



---

## Maurice Duverger's Model of Party System: A review

Srikant Pandey, Assoc. Professor

Deli College of Arts and Commerce, University of Delhi

### Abstract

Party system has emerged as a critical component of comparative political theory. It has led to the development and improvement in theoretical yardsticks of analyzing nature and character of competition in political arena/ electoral politics. Duverger, no doubt emerged as one of the prominent pioneers in theorizing party system in comparative politics. Though his successors in theorizing party system have come out with qualitative contributions but his conceptualizations are still relevant in understanding the party system of a political system.

### Key Words

Party, System, Competition, Electoral, Democratic, Alternation.

At the outset of his analysis he clearly says that party systems are the product of many complex factors, some peculiar to individual countries, others general. Amongst the first may be cited tradition and history, social and economic structure, religious beliefs, racial composition, etc. Factors common to all countries may include socio economic, or the influence of class structure on political parties, ideological, and technical factors or the method of ballot. However, as far as typological illustration of party systems is concerned, his analysis is based primarily on the numerical criterion which is, no doubt, influenced by the factors mentioned above. He has classified party systems in the following manner:

### Two Party System

The concept of a two-party system should not be misunderstood as interaction between two-party units in the process of electoral competition. If taken literally, it is a classification that does not classify, for two-party systems in the literal sense are extremely rare, if indeed they have ever system. While investigating to establish causal relationship/ the root cause of the rise and growth existed. Even in Great Britain and, in the United States of America which are considered the 'paragons' of bipartisan system minor parties have always operated alongside major ones. However, due to their limited and local character these systems are called typically two-party of



two-party systems, he came to the conclusion that with a few exceptions it is generally associated with the simple-majorities single-ballot systems. He clearly says, " The simple-majority, single ballot system favours the two party system. An almost complete correlation is observable between the simple-majority, single-ballot system and the two-party systems. The dualist countries use the simple-majority vote and simple-majority vote countries are dualist".( Duverger, Political Parties: Their Organisation and Activity in Modern State, London, Methuen& Co.,1967 ,p 217) He further maintains that this electoral system helps in maintaining as well as restoring an established dualism in spite of schisms in old parties and the birth of new parties. This is made possible through the processes, called Fusion and Elimination. According to this process, if more than two parties are competing in a constituency with no one having a clear majority, the like-minded two parties may reach agreement with one withdrawing its candidate for some form of compensation in other constituencies, in which case the two-party system is restored as a result of fusion or of an alliance very like fusion. Alternatively, if the third or the weakest party insists on contesting, it is gradually deserted by the electorates, which is called elimination. The example of Great Britain has been cited, as to *how* elimination of Liberal Party led to the restoration of two- party system in that country which had been threatened with the rise of a third party.(ibid ,pp 218-227)

In the present day application of this assumption is generally referred as duopolistic nature of a bi-party system implying thereby that such a system is manifested by existence of predominantly two 'major' parties that have equal opportunities to gain electoral majority. A bi-party system, in its classical form, may exhibit three basic features: though, existence of small parties are not denied but the required electoral and legislative strength for gaining political power rests primarily with either of the two major parties. Secondly, in such a system one of the major parties would form the government and rest of the parties including the other major parties would sit in opposition. Thirdly, the power would alternate between these two major parties; both are electable and the opposition serve as a wing of government.( Andrew Heywood, Politics, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p260)

### Multipartism

In this category he puts all those political systems where more than two major parties exist and compete in the electoral process. However, he is of the opinion that a typological illustration of the Multi-Party system is not easy to establish, as innumerable varieties can be imagined ranging from three parties to infinity, and within each variety innumerable patterns and shades of difference are possible.( Duverger,p228) However, by discovering the ways in which multiparty



