Carles Boix : The Emergence of Parties and Party Systems
Summary by Aaron Jacques
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In his work “The Emergence of Parties and Party Systems”, Boix tries to make clear the processes which led to the development of party systems in the world, that is, why they are needed and why they work. He establishes the question of what happens and why, then proceeds to compare the leading theories on the subject, before beginning on a process for the creation of a theory on the subject, and finally proceeding with a historical analysis of the phenomenon using what he has described up to that point.


In the first part of Boix’ work, he asks the question that will frame what he looks into for the rest of the work. He notes that, while political parties have appeared without a fail in democratic systems everywhere, they differ both externally, in their presentation and ideological orientation, and internally, in terms of hierarchy and cohesiveness. This defines Boix’s main evaluation points, number, size, and ideological preference. He will use these in both his evaluation and suggested restructuring of the competing approaches.

Sociological accounts

Boix describes the sociological approach to the emergence of parties in this section. He quotes the work of Lipset and Rokkan in 1967, who focused on the great differences of interests and cultures in Europe as an explanation for why the many parties and party systems emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They said that the development of these systems was mainly based on the construction of modern, secular states, and the industrial revolution, both of which allowed more and more interest groups to make themselves heard, thus requiring parties to represent them.

Boix then goes into the limits of the account, with the intent of amending the sociologist account somewhat. His critique is that voters are often considered uneducated or too numerous for their intentions to really count. This means that it is up to the politicians, who are self-motivated and only seek votes. Boix then amends the theory. He states that no matter what, if we assume that politicians are rational actors, so too are the voters, and so the voters, nom atter what, will still seek the most profitable solution, and will find some affinity in the platform they vote for. This implies some representation, despite the failings of the sociological model, and so the important amendment, according to Boix, one must take into account that voters, while they can somewhat be categorized into broad groups, still have individual thoughts, so the farmer won’t always vote agrarian and the poor won’t always vote for welfare. A large failing which Boix seeks to address next, however, is the lack of consideration for the rules and organizations of elections, and their purposes.
Organizational and Institutional Explanations

Here, Boix says that the gap between the policy instruments and the voters’ interests must be addressed, and proceeds to work into the institutionalist literature. He outlines the two main schools of thought, that of Przeworski and Sprague (1986) who say that the most important point is to investigate the roles of political elites and organizations in choosing what constituencies to mobilize and under which banner. He also mentions Cox (1987) and Duverger (1954), who say that the rules of the system and the national institutions determine the number of candidates and parties, rather than the individuals within it.

There are two main limits to this theory according to Boix. First, he says, the rules can’t predict the human factors of a party, that is where it will emerge, where its supporters will be, and what its ideological commitments will be. The Second issue is that institutional models can not easily represent or adapt to change. They assume that the rules are in some sort of self-sustaining equilibrium, which seems fairly true, sicne those who come to power have little interest in changing the system that put them there, but cultural and social elements such as changes to the fundamental class structure in place can affect the equilibrium, rules or no rules.

A Theory of Party System Emergence : Analytical Steps

Here, Boix integrates the two main views in order to create “a more systematic explanation of the emergence of party systems.” He does this in two main steps. First, he analyzes the structure of the incentives within which voters vote and politicians run for office. This is to get an idea of how voters and politicians work to reach their objectives. The second step is a historical analysis, looking at the steps in history through which politicians started their parties, and why they chose the systems they did, which in turn shaped the number of parties and their types. He then goes on to expand on the idea, essentially stating that this method would come down to using institutionalistic trains of thought to analyze the framework and rules of a system, which would give him the framework in which voters and politicians work, then he would use a more sociologist point of view to find out what, within that framework, is in the interests of the actors and how they would act to achieve it, by voting or by running for a party position.

Historical Account

Boix finally takes his analysis method to the historical sequence of party emergence in the West. He begins with a description of the typical country before party systems, where they had small electorates, elections were through small, often single
member districts, and competition was extremely decentralized, which means the candidates were often running solely in their own interests, with little to no coordination with other candidates across the country.

When states began to grow, says Boix, the situation changed dramatically. The state began to have a much greater role in issues, which meant that the government had to coordinate far more in order to be more effective in its new role. Boix uses the example of Britain, as studied by Cox (1987) as an example of the rapid increase in legislative cohesion in parties with the development of the modern state.

In response to the nationalization and centralization of parties, the parties began to organize themselves along new lines, based mainly on the space of electoral competition and the sequence and pattern of electoral mobilization. Two main points affected the space of electoral competition. The first was the economy, since transport costs were lowering globally, which meant that coordination as well as trade were easier both within and outside of the state. This made economic policy an important issue for everyone in the country. The second point was the nationalization of religion and culture. Religion and culture became large issues in countries with varied other versions of each than the official one the state supported. Boix cites Britain and the Netherlands as prime examples, due to the Catholic-Protestant or Anglican-Nonconformist conflicts.

The sequence of mobilization, according to Boix, went in three main steps. First, countries normally had two main parliamentary parties which held dominance over the system, and had been very stable until then. With the emergence of the religious question, third parties emerged, in an attempt to add new, specialized points of view to the issues at hand. The stability of the old parties had been a very structural and institutional thing, and so the introduction of new parties could only follow on a similarly structured or institutional basis, which was furnished by religion. The last step was the introduction of socialist parties, as the economy became a more serious issue, and voting was extended to voters who had been until then unenfranchised, such as those who did not own land, or lived in rural areas removed from the need for participation in a detached government.

**Electoral Institutions and the Resulting Party System**

Boix quotes Duverger (1954), Taagepera and Shugart (1989) and Cox (1997) to say that the type of electoral laws and the nature of party systems are strongly correlated. He then goes on to indicate that this means that most systems, once in place and supported legally, will not change, barring extreme conditions. Electoral systems hardly change over time, but it was, according to Boix, the emergence of a credible socialist movement which finally forced the changing of the existing systems, sometimes at the cost of one of the existing parties. Finally, he suggests that proportional representation was, in the face of this suddenly powerful socialist
movement, the way for voters to rally and defeat socialism, since often their parties would be too balanced or in too much disagreement to allow electoral advantages for any faction or any instrumental votes.

Boix’s methodical approach to examining the issue of the emergence of party systems in the West is very interesting for a number of reasons. Boix gives the reader a well defended point of view on the issue, backed up by an analytical method he designs himself in the work. More importantly, though, is the big picture. Boix’s work is an excellent example of applied comparative politics, and a great piece to study for the current course of POE 320. His method of first drawing on applicable theories, then determining which parts of them are appropriate for use, then combining them is key to what we as a class do, and specifically an excellent example for our upcoming essay.