

Daniel J. Epstein—Dissertation Abstract

Tipping the Scales for Parties: Executive-Legislative Balance and Party System Institutionalization in Post-Transition Russia and Brazil

This dissertation examines a critical institution of democracy, the political party system, in two very different cultural and historical contexts. The findings demonstrate that the balance of power between the legislative and executive branches is a key explanatory factor in incentivizing politicians either to institutionalize a system of political parties, or to allow the system to remain inchoate and the parties epiphenomenal.

The party system as an institution plays important roles in various realms of democratic politics including voting, legislation, and linking elites to citizens to legitimate power. Much of the literature on parties and party systems, though, has focused on the traditional, stable democracies of Western Europe and North America (Duverger 1954, Lipset and Rokkan 1967, Sartori 1976, Aldrich 1995, Carey and Shugart 1995). Scholars focused on the emergence of new democratic regimes have noted parties' importance (Linz and Stepan 1996, Levitsky and Cameron 2003), but the process of party system institutionalization in transition regimes, a key to the consolidation of democracy, has been understudied. Studies of parties and party systems in transition regimes have been so focused on the particular country or small group of like countries under study (Kitschelt et al. 1999, Mainwaring 1999, Moser 2001, Hale 2006) that they have not uncovered general mechanisms that can explain variation in party system institutionalization across cultural and historical contexts.

My investigation focused on two countries with different cultural and historical backgrounds which both underwent regime transition near the end of the Third Wave of Democratization (Huntington 1991). Their size and population set them apart from other Third Wave countries and make them ideal for a study that values both richness and generalizability in explanations. Russia and Brazil are also ideal for studying the phenomenon at hand because their constitutions set up each of their federal sub-units as its own political arena with its own party system that can be studied and measured. Thus, the two national cases can be multiplied by their sub-units to create the ingredients for statistical analyses that control for country-specific factors, which make up an important part of this dissertation. Examining the dynamics of party system institutionalization at the regional level in Russia and Brazil provided insight into national party system processes in both countries, but minimizes the impact that major but anomalous events may have on the explanations for party system institutionalization that emerge from studies limited to the overall national party system.

Drawing on a various strands of thought on political competition (Weber [1918] 1978, Schattschneider 1942, Downs 1957, Fish 2005), I propose that a key factor in explaining variations in the degree of institutionalization of party systems is the balance of power between executive and legislative branches. Because a legislature contains many seats, its members need a stable mechanism to dependably produce a majority in order to capture the power the legislature commands. Although in electoral contexts, parties can be out-competed by “party substitutes” (Hale 2006), I theorize in my dissertation that nothing will adequately substitute for a political party as a mechanism for solidifying control of the legislative branch. Thus, the more power there is at the legislature's disposal, the more incentive there is for politicians to devote themselves to political parties and sacrifice other benefits that might accrue from personalistic or anti-party behavior. In presidential regimes, the executive (a regional governor or national president) is a single elected official, and as a result, winning an election is the only step necessary for a politician to capture all the power at that office's command. Often political parties are unnecessary—or even a hindrance—to getting elected president (or governor). The more the balance of power tips toward the legislature and away from the executive, the more

politicians' incentives for party-building are enhanced and the better institutionalized the party system is likely to be. By contrast, the weaker the legislature and the more the executive dominates the politics of the nation or region, the more politicians are likely to limit their investments in parties and adopt behaviors such as shifting their allegiances in return for patronage. This undermines parties and produces a fluid party system, where party labels and organizations are epiphenomenal to actual political struggles.

In the dissertation, I found the theory confirmed in comparisons of national level party system institutionalization and legislative-executive relations in Russia and Brazil, and also in my studies of federal sub-units of both countries. In regions where legislators were best able to carve out autonomous spaces vis-à-vis governors, Santa Catarina and Volgograd, the political party systems showed the greatest stability. By contrast, in Paraná and Voronezh (neighbors of the two former regions in Brazil and Russia, respectively), in spite of similar economic and demographic characteristics, successive governors were able to rule by treating the regional legislature as little more than an afterthought, and the political party systems were characterized by high volatility. In other pairs of regions, I found tendencies that provide a greater understanding of how party systems can develop in the presence of different political patterns. In Goiás and Novosibirsk, I found that regional political cleavages that create opposing sides can translate into some degree of party system institutionalization, although this process may be retarded when a governor tries to enhance the power of the executive too much. In Rio de Janeiro and Chelyabinsk, I found that where governors acknowledge legislative strength by seeking the cooperation of the legislature, some degree of party system institutionalization can ensue, although this is muted if it leads to a unanimity of elites that reduces competition. In Bahia and Bryansk, I found that iron-fisted governors and regional political machines that subjugate all other powers in the region through clientelism and administrative resources can create temporarily stable parties, but that these can shatter, causing upheaval in the party system, if the conditions enabling clientelism and administrative resources shift. Finally, in Maranhão and Astrakhan, I found that in smaller, less-developed regions, politics that center more on long-standing personal relationships than on partisan or institutional positions can also undermine the institutionalization of political party systems, especially when stable patterns of personal relations are interrupted by deaths or non-political spats. In addition, I have been able to perform statistical tests with some proxy data that also show that the more powerful regional governors are, the more volatile—and thus weakly-institutionalized—party systems are at the regional level in both countries.