

Public Images of Political Parties: A Necessary Evil?

RUSSELL J. DALTON and STEVEN A. WELDON

The debate on citizen images of political parties is long standing, but recently it has taken on added importance as the evidence of party dealignment has spread across Western democracies. This article assembles an unprecedented cross-national array of public opinion data that describe current images of political parties. Sentiments are broadly negative, and this pessimism has deepened over the past generation. Then, we demonstrate how distrust of parties decreases voting turnout, contributes to the fragmentation of contemporary party systems and the electoral base of new protest parties, and stimulates broader cynicism towards government. Although political parties are the foundation of the system of representative democracy, fewer citizens today trust political parties, and this is reshaping the nature of democratic politics.

Perhaps no institution is so closely identified with the process of representative democracy as are political parties. The renowned political scientist E.E. Schattschneider (1942: 1) penned the oft-cited conclusion that ‘modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties’. Similarly, James Bryce (1921: 119) stated ‘parties are inevitable. No one has shown how representative government could be worked without them’. More recently, Giovanni Sartori wrote, ‘citizens in Western democracies are represented *through* and *by* parties. This is inevitable’ (Sartori 1968: 471). Many other political scientists and political analysts share these views, ranging from the American Political Science Association’s call for more responsible party government in 1950, to a 1999 *Economist* article that examined the role of political parties as the basis of democracy.¹

Yet even if parties are generally seen as essential to democracy, there is dissent on the nature of their contributions. On the one side, the party government literature stresses the positive role that parties play in framing political choice, socialising elites, mobilising citizens, and organising government (e.g. Sartori 1976; Hershey 2004). On the other side, there is a long history of anti-party sentiment from Rousseau to Madison that

Correspondence Address: Professor Russell J. Dalton, Political Science Department, University of California, Irvine, CA 92697, USA. Email: rdalton@uci.edu

criticises the mischief of faction and the ways parties can impede the democratic process (Ignazi 1996). Alexis de Tocqueville, for example, called political parties an evil inherent in free governments. These sentiments were echoed in Bale and Roberts' review of the recent debate on electoral reform in New Zealand: 'voters are not particularly enamoured of parties, but they reluctantly recognize – if not consciously – that they are a necessary evil' (2002: 17).

The theoretical debate on the political role of parties is long standing, but recently it has taken on additional importance as evidence of growing public disenchantment with parties has spread across Western democracies (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). The membership rolls of most established parties have decreased (Scarrow 2000; Mair and van Biezen 2001). Electoral turnout is in decline. Psychological attachments to political parties – party identifications – also are weakening. Finally, the rise of anti-establishment protest parties on the Left and Right is yet another sign of this malaise.

In addition, these sentiments are fuelling demands for institutional change. Italy, Japan and New Zealand have recently transformed their electoral systems, at least partially due to spreading popular dissatisfaction with political parties (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001). There are also current demands for electoral reform in England, the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada and other nations (Norris 1995).

This article examines the public image of political parties in contemporary advanced industrial democracies. Our research first reviews the current evidence on how citizens view political parties and the system of party government. We assemble data from a diverse array of public opinion surveys to describe contemporary opinions and track them over time. The evidence suggests that distrust of political parties is spreading across these nations.

Then, the second section of this article examines some of the potential political implications of spreading distrust in political parties. We examine the link between party trust and participation in politics, and more broadly images of the democratic system of representative government. We also consider how distrust shapes electoral choices, potentially contributing to the fragmentation of contemporary party systems and the electoral base of new protest parties. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for the workings of the democratic process in contemporary democracies.

Public Images of Political Parties

Because parties are central to democracy, public orientations toward political parties are an important research question. However, scholars differ on how contemporary publics view political parties. In his review of this literature, for example, Thomas Poguntke concluded: 'the data I have analysed do not support generalizations about a broad decline of parties and the rise of anti-party sentiment in Western democracies' (Poguntke

1996: 338). Similarly, writing in the same volume, Paul Webb (1996) did not see clear evidence of growing anti-party sentiments in Britain.

At the same time, there is mounting evidence of declining support for parties and party government in the past two decades across Western democracies. Survey data and membership statistics generally document a drop in party membership over the 1980s and 1990s (Scarrow 2000; Mair and van Biezen 2001). Election turnout and campaign participation are decreasing (Wattenberg 2003; Franklin 2004). Moreover, Dalton (2000) described a general erosion of party attachments across nearly all advanced industrial democracies. He found that the proportion of the public expressing a partisan attachment has declined in 17 of the 19 advanced industrial democracies; the strength of party attachments has decreased in all 18 nations for which there are long-term opinion poll data. Dalton attributed these trends, at least in part, as signs of a growing disenchantment with political parties as agents of representative democracy (also Dalton 2004). A recent cross-national review of political parties similarly found evidence of significant anti-party sentiment across more than a dozen advanced industrial democracies (Webb 2002).

The discussion of public images of political parties often relies on indirect measures, such as the rise of electoral volatility, party membership, turnout levels, or party identification. These indicators provide useful evidence, but they are potential correlates of party sentiments – not the sentiments themselves. Thus, what is needed is more direct attitudinal evidence on what contemporary publics actually think about political parties as actors in the process of representative government. For instance, Poguntke and Scarrow (1996) edited a special issue of the *European Journal of Political Research* that focused on the issue of anti-party sentiments, but there was little empirical evidence on how Europeans actually viewed political parties. Indeed, the discussion was based primarily on the observations of political experts or indirect indicators such as turnout or party membership.

Now a new set of public opinion surveys enables us to examine directly and in greater depth how contemporary publics view political parties. We begin with data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES, module I).² Table 1 presents opinions on two essential ingredients of the current debate about party images: first, are parties necessary to democracy, and second, do parties care what people think.³ These two questions reflect the paradox of current opinions. When asked if parties are necessary, about three-quarters of the public in these 13 democracies respond affirmatively. This supports Schattschneider's (1942) view that democracy without parties seems unthinkable to most citizens (also Schmitt 1983).

