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Political Parties

Riccardo Pelizzo

Introduction

According to a recent conference report, corruption “exists and has always existed,” “it is pervasive, and it has far reaching consequences,” it “represents one of the most significant obstacles to development,” and “it also distorts the proper functioning of democratic institutions.” Yet because corruption “is a symptom of deeper institutional weakness,” the report also insisted on the importance of strengthening the key democratic bodies fighting corruption (“Report on Wilton Park Conference 748” in 2004, presented in appendix 2 of this book). Political parties are part of this set of institutions, aggregating diverse sets of interests, providing the structure for political participation and representation, and formulating policy options on a national level (Africa Political Party Finance Initiative 2004). However, political parties are also globally perceived to be the most corrupt institutions (Wolkers 2005). Therefore, Members of Parliament, in most cases also members of political parties, have a responsibility to ensure that their parties promote an anti-corruption agenda in their platform and that internally the party abstains from corrupt practices.

This chapter will outline how strengthening and institutionalizing political parties is therefore important in the fight against corruption. The first section provides a fairly detailed discussion of the notion of institutionalization. Particular attention is paid to the fact that the institutionalization of organizations depends on a combination of factors such as the organization’s age, generational age, adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence. The second section shows how the notion of institutionalization can be applied to parties and what it means for political parties to become institutionalized. The third section argues that the potential for corruption is inversely related to parties’ levels of institutionalization—so that the more a party is institutionalized, the less likely it is to become involved in corrupt practices—and will illustrate the argument with examples taken from developing nations. The final section will advance some suggestions as to what can be done to more fully institutionalize political parties.

Institutionalization of Political Organizations

The notion of institutionalization has been elaborated by Samuel Huntington (1968, 12), who defined institutionalization as

the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability. The level of institutionalization of a political system can be defined by the adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence of its organizations and procedures. So the level of institutionalization of any particular organization or procedure can be measured by its adaptability, complexity, autonomy and coherence.

But what exactly is this “adaptability, complexity, autonomy and coherence”?

Adaptability refers to an organization’s ability to adapt to changes in the environment in which the organization operates. This adaptability can be measured based on three interrelated indicators. One is the organization’s age. In fact, old organizations have had to learn how to adapt to environmental changes to survive, and they can use this adaptive knowledge to cope with present and future changes. This is why older organizations tend to be more adaptable. A second indicator of an organization’s adaptability is what Huntington calls the “generational age.” This concept first refers to the generation of leaders in power and second reflects an organization’s ability to transfer power from one generation to the next. The more often power is peacefully transferred from one generation to another, the more the organization is adaptable. The third indicator gauges organizational adaptability. This term is used to indicate an organization’s ability to find and perform new functions, once the objectives that the organization was originally created to achieve have been achieved. In other words, the organization either finds some (new) functions to perform or disappears. In this respect, Huntington noted that “an organization that has adapted itself to changes in the environment and has survived one or more changes in its principal functions is more highly institutionalized than one that has not” (Huntington 1968, 15). To sum up, the level of institutionalization of an organization increases with the organization’s age, with generational changes in the organization’s leadership, and with the organization’s ability to always find new functions to perform.

Institutionalization also reflects an organization’s *complexity*. In Huntington’s words (1968, 15), “the more complicated an organization is, the more highly institutionalized it is.” Complexity refers to two distinct (sets of) characteristics (that is, the number of organizational subunits and their differentiation). A greater number of subunits enhances an organization’s ability to “secure and maintain the loyalties of its members.” Moreover, differentiation is important because a diverse organization covers a broad range of interests and products and makes it less vulnerable than organizations “[that] produce(s) one product for one market” (Huntington 1968, 18). This means that as the number and the differentiation of the organization’s subunits increase, the complexity of the organization increases and so does its level of institutionalization.

