Party and Party System Institutionalization: Which Comes First?

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Parties and party systems are treated as separate phenomena in theory, but not in research practice. This is most clearly so in the literature on the institutionalization of party politics, where the party level and the systemic levels are often analyzed through combined fuzzy indices. We 1) propose separate indicators for measuring institutionalization at the party and at the party system level, 2) demonstrate their different dynamics in twentieth and twenty-first century European countries, and 3) investigate the direction of causality. Using a dataset that covers more than 700 elections, 800 parties, and 1,400 instances of government formation in 60 different historical party systems across 45 European countries, we find that party-level institutionalization tends to precede systemic institutionalization. The opposite pattern occurs only in a few countries.

The accepted wisdom in political science is that party systems have a logic of their own, somewhat detached from the life of individual parties (Ware 1996; Mair 1997; Randall and Svåsand 2002). There are countries in which inter-party politics is characterized by predictability in spite of the occasional merger, split, disappearance, or emergence of individual parties. In other countries the roster of individual parties and their electoral support is relatively continuous, but parties frequently realign. As an acknowledgment of two separate, though obviously related, logics and arenas, the typical title of an academic paper or of a university course on party politics is "Parties and Party Systems".

Given this background, one would expect the existence of established separate measures for the two levels and crystallized views on whether party system change leads to

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party-level change, or vice versa. This is, in fact, not the case. The indicators used to measure the two levels tend to overlap and therefore no clear distinction or relationship has been established between the two phenomena. While there have been sporadic attempts at treating institutionalization at the party-systemic level and at the party level separately (e.g., Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2020), through different indicators (we build particularly on Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2021), none of these attempts aimed at establishing a causal sequence between the two phenomena.

Identifying the differences between the dynamics of parties and party systems is not only a theoretical necessity. Through their differentiation we can capture better the speed and character of de-structuration happening in multiparty systems. Furthermore, the careful separation of the two levels can help us in better responding to the practical challenges of democracy promotion,[1] as the contribution of the two levels to the quality or consolidation of democracy may differ.

Most scholars from Huntington (1968) onwards (cf. Mainwaring 1998; Morlino 1998; Tavits 2005) agree that some level of institutionalization of party politics is essential for a proper functioning of democracy, although occasionally too much institutionalization is also suggested to be problematic (Schedler 1995, Mölder, Enyedi, and Casal Bértoa 2023; Yardimci-Geyikci 2015). If the individual parties are institutionalized, then they have better chances to become reliable conveyors of the preferences of the citizens. Durable political parties can help voters to reduce the multidimensional political world into a manageable set of alternatives. Electoral promises can form the basis of accountability exactly because of the longevity of parties; citizens can exercise their right of rewarding or punishing because those who made the promises at the previous elections are still around and accept the verdict of the supporters. Stable parties provide a framework for politicians within which idiosyncratic ideological differences may cancel out each other, and a meaningful electoral choice becomes possible.

The dominance of parties with a track record also provides better conditions for linking the electoral, the legislative, and the executive arenas. Across time, parties get the chance to establish linkages to specific pressure groups, social segments, geographic areas, and economic sectors, representing the interests and values of these units during the campaigns, legislative debates, coalition-building, and governing. The citizens can realize that their preferences expressed as votes translate not only into political rhetoric but also into policies and governmental regulations, and thereby their attachment to the political system may solidify.

As far as the institutionalization of the party system is concerned, the predictability of the alignments between parties is primarily relevant in multiparty settings, where the governments are often based on cooperation among parties. Knowing which party is a "friend" with which other party allows citizens to have rational expectations on the character of the government. The coalescence of parties into formal or informal alliances further simplifies the political landscape, often reducing the number of viable alternatives to two or three.

Since party alliances can fall apart at any minute, their long-term survival signals underlying continuity in the nature of political divisions. This continuity may stem from stable social configurations, but given that conflicts between parties may be outcomes of tensions within a relatively narrow political elite, the stability of blocs of parties also indicates intra-elite consensus on what political competition is about.

Clearly, the contrast between parties and party systems is a contrast between different levels of aggregation. But it is also a contrast between two different logics. At the level of parties, the question to be asked is whether they can maintain a support base and achieve office. At the level of party systems, the question is whether the inter-party relations and the rules of competition and cooperations stabilize.

The functioning of democratic systems of representation may fail on either—or both—fronts. Parties may remain ephemeral institutions with a short timespan or may be unable to maintain unity and may fall apart into various splinter groups. Alternatively, the coexistence of parties may lack equilibria; the political community may not reach an agreement about what are the principal alternative teams. The latter is particularly likely if there is no clear rank order between issue- and value-related conflicts. The classical party systems of Scandinavian or UK politics achieved such an equilibrium by giving priority to class-related interests, and by accepting the Labor/Social Democratic parties as the principal spokespersons of the working classes. On the Scandinavian right there has always been more complexity, but the cooperation between Agrarian, Conservative, Christian Democratic, and right-wing Liberal forces allowed for a consolidation of a bipolar system.

While the party-level and the systemic-level are neatly separated in many theoretical studies, the most common practice of measuring the institutionalization of party systems is to average the features of individual parties.[2] Some scholars use, for example, the average party age (Schiller 2018; Schleiter and Voznaya 2018; Piñeiro Rodríguez and Rosenblatt 2018 and the like) to pass judgment on the institutionalization of party systems. This is a clear case of using information calculated at one level—the parties—to characterize another level—the system of parties. The frequently used indicators of electoral volatility appear to be more systemic in nature, but they are, in fact, also aggregates of features of individual parties (in this case using as input the change of their support from one election to another).

We recognize that the listed measures tell us something relevant about the nature of party politics (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2020). But none of them are truly *systemic* indicators because they miss the very element that constitutes a system: the interactions between the components. In contrast, the essence of our proposition is to use party-level measures for capturing the degree of party institutionalization (PI), and interaction-related measures for capturing party system institutionalization (PSI).

As far as the interactions among parties are concerned, we suggest relying on the party system closure index (Mair 2001; Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2021). The closure approach considers party systems to be institutionalized if a stable set of parties alternate in power following regular coalition patterns. The strategy of relying on the closure index is not without limitations as the empirical basis of this measure is confined to the governmental arena. Information on the relationships among all parties would provide a more comprehensive picture. But the interactions of parties in building governments are central to party relations in general (Rokkan 1970; Smith 1989). Furthermore, data on the often-informal alliances of opposition parties are rarely available. While the closure index misses changes within the opposition, it allows for the analysis of long time spans and a large number of countries.

We propose to consider parties to achieve a high degree of institutionalization if they have a continuous existence and if (legislative) elections are dominated by well-established parties. This strategy of operationalization also aims for an optimal balance between empirical reach and validity. Specific intra-organizational characteristics are not considered for the index as they are available only for a limited time period.