However, contemporary publics are simultaneously sceptical about whether parties care about their interests. On average, less than a third of the public are positive toward parties on this question. Often the contrasts are striking. While 80 per cent of Swedes say parties are necessary to make the political system work, only 23 per cent believe that parties care what

TABLE 1
PUBLIC IMAGES OF POLITICAL PARTIES

	Political Parties are Necessary	Political Parties Care what People Think
Australia	71	23
Britain	77	34
Canada	65	23
Denmark	88	30
Germany	80	18
Japan	65	21
Netherlands	90	43
New Zealand	71	26
Norway	89	39
Spain	83	39
Sweden	80	23
Switzerland	78	39
USA	56	38
Average	76	30

Note: Table entries are the percentage agreeing with each statement.

Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (module I, 1996–2000).

ordinary people think. Similarly, 80 per cent of the Germans think parties are necessary, but only 18 per cent of the public believe that parties care.⁴

Before discussing the impact of these party images, we want to consider two arguments that question the potential significance of the findings. First, some scholars have suggested that public scepticism about parties is the norm for democracy, rather than a new development (e.g. Müller 1999; Sarrow 1996). Yet longitudinal data from several nations points to the erosion of trust in parties over the past generation. Gallup Canada found that only 30 per cent of Canadians expressed quite a lot of confidence in political parties in 1979 – already a fairly low level of support – and this dropped to only 11 per cent by 1999 (Carty 2002). Enmid surveys show that the proportion of Germans who express confidence in the political parties has decreased from 43 per cent in 1979 to only 26 per cent in 1993 (Rieger 1994: 462). Surveys in Sweden found that in 1968 a full 68 per cent of the public rejected the statement that parties were only interested in people's votes; this dropped to 23 per cent by 1998 (Holmberg 1999). Similarly, the British public has become significantly less trusting of political parties over the past two decades (Bromley and Curtice 2002). The American National Election Study found that in the 1960s about 40 per cent of Americans thought parties were responsive to public interests; this decreased to about 30 per cent in the 1970s and 20 per cent in the 1980s. There is parallel evidence of extensive public dissatisfaction with Norwegian political parties (Strøm and Svåsand 1997). The national election study series in six Western democracies have asked whether parties are only interested in people's votes and not their opinions (Dalton 2004: 29–30). Four of the six nations show a clear downward trend in party images (Austria, Britain, Finland and Sweden); only one (the Netherlands) displays a significant increase. Indeed, very few scholars today

argue that public support for political parties and the structure of party government is increasing in their nation of specialisation.⁵

Second, other sceptics of these trends propose that parties are suffering from the general erosion in trust that is affecting all social and political institutions, thus parties per se are not primarily at fault. For instance, Gidengil and her colleagues (2002) suggest that 'Even if feelings about political parties are becoming more negative, we should not rush to infer that the problem lies with the parties themselves. It is possible that political parties are simply serving as a lightning rod for frustration with the political process at large'. Miller and Listaug (1990) also linked the erosion in support for political parties in Norway, Sweden and the United States to the general decline in trust in government.

It is true that trust in other political institutions has been generally decreasing across Western democracies (Dalton 2004; Norris 1999). Political parties are part of this general pattern of decreasing political support. However, when we broaden our perspective to compare political parties with other social and political institutions, the patterns are not reassuring.

Table 2 presents Europeans' trust in various social and political institutions from several recent Eurobarometer surveys commissioned by the European Union. What is most striking is the poor rating that political parties receive across the EU. In the 15 EU member states combined, only 17 per cent of the public trust political parties. Across the 13 organisations assessed in the Eurobarometer surveys, political parties come in last by a significant degree. There is little change over the past seven years.

TABLE 2
TRUST IN MAJOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS ACROSS
THE EUROPEAN UNION (1997-2004)

	1997	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Average	Net Change
Police	62	62	70	67	65	67	65	64	3
Radio			55	62	61	65	63	61	8
Army	61	63	71	70	66	66	63	66	2
UN	47	48	61	68	53	48	61	55	14
Television			54	62	55	57	54	56	0
Legal System	43	45	50	51	48	51	48	48	5
Press			38	46	44	47	46	44	8
Church	50	50	52	44	42	42	41	49	-9
EU	37					44	41	41	4
Unions	38	35	43	39	38	36	36	39	-2
National Parliament	40	41	42	51	42	42	35	42	-5
National Government	37	40		48	39	37	30	39	-7
Big Companies	36	35	35	33	34	29	26	33	-10
Political Parties	16	8	18	18	18	16	16	17	0

Note: Table entries are the percentage 'tending to trust' each institution based on surveys weighted to reflect population of the EU 15.

Source: Eurobarometer series (48.0, 50.1, 51.0, 54.1, 56.2, 57.1, 59.1 and 61).

Confidence in political parties is less than half that given to national governments and they fall far behind unions and big business, as well as the legal system and the media.

Perhaps even more damning evidence comes from a cross-national survey sponsored by Transparency International (2005). The Global Corruption Barometer 2004 asked publics in 62 nations how much corruption affected various political and social institutions. Political parties are the institutions most frequently cited for their corruption problems – but this is not primarily a problem of poor or developing nations. In 17 of the 20 Western democracies included in the project, political parties were rated as the institution most affected by corruption.

The Eurobarometer surveys also allow us to compare party images across the member states of the European Union (Table 3). Using 2004 as an example, there is some variation in trust in parties across nations, but not much. The proportion trusting parties ranges from a high of 32 per cent in Denmark to 10 per cent in Britain. Nowhere do parties engender much trust. While there has been some variation over the past seven years, the overall pattern is one of general consistency. In each nation, political analysts often turn to the specific problems of the nation or the specific structure of political institutions to explain negativity toward parties. Seen in cross-national terms, however, it is clear that negative views of political parties are a general feature of contemporary public opinion. Voters lack confidence in parties across this range of large and small nations, strong and weak economies, majoritarian and proportional electoral systems, and other systemic characteristics.