The level of institutionalization of an organization does not simply depend on the organization’s flexibility and complexity, but also on its *autonomy*. The autonomy of political organizations “is measured by the extent to which they have their own interests and values distinguishable from those of other institutions and social forces.” This last point is actually quite important. It means that the organization is institutionalized if it has been able to develop interests, objectives, and procedures “that are not simply expressions of the interests of particular social groups” (Huntington 1968, 20).

Last (but not least), the degree of institutionalization of an organization depends on its *coherence* and *unity*. In Huntington’s words, “an effective organization requires, at a minimum, substantial consensus on the functional boundaries of the group and on the procedures for resolving disputes which come up within those boundaries” (Huntington 1968, 22).

The Institutionalization of Political Parties

What Huntington said about the institutionalization of political organizations can also be applied to the political party. Political parties, as organizations, are created by certain individuals (or groups thereof) as means to achieve certain ends (Palombara and Weiner 1966, 3–42). The institutionalization of political parties occurs when parties develop the characteristics mentioned above: adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence. Yet what does this imply?

As noted above, the *adaptability* of an organization reflects the organization's age, generational age, and flexibility to adapt to changes in the environment in which it operates. The same logic applies to political parties. The level of institutionalization of a political party reflects its age (how long the party has been in existence), its generational age (whether and how many times the party has been able to transfer power from one generation to the next one), and whether it has been able to adapt to environmental changes.

The first two points are fairly clear, and the third can be illustrated by the following example. Imagine that a given party is created by a group of individuals to achieve a certain objective (for example, to forbid the trade of the seeds of the baobab trees and protect the survival of these majestic trees). The party is created, it campaigns, it wins some electoral support, and it sends some representatives to the national parliament, where these talented parliamentarians introduce a few bills concerning the preservation of baobabs. Fellow parliamentarians understand the importance of this issue and decide to pass the Protection of Baobabs' Seeds Act. At the end of this stylized process, this party has achieved the objective for which it had been created, and it has no reason anymore to exist, unless, of course, the party is able to identify new objectives to pursue and new functions to perform.¹ When a party finds new activities and functions to perform or when it identifies new objectives to achieve, the party is said to have organizational adaptability.

The *complexity* of political parties reflects the combination of two sets of characteristics. The first set is represented by the number of organizational levels. It is, in fact, believed that the complexity of a party organization increases as the number of organizational levels increases. For example, a party characterized by four organizational levels (national, regional, provincial, local) is more complex than a party characterized by only three levels (national, provincial, local). Complexity, however, reflects not only the number of organizational levels but also the number of units at each level of organization. It is believed that the larger the number of units, the bigger and more complex the party organization is.

But what does it mean for a party to become *autonomous* from the environment in which it operates? According to Panebianco, "There is autonomy when the (party) organization develops its capacity to directly control the processes of exchange with the environment."² Therefore, a party controls the processes of exchange with the environment when

¹ The most obvious case of a party being able to do so is when the survival of the party organization becomes a value in itself or rather an objective that a party may wish to achieve. On this, see Panebianco (1982, chapter 4). The English translation is available as *Political Parties: Organization and Power*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, chapter 4.

² My translation of Panebianco's *Modelli di Partito* (1982, 114).

- (a) the party is able to finance most of its activities with the revenue generated by the membership fees and dues—making it less dependent on the external environment to finance itself,
- (b) the party has a fairly developed bureaucratic apparatus and selects its leaders from within the party organization, and
- (c) the party's elected officials are controlled by (and therefore accountable to) the party leadership and bureaucracy.

Finally, the level of institutionalization increases with the structural *coherence* of the party organization. A political party's structural coherence is low when a party's organizational subunits are quite independent from one another, as well as from the party's central organization. The structural coherence of a political party is high when the party's subunits are interdependent and their interdependence is preserved by the fact that resources are managed and allocated among the various subunits by the party central organization.

Parties' Weak Institutionalization and Potential for Corruption

In many developing nations with little (if any) experience of democratic governance, political parties have not been able to become fully institutionalized. This section will try to illustrate why this may be the case and how parties' weak institutionalization relates to corruption.

