

PART VI

MASS POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

CHAPTER 21

THE EMERGENCE OF PARTIES AND PARTY SYSTEMS

CARLES BOIX

WITH the exception of a few Swiss cantons where all voters assemble in annual assemblies or *Landsgemeinde* and some New England towns where neighbors debate and vote in open meetings, all contemporary democracies are representative democracies. Direct democracy is simply impractical in today's world. States are too large in territory and population for a sizeable fraction of the citizenry to debate together and directly any political question at hand in a meaningful, sustained manner. The range and complexity of most issues that fall under public consideration is such that no citizen can master them even if she were to invest all her time in politics. As in the sphere of economic life, where agents work and produce in a highly specialized manner, contemporary politics has given way also to the idea of division of labor in all its dimensions. Instead of deciding directly, voters choose, through regular elections, a number of politicians to set policy and govern them. In other words, they fully delegate the power to make decisions and to supervise those decisions to their representatives for a given period of time, that is, until new elections are held. In turn, those future elections are roughly the only, albeit probably imperfect, mechanism to discipline policy makers to act on behalf of the voters' interests.

The very scale of contemporary politics and the electoral and parliamentary dynamics of representative democracies have in turn prompted politicians to create or join electoral and legislative "teams" or parties, that is, stable organizations through which politicians coordinate their political activity across electoral districts, in parliamentary assemblies, and in executive or governmental committees. In the parliamentary arena the

coordination in parties reduces the transaction costs associated with crafting and passing laws. Moreover, partisan coordination probably enhances the ability of the legislature to hold the executive accountable. In the electoral arena, parties can gather and employ in a more efficient manner the financial and human resources politicians need to inform and mobilize voters. By easing the process of candidate selection and forcing the strategic coordination of voters on their members, they increase their electoral odds of victory. Finally, the creation of a pattern of stable cooperation among some legislators should confer on them a clear advantage over their opponents in terms of presenting a stable program and of defending their record in a clear-cut manner before voters.¹

Unsurprisingly, political parties are a pervasive phenomenon in representative democracies. Factional coordination or the stable cooperation of political representatives came into being shortly after the formation of the first modern assemblies: in the United States since the 1780s, in France in the first year of the French Revolution, in Britain through the opposition of Tories and Whigs. As the electorate expanded and elections became clean and truly competitive mechanisms of selection, those factions developed into gradually more cohesive machines—disciplining their members in favor or against the government, presenting voters with a unified program, and taking care to bring voters to the ballot box. Modern parties, as both electoral and legislative machines, emerged in the late 1820s and early 1830s in Jacksonian America. In Belgium and Switzerland unified Liberal (or Radical) parties were founded in the late 1840s. In Britain, Liberals finally cohered as a parliamentary party in the 1850s. By the 1880s both they and the Conservatives were unified national organizations for all purposes. In the last third of the nineteenth century Catholics and social democrats launched highly centralized, mass parties in continental Europe. By the time the First World War started almost all electoral contests and parliamentary struggles pivoted around well-organized parties in all representative democracies.

1 THE QUESTION: WHAT PARTIES? WHICH PARTY SYSTEMS?

Although the coordination of politicians into parties, that is, into vote-seeking and governing teams of candidates and parliamentarians, has been a universal, almost lawlike phenomenon in contemporary democracies, the ways in which politicians have organized and voters have responded to partisan appeals have varied widely over time and across countries. On the one hand, political parties differ in their internal architecture: how hierarchical they are; the strength of their parliamentary wing vis-à-vis the party apparatus; the number, extraction, and commitment of their

¹ The functions performed by parties were extensively discussed in the sociological and structural literature of the 1960s and 1970s (LaPalombara and Weiner 1966; Sartori 1976). This research was recast in rational and institutional terms, which I follow here, in the 1990s (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Aldrich 1995).

membership; or their cohesiveness, ranging from loose, almost ad hoc coalitions of interests, to tightly disciplined organizations whose members never deviate from the official position of the party (Duverger 1954; Panebianco 1988).

On the other hand, parties vary in their external dimension or attributes, that is, in their articulation in the electoral market. First, they diverge in their ideological orientation and their programmatic goals—in other words, they differ in the set of promises they make to electors and, constrained by world conditions, in the decisions they make.² Second, they differ in the size of their electoral support and parliamentary representation as well as in the stability with which they hold their voters.

The programmatic stance of any party and, to a lesser degree, its electoral strength are a function of the choices made by its members about which goals they will pursue and how they should advance them. But the electoral support of any party depends also on the ideological commitments and political strategies adopted by other political competitors in two ways. First, parties draft their electoral platforms partly in response to the programmatic (and policy) choices other parties make on issues such as the provision of public goods, the control of education, and the conduct of foreign policy. Second, voters eventually vote on the basis of the alternative positions taken by the different parties in the electoral market. In other words, both the size and the political stance of parties are the outcome of the strategic interaction of different politicians and their organizations in their quest for electoral success. From this point of view, it then makes sense to talk about the system of parties or “party system” in any country—that is, about the national profile, in terms of number, size, and ideological preferences, of parties.

In the following section I summarize the two main competing explanations of party systems, the historical-sociological literature and the neo-institutionalist research agenda, and evaluate their strengths and limitations. In the next two sections I then suggest a method of restructuring the way in which we should think how parties emerged that integrates, in a broad analytical framework, both approaches.³

2 CURRENT THEORETICAL LITERATURE

2.1 Sociological Accounts

In a path-breaking study published in 1967, Lipset and Rokkan emphasized the heterogeneity of interests and social groups to explain the emergence of different party systems in Western Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Lipset and Rokkan 1967).

² A recent and important strand of literature distinguishes today between (strictly) programmatic and clientelistic parties (Kitschelt et al. 1999; Stokes 2005). Here I do not make this distinction—I take “clientelistic” parties to have as their program the distribution of particularistic goods to their supporters.

³ Most of this section relies heavily on Boix (2006b).

More specifically, they claimed that the number and relative strength of different parties across European nations was determined by two crucial historical events: a national revolution, that is, the construction of modern, secular nation-states; and the industrial revolution. As the state elites engaged in the construction of a single administrative apparatus, a centralized bureaucracy and a national standardized culture, they faced the resistance of two social groups—the members of territorial peripheries that opposed the process of centralization and the Catholic Church, which was in danger of losing its properties, educational structures, and in some instances its direct influence over state policy. In turn, the industrial revolution, with the emergence of manufacturing firms and the parallel growth of cities, generated two additional dimensions of conflict: between countryside and cities (mostly around trade policy) and, within the latter, between the owners of capital and workers.