TABLE 3
TRUST IN POLITICAL PARTIES BY NATION (1997–2004)

	1997	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Average	Net Change
Austria	24	22	21	25	25	20	19	22	-5
Belgium	10	17	21	19	22	22	20	18	10
Denmark	31	27	32	36	35	37	32	33	1
Finland	14	20	20	22	21	24	21	20	7
France	12	11	15	15	13	15	13	13	1
Germany	13	18	17	17	17	11	11	15	-2
Greece	20	20	19	25	16	17	28	21	8
Ireland	20	21	22	28	24	20	23	23	3
Italy	13	16	13	13	15	15	13	14	0
Luxembourg	31	27	41	32	32	31	31	32	0
Netherlands	40	40	39	34	35	33	27	35	-13
Portugal	14	19	18	22	21	21	16	19	2
Spain	20	19	28	23	24	23	27	23	7
Sweden	16	17	16	22	23	20	21	19	5
UK	18	16	14	16	15	13	10	15	-7
EU 15	16	18	18	18	18	16	16	17	0

Note: Table entries are the percentage 'tending to trust' political parties.

Source: Eurobarometer series (48.0, 50.1, 51.0, 54.1, 56.2, 57.1, 59.1 and 61).

In summary, contemporary publics appear to view political parties as democracy's necessary evil – needed for running elections and organising government, but with doubts about how political parties represent their interests within this process. Moreover, the negative sentiments toward political parties have spread over the past generation. Whereas academics and citizens alike once saw political parties as the pillars of democracy, contemporary publics now see them as unresponsive, untrustworthy, and unrepresentative. If democracy without parties is unthinkable, many citizens today are sceptical about how well parties perform this democratic role.

The Consequences of Partisan Images

Today, cynicism about political parties seems a common element of discourse among political elites and the public at large (Mair 2005). Indeed, the *Zeitgeist*, which once viewed parties as pillars of democracy, now appears to view parties as an impediment to the democratic process. It is chic to be anti-partisan today.

If these images of parties are more than just rhetoric and the fashion of the day, they should affect citizen attitudes and behaviour in meaningful ways. This section examines several potential consequences of distrust of parties. We first examine how growing distrust might affect patterns of political participation and images of the electoral process. Then, we analyse whether distrust of parties provides a basis of support for protest parties and other non-establishment options when citizens do cast ballots.

Electoral Involvement

One potential consequence of the spreading distrust in political parties may be declining involvement in elections and other aspects of partisan politics. Turnout in elections has generally decreased across the advanced industrial democracies, especially over the past decade (Franklin 2004; Wattenberg 2003). In Italy, for instance, turnout decreased from 90 per cent in the 1979 parliamentary elections to 81 per cent in 2001, which is about typical for the decline in other Western democracies. At the same time, other forms of campaign activity – such as attending party rallies, working for political parties, or displaying campaign materials – has also declined (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000: ch. 3).

The erosion of trust in political parties may have contributed to these trends. Although there are long-standing debates on whether political support stimulates or discourages participation in elections (Dalton 2004: ch. 8; Norris 1999), the impact of trust in parties seems more predictable. Individuals who distrust the reliability of parties and the system of party government have less incentive to become active in a campaign structured around party politics. In contrast, citizens who trust parties presumably want their party to win at the next election and participate to achieve this end.

The first column of Table 4 illustrates the relationship between confidence in parties and voting turnout in national elections. Those who feel that parties care what people think generally vote more often – though the restricted variance on turnout in many nations minimises these effects and leads to only modest correlations.⁶ The difference in turnout rates between those most and least supportive of parties better illustrates the total magnitude of these effects. To use the British survey as an example, reported turnout in 1997 was 72 per cent among those who are most sceptical of parties, compared to 89 per cent among the most trustful British. This is a considerable gap in electoral participation.⁷

The second and third columns of Table 4 repeat these analyses with a measure of trust in parties from the 1999 Eurobarometer survey and past/future voting turnout in the European Parliament elections. Again, there is a consistent tendency for trust in parties to encourage citizens to vote whether we use reported vote in the previous EP election in column two or expectations about voting in the forthcoming election in column three. Moreover, studies using other cross-national surveys and tracking this

TABLE 4
TRUST IN PARTIES AND ELECTION TURNOUT

	Voted in National Election	Voted in Last Europarliament Election	Will Vote in 1999 Europarliament Election
Australia	.11	–	–
Austria	–	.12	.19
Belgium	–	.08	.02
Britain	.10	.15	.11
Canada	.10	–	–
Denmark	.07	.03	.12
Finland	–	.08	.11
France	–	.09	.12
Germany	.06	.13	.12
Greece	–	.02	–.02
Ireland	–	.08	.05
Italy	–	.08	.10
Japan	.11	–	–
Netherlands	.04	.15	.17
New Zealand	.05	–	–
Norway	.07	–	–
Portugal	–	.05	.07
Spain	–	.06	.02
Sweden	.12	.09	.15
Switzerland	.10	–	–
USA	.13	–	–
Average	.08	.09	.10

Note: The first column are the Pearson *r* correlation between belief that parties care about what people think and turnout in the national election; the second and third columns are trust in parties and expectation that the respondent had voted in the last Europarliament election or would vote in the upcoming Europarliament election.

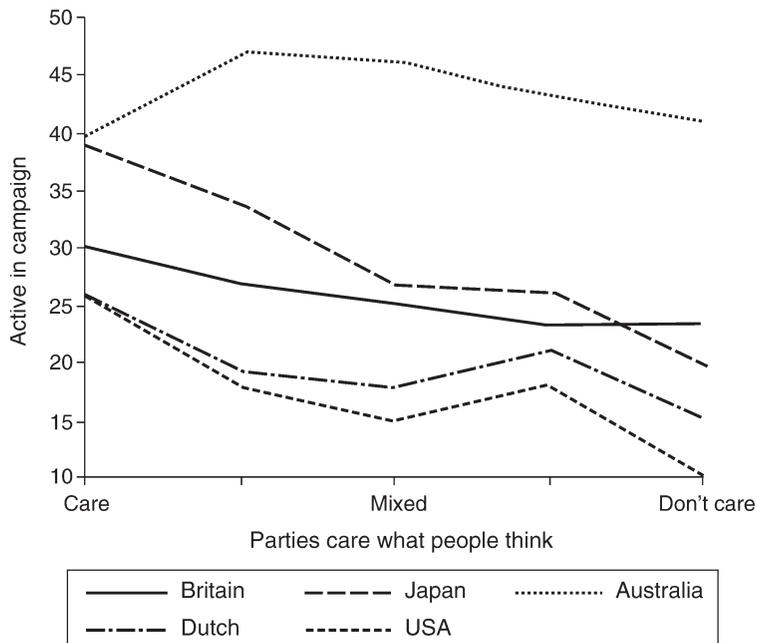
Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (module I) in column one; Eurobarometer 51.0 (March–May 1999) in columns two and three.

relationship over time in the United States come to the same conclusion (Dalton 2004: ch. 8). Consequently, the substantial decline in party trust over the past several decades could significantly contribute to the overall decrease in turnout in Western democracies.