As noted above, age is a crucial factor in determining the adaptability and level of institutionalization of an organization. Also, the older one organization is, the more it is institutionalized. The first and most obvious problem that parties in developing and democratizing countries have encountered in their path toward strong institutionalization is that these countries have often had a relatively brief democratic experience. In countries, like Korea or Taiwan, for example, "political parties also have not had the time to become well-defined."³ As a result, political parties frequently build their support around patron-client relationships, rather than through well-developed issue-oriented platforms. In countries like Cambodia or Malaysia, the presence of an authoritarian regime has certainly not allowed or favored the institutionalization of political parties and of a competitive party system.⁴

There is a second problem. The fact that developing countries have had such a brief democratic experience means that in most cases the parties that have emerged in the course of the democratic transition are still led by the first generation of leaders. This means that they have had little to no experience in transferring power from one generation of party leaders to the next. This means that while the party is

³ A more comprehensive discussion of South Korean parties can be found in Laura L. Thornton and David Kovick, "South Korea," in Manikas and Thornton (2003, 263–316). For a discussion of Taiwanese parties, see David Kovick, "Taiwan," in Manikas and Thornton (2003, 317–70).

⁴ See Laura L. Thornton, "Malaysia," in Manikas and Thornton (2003, 139–82); and David Kovick and Laura L. Thornton, "Cambodia," in Manikas and Thornton (2003, 41–74). The same point could actually be made about Nepal, where the multiparty democracy established by the 1959 Constitution was suspended in 1962 when the government was dissolved and parties were banned. See Mark Wallem and Ram Guragain, "Nepal," in Manikas and Thornton (2003, 184–85).

young, the generation of leaders is not, and this may spark some tensions within the party itself.

Also, political parties in many developing and democratizing nations have not been able to develop complex and articulated party organizations. This means that they have not been able to achieve what Panebianco calls “territorial diffusion”: they have not been able to become rooted in the society that they are supposed to represent. Without large numbers of basic units, parties are inherently unable to become what they should be: that is, “a collection of communities, a union of small groups dispersed throughout the country . . . linked by coordinating institutions” (Duverger 1954, chapter 4). Running the danger of becoming “self-centered, inward looking, and exclusive” (Melia 2005), unresponsive and unrepresentative of the people whom they are supposed to speak for, political parties have trouble becoming full-fledged legitimate institutions.

The final reason explaining the weak institutionalization of political parties in some countries is that they have not been able to develop much autonomy (see box 11.1). This problem manifests itself in several ways. Compounding the lack of issue orientation in party platforms mentioned above, in societies historically characterized by patron-client relationships (as for example in Asia and Africa), parties and politicians are often expected to deliver some goods to their constituents. In some cases, parties and politicians are “expected to pay for community and family events, such as weddings and funerals” (Manikas and Thornton 2003, 10). In more extreme cases, citizens expect “patronage and payments in exchange for political support.”⁵ In such an environment, it is very hard for parties to insulate themselves from the pressures and demands of their constituents. The more a party is insulated from the pressures of the constituents, the more likely it is to resist the pressure to get involved in illicit activities.

The limited autonomy that parties enjoy in developing and democratizing countries is the result of an additional factor. Parties in these countries have encountered major problems in structuring and institutionalizing their internal practices and procedures. In the experience of the Asian countries, for example, this problem emerges because of the “unofficial and often familial, clan-like nature of many parties.”⁶ Parties in these countries have not developed, established, and systematically applied objective, merit-based mechanisms for selecting and promoting party bureaucrats, cadres, and leaders. In the golden age of mass parties and mass party politics in Western Europe, party leaders were often recruited from among the best party cadres and leaders based on how loyal they had been to the party and how well they had worked for it.⁷ This mechanism has demonstrated some shortcomings in consolidated democratic regimes. In fact, party leaders selected from among the party cadres and bureaucrats based on their commitment to their party’s ideological stance may sometimes lack the skills to understand, cope with, and possibly solve the problems of contemporary complex democracies. Also, this is why scholars and practitioners have extensively debated the crisis of highly ideological parties and

⁵ This is, for example, the case in the Philippines. See Celito Arlengue and John Joseph S. Coronel, “Philippines,” in Manikas and Thornton (2003, 217–62). The quote is taken from p. 217.

