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## Party Systems in the Third Wave

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## Party Systems in the third wave

*Scott Mainwaring (bio)*

One of the most difficult obstacles facing the new post-1974 democracies in their efforts at democratic consolidation is weakly institutionalized party systems. The importance of this distinctive

characteristic of party systems in the third-wave democracies has not been sufficiently recognized. Although analyses of Latin American and East European party systems have proliferated in the past decade, they have generally not attempted to challenge the manner in which political scientists typically think about and compare party systems. Such a challenge is in order.

The conventional criteria by which party systems are usually compared are the number of parties and the degree of ideological polarization. Along these two dimensions, the party systems of the third-wave democracies often resemble those of Western Europe. But if we bring in a third dimension—that of institutionalization—the contrast between West European systems and those of new democracies is substantial. Party systems in the third-wave democracies are markedly less institutionalized than those in most long-established democracies. This difference should not be obscured by the fact that parties in the advanced industrial democracies are facing new challenges and experiencing some erosion.

Of course, what is true in general is not true in every case: Not all third-wave democratizers have weakly institutionalized party systems. Portugal, Greece, and Spain, the Southern European countries where the third wave began, took relatively little time to develop systems with a greater degree of institutionalization than is found in most other **[End Page 67]** third-wave democracies. Not coincidentally, democratic consolidation also moved along briskly in these three countries. In Uruguay, old party patterns reasserted themselves after the reestablishment of democracy in 1984. Much the same thing happened in Chile after 1990; in both countries the “new” party systems are reasonably well institutionalized. Among long-established democracies, cases of weak party institutionalization occur rarely and briefly; among third-wave democratizers, they occur more often and have more staying power.

Institutionalization means the process by which a practice or organization becomes well established and widely known, if not

universally accepted. Samuel P. Huntington calls it “the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability.”<sup>1</sup> The belief that a given ensemble of procedures and organizations will endure shapes expectations, attitudes, and behavior. In particular, party-system institutionalization means that actors entertain clear and stable expectations about the behavior of other actors, and hence about the fundamental contours and rules of party competition and behavior.

In an institutionalized party system, there is stability in who the main parties are and in how they behave. Change, while not completely precluded, is limited. The notion of institutionalization implies nothing teleological, no necessary progression from weaker to greater institutionalization. Party systems can deinstitutionalize, as they have done in Canada, Italy, Peru, and Venezuela during this decade. Nor is it inevitable that most third-wave democracies will move toward more institutionalized party systems. On the contrary, it seems likely that many will retain weakly institutionalized party systems.

Although weak institutionalization is typically associated with a variety of problems, this does not imply that greater institutionalization is always better. To the contrary, very high levels of institutionalization may result from a stultified party system. The relationship between party-system institutionalization and the quality of democracy, then, is far from linear, and an institutionalized party system is far from a panacea.

We can conceptualize four dimensions of party-system institutionalization, which are shown in summary form in [Table 1](#).

**Table 1**

## Ideal Type Characteristics of Well and Weakly Institutionalized Party Systems

	<i>Well Institutionalized Systems</i>	<i>Weakly Institutionalized (Inchoate) Systems</i>
<b>Stability in Patterns of Interparty Competition</b>	Highly stable. Major parties remain on the scene for decades. Electoral volatility is low.	Quite volatile. Some parties suffer precipitous declines, while other parties enjoy sudden electoral upsurges.
<b>Party Roots in Society</b>	Parties are strongly rooted in society. Most citizens vote for the same party over time and vote because of party. Organized interests tend to be associated with a party.	Parties are weakly rooted in society. Only a minority of citizens regularly vote for the same party. Instead, citizens vote according to candidates or, if they vote because of...



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