

ISSUE BRIEF

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# Unloved but Indispensable: Political Parties in Europe

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Political parties have been at the center of European politics for decades, if not centuries. The oldest political party still active, the United Kingdom (UK) Conservative Party, was officially founded in 1834, and many other European parties trace their origins back to the second half of the nineteenth century, with Romania's National Liberal Party officially founded in 1875—the oldest party still active in continental Europe.

The rise of political parties in their modern form in Europe has historically been associated with<sup>1</sup> the coming of age of mass politics, and the subsequent need for representation of sectional interests (in other words, the interests of specific social classes). Following the end of World War II in Western Europe, and the end of the Cold War in Central and Eastern Europe, political parties became a central component of European democracies.

Scholars often describe the 1960s and 1970s as the golden age of (Western) European democratic parties. However, the honeymoon did not last beyond this period. A long decline has made political parties much less relevant to modern politics, as they were often replaced by personalized politics<sup>2</sup> and the politicization<sup>3</sup> of one-issue social movements throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

## The State of Political Parties in Europe: A Long Decline

Political parties today are generally unpopular and distrusted by the wider public. In the latest global survey<sup>4</sup> of public attitudes toward democracy from the Foundation for Political Innovation (Fondapol) together with the International Republican Institute

The Freedom and Prosperity Center aims to increase the well-being of people everywhere and especially that of the poor and marginalized in developing countries through unbiased, data-based research on the relationship between prosperity and economic, political, and legal freedoms, in support of sound policy choices.

- 1 Thibault Muzergues, *The Great Class Shift: How New Social Class Structures Are Redefining Western Politics* (Routledge, 2021), <https://www.routledge.com/The-Great-Class-Shift-How-New-Social-Class-Structures-are-Redefining-Western-Politics/Muzergues/p/book/9780367342104>.
- 2 Federico Fabbrini, ed., *The Law and Politics of Brexit: Volume II: The Withdrawal Agreement* (Springer, 2020), <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-41916-5>.
- 3 Donatella della Porta, *Movement Parties against Austerity* (Polity, 2017), [https://www.politybooks.com/bookdetail?book\\_slug=movement-parties-against-austerity--9781509511457](https://www.politybooks.com/bookdetail?book_slug=movement-parties-against-austerity--9781509511457).
- 4 Fondation pour l'innovation politique, *Freedoms at Risk: The Challenge of the Century* (January 2022), <https://www.fondapol.org/app/uploads/2022/01/fondapol-iri-cod-kas-genron-fng-rda-survey-freedoms-at-risk-the-challenge-of-the-century-01-2022-2.pdf>.

(IRI), released in 2021, political parties stood out as the globally least trusted institutions in the democratic world, with only 27 percent of overall trust versus 73 percent distrust. Parties are far more distrusted than parliament (42 percent trust versus 58 percent distrust), the government (43 percent versus 57 percent), the media (44 percent versus 56 percent), or unions (48 percent versus 52 percent), the other institutions that had more distrust than trust. Those are not the only worrying numbers for political parties: not only are they distrusted as institutions, but their memberships seem to have hit all-time lows. While the UK Conservative Party could boast around 1.5 million party members in the mid-1970s, it has not gone over the two hundred thousand-member bar since the late 1990s.

The decline of political parties is part of a long-term societal trend<sup>5</sup> related to more fundamental changes that have impacted European societies, including the declining role of ideologies, the atomization of societies, and the weakening of old social webs that constituted entire social ecosystems, of which political parties were only one aspect. The triumph of individualism since the 1980s has made citizens less conscious of their belonging to a political family, or to a specific social class, and as a result their political identities have become more fluid, resulting in less loyalty to parties or platforms and more support to a particular personality. In the era of mass television, voters have learned to jump between parties as they would between TV channels, a trend accelerated by the rise of the internet and social media in the 2000s and 2010s. A real risk has arisen that any long-term political party project—i.e., building or consolidating a political party representing a specific section of society, articulating its interests in a global vision or ideology, and fielding candidates to defend these interests and ideology in elections with the aim of exercising power in its name or for the greater good—is becoming irrelevant for modern politics.

