

Parliaments without Parties

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Abstract

We are told that an efficient and effective parliament needs functioning political parties. They are necessary to ensure stable government majorities and to provide a link between voters and legislators. Without parties, chaos and instability would ensue as governments would rise and fall on the whim of individual legislators. However, this assumption has largely gone untested, primarily because parliaments in almost all western democracies are entirely dominated by parties.

The aim of this paper is to expand the study of parliament and to examine what happens when parties are not dominant in parliament, to the extent that they are entirely absent or in a minority. The cases for inclusion are the primary democratic parliaments where this occurs, almost all of which are at the regional level. These include: the Tasmanian Legislative Council in Australia, the Nebraskan state assembly in the US, the Legislative Assemblies of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut in Canada, the legislatures in the British dependencies of the Isle of Man, Channel Islands and the Falkland Islands. Also included are the national parliaments of several Pacific island states (e.g. Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu) where there are no functioning political parties.

Introduction

If there were no parties – in other words, if every member of parliament was an independent with no institutionalised links with other members – the result would be something close to chaos (Gallagher, Laver and Mair 2005: 308).

Parties are inevitable. No free large country has been without them.

No one has shown how representative government could be worked without them (Bryce 1921: 119).

The academic literature on parties is rife with claims that they are a necessary feature of political life in a modern liberal democracy. To this extent, Schattschneider (1977: 1) claimed democracy is ‘unthinkable’ without them and Aldrich (1995: 3) that it is ‘unworkable’. However, most of these claims are unsubstantiated since they have not examined the cases where political life exists without parties. If political parties were necessary for democracy to function then we would imagine that in their absence political life would be ‘nasty, brutish, and short’, to borrow a famous Hobbesian line. These claims need not go untested. There are a number of cases where parties don’t thrive, or are even non-existent. The purpose of this paper is to examine these cases, to understand how they manage without parties, and what this says for the claims of Schattschneider, Aldrich et al. Do we really need parties? This paper is largely exploratory and very a much a preliminary draft, dependent on the acquisition of future funding to explore the relevant cases in greater depth.

Structure

The structure of this paper is as follows. It first outlines why parties are apparently needed in democracy, before moving on to examine the cases where they are not needed. These comprise the data for this paper and they are: the Nebraskan state assembly in the US; the Tasmanian Legislative Council; the British Crown Dependencies of the Isle of Man and the two Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey; the British Overseas Territory of the Falkland Islands; the two Canadian territories of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut; and six Pacific island states - Kiribati, Nauru, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Palau. The data for this paper was sourced from the secondary literature and interviews carried out on fieldwork in Tasmania, Nebraska and some Pacific islands. It is hoped to visit the other cases to complete the fieldwork. The data from these cases is used to examine how their respective assemblies function in the absence of parties.

Why do we need parties?

A paper on the necessity or otherwise of parties needs a discussion of what constitutes a political party and this is not as straightforward as might seem. We all know a party, such as the Liberals, Labor, etc. when we see one but what are its defining characteristics? In many regions, such as South Pacific island states, parties are evolving. They can be in the process of formation, evolving over a number of years as an alliance and organisation. So when

does such an alliance of independents become a party? It can be very difficult to pinpoint a precise moment. The classic characteristics of a party are that it uses a party name, it recruits and selects candidates who stand under this party name, it has a party leader, it adopts a manifesto or political program, and if elected to government its members attempt to implement this program and they act in a unified manner (often under the control of a party whip). There is not the space within the confines of this paper to assess the nature of party evolution and organisation further, so for now the empirical evidence concerning the degree and lack of party organisation in the cases under study has been taken from the secondary literature.

The function of parties

The modern party as we know it has been around for only one hundred years or so, mainly because parties were historically much reviled, as it was believed that they distorted the link between government and the people. Indeed, the term party originates from the Latin verb *partire*, which means to divide, and it was for these very reasons that parties were despised: they were seen to promote sectional interests to the detriment of the nation's welfare (Ignazi 1996: 279). This stemmed from their factional tendencies, sentiment that was echoed by many political philosophers, including Madison in *The Federalist* (Number 10). As Belloni and Beller note, 'party spirit was viewed as the antithesis of public spirit' (1978: 4). In such a climate, the 'private' member of parliament – an independent – was lauded (Beales 1967: 3), because being

independent was more than just a label – it was heralded as the highest state of being for any true democrat; it implied that a politician could make a decision based on his own personal judgement, free of pressure from any external influence, such as parties or interest groups. Keith et al. (1992: 5–7) list a variety of references to the esteem in which independents were held up until the twentieth century; for one, they were seen as altruistic individuals who put the welfare of the state before that of the party. As a result, independents were the dominant type of politician in all democracies until the emergence of the modern political party in the nineteenth century, when the individual actors concerned realised that they could achieve more politically by working in unison. Once it was accepted that parties were not detrimental to society, they took a stranglehold upon political power in all western democracies. With the emergence of the complexities associated with modern government, it became an accepted premise that parliamentary democracy could not survive without parties.