The third limitation of the presented analysis is that it is confined to Europe. Within this geographic scope, however, we can rely on an unusually large dataset, going back to the nineteenth century and basing our conclusions on the observation of up to 60 party systems, from the Second French Republic, established in 1848, to Kosovo, independent since 2008.

Exploiting the variation of a century and a half, including into the analysis party systems that existed at one point but have collapsed by now, and benefiting from cross-national diversity, we are able to document the similarities and differences between the temporal trends in the two studied phenomena. Additionally, our goal is to investigate the causal sequence between PI and PSI and to establish whether we need institutionalized political parties to achieve predictable patterns of inter-party competition or whether the consolidation of relations among parties is a precondition for the consolidation of the parties themselves. Our ambition is not to provide a comprehensive causal explanation for these two phenomena but to highlight the differences between them and to confront the fundamental question: What comes first?

One of the principal observations of the descriptive analysis made possible by the new data and the new indicators is that there is currently a drastic de-institutionalization at the level of parties in Europe, but a much more attenuated decrease in the stability of party interactions in the governmental arena. The evidence also leads us to conclude that one should think of party-level institutionalization being the cause, and PSI being the outcome. Institutionalized parties lead to more stable party relations, but the opposite is mostly not true: systems that develop predictable patterns of party relationships do not necessarily enhance the institutionalization of parties themselves.

In what follows, we discuss the conceptual and operational issues of PI and PSI and then the arguments justifying particular causal sequences between the two. We next introduce the data and the operationalization of the main variables and thereafter present information on the cross-temporal relationships between party and systemic institutionalization. The following section investigates the causal sequence between the two phenomena confirming our main finding—PI is the prime mover. The article ends with a summary of the main findings, including some suggestions for future research.

Party and Party System Institutionalization

In the analyses of party politics, PI and PSI are often collapsed into a combined fuzzy syndrome (e.g., Kreuzer and Pettai 2003; Lewis 2006; Meleshevich 2007; Moser 1999; Rose and Mackie 1988; Shabad and Słomczyński 1999). This is, on the one hand, understandable. Both individual parties and the patterns of party competition can become predictable, anchored, robust, impersonal, and routinized, and there are strong reasons to expect the institutionalization of individual parties and party systems to be related (Lane and Ersson 2007; Rose and Munro 2009; Sartori 1990). On the other hand, we will never learn about their similarities and differences unless we rely on separate empirical indicators.

Even when the party level and the systemic level are treated separately, the features of the units (i.e., parties), primarily their organizational strength and stability, are used to characterize the whole system (e.g., Mainwaring 1998; Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Mainwaring and Torcal 2006; Kuenzi and Lambright 2001; Tan 2006). In other words, there is a mismatch between theory and empirical strategy.

The confusion of the two levels can be minimized if one conceptualizes the institutionalization of parties primarily through organizational continuity and longevity (Levitsky 1998; Bolleyer and Ruth 2018; Scarrow, Wright, and Gauja 2023), while thinking of systemic institutionalization in terms of the stability of the structure of inter-party

competition (Mair 2001). Since there is no deterministic mechanical link between these factors, we allow for the possibility that the patterns of partisan interactions may solidify despite the discontinuity of individual parties or that a substantive change in the dynamics of the system may occur even without a drastic change in the support of parties and without the appearance of new players on the scene. At the opposite end of the spectrum, relationships among parties may remain unpredictable and unstable despite the persistence of party labels.

For measuring institutionalization at the systemic level, we choose the party-system closure index (Mair 2001). Among the available empirical proxies for PSI (e.g., fragmentation, electoral volatility, programmatic stability, etc.) this is the one that focuses most unambiguously on the interactions among parties. Party-system closure is considered high if the combinations of parties constituting governments rarely change, if new parties have a marginal presence in governments, and if governments are not based on the combination of hitherto opposition and government parties. While the closure scores are calculated using information obtained from the governmental arena, they have been shown to reflect the logic of party relations in general (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2021). The reliance on the composition of governments permits us to extend our investigation to a particularly extensive large timespan.

As far as the party level is concerned, the same objective can be reached by focusing on the age of parties and their continuous electoral support. Other possible indicators of PI (e.g., indices of party identification, membership, party switching, party replacement, party nationalization, bureaucratization, financial resources, etc.), are usually available for a limited number of cases over time. Even more importantly, age and electoral support are relevant indicators of PI because they depend directly on the organizational stability and social rootedness of the parties.

This operationalization strategy allows for the examination of the differences and similarities between party and systemic institutionalization across time, and for establishing the causal sequence between the two. In general, based on the literature and on the arguments to be elaborated further later, one should expect a positive relationship between these phenomena. But this relationship is likely to be less tight than assumed by the studies that mix information from the two levels.

Party and Party System Institutionalization: What Kind of Relationship?

Despite the importance of both discussed notions, few studies have probed into the causal relationship between them. Within this relatively small literature, PI is mostly assumed to be a cause of PSI (Roberts and Wibbels 1999; Toole 2000), but some studies treat it as a consequence of

the latter (Tavits 2008).[3] Stable party interactions are unlikely when political parties come and go and frequent changes in party relations may hinder the ability of parties to develop electoral roots and stable organizations. Thus, intuitively, both models are conceivable.

The model according to which continuity in party relationships anchors and stabilizes individual parties is definitely plausible. This logic assumes that when parties do not change partners, new party initiatives are discouraged, and voters are reluctant to change partisan preferences (Mair 1997). In contrast, if the electorate sees parties colligating in an *ad hoc* and pragmatic manner, making alliances out of convenience rather than based on long-standing common interests and ideological proximity, the loyalty of voters and politicians to their party will diminish, making both electoral shifts and organizational splits more likely (Tavits 2008). In other words, uncertain party relations may weaken political parties themselves.

The opposite model considers the institutionalization of parties to be the more profound and more consequential phenomenon and expects the systemic level to stabilize only after political parties achieved considerable organizational continuity and gained a critical mass of loyal supporters. We find the arguments in favor of the second model to be more powerful, and therefore we expect PI to precede PSI. The first argument is quasi-mechanic: predictable relationships between parties require some continuity in the basic building blocks of the system (Moser 2001, 36; Rose and Munro 2009). In theory, a center-left party can be replaced by another center-left party that will have the very same systemic role as its predecessor, but it is highly unlikely that this logic will characterize every single example of party discontinuity.

More substantively, PI implies routinized internal processes for recruitment, deliberation, conflict resolution, and decision-making (Harmel, Svåsand, and Mjelde 2019). The establishment of conflict-solving mechanisms reduces the room for intra-party factionalism and dissent (Mader and Steiner 2019) and increases the chances for internal cohesion to develop (Harmel and Svåsand 2019; Basedau and Stroth 2008). In a political system dominated by such parties, there is less reason for voters to abandon parties and to consider newcomers (Gherghina 2015; Tavits 2013). The smaller magnitude of "homeless" and "wandering" voters is helpful for systemic-level stability: abrupt shifts in electoral balance from one election to another can easily undermine the consolidation of inter-party competition (Ponce and Scarrow 2022).