systems came into existence, he comes out with some general features which are displayed in this type of party system. Accordingly, he has constructed a theoretical pattern; that the two-party system is natural, and the tendency towards multi-partism is a result of two different phenomena: internal division of opinion and their overlapping. As far as internal division of opinion is concerned, all the parties do have moderates and extremists. If they fail to meet on common ground, it leads to a split and the rise of a centre party: by dilution of the doctrines of the Right and Left. He says “a splits opinion give rise to centre parties. There exists no center view, no central tendency, no central doctrine, separate in kind from the doctrines of the Right or of the Left, but only a dilution of their doctrines, attenuation, a moderate doctrine. If the Liberal party splits into Liberals and Radical, then the former become a central party. (ibid, p230). In his analysis such trends can be witnessed in case of political parties of Switzerland, Denmark and Holland etc. However, because of its very position and the contradictory attractions that are exerted on its members produce inside it a fundamental cleavage. Every centre party is therefore by its very nature divided. An exception occurs when two centre parties co-exist in a country. The second phenomenon which is more widespread than the split is called overlapping. It consists in the non-coincidence of a number of different dualisms of opinion with the result that their combinations produce a multiparty system. It presupposes that, there are various sets of antitheses in different sectors of political activity and these are largely independent of one another. It, therefore, provides an opportunity to adopt a viewpoint in one field and still be relatively free to choose one's point of view in other fields. Multi-partism therefore arises from the mutual independent sets of antitheses. Explaining this phenomenon he says that ‘overlapping’ is apparently more widespread than ‘split’. Citing the examples of France, Belgium, Spain and Italy he argues that a multi-partite division is produced by a combination of non-coincidence of several dualist opinions within a given system.( ibid,231). In Duverger’s scheme of multi-partism the causal explanation lies either in ‘split’ or ‘overlapping’ in natural two-way division. Elaborating it further it is opined that split may take place in any system-bourgeois or socialist- and the electoral system may act as a catalyst. On the other hand overlapping requires non-coincidence in society which implies that in any society that is divided along lines of class and sections without coinciding the chances are that this will lead to rise of four parties.( Macdonald, Neil A.Party Perspectives: A Summary of Writings in Harry Eckstein and David E. Apter (eds), Comparative Politics, Delhi, Surjeet Publications, 2003, pp239-40).

The multi-party system can be of different varieties according to the number of rival parties, e.g., tri-partism, quadri-partism, polypartism, but each of these reflects one common factor, viz., the electoral system. According to his observation almost all countries with simple majority and second ballot system and proportional representation are also countries with multi-party system.



---

The only real exception to the multiplying effect of the second ballot is provided by Belgium which remained a two-party system despite the application of the second ballot.

However, there are scholars who contend that multi party system emerges when two parties secure almost equal number of seats in the legislature but fail to form the government on its own because of falling short of the requisite number. It is argued therefore that multi party system emerges when no party garners absolute majority followed by sharing of majority of the votes and public offices by three or more parties among themselves. Such governments are mostly coalition or fusion governments.(Austin Ranney and Kendall Willmore, The American Party System, American Political Science Review, vol. xlvi, 1954,p480). In fact in multi party systems the basic tools to form the government are post-elections “negotiations’ and ‘horse trading’.( Heywood,,pp263-264).

### Single Party System

Considered to be a new kind of political system, it refers to dictatorship based on a party. However, one should not equate single party with a totalitarian party as the there are single parties that are not totalitarian, and there are totalitarian parties in multi-party systems.( Duverger, p256) As far as the structure or the internal organization is concerned there is no clear line of demarcation between the pluralist parties and single parties. A. party, he says further, tends to become the only one because its structure is totalitarian; it does not adopt a totalitarian structure because of a desire to become the only party.(ibid ,p256)

Though there are several single party systems, Duverger has discovered some general features which are the following: First of all, in all the single party systems, practice preceded theory. For example, even in Soviet Russia, theoretical legitimacy to the monopolistic rule of monolith communist party was not secured until the constitution of 1936 was enacted. Second, it aims at forming new elites, to create a new ruling class, to unite and to shape the political leaders capable of organizing the country for the masses cannot themselves govern. The function of these leaders of the party is not so much to administer as to ensure the vitality and fidelity of the administration. Third, it maintains its link between the government and the masses through *tis* thousands of cells and sections scattered throughout the country, through all the strata of the population and all social groups. Thus, it is both a state body capable of understanding state decisions and a group of citizens who feel the reactions of the people in themselves and in their neighbours and who are able to express these to their leaders. Another function of the party in such a system is to act as a propaganda machinery as well as a spying and informing agency of the government. And, last, but not the least, the party acts as an instrument of terrorism. It

---



---

secures loyalty of all the citizens through supervision of party members. Moreover, loyalty of the party's political elite is ensured by actual supervision of the members of the party and spotting suspects and denouncing them.

