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## The role of political parties in strengthening or weakening democratic institutions

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### Abstract

Political parties play a crucial role in shaping democratic institutions, either reinforcing their stability or contributing to their erosion. This paper explores how political parties can strengthen democratic systems by promoting political accountability, pluralism, and adherence to constitutional norms. Conversely, it examines how parties can weaken democracy through the centralization of power, corruption, and undermining checks and balances. Drawing on examples from both established and emerging democracies, the paper highlights the dual role of political parties in democratic governance. The findings reveal that while political parties are essential to democracy, they can also pose significant challenges when they prioritize short-term power over long-term institutional integrity.

**Keywords:** Political parties, strengthening, weakening democratic institutions

### Introduction

Political parties are central actors in modern democracies, serving as key mechanisms for political representation, policy formation, and public accountability. Their role in the functioning of democratic institutions can either strengthen or undermine the democratic process, depending on how they engage with the structures of governance, the norms of political participation, and the rule of law. In this paper, we examine the dual role of political parties in democratic systems, exploring how they contribute to the stability of democratic institutions or, conversely, weaken them through practices such as authoritarianism, corruption, and the erosion of checks and balances. Drawing on examples from both established and emerging democracies, this study explores the intricate dynamics between political parties and democratic institutions, presenting key findings and discussions from recent research.

### Objective of the study

The objective of this study is to examine the role of political parties in either strengthening or weakening democratic institutions, exploring how their actions and strategies impact the stability, integrity, and functionality of democratic systems.

### The Role of Political Parties in Strengthening Democratic Institutions

Political parties, in theory, are meant to act as intermediaries between the people and the state. They organize political competition, articulate public demands, and convert these into actionable policies through governance. In democratic systems, political parties are expected to uphold constitutional principles, respect institutional integrity, and maintain transparency and accountability.

One of the primary ways in which political parties strengthen democratic institutions is by promoting political pluralism. In competitive democracies, the presence of multiple parties ensures that a diversity of viewpoints is represented in the policymaking process. This multiplicity is critical for ensuring that no single faction dominates the political landscape, fostering a system of checks and balances. For example, in countries like Germany and the Netherlands, political parties function within a proportional representation system, which encourages coalition-building and compromise, preventing the dominance of one party and ensuring a more inclusive political process. These coalitions often reflect the broad spectrum of societal interests, contributing to more balanced policy outcomes and promoting

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democratic stability.

Political parties also strengthen democratic institutions by serving as vehicles for political accountability. In well-functioning democracies, political parties are subject to electoral competition, meaning that if they fail to meet the expectations of the electorate, they can be voted out of power. This electoral mechanism is a critical form of democratic accountability. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the alternation of power between the Conservative and Labour parties has allowed for accountability through elections. Parties in opposition play a crucial role in scrutinizing government actions, proposing alternative policies, and ensuring that the ruling party does not overstep its authority. This form of opposition reinforces the strength of democratic institutions by maintaining a system of governance that is responsive to the electorate and bound by the rule of law.

Moreover, political parties can bolster democratic institutions by protecting civil liberties and promoting adherence to constitutional norms. In countries like Canada and the Scandinavian nations, political parties have historically defended civil rights and worked to ensure that democratic institutions such as an independent judiciary and a free press remain intact. Parties that respect these institutional safeguards contribute to the longevity and resilience of democratic systems. They serve as defenders of the democratic order, particularly during times of political crisis, by upholding the integrity of electoral processes and respecting the independence of key institutions like courts, legislatures, and election commissions.

### **The Role of Political Parties in Weakening Democratic Institutions**

While political parties can play a vital role in strengthening democracy, they can also weaken democratic institutions when they pursue power without regard for constitutional principles or democratic norms. One of the ways in which political parties can undermine democracy is through the erosion of checks and balances. When political parties, particularly those in power, seek to concentrate authority in the executive branch and weaken the legislative and judicial branches, they disrupt the balance of power that is essential for a healthy democracy. This has been observed in countries such as Hungary and Poland, where ruling parties have undermined the independence of the judiciary, restricted media freedoms, and altered electoral rules to entrench their power. The centralization of power in the hands of a single party or leader compromises the ability of democratic institutions to function independently and hold the government accountable.

Another significant threat posed by political parties to democratic institutions is the normalization of corruption and clientelism. In some cases, political parties become vehicles for personal enrichment or the enrichment of a small elite, rather than serving the broader public interest. Corruption undermines public trust in democratic institutions and leads to the erosion of the rule of law. In Brazil, the vast corruption scandal involving the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores) and the Operation Car Wash investigation highlighted how entrenched corruption within a ruling party can lead to a crisis of democratic legitimacy. This scandal, which implicated numerous politicians and business leaders, damaged public confidence in democratic governance and led to widespread protests

demanding political reforms.