Furthermore, strong and recognizable party brands are typically associated with relatively stable ideological platforms (Lupu 2016, Rosenblatt 2018), promoting recurrent alliances and coalitions (Mainwaring and Zoco 2007). In those systems where parties lack a secure core of

supporters, stable partisan relationships will be more difficult to achieve, as parties will be more inclined to change their ideological stances, confounding both voters and politicians as to what they stand for.

The routinization of coalition preferences is also helped by the fact that established parties are likely to be present across the whole nation and to have professional staff (Szczerbiak 2001). Professional politicians who are in party office across longer time periods are more apt at striking cross-party deals and at holding each other accountable.

To conclude, while the causal arrow running from the systemic to the party-level also appears to be plausible, is likely to be weaker and more indirect than the one running from the party level to the systemic level. A party system can be expected to institutionalize primarily when it has a continuous core of parties. When that is not the case, we can expect an open arena of government-building, and constant coalitional innovations. Therefore, we hypothesize that in most cases the institutionalization of political parties will lead to the institutionalization of the party systems, and not the other way round.

Data and Operationalization

We make use of a new dataset comprising all European countries that have had a meaningful experience with democracy since 1848. A country is considered to be democratic when 1) it has a score of ≥6 in the Polity IV index, 2) universal (male) suffrage elections have been held at least once, and 3) governments are formed with (and rely on) parliamentary support rather than on the exclusive will of the head of state (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2022). The full dataset spans 171 years (from 1850 to 2021) and

60 different historical party systems across 45 countries (refer to table 1 for details). The number of electoral cycles varies between 1 (e.g., Greece's post-World War II Kingdom or Poland's First Republic) and 35 (Switzerland). Partial and constitutional assembly elections are not taken into consideration except when explicitly stated otherwise. The number of cabinets per country varies between 2 (post-World War II Turkey and inter-war San Marino) and 61 (France's Third Republic). The full data set thus covers 729 elections, 878 parties, and 1,475 instances of government formation. All in all, this constitutes almost the entire universe of cases for European democratic party systems.[4]

By default, the attributes of party relations of specific (democratic) countries are used to characterize the party system of that country. In this sense, countries and party systems could be used as synonymous labels for our units of analysis. But some countries had a ruptured history, with democratic periods being divided by—often lengthy—non-democratic spells, leading to a profound transformation of both party-political actors and their relations. In such instances we talk about different "party systems" nested in the history of a particular country. The temporal boundaries of such party systems are provided by the continuity of democratic arrangements, and the scores refer to the (relational) features of party politics within the uninterrupted democratic spells. In other words, our actual units of analysis are democratic periods. Typically, the entire democratic history of a country is one single spell, but this is not always the case. This is why, for example, we distinguish between four separate French systems in table 1.

Table 1
Party systems of democratic periods included in the dataset

Albania	2001-2021	Germany I	1919-1933	Norway	1903-2021
Andorra	1993-2021	Germany II	1949-2021	Poland I	1922-1926
Austria I	1920-1932	Greece I	1926-1936	Poland II	1991-2021
Austria II	1945-2021	Greece II	1946-1948	Portugal	1976-2021
Belgium	1919-2021	Greece III	1974-2021	Romania	1996-2021
Bulgaria	1991-2021	Hungary	1990-2021	Russia	1999-2006
Croatia	2000-2021	Iceland	1942-2021	San Marino I	1920-1923
Cyprus	1976-2021	Ireland	1923-2021	San Marino II	1945-2021
Czechia	1992-2021	Italy	1948-2021	Serbia	2000-2021
Czechoslovakia	1920-1938	Kosovo	2007-2021	Slovakia	1992-2021
Denmark	1910-2021	Latvia I	1922-1934	Slovenia	1992-2021
Estonia I	1920-1933	Latvia II	1993-2021	Spain I	1931-1936
Estonia II	1992-2021	Liechtenstein	1993-2021	Spain II	1979-2021
Finland I	1917-1930	Lithuania	1992-2021	Sweden	1917-2021
Finland II	1945-2021	Luxembourg	1919-2021	Switzerland	1896-2021
France I	1849-1851	Malta	1962-2021	Turkey I	1946-1953
France II	1876-1940	Moldova	1994-2021	Turkey II	1961-1979
France III	1946-1957	Montenegro	2006-2021	Turkey III	1983-2013
France IV	1968-2021	Netherlands	1918-2021	Ukraine	1994-2013
Georgia	2004-2021	North Macedonia	1990-2021	United Kingdom	1918-2021

Operationalization of Main Variables

As mentioned earlier, PSI is measured by the closure index. The empirical basis of the index is provided by data on the party composition of governments and on the partisanship of the ministers. The index has three components: alternation, formula, and access. The *alternation* sub-index shows a low score if partial alternations are the rule, meaning that some of the ruling parties continue in office while others do not, and cabinets are a mix of parties from within the previous government and from without. The *formula* sub-index has low scores if there are frequent innovations in the coalition formulae. Finally, the *access* sub-index has low scores if new parties have easy access to government. Low scores are taken as indicators of open, under-institutionalized party systems. In contrast, we speak of highly institutionalized (closed) systems if the incumbent parties tend to leave office together or if governments tend to remain in office across long time periods, if governments are typically based on fixed alliances of parties and if they consist of parties that have already governed in the past.

To indicate the degree of closure for a particular year, we use a weighted average measure for each particular year that takes the year in question as well as all previous years of the party system into account. The weighted average closure for year n of the party system takes all years from 1 to n into account. Weights for each year are the year number divided by the triangular number of n. This results in a linearly decreasing weighting scheme, where the more recent years are given more weight and the weights would reach 0 beyond the beginning of the party system.[5]

To capture the level of PI, we introduce two variables. The first is the average age of parties, widely used in the literature (see Dix 1992; Huntington 1968; Kuenzi and Lambright 2001; Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Mainwaring 1998; Roberts and Wibbels 1999; Tan 2006). In order to calculate this indicator, we have collected data on the year of foundation of political parties from multiple sources, including party statutes and official websites. While party mergers are considered cases of organizational rupture (e.g., Liberal Democrats in the UK, Christian Democratic Appeal in the Netherlands, Freedom Union in Poland), simple name changes (e.g., People's Party in Portugal and Spain) are not. In the case of splits, the age of the splinters starts from the moment of the split, while any successor party will not have its age re-started. We consider all those parties that obtained at least 3% of the national vote at least once in their lifetime.[6]

Capturing organizational continuity exclusively through average age gives an advantage to older democracies. Additionally, a simple average is not sensitive to the fact that some parties are more important than others. In order to make up for these deficiencies, the employed PI measure also includes the Established Party Domination (EPD) index (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2021, 150-151). The index has a high score if voters tend to cast their vote for parties that were established at the beginning of the party system. Each party contributes to the index with its vote share plus 5%[7] for each year since the party first participated in elections. The index calculates a reference score and an actual score for each election. The reference score for an election assumes that all parties have endured since the founding elections,[8] while the actual score takes their actual durations into account. The EPD index is the ratio of the two.