Additional evidence on the impact of distrust on participation comes from relating the party trust question from the CSES project with measures of campaign participation from several of the national election studies in this project.⁸ Figure 1 plots the percentage that participated in some form of campaign activity by the belief that parties care what people think. Although these relationships are also modest, campaign activity is clearly more common among those who trust parties to respond to their interests. Among Americans, for example, only 10 per cent of those distrustful of parties participate beyond voting, compared with 26 per cent among the most trustful respondents. In absolute terms this represents more than a doubling of campaign activity as a function of political support.

In summary, the erosion of trust in political parties has decreased the motivation for citizens to participate in a process that lacks their confidence.

FIGURE 1
FEELINGS THAT PARTIES CARE AND PARTICIPATION IN ELECTION
CAMPAIGN



Note: Figure entries are the percentage active in the campaign by belief that parties care what people think. The number of campaign items varies across nations.

Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems.

Moreover, there is some evidence that political distrust is prompting these same individuals to seek access to politics through less conventional and non-partisan means, such as directly contacting politicians and other forms of direct action (Dalton 2004: ch. 8; Cain *et al.* 2003). Thus, public doubts about parties are reshaping participation patterns, leading to new means of citizen influence and changes in the workings of the democratic process.

Electoral Choice

If citizens do vote, how do party images affect their electoral choices? This is important because elections, for many, are the defining feature of the modern democratic process. They are critical junctures where individuals take stock of their various political attitudes and preferences, and transform them into a single vote choice. The aggregation of votes, in turn, determines the formation of government.

The preceding section presented evidence that those who are distrustful of parties are more likely to abstain from voting. Yet abstaining is not the only option available to distrustful citizens. They also may choose to ‘vote for a party that vows to do politics differently or...one of the traditional alternatives in the hope that its behaviour will change’ (Gidengil *et al.* 2001: 494; also see Hetherington 1999).

First, recent decades have seen the emergence of anti-party parties on both the Left and the Right. Green and left-libertarian parties first made electoral breakthroughs in the 1980s, and shortly thereafter the extreme right experienced a surge of support across several advanced industrial democracies. Although they hold vastly different ideologies and policy goals, these parties have echoed a common message: the established parties are self-serving, corrupt, and indifferent to citizen interests (Mudde 1996). Some empirical studies indicate a strong element of anti-party sentiment among at least the supporters of far-right parties (e.g. Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Lubbers and Scheepers 2000; Gidengil *et al.* 2001). In contrast, a recent comparative study of far-right supporters in France, Belgium and Germany found little evidence of such a link (Brug *et al.* 2000). In short, the continued existence of these anti-establishment parties gives distrustful and disenchanted citizens another viable option at the ballot box.

Second, those dissatisfied with parties may choose nonetheless to support one of the established parties. Some voters may not see abstaining or voting for an anti-party party as viable options, and hence they support an established party – especially the opposition – in the hope that it will change politics (Gidengil *et al.* 2001; Torcal *et al.* 2002).

In short, citizens who are disenchanted with political parties have three basic options at election time: abstaining, voting for an anti-party party, or voting for an established party. To address this issue with greater precision,

we separate anti-party parties into those on the Left and Right,⁹ and divide established parties into incumbents and opposition based on the parties that formed the government at the time of the survey.

Table 5 shows the electoral behaviour of those who believe parties do not care what individuals think, using data from the CSES project. For comparison purposes, the bottom row presents the average difference between those who trust and distrust parties. As can be seen from the table, the most common choice for distrustful citizens is neither abstaining nor supporting anti-party parties, but rather voting for one of the established parties. On average, 68 per cent cast their vote for an established party. Australia, which has limited viable protest options and compulsory voting, is at the high end with 94 per cent.¹⁰ On the low end is Switzerland, the only country where a majority of distrustful citizens fails to vote for an established party. Notably, there is no clear relationship between the type of political system and support for established parties. For instance, the Netherlands and Norway, which have highly fragmented party systems, are at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of the support given to established parties.

Although distrustful citizens tend to remain loyal to established parties at election time, there is a clear difference in the parties they support. On average, they support incumbent parties only 28 per cent of the time. This is in stark contrast to the 41 per cent support that incumbents enjoy from citizens who are *trustful* of parties. In fact, as one can see, among all

TABLE 5
PARTY DISTRUST AND ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR

	Conventional Parties			Anti-Party Parties			
	Incumbent	Opposition	Total	Left	Right	Total	Abstain
Australia	34	60	94	3	–	3	2
Britain	17	61	78	–	–	–	22
Canada	18	34	52	–	28	28	18
Denmark	28	33	61	10	21	31	7
Germany	23	43	66	19	4	23	9
Japan	28	41	68	8	–	8	19
Netherlands	52	31	83	7	–	7	10
N. Zealand	19	41	60	15	20	35	5
Norway	20	37	57	9	17	25	19
Spain	31	51	82	4	–	4	11
Sweden	28	42	70	13	–	13	15
Switzerland	27	8	35	2	15	17	37
USA	31	36	66	–	–	–	30
Distrustful Citizens (Avg)	28	40	68	9	18	28	16
Trustful Citizens (Avg)	41	38	79	8	7	15	9
Trustful vs. Distrustful Difference	–13	2	–11	1	11	13	7

Note: Table entries are the percentage that chooses each electoral option among those who do not believe parties care what individuals think.

Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (module I).

established parties it is only in support for the incumbents where trustful and distrustful citizens differ. These findings demonstrate the difficulty in determining the extent to which anti-party sentiments are an indictment of established parties as a whole, or simply dissatisfaction with the current ruling parties.

Turning now to support for anti-party parties and abstaining altogether, there are a couple of notable findings. First, in several countries distrustful citizens are more likely to vote for an anti-party party than to abstain. This is particularly pronounced in Denmark and New Zealand. Nonetheless, abstaining from the electoral process remains a common choice, especially in countries with majoritarian electoral systems. Overall, the distrustful are nearly twice as likely as the trustful to either vote for anti-party parties or abstain from voting. Second, comparing support for Left and Right anti-party parties, it is clear that the far-right parties are particularly likely to garner support from those distrustful of parties. In the five countries where there are viable anti-party parties on both sides of the ideological spectrum, only in Germany does the Left gain more support than the Right from distrustful citizens.

The importance of anti-party sentiment for far-right support becomes more evident when we compare trustful and distrustful citizens. In the countries where there is a viable far-right party, the distrustful vote for it 18 per cent of the time, whereas the trustful vote for it only 7 per cent of the time. That is, the distrustful are more than two and a half times as likely to vote for a far-right party as are those who trust parties. A different pattern emerges, however, when we compare support for leftist anti-party parties. There is virtually no difference in the two groups' support for these parties. This suggests that distrustful voters no longer view extreme left parties as a primary protest option. These parties tend to be older than the new far-right parties. Moreover, far-right parties have tended to indict the far-left as part of the political establishment, bolstering themselves as the only true anti-party party (Schedler 1996).

The existence of anti-party sentiment among the supporters of anti-party parties does not mean that anti-party sentiment actually predicts this behaviour. As we showed above, a significant majority of those holding anti-party sentiments continue to support traditional parties. Therefore, in Table 6 we examine the extent to which trust in parties correlates with the specific types of electoral behaviour.

Although the correlations are relatively modest, most are significant and indicate that anti-party sentiment does influence electoral behaviour in important ways. The first column reveals that those who believe parties do not care what individuals think are less likely to vote for the incumbent party. The relationships are relatively strong for Canada, Japan and New Zealand. The respective elections in Canada and Japan were critical in that they offered new, viable alternatives to disaffected citizens. In Canada the Reform Party emerged as a clear alternative to the political establishment,

TABLE 6
TRUST IN PARTIES AND ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR

	Incumbent Party	Left Protest	Right Protest	All Protest Parties	Abstain	Protest, Abstain, or Spoil
Australia	-.03	.05	-	.05	.11	.10
Britain	-.11	-	-	-	.10	.11
Canada	-.23	-	.12	.12	.10	.18
Denmark	-.09	-.04	.22	.12	.07	.15
Germany	-.13	.01	.09	.04	.07	.07
Japan	-.23	.04	-	.04	.11	.14
Netherlands	-.10	.00	-	.00	.06	.04
N. Zealand	-.20	.09	.11	.16	.05	.17
Norway	-.10	.00	.14	.11	.07	.14
Spain	-.10	-.01	-	-.01	.06	.04
Sweden	-.11	.08	-	.08	.12	.16
Switzerland	-.10	-.02	.02	.01	.10	.12
USA	-.09	-	-	-	.13	.13
Average	-.12	.02	.12	.07	.08	.12

Note: Table entries are the Pearson r correlation between belief that parties care about what people think and each variable.

Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (module I, 1996–2000).

vowing to do politics differently. The elections in New Zealand were the first time they had moved from a majoritarian electoral system, giving voters several alternatives to traditional parties.

The correlations between anti-party sentiment and anti-party voting are in columns 2 to 4. As noted above, there appears to be no relationship between anti-party sentiment and voting for a far-left party. Yet a closer inspection of the correlations suggests a more complicated picture. In countries where there is not a viable far-right party, anti-party sentiment correlates more strongly, albeit still modestly, with support for a far-left party. Except in New Zealand, the presence of a far-right party eliminates any correlation between anti-party sentiment and support for a far-left party.

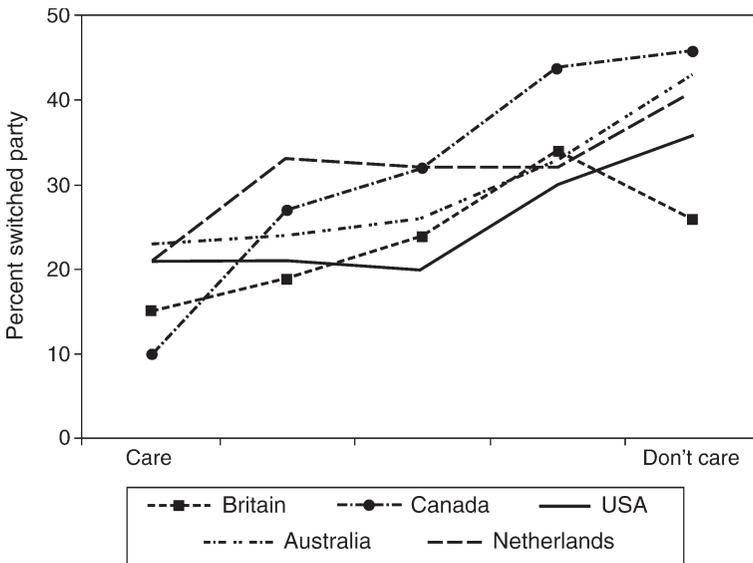
In contrast, distrust in parties is consistently correlated with far-right party support. This is strongest in Denmark, but is relatively robust for all countries except Switzerland. Thus, anti-party sentiment does lead to a vote for anti-party parties, but all such parties are not equally attractive. The extreme left attracts distrustful voters primarily when they are the only anti-party option, whereas far-right parties seem to be the preferred choice. Distrustful citizens are not only more likely to support far-right parties but, as secondary analyses not shown here indicate, a large number of far-left voters actually are quite optimistic about political parties as agents of democracy.

The final column shows the relationship between anti-party sentiment and all modes of anti-party establishment behaviour – including, spoiling one's ballot, abstention and protest votes. The correlations are again modest, but they are all in the expected direction and significant.