Political parties can also weaken democratic institutions by promoting authoritarian practices. In several countries, ruling parties have employed strategies that erode the democratic process, such as undermining electoral integrity, repressing opposition, and limiting political freedoms. Venezuela's United Socialist Party (PSUV), under the leadership of Hugo Chávez and later Nicolás Maduro, has been accused of manipulating elections, cracking down on political opposition, and limiting press freedoms. These actions have led to the dismantling of many of Venezuela's democratic institutions, transforming what was once a democracy into an authoritarian state. The ruling party's control over key state institutions, including the electoral commission and the judiciary, has allowed it to maintain power despite significant opposition and popular discontent. The rise of populism has further complicated the role of political parties in democratic systems. Populist parties often present themselves as challengers to the established political order, positioning themselves as representatives of "the people" against corrupt or elitist institutions. While populism can sometimes serve as a corrective to institutional complacency, it often leads to the weakening of democratic norms. Populist leaders frequently attack democratic institutions, such as the judiciary, the press, and electoral commissions, claiming that these institutions are biased or part of a broader conspiracy against the popular will. This rhetoric undermines public trust in these institutions and creates a polarized political environment where the rule of law is increasingly disregarded. In the United States, the populist rhetoric of former President Donald Trump and his refusal to accept the results of the 2020 presidential election led to an unprecedented assault on democratic norms, culminating in the January 6, 2021, storming of the U.S. Capitol by his supporters. This event highlighted the fragility of democratic institutions when political parties and their leaders refuse to accept democratic outcomes and engage in anti-democratic practices.

### **Discussion**

Recent studies on the role of political parties in strengthening or weakening democratic institutions reveal a complex and often contradictory picture. On one hand, political parties are indispensable to the functioning of democracies, as they provide a means for political representation, policy formulation, and accountability. When parties respect democratic norms, foster political competition, and engage in transparent governance, they contribute to the stability and resilience of democratic institutions. This has been observed in countries with long-standing democratic traditions, such as Germany, where political parties operate within a framework that encourages coalition-building, compromise, and respect for the rule of law.

However, the findings also suggest that political parties can become sources of democratic erosion, particularly when they prioritize short-term political gains over long-term institutional integrity. In emerging democracies and countries experiencing democratic backsliding, political parties have been instrumental in undermining democratic institutions by concentrating power, promoting corruption, and attacking the very institutions that safeguard democracy. Countries like Hungary, Poland, and Venezuela serve as cautionary examples of how political parties, once

in power, can subvert democratic norms and institutions to entrench their rule. These parties often use legal and extralegal means to weaken the judiciary, limit press freedoms, and manipulate electoral processes, thereby eroding the foundations of democratic governance.

Furthermore, the rise of populist parties has introduced new challenges to democratic institutions. Populist parties, which often claim to represent the “true will” of the people, frequently undermine democratic institutions by casting them as corrupt, elitist, or undemocratic. This has led to increased polarization, the weakening of checks and balances, and the erosion of trust in key democratic institutions. The findings of the study underscore the importance of safeguarding institutional integrity and preventing political parties from undermining the democratic norms that are essential for the survival of democratic systems.

In conclusion, political parties play a dual role in either strengthening or weakening democratic institutions. While they are essential for political representation and accountability, their actions can also lead to the erosion of democratic norms, particularly when they seek to concentrate power or undermine institutional safeguards. The findings of this study highlight the need for robust institutional checks and balances, transparent governance, and a political culture that values democratic principles over short-term political gains. Protecting democratic institutions requires vigilance from both political parties and civil society to ensure that the foundations of democracy remain strong, even in the face of challenges posed by populism, corruption, and authoritarian tendencies

### Conclusion

In conclusion, political parties are fundamental actors within democratic systems, capable of both strengthening and weakening democratic institutions. When they promote accountability, respect constitutional norms, and foster political competition, parties contribute to the stability and resilience of democracy. However, when they prioritize power consolidation, engage in corruption, and undermine checks and balances, they erode the very foundations of democratic governance. The study’s findings underscore the importance of maintaining robust institutional safeguards, ensuring political transparency, and fostering a culture of respect for democratic principles to prevent democratic backsliding. The role of political parties, therefore, is pivotal in determining the health and sustainability of democratic institutions.

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