The capital–labor conflict eventually emerged in all countries—and acquired full political significance with the full extension of universal suffrage. By contrast, the specific nature and the strength of the other three kinds of conflict (territorial, religious, and rural–urban) varied across Europe (and, by default, although Rokkan and Lipset do not treat them, in the former settler colonies governed through democratic institutions). The type of political parties that formed varied across countries as a function of those dimensions of conflict. To name a few examples, religious conflict was considerable in most Catholic countries as well as in those countries where there was a significant Catholic majority. But it was fundamentally absent in Scandinavia. Trade policy played a central role in the latter and in most large states but not in countries such as Belgium or the Netherlands.

In addition to the variation in the nature and size of social interests, party systems were also shaped by the sequence of alliances made by the political elites (and counter-elites) of each country. In those countries where the Reformation triumphed and the state controlled the national Protestant Church, the central conflict hinged around trade issues and the opposition of land versus town. In Britain landholders and the established Church coincided in the Conservative Party against a Liberal Party based on urban interests and Nonconformist Protestants. In Scandinavia, the urban center confronted the landed areas (and, in some cases, the dissident churches). Catholic countries experienced in turn a split between clerical and anticlerical parties and each of these was intertwined with the land–urban cleavage in different forms. Those countries sitting on the border between Protestant and Catholic Europe, that is, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, combined both worlds—with the electoral support of each party clustered in particular geographical areas.

2.2 Limits of the Sociological Account

The work of Lipset and Rokkan has spawned a substantial sociological literature bent on understanding the interests and sectors that supported each party.⁴ Yet it has also

⁴ For a recent summary of the literature see Caramani (2004).

prompted in due time important criticisms. Here I first discuss and reject what we may want to call a radical critique of the sociological approaches to party formation. I then introduce an amended theory of interest-based party politics—one in which institutional environments and the sequence of entry in elections are decisive to understanding the final form of party systems.

In its most radical stance, some critics of the sociological approach question entirely the assumption that voters have a set of pre-existing preferences that politicians represent in a direct, immediate manner. They contend, instead, that identities and political preferences do not exist as objective data waiting to be channeled and mobilized by certain parties and that it is in fact politicians and parties that shape identities. Their argument comes in two main forms. Some scholars claim that political preferences effectively do not exist—voters are an ignorant set, at most endowed with private motives or passions, which an ambitious politician articulates around some ideological principle to serve his own private interests. Others acknowledge that voters' preferences (over some policies or issues) may exist but immediately assert that they are too many to serve any practical purpose for the researcher interested in predicting why certain groups and ideas became mobilized in the electoral arena. Since any political identity may emerge, as little attention as possible should be paid to the idea of pre-existing "electoral spaces." In both accounts, politicians are not ideologically motivated actors that seek to represent certain interests and implement their policy preferences. They are, instead, vote-maximizing entrepreneurs who, calculating which types of issues may increase their electoral support, choose what groups to politicize and mobilize and in what ways. Mainly cultivated in the study of ethnic conflict and national identity, this radical critique of the sociological theories of identity formation and mobilization has gathered steam in recent years to explain the formation of new cleavages in democratizing nations in the former communist bloc and the Third World.⁵

It is interesting to notice that this "constructivist" critique partakes of one of the central tenets and weaknesses of the darling of Keynesian macroeconomics theory—the pre-rational expectations model of business cycles. To justify the possibility of expanding demand and lowering unemployment without incurring any accelerating inflation, until the 1960s Keynesian economists assumed that workers were ignorant or plainly irrational individuals who would not push for higher wages in response to the manipulation of economic aggregates by a smart, strategic government. Naturally, their models crumbled under the monetarist and rationalist critiques they received in the 1970s. Similarly, political constructivists generally present voters as fools that can be easily manipulated by politicians. Yet they are logically inconsistent in how they build their theory: whereas they break the central tenet of instrumental rationality for voters, they do not for political elites, which they assume to be fully strategic in their behavior.

An amended interest-based theory of party systems. If we accept that both voters and candidates are rational agents, that is, they are capable both of defining their interests—immediately or, over time, by learning, through trial and error, what their

⁵ For a forerunner of these arguments, see Sartori (1968), who insisted on the autonomy of politics to explain party formation over purely sociological accounts.

interests are—and of acting upon them—selecting their representatives according to some welfare-enhancing criteria in the case of voters and crafting viable candidacies to win elections in the case of politicians—some sociological theory of elections has to be brought back in again. Politicians do not operate in a vacuum: their electoral promises and their policy-making decisions need to make sense in the context of the everyday practices and preoccupations of voters to give the former a reasonable chance to succeed at the ballot box. For politicians to successfully mobilize voters on the basis of certain ideas or programs, voters must sense some (material or ideational) affinity with the electoral platform they are offered. In short, to explain party systems we need to understand the type and distribution of preferences of voters, that is, the nature of the policy space.

Still, even if interests matter, the sociological approach is in need of considerable amendment. Sociological approaches forget to characterize the conditions (of a temporal, organizational, or institutional kind) that determine the ways in which politicians choose to coordinate in parties. In other words, the sociological literature has been too quick in positing an automatic relationship between interests and political action. Instead, interests should be thought of as being latent variables that may or may not crystallize in the form of parties. As shown by the spatial literature of elections that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s and has overtaken the discipline since the publication of Rokkan and Lipset's work, political parties cannot be seen as the unmediated reflection of social and economic interests for at least three reasons.⁶ First, voters care about multiple issues—and their positions on the latter are not necessarily correlated in the same direction. For example, most farmers favor agricultural subsidies and this may lead to the formation and electoral success of an agrarian party. But not all farmers necessarily behave as such at the ballot box—a fraction of them may cast their vote for a non-agrarian party that promises policies, such as universal health care or the introduction of teetotaler laws, about which they care first and foremost. Thus, in a multidimensional space, parties can structure a winning coalition by appealing to very different types of voters. Second, parties may break a straightforward relationship between the economic position of voters and the policy that would result from automatically satisfying their interests through the construction of broader policy bundles (higher public spending on education to compensate for trade openness). Workers employed in import-competing firms should be prone to vote for protectionist parties. But they may end up voting for a free trade candidate if the latter credibly promises compensatory mechanisms (such as vocational training) to adjust to future global shocks (Boix 2006a). Finally, most decisions of voters about whom to support are mediated by their beliefs about the effects that certain policies will have on their welfare. Thus, a substantial portion of the low-income voters may end up voting for conservative parties if they believe that low taxes and laissez-faire policies, which in principle reduce the amount of net transfers they will receive from the state and weaken any

⁶ This literature shows that positing an automatic translation of interests to parties would be wrong even in a world in which institutions did not exist or did not force voters to coordinate and act strategically. I deal with the impact of institutions later, in Section 2.3.

protective regulations in the labor market, are the best mechanism to generate growth and raise their income in the long run.