Finally, given the many citizens who distrust parties, yet continue to vote for one of the mainstream political parties – primarily the opposition – we might ask whether this reflects actual support for the specific opposition parties, or a continuous rejection of incumbents regardless of who holds power. If the latter is the case, then it implies that party distrust is, in fact, a general indictment of all parties. Moreover, it suggests that anti-party sentiment increases voter volatility, and hence directly contributes to the weakening of partisan attachments.

Employing data from national election studies in five countries that included the CSES party image question, we examine whether party images contribute to voter volatility. Figure 2 plots the percentage that voted for a different party in two adjacent elections by the belief that parties care what people think. The relationships show that distrust in parties stimulates a marked increase in voter volatility. Among Canadians, for example, only 10 per cent who trust parties voted for a different party in the previous election, compared with 45 per cent among the most distrustful respondents. It appears, then, that dissatisfied citizens contribute to the growing segment of floating voters in advanced industrial democracies. Even when they vote for mainstream parties, these parties cannot depend on them for sustained support.

FIGURE 2
FEELINGS THAT PARTIES CARE AND ELECTORAL VOLATILITY



Note: Figure entries are the percentage voting for a different party in the previous national election by belief that parties care what people think.

Source: National Election Studies, Australia (1998), Britain (1997), Netherlands (1998), USA (1996) and Canada (1997).

In summary, anti-party sentiment is widespread in advanced industrial democracies, but such sentiment does not directly translate into anti-party establishment behaviour. More than two out of three distrustful citizens continue to vote for one of the established political parties. However, when voting for an established party, they are much more likely to vote for the opposition. This suggests that anti-party sentiment is at least partially a criticism of the ruling parties. Moreover, given the option between either abstaining or voting for an anti-party party, dissatisfied citizens are more likely to choose the former. Far-right parties are preferred to their counterparts on the Left, but equally important is that a large proportion of the left-wing anti-party voters do, in fact, believe parties care what individuals think. In other words, the Left attracts both party cynics and party optimists, whereas supporters of the Right are overwhelmingly cynical of parties.

The Generalisation of Distrust

Dissatisfaction with political parties has its most direct impact on features of electoral politics and participation in parties and elections. Yet, because the system of party government is so closely tied to the democratic process in most nations, these sentiments have potentially broader implications for citizen images of government and the democratic process. Indeed, prior research routinely demonstrates the strong relationship between trust in parties and other dimensions of political support (e.g. Dalton 2004: ch. 3). Miller and Listaug (1990) even argued that trust in parties is a major source of broader system evaluations.

The link between party evaluations and other elements of political support is demonstrated in Table 7. For instance, the first column displays a pattern of consistently strong correlations between confidence in parties and satisfaction with the way democracy works in the nation. These correlations are among the strongest presented in this study. The next column in the table shows the relationship between confidence in parties and the belief that votes make a difference. Again, a lack of party support erodes the belief in this basic tenet of the democratic process.

Perhaps the most striking finding comes from the last column in Table 7. The CSES survey asked respondents if they felt the most recent national election was conducted fairly: sentiments which touch the very legitimacy of the system of representative democracy. Fair and honest elections are the norm in the advanced industrial democracies included in this study. But in several nations there is a significant minority who question the fairness of elections: Switzerland 7 per cent, Sweden 8 per cent, Spain 9 per cent, the United States and Britain 15 per cent, and Japan 27 per cent. Moreover, there is a disturbing link between a lack of confidence in parties and the belief that elections are not conducted fairly. To use the United States to illustrate this relationship: a full 90 per cent of those who believe parties care

TABLE 7
TRUST IN PARTIES AND POLITICAL SUPPORT

	Satisfied with Democracy	Vote Makes a Difference	Was Election Fair
Australia	.28	.15	–
Britain	.28	.15	.08
Canada	.35	.22	–
Denmark	.37	.11	.18
Germany	.28	.13	.11
Japan	.17	.13	.30
Netherlands	.24	.16	.12
New Zealand	.35	.14	.22
Norway	.21	.12	.08
Spain	.18	.18	.08
Sweden	.36	.19	.09
Switzerland	.23	.15	.14
USA	.23	.20	.25
Average	.27	.16	.15

Note: Table entries are the Pearson *r* correlation between belief that parties care about what people think and each variable.

Source: Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (module I, 1996–2000).

about the public also believe in the integrity of elections, versus a bare majority of 51 per cent among those least confident in parties. Certainly, it is a challenge to the very system of representative democracy when such doubts exist among a significant part of the electorate.

At least indirectly, there is evidence that such popular doubts about political parties are fuelling demands for reforms in the structure of electoral politics. Growing public disenchantment with political parties led to electoral reforms in Italy, Japan and New Zealand during the 1990s (Shugart and Wattenberg 2001). There are mounting pressures for electoral reform in Britain as well, and the current Dutch government is committed to restructuring that nation's electoral system. In the United States, dissatisfaction with parties and politicians stimulated term-limit reforms in several states. Frankly, we doubt whether these changes in election procedures will fully address the public's scepticism. Initial survey evidence suggests that the reforms in Japan and New Zealand, for instance, did not restore public confidence in parties (Dalton 2004: ch. 8). In addition, the fact that distrust in parties extends across different electoral systems and party configurations suggests that institutional reform will not resolve this problem. Rather, the urge for reform illustrates the public's underlying negativity toward parties and the system of party-led government.

Without addressing the issue of causality, it is clear that party support is part of a syndrome of general evaluations of the institutions of representative democracy and the overall evaluations of the democratic process. Thus, it would be a mistake to treat these measures of party support as distinct from other measures of political support. A negative image of parties is linked to negative images of other elements of the democratic process.

Distrust of Parties and Democratic Governance

It would be premature to write an obituary for political parties. Political theory and contemporary publics agree that political parties are a necessary and important component of the democratic process. The positive contribution of political parties is indisputable, and democracy without parties is still difficult to imagine.

At the same time, citizens today express widespread scepticism about political parties as institutions, and the process of representative government based on political parties. Most citizens believe that parties do not care what they think, are not sufficiently responsive to public interests, and cannot be trusted to represent the public's interests. Such sentiments have also become more common in the past generation.