During the past fifteen years, the impending death of political parties has repeatedly been announced: various pundits have contested their usefulness in aggregating aspirations of society in an age of social media; scholars and democracy promotion professionals have preferred studying the rise of direct democracy and alternative modes of decision rather than the decline of political parties; and even politicians have shied away from giving their political movement the name of “party,” even though those movements performed their primary function, which is to field candidates for elections.

Data from the Atlantic Council’s Freedom and Prosperity Indexes show that political freedom in Europe has steadily declined, with the region’s score dropping from 86.6 in 2010 to 84.2 in 2023.

Specific components of political freedom have fared especially poorly. Notable among these components is political rights, encompassing freedom of expression as well as freedom of association. Political rights in Europe have dropped more than five points, falling from 84.9 in 2010 to 79.7 in 2023. While political rights have declined in all regions of the world, Europe’s decline has been particularly notable, more severe than in North America, the Middle East and North Africa region, and sub-Saharan Africa, and on par with the drop seen in East Asia and the Pacific. Only South and Central Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced sharper regional declines in political rights since 2010.

### Decline and (Near) Fall of Political Parties in Europe

The disdain for political parties was perhaps best described by Italian populist firebrand Beppe Grillo, who, as leader of the Five Star Movement, publicly stated<sup>6</sup> that he “hated” and “wanted to destroy” political parties, to replace them with a more direct form of democracy. In the case of the Five Star Movement, this took the shape of an online network—the Rousseau platform<sup>7</sup>—dedicated to keeping a close link between the party elites and sympathizers.

In the end, the endeavor proved quite problematic as the platform’s rules and functioning remained notoriously opaque and its ownership by a private company became an issue in Italian politics. The project also quickly lost speed as the Five Star Movement had to balance its revolutionary ambitions with the day-to-day constraints of exercising power, losing much popular enthusiasm (and participation) in the process. But the Rousseau platform was symptomatic of a wider problem that struck political parties in the 2010s: with the rise of social networks, it seemed that any intermediation between the elites and the people had become obsolete, thereby questioning the primary *raison d’être* of political parties. At the same time, the years that followed the 2008 financial crisis were marked by an increasing level of distrust for political elites (organized in political parties), seen as disconnected from the rest of society.

Largely unpopular, political parties came to be considered unhelpful, and sometimes even harmful, for democratic development. This was particularly the case in the democracy assistance community, where political party work became out of fashion, before disappearing almost completely from programming around the world. In the meantime, new movements challenged the supremacy of traditional, legacy parties, and some became quite successful, from Emmanuel Macron’s *En Marche!* in France to Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement in Italy.

5 Martens Centre, *Why We Still Need Parties: The Resilience of Europe’s Political Parties Explained* (Martens Centre, 2021), <https://www.martenscentre.eu/publication/why-we-still-need-parties-the-resilience-of-europes-political-parties-explained/>.

6 Nicola Biondo, *Il sistema Casaleggio* (Ponte alle Grazie, 2020), <https://www.ponteallegrazie.it/libro/il-sistema-casaleggio-nicola-biondo-9788833311807.html>.

7 Ralph Schroeder, “The Internet, Surveillance, and Society: Consent and Its Limits,” *JeDEM—eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government* 13, no. 2 (2021), <https://jedem.org/index.php/jedem/article/view/704>.

Yet what is remarkable is that despite their decline and a crisis that many had described as terminal, European parties have remained at the center of the game in most countries' political systems. Perhaps even more importantly, they have proved indispensable for the functioning of democracy in Europe: in the Netherlands, despite an extremely atomized party system and a global rejection of parties, no agreement on a coalition government can be passed without negotiations among them. In Italy, the Five Star Movement soon understood that it needed to convert into a much more classical political party to implement its political program: it built more traditional structures and adopted a clear positioning on the very left-right divide that it had claimed to supersede a few years before.