The non-sociological traits of Lipset and Rokkan. Before I consider in detail the organizational and institutional literature that has developed to complement or even replace sociological explanations of party formation, let me note that Lipset and Rokkan did something that many of their direct followers (and, particularly, most of their summarizers) have failed to do: they acknowledged that a purely “society-centered” rendition of the process of party formation would be insufficient.⁷ Accordingly, they stressed both the temporal and the institutional factors at play in the formation of parties: they insisted on the rules that governed participation and representation during the nineteenth century; and they emphasized that parties were ultimately the result of choices made by elites about what groups they would ally with.

Still, their non-sociological arguments were cast at too high a level of generality. It is true that they postulated a set of “cleavages” and they derived from them several actors or groups (in the administrative, economic, territorial, and religious arenas) of universal application to explain Western Europe. And they even described the types of alliances (or, more precisely, the restrictions on the alliances) that could be struck among those different groups. But, beyond several specific historical descriptions of the patterns of political representation for particular countries, they never specified the ways in which those groups (alone or in a coalition with other groups) became organized in certain institutional networks and party organizations across countries. Writing before the literature on social choice and spatial models became ingrained in the scientific study of politics, they paid little attention to the derivation of elite strategies from their ultimate preferences. And they did not specify the ways in which electoral rules and organizational capacity mattered for electoral purposes.

2.3 Organizational and Institutional Explanations

If the electoral arena is often crowded with multiple issues (i.e. if it is a multidimensional political space) and if there is an uncertain link between voters’ interests and the policy instruments that must be adopted to satisfy them, then sociological explanations must give way to models that emphasize the ways in which institutional structures determine the nature of partisan representation.

Within this institutional literature, there are in turn two broad schools of thoughts. On the one hand, several scholars emphasize the role of political elites and organizations in choosing what constituencies to mobilize and under what banner. Przeworski and Sprague (1986) investigate the decision of socialist parties to contest elections and the means through which they managed an electoral tradeoff between appealing to their natural constituencies as working-class parties (at the risk of never attaining an absolute majority in parliament) and moderating their platforms to attract middle-class voters.

⁷ Kitschelt (this volume) is a clear attempt to correct the standard and strictly sociological interpretation of Lipset and Rokkan.

Kalyvas (1996) locates the emergence and growth of Christian Democratic parties in the decisions of church elites and the organizational capabilities of the Catholic lay movement.

On the other hand, strict institutionalist scholars have shown that electoral and constitutional rules determine the number of candidates and parties through two channels. First, electoral rules, and particularly plurality rule, encourage the strategic behavior of both elites and voters, forcing their coordination around those candidates that appear viable to avoid wasting votes and resources. More specifically, single-member districts lead to the concentration of ballots onto two candidates. As the magnitude of the district rises, the number of viable candidates rises as well. Generally speaking, in districts with M seats, the number of viable candidates, that is, the number of candidates that will receive votes, will not exceed $M+1$ (Duverger 1954; Cox 1997).

Second, national institutions matter as well in how they shape party coordination for a simple reason: electoral laws may determine the extent of coordination at the district level but they cannot account for the process of party coordination across districts. In his path-breaking study of nineteenth-century British parliamentary politics, Cox (1987) attributed the formation of a two-party system to (the combination of plurality rule and) the growth of government as a cabinet fully responsible before parliament (and capable of employing the threat of elections to exact the loyalty of its supporters). Shugart and Carey (1992) have shown that presidentialism also shapes the number of candidates. In presidential systems where the president is elected through plurality rules, the number of electoral candidates is close to two. This is particularly true when the legislature is also elected using plurality law. If the legislature is chosen according to proportional representation (a frequent case in Latin America), the number of presidential candidates slightly exceeds the Duvergerian prediction: it is likely that having many congressional parties increases the chances that more than two will launch their own candidate in the presidential contest. In presidential systems with a run-off election the constraining effect is much milder: the number of presidential candidates fluctuates around four. The type of presidential election affects the structure of party systems in the legislature as well. If the president is elected through plurality and both presidential and legislative elections are held at the same time, the number of congressional parties is small—between 2.1 and 3.1 depending on the electoral system for the election of congress. Otherwise, the type of presidential election has no impact on the congressional party system. More recently, Chhibber and Kollman (2004) have emphasized the federal or centralized nature of the state to explain the final number of parties.

2.4 The Limits of Institutionalism

Institutional accounts face two important limits. First, the type of rules in place cannot be employed to predict the spatial location, ideological commitments, and nature of electoral support of the parties that will compete in the electoral arena—particularly if elections take place in multidimensional spaces. Plurality rule may

generate two-party systems. But whether two competing parties end up being socialist and conservative, liberal and clerical, free trader and protectionist, or any other combination is independent of the electoral law in place.

Second, institutional models cannot easily account for change. Strict institutionalists think of institutional rules as some sort of self-sustaining equilibrium. According to this account, plurality rule generates a two-party system in which the two parties have no interest in lessening the constraining effects of the electoral law. Proportional representation fragments the electoral arena into several partisan structures and the actors that profit from this fragmentation veto any attempt to tighten the requirements to elect any representative. To put it more generally, strict institutionalists see the political actors as wholly endogenous to the institutional structure in which they make choices—as a result, because policy makers are themselves the outcome of a particular incentive structure, they should have little interest in changing the rules of the game that sustain them.⁸

There is much truth in this view of institutions as relatively stable mechanisms. But constitutional settings in general and electoral laws in particular are themselves the choice of political actors. And these political actors are not wholly endogenous to the institutional rules in place. Shocks exogenous to electoral laws (for example, the formation of an industrial working class) and the option new actors have to develop strategies of action external to the electoral game (for example, forming unions that contest elections at a later point) have the capacity of altering the institutional equilibrium in place.