However, he believes that instead of a general analysis of one-party system one should analyse two prominent such systems, namely, the communist system and the fascist system.(ibid, 263) As far as the one party system in communist regime is concerned, it can be defined as the tools of the proletariat to overthrow the authority of middle class. On the other hand, the fascist parties are tools of the middle classes to retain their power and to prevent its falling into the hands of the proletariat. As far as the organizational structure is concerned, both the parties have strict centralization with vertical links. As far as the method of recruitment is concerned the closed system of fascists tends to isolate them from the nation, whereas in a communist regime an ordered mobility of the elite possible and contact with the masses is not broken.

Another aspect of single-party system, though it seems ridiculous, is that totalitarian parties can exist in a pluralist system. The best examples according to him are the communist parties in France and Italy at the present time. Conversely, some single parties are not really totalitarian either in ideas or in organization. The best example of this has been the People's Republican Party of Turkey which operated from 1923 to 1946 as a single party, based on democratic ideology. It gave no official recognition to monopartism and remained committed to a plural party system, monopoly being a result of the special political situation in Turkey.(ibid, 276-277)

Having analysed Party system on the numerical criterion, he moves on to analyse it on the basis of their strength and alliances. As far as party strength is concerned he provides a three-fold classification:

#### Parties with a majority Bent

All parties which command an absolute majority in parliament or are likely to do so are called parties with a majority bent. Their existence is normal in a two-party system, except in such cases where their disproportion is so great that one of them is reduced to the situation of being permanently in a minority. However, in multi-party systems the existence of parties with a majority bent is quite exceptional. Hence, a party with a majority bent knows that at some date it is likely to come to power, it is generally realistic. In consequence, it does not promise more than what is possible; places greater stress on concrete problems than upon theoretical questions, as one cannot govern by theories.



---

## Major Parties

Those parties which do not ever get an absolute majority in exceptional circumstances are termed as major parties. They normally govern in association, inside a coalition cabinet. But, due to their strength they play an important role inside such alliances. If, they are in opposition, they can exert an effective influence. All such parties take help of demagogy for electoral dividends as they know that their programme will never have to face facts, because they will never come to power individually; they will always share the responsibilities with their allies. As a consequence, always there is an opportunity to attribute to their allies the responsibility for failure.

## Minor Parties

Parties which never have more than a small number of representatives in parliament and do not seem therefore capable of playing an important role either in the government or in the opposition are categorised as minor parties. However, they have been further categorised under the following headings:

### Personality Parties

These are purely parliamentary groups having neither real party organization nor true social structure. Though there are independent minor parties yet generally they are satellites of major parties and act under their discipline. However, these parties are in general fluid and shifting.

### Permanent Minority Parties

Unlike the personality parties, these parties are not only limited to the parliamentary level, rather they have an organization, either national or local. They may be based either upon the caucus or the branch or the cell or militia. Structurally, there are mass parties based upon ethnical, geographical, religious or political minorities. As a consequence, they do not accept the complete fusion of the national community. Despite being minor parties in the parliament, they are very strong locally, frequently occupying the position of a dominant party or even of a single party.

However, the influence of minor parties on the electoral or on the parliamentary plane must not be overlooked. It has been observed that in such circumstances where the gap between the



---

majority and the minority is very narrow they may assume the role of arbiters as their movement may alter this balance of power.

#### Development of Party Strength

Duverger has tried to provide a dynamic view of party strength on the basis of a comparative study of electoral sociology of parties. And on the basis of his analysis, he explored some common patterns of development, and described them under following schematic form : -

#### Alternation

It exists primarily in dualist countries. It has been defined as a pendulum movement, which means that each party moves from opposition to office and from office to opposition. Great Britain and U.S.A. are always cited as the classic examples of this type. However, alternation may take place in a system with electoral coalitions also.

#### Stable Distribution

Unlike alternation it is defined as the absence of any serious variation among the parties over a long period. Moreover, it has been noticed that with some exceptions stabilizing tendency has been the product of Proportional Representation.

#### Leftism

It seems to be a general phenomenon, with one important exception, the United States. It is defined as the process of a slow but regular movement towards the left. And, the rise of this tendency corresponds to the social evolution which brought a new strata to power during the period in which the modern system of political parties was built up and developed.