So what roles do parties fulfil? Any standard politics textbook lists a number of these, but the main roles include: the aggregation of interests, the structuring of preferences, the provision of a ‘brand name’ to make the voting decision easier for voters, the provision of a linkage between the ruling and the ruled, and the recruitment and socialisation of the political elite (Gallagher, Laver and Mair 2005: 308). In addition, parties help prevent the instability that can result from cyclical majority rule (Aldrich 1995: 39–41; Brennan and Lomasky 1993: 81–86), and overcome the problem of collective

action that could result in low voter participation by mobilising the electorate (Aldrich 1995: 24). Further, Dalton follows the approach of Easton that sees political support as a multi-level dimension, that is, political support for one level affects support for another. Because parties are so intertwined with democracy, a loss in support for the former may have disastrous consequences for the latter, as it may result in 'eventual revolution, civil war, or loss of democracy' (Dalton 1999: 59 quoted in Holmberg 2003: 289-290).

There is almost a consensus then that parties are needed for a parliamentary democracy to function and survive. But as is detailed below there are a number of cases where parties are absent, but democracy has thrived. Why is this the case? What does this say about the stated assumptions concerning the necessity of parties? Are these outliers that should be ignored or should the normative role of parties be questioned?

Data

The cases for analysis in this paper are parliaments where parties are absent or in the minority. These include: the Tasmanian Legislative Council in Australia, the Nebraskan state assembly in the US, the Legislative Assemblies of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut in Canada, the legislatures in the British dependencies of the Isle of Man, Channel Islands and the British Overseas Territory of the Falkland Islands. Also included are the national parliaments of six Pacific island states where there are no functioning political parties. In the section below a snapshot is provided for each of these cases.

The website of the Tasmanian Legislative Council (upper house) claims that it is the only parliamentary chamber in the world that has never been controlled by political parties. Although independents have always been in the majority, the Tasmanian case is slightly different to the others in that parties have almost always been present, particularly the Labor Party. One reason given for the failure of parties to replicate their success from the lower house level is due to the institutional structures of the upper house – there has never been a general election for the Legislative Council, simply annual staggered elections for the single-seat constituencies (Sharman 2013: 328).

Nebraska is a slightly different context. It is a non-partisan unicameral state legislature (the only one of its type in the US). Almost all Senators are members of either the Republicans or Democrats, who will canvass on their behalf during the election campaigns and their respective party affiliations are known to the public. However, once elected Senators remain true to their non-partisan stance and there is no caucus in the assembly, despite external pressure from the parties. Members are free to vote on each and every bill as they wish, with approximately 200 of the 600 introduced annually passed into legislation. Although there are some informal coalitions, new majorities are formed for each bill.

The three British dependencies (Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey in the Channel Islands) and one of the British Overseas Territories (Falkland Islands)ⁱ have assemblies dominated by independents. In the Isle of Man independents have always controlled the lower chamber, the House of Keys,

and parties have only recently made a breakthrough with the Liberal Vannin Party currently holding 3 seats (out of 24). In Guernsey there are no political parties in the States (the lower chamber), while in Jersey some alliances that back members have emerged in recent years, but following the last set of elections independents were the sole form of representation in the States. Parties are similarly absent in the Legislative Council of the Falkland Islands, a unicameral assembly that replaced the Legislative Assembly under a new constitution in 2009.

Both Nunavut and the Northwest Territories in Canada are consensus democracies, so in the absence of partisan conflict, parties are not needed. The Legislative Assembly of the NW Territories is almost 150 years old, whereas that in Nunavut was created little more than ten years ago, following the separation of Nunavut from the NW Territories. A nonpartisan model has been the tradition of politics in these regions, apart from a short period of party rule at the turn of the 20th century.

In the Pacific, size and cultural heritage appear to be the main factor inhibiting the emergence of political parties in the six states of Nauru, Tuvalu, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau. In each of these states independents are the sole form of representation. Attempts have been made to form alliances and parties in some of these islands but they have never succeeded, primarily because it is claimed they don't need political parties. For example, Veenendaal (2013: 8) described political life in Palau as one of 'attitudinal homogeneity, personalized politics...lack of ideologies and

particularistic relations between politicians and citizens'. In such an environment, there is little need for the clan or political leaders to form parties.

Why not parties?

It is not just in these jurisdictions that parties are absent. They are also not a feature of political life in regions such as various emirates in the Middle East. The difference is that these are non-democracies where parties are not needed to perform functions such as recruit elites for elections or to provide a linkage between rulers and the ruled. The regimes examined in this paper need these functions to be performed but it is not done by parties. An analysis of how they survive without parties will provide an insight into the necessity of parties for parliamentary life.