3 A THEORY OF PARTY SYSTEM EMERGENCE: ANALYTICAL STEPS

Given the insights and limitations of the models reviewed so far, a more systematic explanation of the emergence of party systems must be based on the integration of two theoretical steps. The first step is strictly analytical and consists in describing the structure of incentives within which voters vote and politicians decide to run for office. Depicting the institutional mechanisms of any representative democracy, that is, the ways in which elections, government formation, and policy making work, will let

⁸ Most explanations of the choice of institutions either depict institutions as efficient solutions to collective action and time consistency problems (Knight 1992) or simply refer to them as self-reinforcing equilibria (Putnam 1993). The adoption of proportional representation has been related to the trade requirements of small countries (Rogowski 1987) or to its capacity to manage political conflict in heterogeneous societies (Katzenstein 1985; Lijphart 1977). Political parties have been purported to solve coordination failures (Aldrich 1995; Cox 1987). Still, efficiency theories have clear difficulties in accounting for cross-temporal and cross-national variation and, particularly, in explaining the choice of suboptimal institutions, the pervasive existence of instances of political stagnation, and the breakdown of political regimes. As a matter of fact, the predominance of these rather functionalist approaches is doubly surprising given a central insight of analytical institutionalism: that, precisely because they shape political equilibria, institutions are themselves the outcome of political strategies (Riker 1986).

us predict, at a most general or abstract level, the ways in which voters and politicians act to maximize the probability of reaching their objectives—given the institutional rules in which they operate. This can be done by drawing upon the very extensive contemporary literature on elections, spatial theory, and strategic coordination (driven by electoral rules) to describe the workings of representative government.

The second step is historical. Starting from the incentive structure that shapes the behavior of voters and parties, we need to describe and make sense of the sequence of historical events through which politicians coordinated in parties, choosing particular programs and electoral strategies, and voters then rallied around them. Such an approach should show why certain parties emerged at certain historical junctures; why others did not or, if they did, failed at the ballot box; and, finally, why they chose particular electoral institutions which, in turn, shaped the number and type of viable parties.

These two steps are complementary. Without analytical foundations, the historical description of party systems and elections would remain an amorphous, variegated set of facts. With some partial (and very laudable) exceptions, most of the scholarly literature on this problem still has this character. Conversely, without any attention to the historical sequence at work, we would be unable to account for the dynamics of institutional change that were at the heart of the process of party formation we want to explain. And therefore we would be unable to sort out which variables preceded which events and how. As discussed before, this lack of attention to history (and, more precisely, timing) handicaps most of the formal work on electoral systems and party systems. The findings that institutional structures covary with the number of parties are mostly correlations that tell us little about the way in which institutions and parties unfolded over time and how actors shaped the mechanisms of democratic representation.

Consider now in more analytical detail the way in which democratic elections work. As summarized in Figure 21.1, in any election, some citizens first decide to advance their candidacy (jointly with a particular electoral platform or list of policy promises). Voters then cast their ballots and only a few candidates become elected, that is, only a few gather a sufficient number of votes (where sufficient is defined by the electoral law in place) to get into public office. After elections, the elected representatives convene to form government and set policy until new elections take place. These policies, which may well include the procedures to select candidates in future elections (i.e. the electoral laws), purportedly have an impact on the well-being of citizens (and politicians) and should affect how the next election is fought and how voters will decide again.

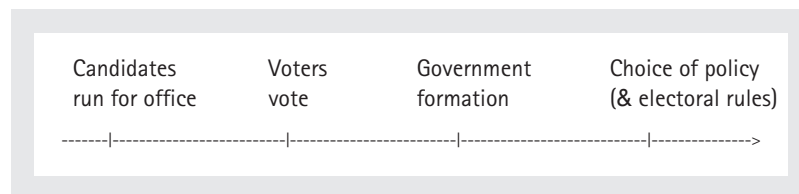


Fig. 21.1 The temporal sequence of representative democracies

Given this temporal structure, where elections lead to some policy outcomes which may have some welfare effects on the electorate, the decision of voters to cast their ballot for a given candidate depends in turn on two things. In the first place, voters generally vote for the candidate who makes promises (or who, in case she is running for re-election, brings in certain accomplishments) that are relatively closer to their ideal policies or goals than the positions adopted by the remaining politicians. Yet, in the second place, the decision of voters to support a politician is conditional on them considering her a viable candidate, that is, on believing that she has reasonable chances of winning (and probably of affecting the choice of policy). More precisely, voters vote for a candidate if they (individually) expect that she will muster enough support from other voters to be elected to office. Thus, voters may decide to eschew the candidate they like most but believe very unlikely to win and instead concentrate their support on a less preferred but electorally “safer” politician (to defeat a third and even less preferred candidate).

Given the mechanisms that define the behavior of voters, we can turn to see how politicians will behave—that is, under what conditions and in what ways they will decide to run for office. First, candidates will tend to pick policies that are attractive to a sufficient section of the electorate (to go on and win the seat they are contesting). Second, politicians will only contest an election (and therefore parties will only be launched) if they can appear as viable candidates, that is, only if voters will take them as serious alternatives worth voting for.

From the structure of incentives of voters (electing welfare-maximizing representatives) and politicians (being recognized as useful and viable candidates and then being elected), there follow three main components or building blocks on which we should construct a theory of party system formation: the preferences of voters; their information and beliefs (about what other voters will do and the chances of politicians to get elected); and, finally, the electoral institutions through which votes are aggregated and candidates elected.

First, since elections discipline politicians to act on behalf of the electorate, a theory of party system formation must depart from an account of the distribution of the voters’ preferences, that is, of the electoral space in which parties compete. Parties cannot deviate too much from the demands of their voters because they risk being heavily punished in the electoral arena. Still, knowing the profile of the electorate would seldom be enough to predict the nature of the party system in any given country for reasons I discussed before: only on rare occasions do voters have full information about the policies of parties; and they may have positions in multiple dimensions that may make them susceptible to many different types of political appeals. All in all, however, the types and numerical distribution of voters act as the main determinants of how parties position themselves in the electoral market.