⁶ Laura L. Thornton, “Introduction,” in Manikas and Thornton (2003, 10).

⁷ See Panebianco (1982, 115). The classic studies on mass parties remain Duverger (1954) and Neumann (1956, 395–421).

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Box 11.1 *Examples of Interrelated Causes/Consequences of Weak Party Institutionalization*

Youth of Democracy and Political Parties. Domination/abuse of power by one political party; confusion of party and nation; marginalization of opposition parties; voter intimidation; little internal democracy; lack of membership, legitimacy, and ideology

Lack of Ideological, Issue-Oriented Platform. Donors and members expect financial benefits and kickbacks from contributions to party; patronage networks develop; in many countries, politicians and parties are expected to sponsor or pay for social services for their constituents (schooling fees, roads, weddings, funerals . . .); vote buying (cash or gifts); party switching

Lack of Internal Procedures and Regulations. Little internal transparency-accountability-democracy; mismanagement; hijacking of the party line by a few well-placed officials

Lack of Membership. Little financial contributions from party members leads to "creative fundraising; lack of legitimacy, representation, and responsiveness; reliance on financial support by vested interests, squeezing out reformers; and misuse of state resources.

Sources: Hodess 2001; Bryan and Baer 2005; and Manikas and Thornton 2003.

have suggested that parties should abandon their ideological baggage and become sufficiently flexible to cope with a world that demands complex, nonideological answers for complex problems.⁸ This said, one should keep in mind that selecting party leaders on the basis of their loyalty to the party and to the party's well-being had also some obvious virtues in the mass parties' golden age. The most important virtue was that a party leader or cadre would not do (and would not allow any of their subordinates to do) anything that could possibly harm the reputation of the party. Imperfect as it could be, this system often prevented parties from (or minimized the extent to which parties were) engaging in extensive illicit practices.

Parties' weak institutionalization (in terms of age, generational age, autonomy, and so forth) is not the only cause of political corruption, but it is certainly one of the causes of party corruption.⁹ The internal life of weakly institutionalized parties is neither transparent nor accountable to voters and citizens. Yet parties must serve as models and demonstrate the principles of governance. The behavior of parties toward each other will reflect on the attitude that citizens have toward democracy. Moreover, the internal organization (that is, if they are self-serving, divisive, and intolerant, rather than inclusive, tolerant, transparent, and respectful of rules) will serve as an indication of its behavior in government (Melia 2005). It will also strongly influence the willingness of prospective members to join political parties. Not surprisingly, weakly institutionalized parties tend to have a fairly small membership base. This means that they must find financial resources other than those

⁸ A review article on the party crisis debate can be found in Daalder (1992, 269–88). A more recent assessment of the literature can be found in Pelizzo (2003).

⁹ One could very well argue that parties' weak institutionalization is both a cause and a consequence of corruption. The argument goes as follows: weakly institutionalized parties are particularly prone to engage in corrupt practices, corruption undermines parties' autonomy from the environment in which they operate, and autonomy is a key component of institutionalization. Therefore, if there is little to no autonomy, there is little to no institutionalization. (I thank Marco Verweij for the useful remark.)

generated by membership fees, and when legally collected funds are insufficient to cover the increasingly high costs of politics, parties may have to accept illicit contributions, bribes, and kickbacks. The claim that “corruption is a symptom of deeper institutional weakness” is quite accurate when applied to the corruption of political parties. Parties’ corruption reflects the fact that they are weakly institutionalized. Hence, to minimize and possibly eliminate corruption from party politics, it is necessary to eliminate the conditions that make corruption possible (that is, parties’ weak institutionalization). But how can parties become properly institutionalized?