Initially, the explanation for such partisan malaise was linked to the specific history of a nation. Americans supposedly lost trust in parties because of the scandals and policy failures of government, illustrated by Watergate, Congressional scandals, revelations on campaign finance, and similar problems. Italians were alienated by the exposure of corruption in the political and economic systems. Canadians lost faith because of the strains of regional tensions reflected in the party system. Germans were frustrated with the problems that flowed from unification. The research literature in most nations tells a similar tale of how unique national conditions produced these patterns.

Such national conditions are undoubtedly relevant, but our data suggest that spreading dissatisfaction with political parties (and other institutions of representative government) is a general pattern across the Western democracies. Rather than coincidental crises or scandals separately affecting these nations, it seems more likely that these trends represent a broader change in the role and image of partisan politics in contemporary democracies. It is certainly possible that trust in parties might rebound as elites attempt to change these opinions, such short-term change is likely (but also likely to be temporary). In the long term, we suspect that citizen images of government have changed in ways that will continue to limit popular support for parties and the traditional pattern of party government.

If we accept this conclusion, then we must consider the implications of continuing public distrust of political parties. Our findings suggest that distrust of parties has contributed to the erosion of voting turnout and campaign activity in Western democracies. If growing proportions of the public believe that parties do not care about their opinions, why should these individuals then care to vote? Instead, distrust is likely to spawn more involvement in non-partisan forms of political action, such as direct contact with politicians, unconventional participation, citizen interest groups, and other forms of direct action (Dalton 2004: ch. 8).

If the sceptical citizen does turn out to vote, this affects their voting choices. Across Western democracies, distrust in parties appears to

generally increase support for two types of parties: established parties who are in opposition and far-right parties. These two options represent different paths for remedying the ills of political parties. The first helps to make established parties more responsive to the citizens, since dissatisfied voters are willing to support the opposition. The second is a more radical rejection of traditional party politics and it represents a desire to change from without the fundamental nature of modern, representative democracy. Another important finding is that despite the criticism far-left parties have levelled at the political establishment, their supporters are generally no more likely than other citizens to express disenchantment of political parties.

Even more important, our findings have implications beyond these immediate effects on citizen political behaviour. Spreading distrust of political parties will probably increase pressures for institutional changes that alter or diminish the role that parties play within the democratic process (Cain *et al.* 2003). One set of reforms has aimed at improving the system of elections and representative democracy to improve the system of party government. For instance, dissatisfaction with parties has fuelled demands for reform of electoral systems in Italy, New Zealand, Japan and several nations.

A second set of reforms has focused on expanding non-partisan aspects of the democratic process and institutional changes to facilitate this access. Thus, increasing use of referendums, citizen hearings, and other forms of direct action allow voters at least partially to bypass partisan politics. Changes in policy administration are also likely to follow, as people demand a direct voice in politics because they distrust parties as their agents.

In summary, this public scepticism about political parties is one piece of a general syndrome involving the public's growing doubts about representative democracy, and a search for other democratic forms. Parties are likely to retain their central roles in structuring electoral choices and organising the working of the parliamentary process, but their broader role in the system of democratic politics is being challenged.

Notes

We would like to thank Anthony McGann, Ingrid van Biezen, and Martin Wattenberg for their comments on a previous version of this paper. This is a revised version of an article that first appeared in *Rivista italiana di scienza politica* 34 (December 2004), 381–404.

1. 'Empty Vessels', *Economist*, 24 July 1999, 51–2.
2. The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems data were acquired from the CSES website: <http://www.cses.org>. The other data in this article came from the Inter-university Consortium for Political Research at the University of Michigan.
3. Both items are measures on a five point agree/disagree scale; Table 1 presents the two agree categories for each question, and thus should be comparable. These two questions are strongly intercorrelated. For the 13 nations in Table 1, the average Pearson *r* correlation between the two items is .26.

4. These are not isolated findings. For instance, the 1997 Canadian election study asked a battery of party image questions (Gidengil *et al.* 2001). They found that sizeable minorities see the parties as untrustworthy and uncaring, with one Canadian in three believing that parties hardly ever keep their election promises (32 per cent) and do not care what ordinary people think (35 per cent). Similarly, Torcal *et al.* (2002) found that citizens in Southern Europe believed parties were necessary for democracy to function, but they were simultaneously sceptical about the performance of parties.
5. Another possibility is that voters are expressing doubts about parties other than their own. In other words, most parties might be considered untrustworthy – except the party that the respondent personally supports. Yet, attachment to one’s preferred political party has also diminished over the past several decades in most of these nations (Dalton 2000). It is likely that voters hold their own party as more trustworthy than the opposition – democracy functions on this premise – but it is also apparent that attachment to one’s preferred party have also weakened.
6. For instance, 90 per cent of the Swedes and Spanish respondents reported voting in the previous election, as did 96 per cent of the Danes and 99 per cent of the Australians. We excluded Australia from Table 4 because voting is compulsory and only 18 people reported not voting in the election (and 11 of these were in the category of least trust in parties). In addition, reported turnout often exceeds official statistics; for instance, 77 per cent of Americans said they voted in the 1996 election, although official turnout rates are 49 per cent of the voting age public.

In other analyses (not shown) we combined party images, age and education in a multivariate model to predict turnout to ensure that the correlations in Table 4 are not spuriously due to other basic predictors. The coefficients for party images remained significant and little changed from the patterns presented in Table 4.