Second, since the expectations voters have about the electoral chances of different candidates may be as central as (or sometimes even more central than) the interests of voters in determining their vote, we need to pay attention to the mechanisms that determine those beliefs and therefore that shape both the strategic coordination of politicians and the instrumental vote of voters. Two points are in order here.

The existence of expectations (and the corresponding strategic behavior that follows from them) confers some considerable advantage on those politicians that entered at the beginning of the sequence of elections relative to later entrants. That is, in an empty electoral arena, where there still is little information (provided by past elections) about who may be the best candidate around which to coordinate to defeat the least preferred politician, strategic considerations may play a minor role in voters' minds. By contrast, once some parties become established as the main electoral contenders, voters are suddenly much more constrained in their behavior. The main parties constantly appeal to their own electoral viability, as already proven in previous elections, in opposition to new, perhaps more preferred but as yet untested candidates, to maintain the allegiance of voters.

This electoral advantage, which comes from having some recognizable label, some organization, and some reputation at winning elections, has an additional and very important consequence. It gives parties the capacity and time to adjust policy promises and particular candidates to shifts in the electorate or in the preferences of electorates so that they can remain strongly competitive in the electoral arena. In short, the combination of being an early entrant and exploiting the strategic calculations of voters explains why we see so much persistence in party labels over time, even under periods of considerable ideological and social flux. Thus, for example, in spite of several wars, the transformation of the economy away from traditional smokestack industries, and substantial changes in social values, Democrats and Republicans have split the American electorate for over a century. Similarly, Conservatives and Labour have alternated in power in London for about eighty years. It has been by exploiting the strategic coordination of voters and gradually adjusting policies over time that these parties have systematically deterred the entry and consolidation of many third political forces.

This discussion on the stability of party systems leads us in turn to a second point, namely the conditions that precipitate the breakdown of the prevailing party system. At first sight, new parties seem to emerge whenever the electoral market changes abruptly—either because substantial numbers of new voters participate in the polls (due to a change in franchise rules) or when the interests of significant portions of the electorate change (for example, after massive migrations to the city or sudden political realignments precipitated by war). Yet, by and large, the formation and consolidation of new parties takes place only when their candidates are able to break the “expectations” advantage that the existing parties tap into to sustain their leading position. This can only happen if the entering parties enjoy sufficient organizational strength to mobilize their electors and move them away from the old equilibrium (in which they voted or are going to vote for one of the old parties because it was viable) to a new equilibrium (in which they support the new party). As the historical section discusses in more detail, the irruption of socialist parties in Europe followed the decision of trade unions to shift their support away from (left-leaning) liberal politicians to social democratic candidates.

Finally, since the decision of voters over whom to vote for (and, in fact, of politicians to form a party) is strongly affected by the institutional rules that specify the translation of votes into seats, we need to examine the nature and selection of the electoral laws to understand the formation of party systems. In the international

system, actors (the states) do not choose the rules of the game—in fact, there are hardly any, except for some informal cooperation within a general condition of anarchy. In markets, firms only partially (if at all) define the rules of competition. By contrast, in representative democracies, politicians set the very rules according to which they will be selected. And they generally draft them to maximize their electoral chances. This simple fact forces us to tackle the causes underlying the choice of the rules of the game. In other words, a theory of party formation would be incomplete if we did not pay attention to the incentives that make politicians maintain the legal status quo (something that happens most of the time) or alter it (something that occurs very rarely and with substantial consequences).

4 HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

In this section I apply the analytical building blocks discussed to interpret the historical sequence through which party systems emerged in the West—starting with a gradual process of political liberalization in the early nineteenth century and culminating with the full incorporation of its citizens in the first half of the twentieth century.

4.1 Initial Conditions

At the starting point of their process of democratization, most countries shared a very similar system of political representation—which we may want to think of as a pre-party system of representation. First, their electorates were very small, for two alternative reasons. In the overwhelming majority of instances, the regulation of the franchise conditions was extremely restrictive—limited to propertied men. In those exceptional cases in which the franchise was much more open, only a small portion of the citizenry turned out to vote. Second, the election of representatives was conducted through small, mostly single-member, districts and based on majoritarian rules. Third, electoral competition was extremely decentralized. Candidates, who were minimally coordinated (if at all) with other politicians across the nation, ran for office on local issues and relied very strongly on personal networks and clienteles in their own constituency. In many cases the idea of competition itself was spotty—candidates ran unopposed in one-third of the British constituencies in the early 1830s, in one-third of the Belgian and Danish districts in the 1850s and 1860s, and in almost a quarter of the Swiss ones in the 1890s. All in all, elected politicians acted as the delegates of local, territorialized interests in what may have often looked like a diplomatic mission in the central parliament. For example, in the early nineteenth century, the vast majority of parliamentary Acts in Britain had a private nature, that is, they authorized or regulated local business, permits, or works (Cox 1987).

4.2 The Growth of States and Electorates

This state of things changed dramatically under the impact of both the construction of unified and modern states and the gradual expansion of the franchise.

As the central state grew or attempted to grow in size and political relevance, mainly in response both to intensifying military competition between sovereign states and to the emergence of an industrial economy (at home or abroad), its decisions (and the administrative machinery it deployed to apply them) acquired an acute distributive profile in the national arena. It is true that national politics had already been crucial to the lives and businesses of a broad swath of the population (or at least to its elites). But up until then their impact had a mostly sporadic or episodic character—mainly around certain critical, well-defined historical convulsions such as wars and religious persecutions. By contrast, by the middle of the nineteenth century, policies devised in the capital systematically affected the interests of everyone in the country. National governments were now adjudicating over a growing number of decisions for the whole territory and therefore were capable of creating true winners and losers at the national level. And this in turn encouraged all the territorial interests represented in parliament to coordinate across territories and representatives either to support the government in place and its policies or to oppose it in a persistent and effective manner.

Besides the heightened role of the state, the gradual expansion of the franchise also spurred the formation of political parties as cohesive parliamentary and electoral machines. Larger electoral districts forced politicians to establish mechanisms to canvass the vote. To compete effectively against the traditional elites that were elected on the basis of a personal vote, the new parties that sprang up in the late nineteenth century to mobilize Catholics and socialist voters had to rely on broad organizations to collect their dues and sustain their candidates.