Considering the vote share of a party implies a contrast between the analyzed party and the total vote. This may sound like bringing in the systemic level, but the goal is simply to capture the relative weight of the party in the electorate and not to tap the relations among parties. Because EPD is calculated differently than party age, it allows for tapping a different layer of PI. It can be high even in a situation where the average party age is relatively low, for example in those newly democratized party systems in which the very same parties are returned to the legislature election after election.

We use the mean of the standardized values of both components, average party age and established party domination as an overall indicator of PI.

The descriptive statistics for the indices and their components across all the years and countries in our full data set (n=2400) (Casal Bértoa, Enyedi and Mölder, 2023) are provided in table 2 and their correlations are shown on

Table 2
Descriptive statistics

Variable	mean	SD	min	max	density
PSI	91	7.6	41	100	
alternation	87	13	8.3	100	
formula	91	9.3	18	100	
access	95	6.4	31	100	
PI	0.024	0.75	−3.1	2.2	
established party domination	84	13	22	100	
party age	34	20	1	98	

Figure 1
Correlations between PSI and PI and their components

Figure 2
Average party and party system institutionalization over time (1900-2021).

figure 1. The correlation between PI and PSI is 0.42. This indicates that the overlap between the two phenomena may be smaller than often assumed, at least using the previously introduced indices. If we look at the components, we see that the relationship is driven by average party age being related to the formula- and access-component of party system closure. Established party domination and alternation play a lesser role in the overall association between party and systemic institutionalization.

Differences across Time and across Systems

The temporal extent of our data set allows us to trace the co-evolution of party and systemic institutionalization in European democracies over more than a century. Figure 2 looks at the two levels of institutionalization aggregated by 5-year periods from 1900 (the earlier nineteenth-century data are too sparse for identifying trends) to 2021. The trajectory of PI across this period has an inverted-U shape with a steep increase followed by an equally steep decline. These data demonstrate, dramatically, the advent and the wane of the mass party era. Political parties were central institutions in the class-dominated politics of the 1950s and 1960s, but the subsequent social transformations led to the appearance of new forces, mergers, and splits of the established actors, and a general appetite for experimentation on behalf of voters.

The process of de-institutionalization is not an exact mirror-image of institutionalization. The latter process was part of social modernization and democratization. De-institutionalization does not require a rejection of
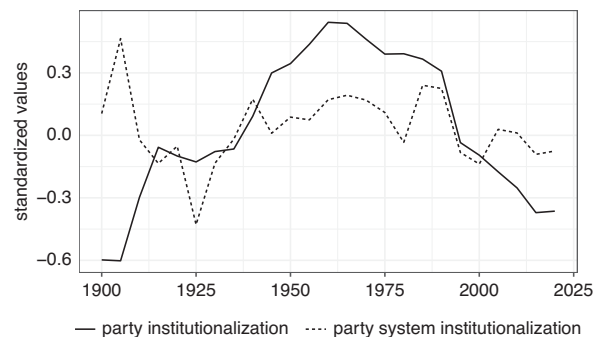
the norms of modernity and liberal democracy. On some aspects these norms may even be supported by the decline of bureaucratic mass organizations.

De-institutionalization is primarily related to phenomena like the personalization of party politics, the professionalization of party elites, the rise of the "party in public office" at the expense of the "party in central office" and of the "party on the ground," and the extension of public funding of parties (Katz and Mair 2018). These phenomena amplified instability and sped up the process of the voters' withdrawal from the electoral arena (Mair 2013; Ignazi 2017; Scarrow, Webb, and Poguntke 2018). Socially rooted parties were replaced by entrepreneurial parties (Bolleyer 2013). The rise of populism also contributed to the spread of fluid and personalistic organizational style (consider *Podemos*, Five Stars Movement, Brexit Party, or the Czech ANO). Together, these processes led to a sharp decline of PI, especially after the 2008 Great Recession.

Party-system closure shows less dramatic changes. Between the 1920s and the 1980s the trend was towards (moderate) growth. The turbulence of the 1990s affected closure negatively, but afterwards systemic institutionalization proved to be more resistant against the forces of destructuration than PI. Having said that, the last half century produced less predictable party systems than the previous one. This trend applies whether the new post-communist party systems are excluded or not from the analysis.

As it follows from table 3, stability in parties and in party relations need not go hand in hand. About one quarter of the cases are characterized either by relatively institutionalized parties but not systems, or the other way round. The configuration of chaotic inter-party relations despite the existence of socially rooted and organizationally continuous parties is well exemplified by Finland. During the interwar period virtually all combinations

Table 3
Party and party system institutionalization across 60 political systems

	Institutionalized Parties	Non-Institutionalized Parties
Institutionalized systems	Austria II, Denmark, Germany II, Greece III, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Portugal, Spain II, Sweden, Switzerland, UK	Albania, France IV, Georgia, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Montenegro, Netherlands, San Marino II
Inchoate systems	Austria I, Belgium, Cyprus, Finland I & II, France III	Andorra, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Czechoslovakia, Estonia I & II, France I & II, Germany I, Greece I & II, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia I & II, Lithuania, Moldova, North Macedonia, Poland I & II, Romania, Russia, San Marino I, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia Spain I, Turkey I, II & III, Ukraine

among the Socialists, the Agrarians, the Communists, the Liberals, the Conservatives, and of the party of the Swedish minority, were tried. Most governments relied on the right-wing and centrist parties, but the Socialists were also able to form a government. Politics changed significantly after World War II, but the logic of complex re-combinations of well institutionalized parties continued. The same applies to the French Third Republic, where the individual parties achieved a high level of institutionalization, but the system remained unstable. With the exception of the Communists all major political forces participated in coalition-making. Out of the 61 governments only 15 had a familiar party combination.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, in Fifth Republic France, Hungary, the Netherlands or post- World War II San Marino, to name a few, the splits and disappearance of individual parties did not undermine the development of meaningful systemic level patterns, providing these cases with relatively high closure scores and low PI scores.

The relatively weak correlations, the occasionally diverging temporal trends, and the existence of cases that excel on one dimension but lag behind on the other one indicate that PI and PSI, while related, are still different phenomena. However, can one of them be considered to be the cause of the other? This is a question we address in the following section.