Conclusions and Suggestions

The previous section suggested that parties’ weak institutionalization in democratizing countries or in newly established democracies is the result of a combination of factors. One is that these countries have a fairly brief experience with democracy and that party democracy and parties have literally not had the time to become fully institutionalized. Yet, institutionalization is not just a matter of time. There are some clear steps that parties should take (and that political reformers and civic activists should advocate). If parties do not develop proper rules and procedures to regulate their internal life, they will not attract party members. If they do not attract members, they will not be able to finance themselves with membership fees. If they cannot satisfy their financial needs legally, they will satisfy them illegally. Numerous measures can be taken to strengthen the integrity and institutionalization of political parties (see boxes 11.2 and 11.3); however, three overarching steps seem particularly important: the regulation of the parties’ internal life, increased membership, and a stronger party bureaucracy.

Box 11.2 *Nonexhaustive List of Measures for Greater Party Institutionalization*

Political Parties

Codes of conduct and ethical standards for members and officials

- Inner-party democracy: Full membership involvement in election of party leaders, officials, and candidates for public office
- Mandatory disclosure requirements on assets and interests
- Regular, independent, and publicly accessible financial audits
- Independent monitoring, evaluation, and disciplinary committees and processes
- Training and ethical education programs for leaders and party officials
- Term limits for party leaders
- Strengthen issue-driven platforms—develop party platform
- Greater interaction of political parties with civil society
- Educate voters on political parties and anti-corruption measures

Legislators

Effective legislation on, and enforcement of, laws regarding party registration and operation, political finance, electoral provisions, and declarations of assets and interests

- Consider the introduction of public subsidies and funding of political parties, tied to party reforms
- Laws and regulations addressing the ability of public officials to direct government business (that is, ensure competitive bidding practices).

Sources: Manikas and Thornton 2003; Bryan and Baer 2005.

Box 11.3 *Examples of Institutionalizing Political Parties and Curbing Corruption in Malaysia*

- *Background.* Political parties are governed by the Malaysia Society Act (1966), which requires them to register and submit financial accounts with the Ministry of Home Affairs. These accounts are not disclosed to the public and do not require parties to reveal their sources of funding. Neither does the law set limits to contributions and spending nor bar the ownership of profitable enterprises by parties, and it provides for little transparency in internal affairs. However, civil-society groups and some political parties have advocated for change and have been successful on some matters:
- *Strengthening National Anti-Corruption Efforts.* The Democratic Action Party (DAP) has identified the curbing of corruption as one of its key objectives in its platform, organized numerous workshops and debates on relevant legislation, and provided extensive input on the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Bill of 1997.
- *Selecting Leaders and Candidates.* The Gerakan Party allows party offices to select “election observers” for internal party elections.
- *Fundraising.* The United Malays National Organization (UMNO) prohibits fundraising by local branches and divisions to avoid undue influence by donors and misuse of funds by party members.
- *Strengthening Ethical Standards and Discipline.* The party Islam se Malaysia developed ethics standards requiring leaders to declare their assets and wealth and appointed an ombudsman to monitor compliance. The UMNO established a disciplinary committee to investigate and punish cases of corruption within the party. The DAP requires candidates to resign from their seats should they violate party principles and switch party.

Source: Manikas and Thornton 2003, 21–28.

Regulating Parties’ Internal Life. Parties must adopt formal rules to regulate the selection of cadres, leaders, and candidates. These rules should be ratified in the party’s formal documents and implemented. Violations of the internal rules should be sanctioned by properly designed committees within the party itself. Parties should also devise some mechanisms to regulate the decision-making process within the party itself. When the decision-making process is transparent and party members know how the party achieves a certain decision, they are quite likely to support the party’s decision—even if it is one that they initially opposed—because they see that decision as a legitimate one.