As shown by Cox (1987), legislative cohesion of British parliamentary parties grew systematically in the nineteenth and reached very high levels by the early twentieth century. Although parliamentary data for other countries in that period are scanty, by the last third of the nineteenth century most countries had several tightly organized parties. The example of Gladstone, who transformed the British Liberal Party into a truly electoral machine in the 1860s, and of the religious mass parties in continental Europe, which obtained impressive electoral results in the 1870s and 1880s, simply forced the old liberal and conservative parliamentary platforms to adapt as well and to become modern partisan organizations.

4.3 Voters' Preferences: The Franchise and the Space of Competition

In response to the nationalization of political life, politicians coordinated into permanent parliamentary (and, later, electoral) parties according to two key factors: first, the space of electoral competition, that is, the economic and religious preferences of voters;

and, second, the sequence and pattern of electoral mobilization. I deal with the first factor in this subsection. I discuss the timing of mobilization in the next subsection.

Two main political conflicts structured the space of electoral competition. On the one hand, the electorate divided over the regulation of economic life by the state. On the other hand, voters often split on the role the state should have on education and the creation of a common national culture.

The economy. A sustained fall in transportation costs (due to new technological advances) in combination with generalized international competition (intensified by the French revolutionary wars) spurred states to assert their control over the economic life of their territory. This implied breaking old local autonomies and corporations, abolishing internal barriers to trade, and eventually building a unified domestic market. Hence, once a national economic space had been established and the state had taken charge of setting the level of tariffs and taxes and the provision of public services, economic policy making turned into the object of systematic contestation between the different economic interests in society.⁹

The impact of economic interests on the *initial* electoral alignment of parties was mediated by the very limited franchise that prevailed in most countries in the first half of the nineteenth century as follows. Since only those individuals with property voted, electoral conflict along the income ladder (over redistributive policies), that is, between upper, middle, and working classes, was very light if not completely absent. Political contestation crystallized instead over the distinctive trade interests of the urban manufacturers in opposition to those of the propertied classes in the countryside. In a way, this coincided with the existing local or territorial representation of interests—rural and urban interests were respectively clustered in different geographical areas and therefore the process of partisan coordination proceeded naturally from the agglomeration of representatives from contiguous districts. (As indicated later, the broadening of the electorate contributed to shift the structure of the electoral space toward more class-based politics.)

The nationalization of religion and culture. Prompted by the ideas of the French Revolution, the wars of the turn of the nineteenth century, and the demands of industrialization, the state engaged in the creation of a homogeneous public culture and, in many instances, in the formation of a unified nation—mainly through the extension of equal political rights and the control and uniformization of the educational system. This hastened a divisive political battle over the delivery of education between the state and non-national churches (either the Catholic Church or non-state Protestant confessions) and, in a few instances, between the state and some national minorities.

Whereas the urban–rural dimension of conflict (mostly associated with trade issues) was almost universal across countries, the educational, religious, and territorial battles

⁹ The construction of a unified economy was part and parcel of the politics of the time and was likely to contribute to the nature of the party system that finally emerged (for example in Switzerland). But I take the process of unification as mostly fixed, preceding (and mostly exogenous to) the processes of partisan coordination I am examining here. This assumption seems reasonable since all states eventually unified their economies—when they did not they eventually failed and disappeared (this is a way to read the absorption of all the smallish states that ended up in Germany and Italy).

broke out in some countries only. Whether they did was a function of the relation between the state and the existing church or churches in each country. The religious dimension of conflict did not appear in those countries where there was a single national church. There the state controlled its whole administrative apparatus and the provision of education. There was no organized opposition—in fact, there was little reason to expect it since the state did not discriminate (as it did in countries with a plurality of churches besides the official church) among its citizens for religious beliefs.

Religion only became a central matter of contention in those countries with several churches besides the official, state-sponsored church. This happened both in Protestant countries, like Britain, where church-goers were divided between Anglicans and Nonconformists, or the Netherlands, which had several Protestant churches (on top of a substantial Catholic minority), and in Catholic countries, where the Church controlled most of the existing educational structure. (This line of explanation departs strongly from the standard theory put forth by Lipset and Rokkan 1967, who distinguished between Protestant countries, with hardly a religiously defined electoral divide, and Catholic ones, with a marked clerical–anticlerical cleavage. The problem with their explanation is that religious conflict was not confined to Catholic nations. It was notorious in several Protestant countries as well.¹⁰)

The existence of a restrictive franchise had a much smaller impact on altering the way in which the religious question affected the construction of electoral coalitions. Religious differences often cut across income levels and economic sectors—that is, in many instances religious practice and affiliation varied independently of class or profession. In those circumstances, religious and educational disagreements continued to play a key role in both the elections and parliament.¹¹

4.4 The Sequence of Mobilization: From Dimensions of Conflict to Party Systems

Two initial parliamentary parties. At the initial stages of the process of coordination, that is, when most instances of collaboration happened at the parliamentary or congressional stage (while individual candidates still run as independents in their respective districts), the need to support (or oppose) a national government and pass

¹⁰ Lipset and Rokkan actually noted this for Norway—but then made reference to the territorial, periphery nature of Norwegian fundamentalism to explain this exception away. Still, their explanation cannot encompass the cases of Britain, where Nonconformism was one of the pillars of the Liberal Party in the middle of the 19th century, and the Netherlands, where the formation of the CHU and ARP cannot be accounted for. The religious cleavage faded away in Britain in the early 20th century—but the territorial cleavage it marked still persists today. In the Netherlands, it did not disappear until the 1970s.

¹¹ Still, the impact of the franchise was not always negligible. In several cases the structure of the franchise biased the weight of different religious denominations at the ballot box. For example, because most Welsh Nonconformists were disenfranchised till the electoral reform of 1868, the Liberal Party did not control Wales until the last third of the 19th century. Similarly, the very restrictive electoral franchise in place in Belgium until 1893 put the Catholic party at a permanent disadvantage at the polls. This was a well-known fact to Liberals, who tried to tinker with it even more as the Catholic challenge grew over time.

national policies impelled politicians to coordinate in two parliamentary (and generally loose) parties—generally speaking, conservative and liberal.¹²

In one-dimensional electoral spaces, these parties proved stable even as they grew tighter in their parliamentary cohesion and stronger in their organizational capacity over time. In a few instances, one-dimensional spaces were the result of only having one dimension of conflict. This was the case of Sweden in the 1880s, where the religious-educational question hardly mattered and its population was culturally homogeneous. After a modern parliament replaced the old four-chamber system, the fall of agriculture prices in the 1870s spurred a bitter conflict between protectionists and free traders, each one clustered geographically. After the former suffered a temporary split, both forces crystallized into liberal and conservative parties. One-dimensional competition also happened in countries with several electoral dimensions that nonetheless were relatively well correlated—the case of Belgium, at least before the introduction of near universal male suffrage in 1893, where rural districts were overwhelming Catholic while urban constituencies were strongly anticlerical.