Parties or Party Systems: The Chicken or the Egg?

In general, we test for what is known as Granger causality (Granger 1969)—whether the past values of one time series are able to predict the future values of another time series. This approach has its weaknesses (e.g., Freeman 1983) as it is only able to establish mechanical temporal precedence that should be interpreted through theoretical expectations. Temporal precedence does not prove causality, but it constitutes a major and empirically verifiable precondition of it.

We first test for Granger causality in panel data using the method suggested by Dumitrescu and Hurlin (2012) and implemented in the "plm" (Croissant and Millo 2008) package in R (R Core Team 2022). The method implements a series of Granger tests per unit (country) and provides a hypothesis test for whether there is evidence for Granger causality in the panel as a whole. This can mean that there is evidence for causality for some of the units, but not necessarily all. We run the test for the aggregated indices using lags from 1 to 5 years (which limits the party systems that we can include in this particular analysis to those that have more than 20 observations—i.e., 36 party systems).

We then test for the causal sequences across years within party systems using a fixed-effects panel model with lagged dependent variables to account for serial correlation and lagged predictors. That is, we test if the variation of PI within party systems is associated with subsequent variation of PSI or vice versa. We use one-, two-, and five-year lags for the predictors in our models to allow for the potential causal effect to play out over various periods of time.

In general, we follow the logic suggested by Beck and Katz (2011) for the analysis of time-series cross-section data. As the units of analysis are countries that constitute the whole population and as we are not aiming to draw direct conclusions beyond our population, a fixed-effects model is preferable over a random-effects model (Hsiao 2014, 48-49). Our dependent variables are correlated over time and this introduces serial correlation into the model, which can be addressed by including lagged dependent variables. We are aware that in a fixed-effects panel model this introduces bias into the estimates, but also that this bias is mitigated as the number of over-time observations per unit (democratic periods of party system) is considerable (Beck and Katz 2011, 342). We fit the models using the "plm" package (Croissant and Millo 2008) in R (R Core Team 2022), using party system as well as year of democracy fixed effects to take into account the fact that levels of PI and PSI might differ for

different party systems and that there might be a pattern of variation that depends on the time that a party system has been democratic (e.g., PSI tends to be lower in the earlier years of the system). A fixed-effects model like this analyzes associations with respect to the time or panel unit means, i.e., the variables are effectively centered around the unit means. Variation between countries or regions is thus taken out of the picture. Finally, we use robust standard errors as suggested by Beck and Katz (1995).

In order to illustrate the full effect of our variables of interest in the panel models with lagged dependent variables, we show the long-term effects of the predictors that take into account how the effect carries on through the lag of the dependent variable (Beck and Katz 2011, 336) as well as the confidence intervals for these long-term effects calculated using the delta method as implemented in the "msm" package (Jackson 2011) in R (R Core Team 2022).

Finally, as robustness checks we also present the results of models that focus on the components of the indices, as well as models containing additional covariates that could help to explain variation in both party and systemic institutionalization. We also run the primary analysis using an alternative approach for serially correlated data —the Prais-Winsten estimator for AR(1) serial correlation (Prais and Winsten 1954). This method estimates the serial correlation (ρ), transforms the data accordingly, and fits an OLS model to the data.

The overall Granger causality tests in the panel between PSI and PI indicate that there is evidence of causality moving from PI to PSI (Z-tilde = 9.22, p-value < 0.001), rather than from PSI to PI (Z-tilde = 1.36, p-value = 0.17). This suggests that for at least some of the party systems in the data set there is indication for a temporal sequence in the data. Changes in PI help to predict subsequent changes in PSI and not the other way around. Malta, Germany, and Italy illustrate well the causal pattern. In Malta the predictable two-party system could build on the well-entrenched political organizations of Labour and of the Nationalists, with very strong social roots dating back, respectively, to "the *Riformisti*, who favored British policy, and the *anti-Riformisti*, who upheld Italian language and culture," political movements in the late nineteenth century (Carammia and Pace 2022, 113). In Germany, party relations became routinized after the Christian Democrats achieved their final shape through mergers and absorptions. In Italy, the seven main political parties (i.e., Communists, Socialists, Social Democrats, Republicans, Liberals, Christian Democratic, and neo-Fascists) were socially rooted and organizationally stable well before Sartori's (1976) polarized pluralist pattern of inter-party competition, with the Christian Democracy making governing coalitions with all major parties except the Communists and the neo-Fascists, consolidated in the early 1960s. Italy illustrates well the typical logic of de-institutionalization too: it was the dissolution of six

of those seven political parties in the mid-1990s that led to the collapse of the party system and the appearance of socially less anchored and organizationally weaker political forces.

The data suggest that in only three cases—Andorra, Denmark, and North Macedonia—was the institutionalization of parties preceded by the consolidation of the party system. Out of the three, Andorra is the most extreme case: the current-day protagonists of the party system (the Democrats for Andorra and the Social Democratic Party) were established only at the beginning of the twenty-first century, following a long period of predictable party politics structured around the Liberal Party, a party of "notables" (Minoves 2022, 80).

Table 4, showing results of panel data regressions, provides further evidence for PI preceding PSI. Both one-, two-, and five-year lags of PI indicate a positive association to PSI at time *t*, while for PSI there is no association for the one- and two-year lagged values. We do see a positive association with PSI at *t*-5 and PI at *t*, but compared to the effects of PI on PSI, this association is with much more uncertainty.

The corresponding standardized long-term effects that consider how a change carries forward in time through the lagged DV are shown in figure 3. Note that even though the instantaneous effect of PSI (*t*-5) on PI (*t*) is smaller than the effects of PSI on PI, the fact that the serial correlation for PI is much stronger means that the long-term effects are comparable. But even so, there is clearly more evidence for potential causality running from PI to PSI than vice versa.

In order to test the robustness of these findings, we repeated the analysis substituting our indicators for other suggested measures of party and systemic institutionalization. We used electoral volatility and parliamentary fragmentation as substitutes for closure and the Varieties of Democracy (VDEM) (Coppedge et al. 2021) party institutionalization index (v2xps_party) as well as two of its components, the party organization index (v2psorgs) and the party linkages index (v2psprlnks), as substitutes for our PI index. The party organizations index captures the extent to which parties have permanent organizations and the party linkages index measures the extent parties have programmatic, as opposed to clientelistic, linkages to constituents.

In our yearly data set, closure has a correlation of -0.3 with parliamentary fragmentation and -0.43 correlation with electoral volatility. The negative correlations reflect that for both of these alternative measures of PSI, higher values should indicate less institutionalization. The VDEM overall party institutionalization index has a correlation of 0.32 with our indicator of PI, the party organizations index has a correlation of 0.26 (0.44 with party age) and the party linkages index has a correlation of 0.22. In other words, the associations are weaker, but they are all positive and significant.