The adoption and the implementation of these rules would address the fact that parties are somewhat detached from society. According to an NDI study, “some parties have alienated civic activists and leaders,” “the polarization between civil society and parties is striking,” “activists eager to become involved in issue-based political activity frequently turn to NGOs instead of joining political parties,” and “civic groups are in practice effectively replacing parties by representing citizens on issues of concern and presenting proposals to the government” (Manikas and Thornton 2003, 11). Civic activists stay away from political parties not only because parties are known to be corrupt but also because there seems to be no way in which parties can be reformed and moralized. The fact that parties lack proper institutional mechanisms for selecting cadres and leaders or for making decisions means that if civic activists joined parties, they would have little to no power to reform the parties themselves (Manikas and Thornton 2003, 10–11). Therefore, to attract desir-

able members, it is very important for parties to develop and adopt some objective, merit-based, and transparent rules and procedures to regulate their internal life.

Membership. This type of reform could have an additional benefit. By increasing parties' accountability to their members, it could give prospective members an incentive to join parties and could expand parties' membership base. This would be quite an important result because even if parties charge minimal membership fees, the expansion of parties' membership base would also increase the party income generated through membership fees and would reduce parties' need to rely on external sources of financial support—which is generally considered to be one of the most important reasons why parties may accept illicit contributions and become corrupt.¹⁰ In other words, by expanding their membership base, parties can take one of the most important steps in the course of their institutionalization: they can directly control how they are financed, or in Panebianco's words, they "directly control the processes of exchange with the environment."¹¹

There is an additional reason why the expansion of the membership base is important for political parties: as the membership base expands to include additional social groups (religious, ethnic, socioeconomic, and so on), the party must take into account the sometimes conflicting demands of these various social groups. Its policy stances, decisions, and proposals are "likely to be the result of competition among social forces. A political party, for instance, that expresses the interests of only one social group—whether labor, business, or farmers—is less autonomous than one that articulates and aggregates the interests of several social groups. The latter type of party has a clearly defined existence apart from particular social forces" (Huntington 1968, 20). The fact that the party has an existence independent of that of the social groups that the party represents means that the party is autonomous from them, and as the party's autonomy increases, so does its institutionalization.

Party Bureaucracy. As has been seen, the institutionalization of a political party is strong when the party has high levels of autonomy and structural coherence. In the previous paragraph, it was suggested how a party can be made more autonomous from various social groups. But how is a party supposed to increase its structural coherence? The structural coherence of a party increases as the party develops the ability to control its subunits, keep them accountable, administer the allocation of resources between the various subunits, decide the party line, and ensure that the subunits adopt the centrally decided party line. A party's ability to do all these things depends, in its turn, on its ability to create a centralized party bureaucracy. It is the party's centralized bureaucracy that explains the party position to ordinary members, tells elected officials how to conduct themselves, monitors the behavior of lower-level officials and members, and sanctions what it considers improper conduct.

Transparent internal rules and regulations, the expansion of membership, and the development of a proper party bureaucracy are the conditions without which parties cannot become strongly institutionalized—and without strong institutionalization, parties are particularly vulnerable to engaging in various forms of unethical

¹⁰ There is some consensus among scholars and practitioners alike that when legally collected funds are insufficient to cover the increasingly high costs of politics, corruption does not simply happen, it must happen. On this, see the "Report on Wilton Park Conference 748" in 2004, which is included in this book in appendix 2.

¹¹ My translation of Panebianco (1982, *Modelli di Partito*, 114).

behavior—including corruption. Indeed, as the former President of the Philippines, Corazon Aquino (2003, 1–2), noted herself: “The search for a winning formula against corruption . . . depends a lot on political parties, which are the training grounds of political leaders. It is in the political party where the ideologies and values of young leaders are shaped. . . .”

Institutionalizing political parties, strengthening and reforming them from within, goes hand in hand with the fight against corruption by other political institutions. Such reforms increase the legitimacy and representational value of parties, build the popular trust toward democracy, and lend the national anti-corruption efforts additional credibility.

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