The religious question and the entry of third candidates. In those countries where both the economic and the religious issues were salient in the electoral arena, the dominant position of liberals and conservatives was certainly weaker—particularly given that the religious issue was sustained by a certain organizational network that could be mobilized at any time against any of the existing candidates. This mobilization, and the corresponding collapse of two-party systems, happened in Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, where Catholic and Protestant parties launched successful electoral campaigns in the second third of the nineteenth century. But all other two-party systems, like the British one, did remain in place until the final expansion of the universal suffrage in the early twentieth century (and the growth of socialism).¹³

The roots of electoral stability of liberals and conservatives (or the lack of it) were mostly of an institutional and organizational kind. As discussed in the analytical section above, in the context of majority rules, which were in place across all countries in the nineteenth century, voters had very few incentives to desert the existing party, such as the liberal party, in favor of a more preferred alternative, such as a radical candidate, unless they had strong assurances that, by doing so, they would not split the left-wing majority and make the victory of a conservative politician possible. In this coordination game, the liberal party (as well as any other dominant parties in their respective districts) enjoyed an electoral advantage that allowed it to remain in power and to contain internal splits and external threats with considerable

¹² The tightness of these coalitions was a function of the institutional structure of the country (the French Third Republic, where the structure of the legislature was based on strong committees, had very loose parties) and the emergence of well-organized competitors in the electoral arena (which prompted competitors to strengthen their internal organizations).

¹³ As discussed in the following section, the number of dimensions did not predict the number of parties. This has instead been the position of a substantial part of the literature that followed Lipset and Rokkan (1967). Taagapera and Shugart (1989), for example, claim that the number of parties is simply the number of dimensions minus one. Lijphart takes a similar position conditional on the degree to which dimensions of conflict overlap or not. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) develop a broad theory of cleavages and interests—but their discussion on the ways in which these cleavages or groups become represented is informal and particular to each country they examine.

success. A third party could only contest the elections as a truly credible alternative and therefore convince enough voters to simultaneously move away from the old parties if it could rely on a strong organizational basis or, more often, on some parallel, “pre-partisan” organization that could convince all their members that (given the context of majoritarian rules) everyone else in that organization would vote for that new party simultaneously.

In those countries in which liberal and conservative politicians had clashed (and coalesced in separate parliamentary factions) around the religious dimension early in time, that is, where educational and church-related issues had crystallized into the main partisan and electoral alignment, one of the two parties relied or came to rely on the network of religious organizations. As a result, no third party could exploit (or, in fact, had any incentive to exploit) the latter.¹⁴ This was the case of Belgium, where educational matters and church policy defined all elections since the 1840s, in France, where voters split along clerical–anticlerical lines from the French Revolution (Tackett 1986) throughout the 1970s (Converse and Pierce 1986), and in the southern German states (before German unification). In all these cases, conservative candidates (and their successors in the form of a Catholic party in Belgium) counted on a dense network of Catholic associations and practices. In a reverse way, this was also the instance of Britain. There the first phase of partisan competition (after the first electoral reform of 1832) grew out of the trade (and therefore territorial) divide in the 1840s. Yet in the late 1850s and early 1860s religious issues, which had been relevant in a sporadic manner in the first third of the nineteenth century, came to the forefront of electoral politics as Gladstone decided to appeal to and integrate the Nonconformist electorate and its organizations into the Liberal Party to defeat the Tory Party. Accordingly, the politicization of the religious dimension did not result in a new party. It was simply subsumed within the already existing (and increasingly more disciplined) two parliamentary parties. (Naturally, once politicians started targeting a large and therefore heterogeneous portion of the electorate, they had to face considerable electoral and political tensions within the party. The British Liberal Party, for example, picked its support from urban employers and skilled employees in export-oriented firms, Nonconformists, and non-church-goers. Similarly, many Catholic parties in continental Europe included rural voters, urban middle classes, and a sizeable chunk of the working-class electorate—particularly after the introduction of universal suffrage. Their leaders had to manage considerable factional conflict through legislative logrolling and the creation of compensatory mechanisms to buy disgruntled voters. The stability and coherence of these parties were less than robust. From time to time parties suffered from dramatic breakdowns and parliamentary realignments like the 1885 split between Gladstonian Liberals and Liberal Unionists in Britain or the temporal split between moderate and radical free traders in Sweden from 1893 to 1899. Yet, all in all, they enjoy truly remarkable levels of electoral continuity.)

By contrast, the initial divide between liberals and conservatives collapsed in Prussia (before 1870) and unified Germany (after 1870), the Netherlands, and Switzerland. In

¹⁴ Moreover, there were generally no organizational networks of a rural versus urban kind that could be employed to galvanize voters on that dimension. Even then there were some exceptions, such as the farmers’ parties that appeared in Germany in the late 1890s and Scandinavia in the early 20th century.

all these instances, Liberals moved toward a strong anticlerical position in the second half of the nineteenth century. In turn, Conservatives, representing the Protestant elites that had built those countries—by war in Germany and Switzerland—could not appeal to Catholic voters in a credible manner. In those circumstances, the existing religious networks could be and were easily mobilized to break the bipartisan status quo (Kalyvas 1996).

The entry of socialist parties. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the party system in advanced democracies witnessed a new wave of transformations as a result of the growth of socialist parties. This change derived from the combination of two factors: a broader and changing electorate and the decision of unions to sponsor challengers against liberal incumbents.

As voting rights were eventually extended to hitherto unenfranchised citizens at the turn of the twentieth century, the electoral space evolved accordingly. The past dominant divide between rural and urban districts which characterized the electoral politics of the nineteenth century now became subsumed within a broader space where income differentials mattered substantially. This transformation of the electoral space opened a window of opportunity for socialist, that is, non-liberal left-wing parties. As summarized in Table 21.1, the Belgian, British, and Swedish socialist parties only became a relevant force after the introduction of universal or quasi-universal male suffrage.