Table 4
Two-way fixed effects panel models with lagged dependent variables (DV) and lagged predictors (standardized coefficients)

	Dependent variable:					
	PSI (t)			PI (t)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DV (t-1)	0.634*** (0.020)	0.639*** (0.019)	0.736*** (0.017)	0.931*** (0.009)	0.928*** (0.009)	0.929*** (0.009)
PI (t-1)	0.062*** (0.018)	—	—	—	—	—
PI (t-2)	—	0.067*** (0.017)	—	—	—	—
PI (t-5)	—	—	0.036* (0.015)	—	—	—
PSI (t-1)	—	—	—	−0.011 (0.006)	—	—
PSI (t-2)	—	—	—	—	−0.007 (0.006)	—
PSI (t-5)	—	—	—	—	—	0.013* (0.006)
Observations	2,400	2,393	2,239	2,400	2,340	2,168
Adjusted R^2	0.420	0.439	0.572	0.866	0.865	0.869

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Figure 3
Long-term effects between PI and PSI
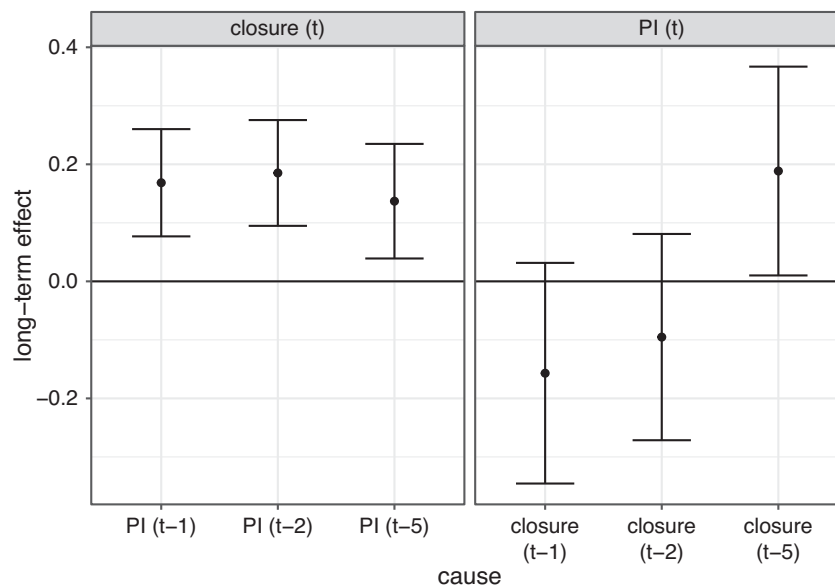
Substituting fragmentation for closure (figure A4 in the online appendix) we see that PI at time *t-1* is related to fragmentation at time *t* in the expected direction, but the coefficient was not significant with the other two time lags.

Substituting volatility for closure (figure A5 in the online appendix), we found that PI predicted electoral volatility in all three-time lag specifications. Replacing our PI measure with the VDEM indicators (figures A6–A8 in
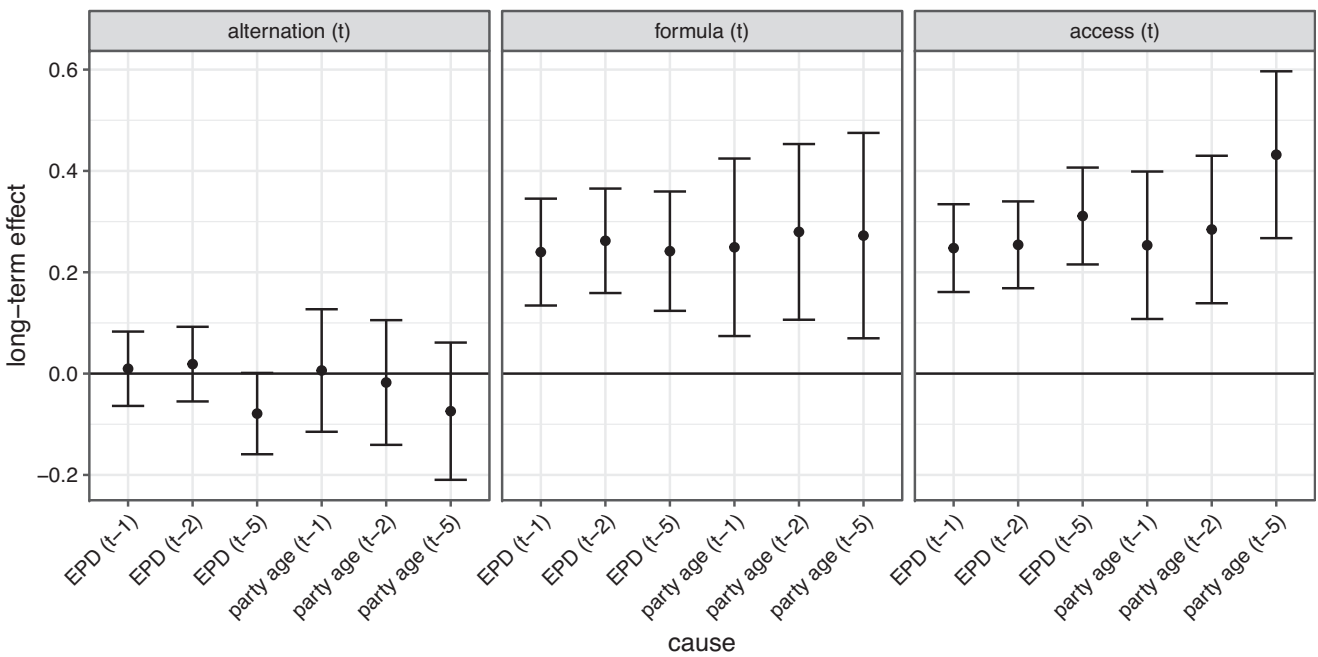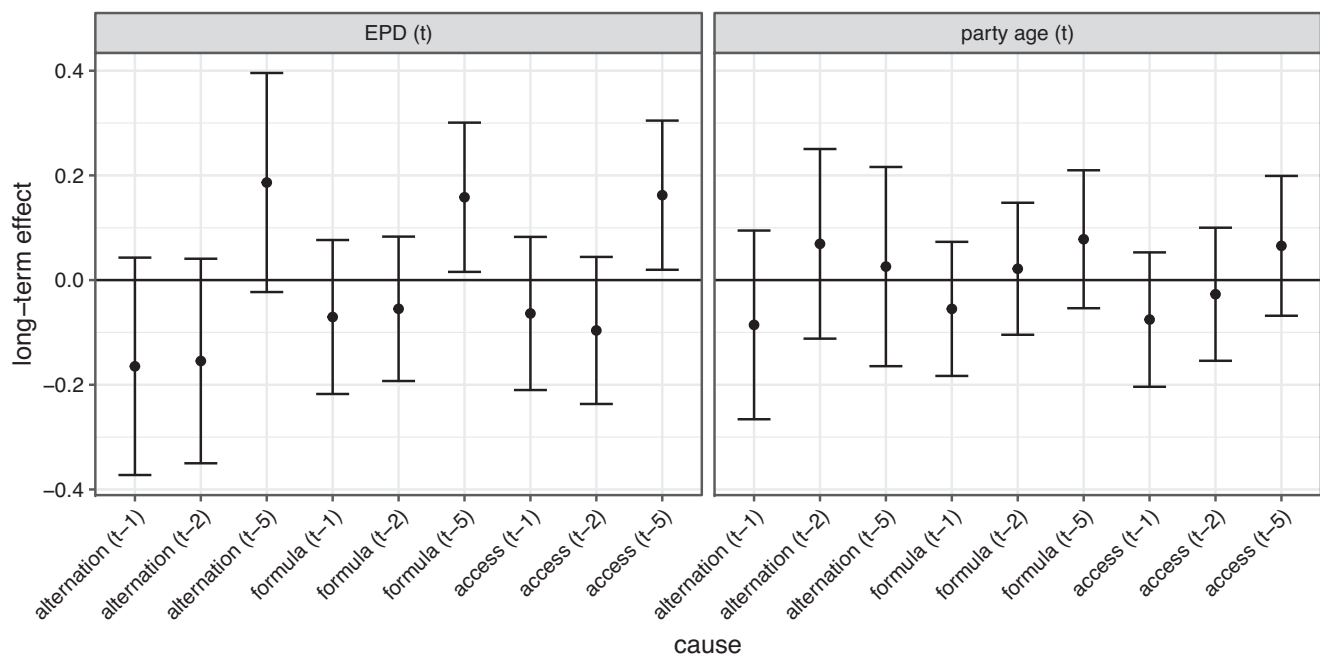
Figure 4
Long-term effects of components of PI on PSI