The experience of the past decade has shown that despite their unpopularity, political parties remain indispensable for the functioning of democracies in Europe—when they are present, plural, and organized, democracy is doing well. When they are not, or when the party system is unbalanced, democracies suffer and even backslide.

To prove this assertion, this paper will look at four telling examples in recent European history, taking from the experiences of 1) Romania, which is undergoing a transformation as traditional political parties suffer a systemic challenge; 2) Spain, where parties have survived this challenge and fought back; 3) France, where the system is still in flux as a result of the destruction of the political party system; and 4) Hungary, where an unbalanced party system has much to do with the current political backsliding.

### Political Parties Challenged (Romania)

Following the demise of the communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu, Romanian political life slowly evolved from a system dominated by reformed former communists against a multiple-party opposition in the 1990s to a more “classic” bipartisan system dominated by two political families in the later 2000s and early 2010s, with two parties slowly emerging as embodying the left and the right, i.e., the Social Democratic Party and the National Liberal Party, respectively.

However, as soon as this bipartite system consolidated, it was challenged by newcomers. Several grassroots citizen anti-corruption movements emerged in the mid-2010s, fielding candidates in local elections; their early success led to the formation of the Union to Save Romania (USR), a citizen movement that progressively turned into a party breaking the traditional duopoly between the old post-communist and the new private elites.

USR's rise, as well as initial difficulties for the media and traditional politicians to situate the party on the conventional political spectrum, has disrupted the political scene in Romania ever since, even more so as USR suffered several splits and internal crises that have transformed it into a more traditional political

party. USR even took a shot at governing as a junior partner in a coalition with National Liberal Party (2020-21). The movement's resilience over time and its transformation into a more traditional party has meant that it has become a part of the system now, while dissatisfaction with elites has continued to fuel the rise of new actors on the right fringes, first with the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, and more recently with SOS Romania. Their rise as anti-systemic parties has meant that the Romanian political system is currently atomizing and fracturing, leading to more difficult governance with more unstable governments.

### Party Resilience as a Factor of Stability—and Increased Polarization (Spain)

Spain found itself in a situation relatively similar to that in Romania in the early 2010s, when the two parties that had dominated national politics for thirty years, the center-left Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the center-right People's Party (PP), were challenged by new movements following the 2008 financial crisis, whose consequences were particularly harsh in Spain, in particular for youth.

The anti-austerity Indignados movement mobilized young people on Spain's main squares in the early 2010s, and quickly turned into Podemos—a movement that refused the appellation of political party and included direct democracy in its platform. In the region of Catalonia, citizens' anger was redirected by anxious regional elites to hide their own shortcomings under the slogan “*Madrid nos roba*” (“Madrid is stealing from us”), leading to a larger secessionist movement that culminated in the pseudo-independence referendum of October 2017, boycotted by unionists and annulled by the Spanish Supreme Court.

To face these secessionist movements, unionists organized outside of traditional political parties. The liberal Ciudadanos originally emerged in Catalonia and turned national in the mid-2010s to pose itself as a liberal alternative to the system. Later on, as the unionist sentiment turned into more radical nationalism, another party emerged further to the right on the political spectrum, Vox.

While neither Ciudadanos nor Vox ever really challenged the idea that they were actual political parties, their anti-system discourse greatly weakened traditional political parties: in the 2000s, the PSOE-PP duopoly obtained together between 75 percent and 85 percent of the votes in elections; in the 2010s, their share of the vote had declined drastically, to just 45.4 percent of the votes in the 2019 elections (with PSOE obtaining 28.7 percent of the vote, and PP, 16.7 percent).

At this stage, it seemed that the reign of traditional parties had come to an end, perhaps along with the unity and territorial integrity of Spain. But traditional parties proved to be much more resilient, and as they progressively adapted their structures and discourses to changing public behaviors, they started to regain

strength. In the 2023 legislative elections, PP and PSOE together scored 64.8 percent of the vote—with PP at 33.1 percent (+12.3 points) and PSOE at 31.7 percent (+3.7 points). Moreover, recent polling suggests that each party is currently consolidating its positions, to the detriment of those very “movement” parties that challenged them over the past few years.