Table 21.1 Socialist parties and electoral success

		Extent of male suffrage	
		None or partial	Universal
Unions shift support to socialist parties	No	Britain before 1900	USA
		Belgium before 1870s	[Canada]
		Norway before 1900	France till 1900s
		Sweden before 1900	New South Wales before 1890s
			Switzerland before 1900
	Yes	Britain 1900–18	Australia
		Belgium 1870s–1893	Britain after 1918
		Italy before 1918	Belgium after 1893
		Norway 1899–1900	France partially after 1905
		Sweden 1900–11	Germany after 1871
		Italy after 1918	
		Norway after 1900	
		Sweden after 1911	
		Switzerland in 1900s	

But this condition was in itself insufficient. Without the proper organizational tools, socialist candidates could hardly derail any liberal or progressive incumbents. As with the case of other political issues, the existing majoritarian electoral laws truly deterred the entry of third candidates. In nineteenth-century France, Switzerland, and the United States, male universal suffrage did not result in the emergence of any socialist party in parliament. In Norway, where the proportion of enfranchised men grew from 21 percent in 1879 to 90 percent in 1900, Liberals and Conservatives continued to receive together over 95 percent of the votes during that period. It was only after trade unions, historically allied to the liberals, decided to break with the latter that socialist parties emerged as a real threat to the old party system at the turn of the twentieth century. The emergence of strong social democratic parties across Europe is well correlated with the decision of unions to stop supporting liberal candidates: in the early 1870s in Germany, in the 1880s in Belgium, in 1899 in Norway, in 1900 in Britain, and in the early 1900s in Sweden. By contrast, without union endorsement, socialist parties fared dismally. Before the formation of the Labour Representation Committee in Britain, several socialist candidates ran for office yet failed in a resounding manner in the 1890s in London. Unable to secure the support of unions, the American Socialist Party peaked at between 3 and 6 percent of the national vote in the 1910s, was barely represented in Congress, and fizzled out in the inter-war period. Similarly, although male universal suffrage was in place in Switzerland from the middle of the nineteenth century, the Swiss Socialist Party did very poorly among working-class voters before the union movement shifted its political alliances away from radical liberal candidates in 1908.

4.5 Electoral Institutions and the Resulting Party System

The scholarly literature on electoral systems has shown that the type of electoral laws and the nature of party systems are strongly correlated (Duverger 1954; Taagepera and Shugart 1989; Cox 1997). Plurality and majority rules come hand in hand with two-party systems. Proportional representation laws tend to generate multiparty systems.

Majoritarian systems—particularly plurality rule—reinforce two-party systems for two reasons. Because, as described before, the election of the top vote-getter in a single district compels voters to coordinate strategically around the top two candidates, that electoral system dissuades any parliamentarians from splitting from their own party (even in the wake of substantial policy disagreements). Moreover, it also makes it very hard for any new political force to attract the support of enough voters to become a robust alternative to the established parties. Thus, the top two parties in votes (and seats) should have no incentives to change the electoral system. Absent a massive electoral realignment, due either to a strong organizational network that breaks up the existing partisan duopoly or to a political crisis of historical proportions, the status quo does not change and majoritarian rules and bipartisan systems remain in place indefinitely.

Proportional representation has similar self-sustaining tendencies. By lowering the threshold to elect a candidate, it often pushes the party system to higher levels of

fragmentation. Naturally, once there are several parties, none of them has any incentive to re-establish plurality rule because that change could well mean their electoral demise. Therefore, substituting plurality rule for proportional representation will only be implemented under extraordinary circumstances and by actors external to the old party establishment.¹⁵

A quick look at the evolution of electoral laws since the emergence of representative democracies shows that electoral systems hardly change over time. Plurality and two-round majority laws remained in place across the West during the nineteenth century. Starting in several Swiss cantonal elections in the late nineteenth century and in Belgium in 1899, most countries adopted proportional representation mechanisms in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Majoritarian electoral regimes only remained in place in Britain, its settler colonies, inter-war France, Japan, and Spain. After 1920 the reform of existing electoral systems again happened very rarely.¹⁶

The dramatic transformation of the electoral system in most first-wave democracies in the early twentieth century resulted from the rapid growth of socialism. Without the rapid emergence of a credible socialist machine, electoral rules did not change. The two main parties splitting the national vote had no incentive to change the rules that maintained their electoral advantage. At most, they simply adjusted their electoral platforms in response to the changing interests of voters and to potential third-party challenges. In the United States, Republicans and Democrats easily weathered the (eventually abortive) appearance of a socialist party in the early twentieth century. In Canada Liberals and Conservatives kept receiving most of the votes until the 1930s.

By contrast, wherever labor and socialist parties became credible alternatives at the ballot box, the majoritarian system actually multiplied their threat very quickly: it made it possible for socialists to transform themselves into one of the top two parties at the expense of one of the old parties. Still, the emergence of socialism acted as a necessary but not a sufficient condition of electoral reform. Proportional representation was not introduced whenever one of the old parties retained a dominant position in the non-socialist camp (and therefore attracted all non-socialist voters). This was the case of Britain, where the Liberals split into two factions after the First World War and the Conservatives, emerging as the safest alternative to block socialism, eventually absorbed anti-Labour liberals. By the mid-1920s, as it was clear that the Liberals were fast becoming a marginal force, neither Labour nor the Tories entertained anymore the idea of dropping the plurality system. Proportional representation did not become law either whenever the non-socialist parties coalesced to form a single political organization—this happened in Australia, where free traders and protectionists merged to form the Anti-Socialist Party in the mid-1900s.

Proportional representation replaced the old electoral system in those countries in which the socialist party was strong and none of the non-socialist parties could act as

¹⁵ This is the case of the French electoral reform of 1958 and in the Italian one in the early 1990s.

¹⁶ Shifts from plurality to proportional representation or vice versa took place only, and very rarely, after the Second World War and in the early 1990s (with the collapse of dominant party hegemonies in Italy and Japan). France and Greece are the only countries which have experienced systematic volatility in their electoral systems throughout the 20th century.

the focal point around which non-socialist voters could rally to defeat socialism—either because the non-socialist parties were too balanced in votes and voters could not determine which one had an electoral advantage or because their political disagreements over other issues such as trade or religion were so intense that they blocked any type of instrumental vote.

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