Figure 5
Long-term effects of components of PSI on PI

the online appendix), we received significant results only in one instance: VDEM's party organizations index at time *t-5* helped to predict closure at time *t*.

To summarize the robustness checks, they largely confirmed the pattern found with our measures, but the results were typically less strong and less clear (refer to the online appendix for more detail).

We ran the same analyses that are reported in table 4 also on the components of the two indices separately and the long-term effects from these models are shown in figures 4 and 5 (refer to tables A1-A5 in the online appendix). These results give us further details about the structure of potential causality between party and systemic institutionalization. We see that both established party domination and the average age of parties are positively related to subsequent PSI on the dimensions of formula and access. This is equally true for 1-, 2-, and 5-year lags for the predictors. Alternation, however, seems to capture something different as alternation at time *t* is not related to the components of PI across all time lags.

If we look in the other direction, as shown in figure 5, we see that the positive association between PSI and PI is driven by established party domination at time *t* being related to formula and access at time *t-5*. We see a positive association also for alternation at *t-5*, but the confidence interval for that association narrowly crosses 0. There is no association between average party age at time *t* and the components of PSI at times *t-1*, *t-2* and *t-5*.

Following the existing literature on the institutionalization of party politics (see especially Bolleyer and Ruth 2018; Lupu 2016; Tavits 2005, 2008, 2013, Mainwaring and Bizzarro 2018; Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2021), we modeled our main variables (PI & PSI and their components) and the potential causal associations between them also through models that included various institutional, economic, and political variables traditionally used to represent different aspects of the environment of party politics as contemporaneous predictors, namely:

a) the electoral system, whose impact is operationalized through Gallagher's (1991) the least-squares index of disproportionality;
b) economic development, measured using the logarithm of GDP per capita of the election years (Gapminder 2021);
c) fragmentation, calculated through the Laakso and Taagepera (1979) effective number of parliamentary parties index; and
d) polarization, captured by the percentage of votes for anti-political-establishment parties[9] (cf. Karvonen and Quenter 2002; Powell 1981).

The detailed results of these analyses are reported in tables A6 and A7 in the online appendix. In none of the

models did the results reported here change substantially (only the uncertainty related to the estimates increased, as expected).

Finally, we also tested for the potential causal sequence using the Prais-Winsten estimator, which is reported in table 5. The results for this model echo what was shown earlier—that past increases in PI help to predict future increases in PSI and not vice versa. One major notable difference here is that the model shows a negative association between PSI at *t-2* and PI at time *t*. But this only strengthens the overall conclusion that increased PI is more likely to eventually lead to increased PSI and not the other way around.

Conclusions

We started our article with the expression of unease concerning the fact that systemic institutionalization is often measured by phenomena that pertain to individual parties and have little to do with the systemic level of party politics. Conceptually, change in parties does not necessarily mean party-system realignment, and the reconfiguration of inter-party relations may happen leaving the roster of parties intact.

Building on Casal Bértoa and Enyedi (2021), but considering a longer period of time and using a different methodology, we have confirmed that the empirical separation of the institutionalization of political parties and the institutionalization of party systems reveals the existence of dynamic processes that run in parallel in some periods (between the 1930s and the 2000s) of European history, but diverged in others (1900–1930, 2000–2020). But the major novelty of the current exercise is the establishment of a temporal sequence.

The analysis led us to conclude that out of the two phenomena, PI is the prime mover. In order to achieve a predictable system, it seems that one needs to stabilize the parties first. Mair (1997) suggested the opposite logic: that disloyalty among parties will trigger the infidelity of voters to their favorite party, and thereby party system change will undermine the stability of individual parties. Our results do not deny the possibility of such scenarios, but the prevailing model appears to be the opposite: an increase in the stability in party relations is predicated on increasing the stability of individual parties.

In the context of European politics, our analyses have shown that there is an overall tendency of deinstitutionalization, as suggested by many observers, but this tendency is much stronger at the level of parties. At the level of party relations, the signs of disintegration are less obvious. Considering, however, what we have found in terms of the causal sequence between PI and PSI, there are good reasons to expect a shift towards openness at the systemic level in the near future.

From an academic point of view, the fundamental recommendation of our article is to measure systemic institutionalization through indicators of party interactions

Table 5
Results from Prais-Winsten AR(1) model (standardized coefficients, panel corrected standard errors)

| | Dependent Variable: | | | | | |
| | PSI (t) | | | PI (t) | | |
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
intercept	−0.358 (0.501)	−0.279 (0.336)	−1.329 (0.280)	−0.026 (0.342)	−0.019 (0.345)	−0.085 (0.355)
PI (t-1)	0.092* (0.034)	—	—	—	—	—
PI (t-2)	—	0.116** (0.036)	—	—	—	—
PI (t-5)	—	—	0.088*** (0.024)	—	—	—
PSI (t-1)	—	—	—	−0.001 (0.009)	—	—
PSI (t-2)	—	—	—	—	−0.020** (0.008)	—
PSI (t-5)	—	—	—	—	—	−0.008 (0.009)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rho	0.58	0.59	0.75	0.94	0.94	0.94
Observations	2,400	2,393	2,239	2,400	2,340	2,168
Adjusted R^2	0.28	0.29	0.27	0.07	0.07	0.07

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001
Standardized coefficients, panel corrected standard errors

and not by aggregating the features of individual parties. This empirical strategy opens the door to establishing and comparing the causes of the two types of institutionalizations, an exercise that requires further work.