There are a number of hypotheses as to how they manage without parties in these jurisdictions. The first relates to size. Given a conducive political culture (discussed in the next section), size can matter in three ways: the size of the population, the territory and the parliament. In a jurisdiction with either a small population or territory, the levels of personal interaction are higher than in larger communities and there is usually a greater premium placed on face-to-face contact (Anckar 2000). Such a culture, combined with a small-sized society, reduces the necessity of parties, which are not needed as heuristic cues or to mobilize voters. This in part explains the absence of parties in the pre-nineteenth century, when the limited suffrage meant that

candidates had little need for party organisation to mobilize support. Instead it was assumed that the strength of a candidate's name was enough of a voting cue (Cox 1987). Small societies are also likely to be more homogeneous (Dahl and Tufte 1973), with fewer social divisions, further reducing the need for political parties (Anckar and Anckar 2000). Although the influence of homogeneity is disputed by Veenendaal (2013), who cites examples of small homogenous states with parties (e.g. Seychelles) and small heterogeneous states without parties (e.g. Tuvalu, Marshall Islands). In general, however, size seems to matter. One study of thirty-one small island states found that eight of them lack political parties (Anckar 2000).

The third means by which size can affect the absence of parties relates to parliament. In general, the smaller the assembly the fewer the pay-offs arising from the formation of a party. In small arenas it might be easier and more beneficial for members to form temporary coalitions; this would allow them to reap both the benefits of collective action in parliament and non-partisanship in the electoral arena. Sharman (2013) cites the size of the Tasmanian Legislative Council (fifteen members) as a potential factor as to why it has never been controlled by political parties.

To further explore the relevance of size Table 1 below details the size of population and territory of all the cases in this paper, as well as the size of their parliaments for analysis. Tasmania and Nebraska have by far the largest populations in our sample, which is therefore a reason why parties are present in these jurisdictions and dominant at other levels. Kiribati,

Micronesia and the Marshall Islands all have larger populations than the remaining cases, but these are dispersed across a large number of islands. In general, outside of Tasmania and Nebraska, the population of all these regions is pretty small. Population does not necessarily correlate with territorial size as the two outliers are the Canadian territories. However, much of the geography in these regions is inhospitable and so territorial size here is not a key factor. Another factor considered in the literature related to geography is the state of dispersion of the islands with the various archipelagos (Anckar 2000). The higher the level of dispersion, the more difficult it would be to form national institutions across these islands. However, Veenendaal (2013) claims the evidence doesn't support this hypothesis, because the likes of the Solomon Islands, Seychelles, Vanuatu and Fiji for a time all had many political parties.

Assembly size seems to be an important factor. The smaller the chamber the easier it is to form ad hoc coalitions and so the less the necessity to form parties. Certainly all the cases examined here are small chambers, and size seems a necessary, but not sufficient factor. There are other small parliaments that have parties so there must be other factors explaining their absence in these states.

Table 1. Size of parliaments and regions

Jurisdiction	Members	Population	Territory (sq. km)
Tasmania	25	513,400	68,401
Nebraska	45	1,865,000	200,520
Isle of Man	24	84,497	572
Guernsey	45	65,345	78
Jersey	29	97,857	118
Falkland Islands	11	2,932	12,200
Palau	16	19,000	458
Nauru	19	9,434	25
Kiribati	46	103,248	810
Tuvalu	15	10,698	21
Marshall Islands	33	69,747	180
Micronesia	14	106,104	702
NW Territories	19	43,537	1,346,106
Nunavut	22	31,906	1,877,787

Source: CIA World Factbook.

All the world's sovereign democracies without parties are in the Pacific region: Palau, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru and Tuvalu (Anckar 2000: 242). The common factors appear to be cultural restraints and geographical dispersion, not necessarily diminutive size (Ibid). Veenendaal (2013) observes that not only are parties absent, but politics is very personalistic and tends to revolve around leaders. This element of patron-client relationship lessens the need for parties.

The second factor is political culture. In many of these regions there is a culture that is anathema to the development of parties. In particular, in the Pacific islands there is a strong tradition of personalism and localism. Personalism implies that electoral behaviour is motivated by personal knowledge of, and interaction with, candidates; localism that it is affinity to

the local community and how the candidate deals with its primary issues that matter. In such a culture, party label is less of an asset than an environment where national issues and policies are to the fore and where parties are seen as the only viable organs of political representation. In addition, the prevalence of personalism and localism result in the development of patron-client networks and particularism whereby politicians are seen as patrons who deal on a personal basis with voters, their clients. Parties would only get in the way of this relationship, which is why patrons tend to be against the development of parties. While a regime without political parties might seem more democratic due to the direct nature of the link between ruler and ruled, this is not necessarily the case. As Veenendaal (2013) argues, patrons may well be anathema to the emergence of political parties, who are seen as the agents of democracy. The emergence of parties is seen as a challenge to their personal rule and will lessen their power. So parties might be absent because of some anti-democratic tendencies.