7. Distrust in parties seems to have a general demobilising effect upon voters that reaches beyond electoral participation. For instance, in most nations those who distrust parties also score lower in national indices of political knowledge included in the CSES survey. However, many of the knowledge questions are based on political parties or elected officials, and this might exaggerate the partisan effect.
8. The campaign activity items were not included in the CSES dataset. Instead, we accessed the data from the separate national election studies that included the CSES supplement. The number and type of campaign activities vary across nations in the CSES surveys. Thus, the absolute levels of activity should not be compared across nations.
9. The literature is uncertain about which parties should be defined as anti-establishment parties. We include all far-right nationalist, communist and extreme-left socialist parties. In addition, we include Green parties as long as they are not more ideologically centrist than the mainstream left party. Specifically, we defined the following as anti-establishment parties: Australia, Greens (L); Canada, Reform (R); Denmark, Red-Green List (L) and Danish People’s Party (R); Germany, PDS (L), Greens (L), Republikaner (R), and DVU (R); Japan, Communist (L); Netherlands, Green Left (L); New Zealand, Alliance (L) and NZ First (R); Norway, Red Electoral Alliance (L) and Progress Party (R); Spain, Communist (L); Sweden, Extreme Left (L) and Greens (L); Switzerland, Swiss People’s Party (R).
10. The data are from the 1996 election. In the following elections, a more viable anti-party party has emerged in Pauline Hansen’s One Nation Party.

References

- Bale T., and N. Roberts (2002). ‘Plus ça change . . . ? Anti-party Sentiment and Electoral System Change: A New Zealand Case Study’, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 40, 1–20.
- Bromley, C., and J. Curtice (2002). ‘Where Have All the Voters Gone?’, in A. Park *et al.* (eds.), *British Social Attitudes, 19th Report*. London: Sage Publications.

- Brug, W.V.D., M. Fennema, and J. Tillie (2000). 'Anti-immigrant Parties in Europe: Ideological or Protest Vote?', *European Journal of Political Research*, 37, 77–102.
- Bryce, J. (1921). *Modern Democracies*. New York: Macmillan, 2 vols.
- Cain, B., R. Dalton and S. Scarrow, eds. (2003). *Democracy Transformed? The Expansion of Citizen Access in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carty, K. (2002). 'Canada's Nineteenth Century Cadre Parties at the Millennium', in P. Webb, D. Farrell and I. Holliday (eds.), *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clarke, H., and M. Stewart (1998). 'The Decline of Parties in the Minds of Citizens', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, 357–78.
- Dalton, R. (2000). 'The Decline of Party Identification', in R. Dalton and M. Wattenberg (eds.), *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dalton, R. (2004). *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dalton, R., and M. Wattenberg, eds. (2000). *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Franklin, M. (2004). *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gidengil, E., A. Blais, N. Nevitte and R. Nadeau (2001). 'The Correlates and Consequences of Anti-partyism in the 1997 Canadian Election', *Party Politics*, 7:4, 491–51.
- Gidengil, E., A. Blais, R. Nadeau and N. Nevitte (2002). 'Changes in the Party System and Anti-party Sentiment', in W. Cross (ed.), *Political Parties, Representation, and Electoral Democracy in Canada*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Hershey, M. (2004). *Party Politics in America*. New York: Longman.
- Hetherington, M. (1998). 'The Effect of Political Trust on the Presidential Vote', *American Political Science Review*, 93, 311–26.
- Holmberg, S. (1999). 'Down and Down We Go: Political Trust in Sweden', in P. Norris (ed.), *Critical Citizens*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ignazi, P. (1996). 'The Intellectual Base of Rightwing Antipartyism', *European Journal of Political Research*, 29, 279–96.
- Kitschelt, H., with A.J. McGann (1995). *The Radical Right in Western Europe*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Lubbers, M., and P. Scheepers (2000). 'Individual and Contextual Characteristics of the German Extreme Right-wing Vote in the 1990s. A Test of Complementary Theories', *European Journal of Political Research*, 38, 63–94.
- Mair, P. 2005. 'Democracy beyond Parties', paper presented at the annual sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research, Grenada, Spain.
- Mair, P., and I. van Biezen (2001). 'Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies', *Party Politics*, 7, 5–21.
- Miller, A., and O. Listhaug (1990). 'Political Parties and Confidence in Government', *British Journal of Political Science*, 29, 357–86.
- Mudde, C. (1996). 'The Paradox of the Anti-party Party', *Party Politics*, 2, 265–76.
- Müller, J. (1999). *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Norris, P. (1995). 'Politics of Electoral Reform', *International Political Science Review*, 16, 65–78.
- Norris, P., ed. (1999). *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Poguntke, T. (1996). 'Anti-party Sentiment – Conceptual Thoughts and Empirical Evidence', *European Journal of Political Research*, 29, 319–44.
- Poguntke, T., and S. Scarrow, eds. (1996). 'Anti-party Sentiment', special issue of *European Journal of Political Research*, 29, 319–44.

- Rieger, G. (1994). 'Parteienverdrossenheit und Parteienkritik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland', *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen*, 25, 458–70.
- Sartori, G. (1968). 'Representational Systems', *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 13, 470–75.
- Sartori, G. (1976). *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Scarrow, S. (1996). 'Politicians against Parties: Anti Party Arguments as Weapons for Change in Germany', *European Journal of Political Research*, 29, 297–317.
- Scarrow, S. (2000). 'Parties without Members? Party Organization in a Changing Electoral Environment', in R. Dalton and M. Wattenberg (eds.), *Parties without Partisans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schattschneider, E.E. (1942). *Party Government*. New York: Rinehart.
- Schedler, A. (1996). 'Anti-political-establishment Parties', *Party Politics*, 3, 291–312.
- Schmitt, H. (1983). 'Party Government in Public Opinion: A European Cross-national Comparison', *European Journal of Political Research*, 11, 353–76.
- Shugart, M., and M. Wattenberg, eds. (2001). *Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: The Best of Both Worlds?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strøm, K., and L. Svåsand, eds. (1997). *Challenges to Political Parties: The Case of Norway*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Torcal, M., R. Gunther and J. Montero (2002). 'Anti-party Sentiments in Southern Europe', in R. Gunther, J. Montero and J. Linz (eds.), *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Transparency International (2005). *Global Corruption Barometer 2004*. <http://www.transparency.org/surveys/index.html>.
- Wattenberg, M. (2003). *Where Have all the Voters Gone?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Webb, P. (1996). 'Apartisanship and anti-party sentiment in the United Kingdom: Correlates and Constraints', *European Journal of Political Research*, 29, 365–82.
- Webb, P. (2002). 'Conclusion: Political Parties and Democratic Control in Advanced Industrial Societies', in P. Webb, D. Farrell and I. Holliday (eds.), *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.