Such a separation is necessary, because PSI and PI may be relevant for different political outcomes. Our study showed that PSI is not a good predictor of institutionalized parties, but Ridge (2022), for example, recently found that it increases satisfaction with democracy, irrespective of the levels of party affection. The systemic level appears to be crucial for the survival of democracy (Casal Bértoa 2017), but too-predictable party relations may dampen the quality of democracy under certain conditions (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2021; Mölder, Enyedi, and Casal Bértoa 2023). PI, on the other hand, has been identified as factor behind partisan mobilization (Ponce and Scarrow 2022), successful anti-corruption efforts (Schleiter and Voznaya 2018), economic development (Bizarro *et al.* 2018), and more extensive and universal welfare (Rasmussen and Knutsen 2021). These results suggest not only that we need to care about these phenomena, but also that we need to systematically distinguish between them.

Our findings have further relevant practical implications. It seems that practitioners and democracy promotion institutions interested in higher degrees of institutionalization should invest primarily into party building. The establishment of socially rooted parties is not only conducive to

healthy linkages between teams of representatives and their voters, but in time it also leads to transparent relations among parties and predictable government-building. Our findings cast doubt on the focus on institutional factors whose primary role is to create stable governments, clear governmental responsibility, and stable alternation in power. These features may be beneficial for the consolidation of democracies, but they do not foster the development of robust, institutionalized political parties. They put the cart before the horse. If parties are strengthened and consolidated, however, then we do not only forge a connection between citizens and the state, but we also increase the likelihood that regular interactions develop among the government-oriented political parties.

There is nothing in our argument that would limit the presented logic to a specific time period, specific region, or constitutional order, but such variations are, of course, possible. Within Europe, geographical regions do not diverge, and the one presidential country (Cyprus) behaved like the parliamentary countries from the point of view of the established temporal pattern. Nevertheless, further studies, working with larger geographical scope, are required to provide us with firm conclusions in this regard.

Our analysis focused on the sequence between the institutionalization of parties and party systems. Obviously, the relation between these two phenomena is nested into an environment that contains factors that constrain

both. An effective and autonomous state, for example, is likely to be a precondition for both, while the emergence of new social cleavages may undermine party organizations and party alliances equally. While existing research has uncovered many of the potential causal factors, more work is needed that systematically and symmetrically separates the party and the systemic levels. Which of these levels is more vulnerable to social upheavals, to the changes in the communication technologies or to the institutional reforms? We believe that these questions need to play a central role in the agenda of party politics research.

Finally, we focused on the "what comes first' question, but the interaction between the two analyzed levels has many further, here unexplored, aspects that we can only speculate on. The cross-temporal positive correlations allow for the possible existence of virtuous and vicious cycles of institutionalization, but they also leave some room for occasional functional trade-offs. It is imaginable, for example, that in certain historical periods a country can "afford" the frequent replacement of parties because the alliance structures (left versus right, isolationist versus expansionist, urban versus rural and the like) are relatively stable, and therefore the continuity of the political system is not threatened by the dis/appearance of specific actors. Equally, the disturbance stemming from a shift of allegiance (e.g., a hitherto right-wing liberal party becoming part of the leftist bloc) may be less damaging due to the robust continuity at the party level. In order to study the working of such functionalist logics one would need to climb further on the ladder of abstraction, and to analyze the political system as a whole, establishing the role of parties and party systems within the political system.

Supplementary Material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592723002530.

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Notes

1 International aid can focus on strengthening political parties (Burnell and Gerrits 2012) or on the stabilization of the party systems (Casal Bértoa 2017), or both.

2 Birnir (2005) provides a rare example of the opposite practice: she used a systemic level phenomenon (electoral volatility) to characterize party institutionalization.

3 Some even discuss party stability as a component of systemic stability (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2017; Mainwaring 2018).

4 Our particular analyses, depending on the lags that we use for the variables, will have a slightly shorter temporal duration.

5 Casal Bértoa and Enyedi (2016, 269-270; 2021, 34-45) provide further details on the calculation of the closure index.

6 This threshold allows us to cover almost all European parliamentary parties as most electoral thresholds (with the exception of the ones in the Netherlands and Denmark) are at or above 3%.

7 EPD is a modified version of Lewis's (2006) Party Stabilization Index. That index increased a party vote share at each election by 20%, assuming that the time between elections is equal (e.g., four years). To bring the calculus closer to real-life dynamics (in real life the time span between elections can vary from a couple of months to a couple of years), and to make the results comparable to the results of Lewis, we have decided to increase the vote share of a party by 5% per every single year (20% divided by the average assumed number of years between elections). If this parameter in the equation is decreased to 0, the index is reduced to the sum of the vote shares of the parties that are taken into account. The higher the parameter, the more the value of the index depends on large parties that have been around since the beginning of the party system. Simulations of the index on our data set showed that there are marginal changes in the value of the EPD index if the parameter is increased beyond 5%.

8 Following Casal Bértoa and Mair (2012), we exclude most 1) constitutional assembly elections (e.g., Austria in 1919; Bulgaria in 1990; Estonia in 1919; France in 1848, 1871, and June 1946; Italy in 1946; Latvia in 1920; Luxembourg in 1918; Poland in 1919; Portugal in 1975; and Spain in 1977); 2) "breakaway" (i.e., regime referendum) elections (e.g., Poland in 1989, Czechoslovakia in 1990) and pre-independence elections (e.g., Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, North Macedonia, Slovenia, or Ukraine in 1990).

9 An anti-political-establishment party is a party that fulfills the following criteria: "a party that challenges the status quo in terms of major policy issues and political system issues; a party that perceives itself as a challenger to the parties that make up the political establishment; a party that asserts that there exists a fundamental divide between the political establishment and the people. It thereby implies that all establishment parties be they in government or in opposition are essentially the same." (Abedi 2004, 12). We take the list of anti-political-establishment parties from Casal Bértoa (2022). As opposed to the closure and PI indices, this index of polarization is not adopted because of its theoretical superiority over other—e.g., ideology-based—measures, but because it is available for more countries and more time periods. The anti-establishment index correlates with Dalton's (2008) left-right polarization

index at 0.7 across party systems (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2021).

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