#### Dominant Party

A party larger than any other, which heads the list, and clearly out-distances its rivals over a certain period of time, is called a dominant party. However, the sociological analysis would reveal that a party is dominant when it is identified with an epoch; when its doctrines, ideas, methods, its style coincide with those of the epoch. In two-party systems the dominant party slows down the swing of the pendulum. In other words, in such a situation one finds alternation at longer intervals.



---

## Party Alliances

As far as alliances are concerned, Duverger is of the opinion that there may be two kinds of alliances: Some are temporary coalitions which take place in order to benefit the parties concerned in the elections, in order to overthrow a government or to support one from time to time. Others are lasting and are strongly organized, so that sometimes they are like super-parties.( *ibid*,p 324)

There are several factors which determine the nature and role of alliances. First of all, the number of parties play a determining role in the formation of alliances. Thus, in a two party-system alliances are quite exceptional: they take the form of National union, during emergencies, one can find such alliances in Great Britain during the First and Second World Wars. Conversely, in a Multi-Party system the government is seldom formed without an alliance. In the authoritarian regimes governmental pressure may lead to alliances; as happened in Balkan democracies between 1920 and 1940.

However, if alliances are based on a common programme, their relations are much more clear and easier. Such a programme is, however, generally vague, more calculated to attract votes than to formulate a plan for positive action. Going further, he says that electoral alliances tend to be dominated by the most extreme party, and governmental alliances by the most moderate party. (*ibid*, p334)The extremist party is, therefore, reduced to the alternative of either taking part in government and deviating from its doctrine or else breaking up the alliance. The attempt to find a compromise solution leads to unending fluctuations. Often the extremist ally takes refuge in support without participation, which makes it possible to maintain the coalition in weakened form while benefiting from the advantages of criticism and opposition. This lead the ruling party away from the common electoral programme and it comes nearer to the moderates; the disappointment of some voters increases which gives an opportunity to the extremist party to adopt a more intransigent attitude. Ultimately this leads to breaks and the alliance is over.

Alliances, on the other hand, can be analysed on the basis of, what Duverger calls, political geography as well. This is another way of classifying alliances from the horizontal point of view. The first and most common to all such alliances is that of the Right and the Left. If these two rival groups form alliances, and if they are sufficiently strong, a multi-party system may become very much like a two party system. But, this two-alliance system is not so sound as a two party system. Within each block mutual rivalries may lead to a demagogic attitude that bi-partism tends to check. Thus, all depends on the degree of cohesion manifested by the respective alliances or parties. Secondly, there can be centre alliances. In this system the centre party may

---



---

shift, towards one or other extreme. Thus, it occurs in a country where there is a three-fold division of opinion. Yet another kind of alliances may be called as National union. In such alliances all the major parties existing in the state are associated irrespective of their differences. Though, such alliances are formed in exceptional circumstances - War cabinets - but it can be formed during the peace time as well. And, finally, the most uncommon and strange form of alliance is between the extremes. It takes place because of their common opposition to moderate parties, and sometimes a common opposition to the regime. Such alliances are less common in the form of electoral alliance, and particularly of a governmental alliance, rather it is in the form of an opposition alliance in parliament. However, every alliance is unequal, the difference being only of degree of inequality which depends upon their respective strength, their position on the political chessboard, and their internal structure.(ibid, p344).

### Conclusion

Party system has emerged as an important sub system of political system as there is hardly any political system which does not follow some kind of electoral method for ensuring democratic principles of representation without which the authority does not get legitimacy. Such an electoral exercise lead to emergence of parties and their democratic engagements result into some patterns and trends which can be analysed and explained with the help of suitable theoretical yardsticks. Duverger is credited with developing pioneering tools and techniques of analyzing party system in a given political system.

### References

Srikant Pandey, PhD Thesis, 2021, The Indian Party system in Coalition Era ( 1999-2014), University of Delhi.

Duverger, Maurice(1967), Political Parties: Their Organisation and Activity in Modern State, London: Methuen & Co.

Andrew Heywood, Politics, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002 .

Austin Ranney and Kendall Willmore, The American Party System, American Political Science Review, vol. xlvi, 1954.

Macdonald, Neil A. Party, Perspectives: A Summary of Writings in Harry Eckstein and David E. Apter (eds), Comparative Politics, Delhi, Surjeet Publications, 2003