Of course the situation is far different in the non-Pacific regimes in our sample, most of which are part of longer established democracies. These regions, such as Nebraska or Tasmania are part of, or connected to, larger jurisdictions where parties are at a much later stage of development and are an accepted feature of the political landscape, just not at the level examined in this paper. Thus, parties are dominant in Canada but they are absent in the Legislative Assemblies of Nunvat and the Northwestern Territories because these are consensus democracies, unlike the Yukon, the third Canadian

territory. The non-partisan nature of these assemblies, as well as the Nebraskan assembly, says that institutional structures are a key factor. Parliaments may be designed in such a way to be non-partisan, whether it is for practical or cultural reasons. It may also be the case that the institutional structures unintentionally result in parties not gaining a dominant foothold, such as in Tasmania. There, the use of staggered elections, which attract little attention, and limits on campaign expenditure have acted to lessen the disadvantages which independents usually face at elections.

A final factor to consider is that all these cases are English-speaking democracies, with most of them having a British colonial background. The exceptions are the Pacific states of Palau, Micronesia and the Marshalls, where the US (itself a former British colony of course) was the colonial power. The relevance of this is that the few countries in which independents are still elected at the national level are primarily English-speaking democracies, such as Ireland, Canada, Australia, the US and India. This is in part a product of a candidate-centred political culture, itself facilitated by the institutional factor of conducive candidate-centred electoral systems, but also possibly something to do with British political culture, although this link needs further exploration.

Of course, all this assumes that an absence of parties implies these regimes are lacking something, particularly in terms of the previously discussed functions of parties. But this is a dangerous assumption to make; if the likes of the Nebraskan assembly, the Tasmanian Legislative Council, or

the Nunavut Legislative Assembly felt it was failing in some manner, surely it would have looked to the experience of its neighbours, where parties are omnipotent, and followed their path. Instead, it may be the case that these functions are being fulfilled, just not by political parties. For example, in the absence of parties there may be informal alliances or personal networks between politicians that cater for the recruitment and socialisation of elites. So organisation may well exist, just not in the form of party. For example, in many of the Pacific islands and elsewhere (e.g. Nebraska) it is possible to identify members of the government and of the opposition as in the case of the islands, where alliances are based on family or friendships (Veenendaal 2013). In other words, the absence of parties does not imply an unstructured and unstable political outcome.

It has also been assumed that life would be easier for politicians, and perhaps voters, if they formed parties. Certainly, this is the assumption of the party-centric literature. But it may be that the independent path is chosen because it's far more convenient to be an independent than form a party; i.e. it's a rational outcome. This is the argument of Aldrich (1995), whose analysis of the origin of political parties in the US identifies it as a rational outcome. If it had been rational for individual political entrepreneurs to remain independent rather than form a party, the Republican or Democratic parties (or their precursors) would never have come into existence. This factor was cited by some in fieldwork for this paper, but more research on the relevance of this factor is required.

Conclusion

The 'Era of Good Feelings' was a time in American history when party politics entered decline. It primarily coincided with the Monroe presidency (1817-1825) and marked the demise of the Federalist party. Buoyed by exuberant nationalism after the War of 1812 and a subsequent economic boom, partisan animosity seemed to abate. In this paper a range of cases where party politics is not present have been discussed, but none of them needed an era of good feelings to generate their presence. Parties have been absent in these parliamentary chambers for a lot longer than the era of good feelings, which lasted barely more than a presidential term.

Two hundred years ago political parties were not seen as necessary as they are today, despite the low esteem in which they are held. Despite this esteem it is still generally believed that parties are needed for modern, complex democracies to function. Thus when independents win seats in parliament and even hold the balance of power, such as in Australia, Canada and Ireland in recent times, there tends to be a lot of outcry over their influence. Claims abound that instability and inefficiency result from a presence of, and reliance on, independents, with surprisingly little empirical testing of these claims. Given the low regard with which parties are held it is even more surprising that there has not been more clamour for a party-free political environment, or certainly an environment where parties are not omnipotent. This is primarily because most buy into the logic of the necessity

of parties. However, as has been shown, albeit very briefly, in this paper, there are functioning and effective political systems where parties are not omnipotent, and in some cases are absent. More research is required to understand this phenomenon, when greater evidence will result in more challenges to the assumptions concerning the necessity of parties.

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ⁱ Pitcairn Island is the only other BOT with no parties but this is because of an extremely small population (56).