also facilitate more general thinking about reequilibration, potentially useful in predicting what awaits the two new party systems

of the Czech and Slovak Republics. Despite earlier failures of their party systems, today Germany and Spain are two of Europe's most stable democracies. Why? Explanations of successful creation of viable party systems can be borrowed from west European experiences as well. Much useful middle level theorizing already exists in the area of understanding different causal factors such as electoral systems (e.g., Katz 1980; Grofman & Lijphart 1986), the impact of economic development, lag in change in societal factors, etc. The logic of such work, and the frameworks they utilize, provides a solid foundation for understanding issues related to parties and party systems in eastern Europe.

### Concluding Comments

Professor Jefferson's call for the use of west European models to study east European party systems openly challenges us to consider analytical tradeoffs inherent to the acquisition of detailed knowledge and to generalizing. His application of Sartori's framework to the Czechoslovak case provides an illustrative example of how this might be accomplished. Such applications inevitably generate numerous questions. My response to Jefferson's essay has focused on several issues. First, his argument regarding generalization about party systems should motivate researchers to think beyond analytical parochialism. Nevertheless, we must remain cognizant of potential criticisms about the "foreignness" of such models and how they can neglect important details. Second, many models inductively derived from west European party systems do not go beyond classification. The possibility exists that many may not be up to the analytical task. I have suggested instead that "middle range" theories might provide greater insight. A third and related point suggested that many west European models are inappropriate given the dynamic nature of party systems in eastern Europe. Assumptions of stability and equilibrium undercut many models' "transportability." Finally, Jefferson's argument easily and logically can be extended. Looking at specific cases in eastern Europe through analytical lenses derived from western Europe should remind us that, while all cases are unique, many of the processes through which they change are not. Transitions to democracy and other types of party system change in other parts of Europe can assist in generalizing about eastern Europe. In addition to models and frameworks, comparison of individual cases can add to our ability to theorize inductively about parties and party systems in newly democratizing countries.

Two final points. First, with such an emphasis on generalizations about party systems, one fruitfully might question why frameworks from western Europe have prevailed and why, for that matter, political parties and repre-



sentative democracy tend to coexist? Second, I believe Professor Jefferson would agree that the logic of his argument about achieving greater theoretical understanding of party systems easily could be applied to other aspects of Europe's new liberal democratic systems.

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