### Doing without Parties (France)

France represents the most radical change in Europe, as the two parties that dominated the country’s political life in the 2000s and early 2010s, the Socialist Party (PS) and The Republicans (LR), were wiped out in one single electoral year (2017) by Emmanuel Macron. The French president even claimed to bust the political system in the rest of Europe—but while most parties survived elsewhere on the continent, in France the PS and LR collapsed. In the 2022 presidential elections, their joint share of the vote in the first round was little more than 6 percent, with the PS presidential candidate scoring 1.74 percent and the LR candidate, Valérie Pécresse, receiving 4.78 percent.

As nature abhors a vacuum, one would have thought that the collapse of the old party system in France should have led to a redefinition of the French political compass and the consolidation of a new party system. That, however, has not happened yet, and the French political scene remains dominated by personality and party-less, as Emmanuel Macron’s En Marche! has failed to take root in France’s political scene and has come only to function during presidential campaigns. Today, only Marine Le Pen’s National Rally can really pretend to be a proper political party, even though it refuses that appellation. All other formations are either too small or not structured enough to fulfill the role of a political party, except to file candidates.

France has never liked parties, and indeed between 1791 and 1905 parties along with other “guilds and corporations” were formally banned. This return to a party-less system has had nasty consequences: the absence of parties able to aggregate and express popular grievances in the parliamentary and electoral scenes has led to the resurgence of violent, unstructured movements such as the Yellow Vests (2018) and the anti-pension reform movement of 2019 and 2023, which were often (rightly) described as modern Jacqueries.

### Party-Building Imbalance and Democratic Backsliding (Hungary)

Hungary has not had France’s problem, in the sense that one party, Fidesz, has survived the wave of political disruption triggered by the financial crisis of 2008 and its consequences. The problem, however, is that Fidesz has been the only functional party remaining in the political field.

Following the meltdown of the then-ruling Hungarian Socialist Party in 2011, no other political party has been able to emerge as an effective opposition, whether in parliament (to mount an effective legislative opposition to uses and abuses of power requested by the executive) or in the civic scene (to mobilize civil society and mount an effective alternative to Fidesz). Meanwhile, the latter has built an extremely professional organization, database, and political ecosystem including think tanks and foundations, and has become one of the best organized parties in Europe.

The result of this imbalance, combined with a supermajority in parliament giving constitutional powers to the ruling party, has much to do with Hungary’s current democratic backsliding. The absence of an effective opposition organized into a well-functioning party (or constellation of parties) means that bad laws or government policies as well as good ones can be passed by the government without an effective check from legislative power—or from civil society, as parties represent their interests in the public debate. In Hungary, an imbalanced political party system with a strong, effective ruling party and an atomized, disorganized, and ineffective opposition has led to institutional disparity and the weakening of institutions.

### The Way Forward

Political parties remain unloved, and it is clear that the golden age of mass-membership to catch-all parties is not coming back—the diversification of the media scene and of European sociology makes such an all-encompassing effort much more difficult to achieve today. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that, despite difficulties, the decline of European parties is probably over, with party membership numbers stabilizing after a long fall (albeit at relatively low numbers<sup>8</sup>), and interest in politics remaining strong. In most countries, the political party scene is transforming, and more often than not atomizing, reflecting in this sense the diversification of European societies.

Political parties have proven not only their resilience, but also their importance in upholding democratic standards in Europe—in fact, democratic problems have often arisen either as a result of a lack of political parties, or a structural imbalance between a well-organized, professional ruling party and a disorganized party-less opposition. Despite their unpopularity, political parties have proven to be indispensable to functioning democracies in Europe, and their absence has more often than not resulted in instability and democratic backsliding.

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8 Martens Centre, *Why We Still Need Parties*.

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*This paper is the second in the Freedom and Prosperity Center's "State of the Parties" series analyzing the strength of multi-party systems in different regions of the world.*



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