# 1

# The Logic of Politics

## Democratic communication

### Objectives and functions

Democracy is not possible without a functioning political public sphere that puts the individual in a position to decide and act autonomously. That much, very few people would wish to dispute. But we have no self-evident criteria that would allow us to stipulate what minimum autonomy requirements would have to be maintained in order for democracy to exist at all. This reservation is true in both a quantitative and qualitative sense. Political-science research has come up with various notions of democracy that are worlds apart in respect to the criteria they employ to evaluate levels of political participation and the quality of political communication. Can we glimpse behind these different perspectives some minimum set of standards that all would agree must be fulfilled if there is going to be a democracy?[1]

Dahlgren has argued that the political public sphere displays four dimensions: (a) media institutions; (b) media representation; (c) social structure; (d) sociocultural interaction.[2] In present-day media societies television plays the dominant, paradigmatic role in the institutional domain, one that pervades and stamps all of the other media. Of course, this generalization should not lead us to overlook the continuing, though episodic, relevance still maintained by those other media, even the "mini-media" of the intermediary sector and civil society. The social structure comes into play chiefly by differentiating the behavior of the audience in assimilating media programming.

Different audiences make sense of media messages in diverse ways, partly as a result of the social strata to which they belong. Sociocultural interaction is a term that pertains to the sphere of face-to-face communication typical of the life-world and civil society. The way citizens in the life-world respond to media messages and other communicative inputs will decide whether they end up as informed participants capable of making acute political judgments.

Relying on Ray's empirical studies, we must assume that a broad stratum of politically ill-informed and uninterested citizens will count as non-discussants.[3] These are citizens who are not inclined to engage in social conversation (face-to-face interaction) about the political messages to which they have been exposed. Because of the passive way in which they assimilate media fare, they are the ones, as Hall would put it, who will most likely respond positively to the "preferred reading" of the messages encoded in media texts. In light of previous research on the reception of media texts it would seem justified to assume that those texts themselves provide a powerful input to *everyone* exposed to them, one that influences all further communication. And for the not insignificant contingent of non-discussants, whose numbers vary from society to society and case to case, media texts play a decisive role in shaping their understanding of the political world. That is one of the most important reasons why the present study focuses on the contributions mass-media input (media representation) can make to an appropriate grasp of the political in media democracies. In pursuing this perplexing question, we must first try to clarify what appropriateness means: our criterion consists in asking whether the aspect of the political thematized in any given instance has been adequately represented in media texts, such that a reasonable member of the media audience could identify the political content *as* political, in terms of its own inherent logic (chapter 1, pages 10–16).

The other reason for concentrating on the political implications of media content has already been mentioned in connection with the media democracy thesis that is so fundamental to this volume. Empirical analysis shows that actors in the political system are increasingly dependent on media codes, not just in designing their political communications but across the whole gamut of their conduct. They tend to assume that they can only count on exerting control over their portrayal in the mass media, thus gaining access (on their terms) to a broad public, if they submit to the established media codes. But there is an implicit tension between media codes and the logic of the po-

litical. Much depends on correctly understanding the nature of that tension, since it poses a perennial obstacle to achieving a successful synthesis between the media codes and the logic of the political. The latter, which we shall reconstruct in the following pages, can serve as a reliable touchstone for judging whether or not the media representation of the political is appropriate.

In laying out the relationship between democratic communication and political logic in this and the next two sections (pages 7–16), we will emphasize three fundamental questions about democracy and its context. First, what are the minimum levels of information and communication that the political public has to attain in order to make possible a kind of civic communication appropriate to modern democracy and to the citizens' own well-founded self-understanding? Second, how can mass media, especially their flagship, television, contribute to a democratically appropriate level of information and communication, and how can we define this contribution? And finally, how can a functioning party democracy contribute to a culture that puts a premium on communication and participation? What will the decline of parties mean for the communicative political culture of a democratic society? The answers to these questions would deliver a reliable yardstick to measure the quality of media communication in the political sphere.

Classical theories of democracy generally define it as a system of institutions, a set of procedures for discussion and decision-making, and, in some cases, as a path to certain outcomes.[4] All of these definitional elements involve a certain mode of communication that is suited to democracy and in turn depends on the prevailing communicative relationships. Pluralist democracies based on the rule of law share a range of crucial characteristics, no matter what their specific constitutions may be. Besides the indispensable guarantees of basic human rights and popular sovereignty as the ultima ratio, pluralist democracies usually display a number of other institutions: a multiparty system, parliamentary procedures, an independent judiciary, freedom of the press (and other media) and a willingness to tolerate highly varying forms and levels of active civic participation. Given widespread agreement on such fundamental issues, differences on other matters such as the advantages of different party or electoral systems, parliamentary versus presidential systems, and adversarial versus consociational democracy play only a subordinate role. Practical experience also shows that aspirations toward constitutional government, pluralism and the rule of law are only realized when

civil societies emerge with a lively, diversified institutional life. A network of what Tocqueville called intermediary bodies, i.e., associations, interest groups, organizations and citizens' initiatives, must arise to mediate continually between society and the political system.[5] The structure and function of the political public sphere as well as of the mass media that shape it have to be evaluated in the light of the strong requirements of this sort of pluralistic, constitutional democracy, and not simply by reference to some isolated criterion such as whether or not free elections are guaranteed.

The case of Germany may be of special interest here, because the Federal Constitutional Court has validated this strong principle of democratic accountability through a number of closely reasoned opinions involving both public and private media, although one must of course recognize the limits of what law can achieve in cases like these. In its decisions the Court has articulated a principle that, while oddly vague, turns out to be appropriately targeted and far-reaching in its effects. It has been incorporated into the charters of the German public broadcasting networks as well as the media laws of the German federal states. Ideally, the mass media would contribute to democratic communication in a number of ways: balanced and comprehensive reporting, objectivity and respect for persons, fidelity to the truth in form, content, and style of coverage, as well as a manner of presenting events that encourages all citizens to participate in public communication. These norms are far-reaching, in that they depict a nearly ideal communicative situation; yet they are also quite vague, since it is not clear how or to what degree they should be applied in the real world of mass communications. Nevertheless, they are appropriately targeted, since they describe the requisite mode of communication with sufficient precision. Whether we can render them concrete in the context of communications policy depends largely on the ideal of democracy that we choose to pursue in our social practices, politics and in the mass media themselves.

## Basic models of democracy

The norms of democratic politics, as they are applied to pluralistic, law-governed polities, demarcate a broad spectrum of possibilities within which there is ample room for different models of democratic participation. This holds true even in cases where competing political actors try to yoke the constitutional framework of their respective commonwealths to their own political projects. There are three

theoretical paradigms that enable us to define alternative approaches to participation in real-world politics: the model of *democracy as a marketplace*, the model of *participatory democracy*, and the model of a *democratic civil society*. All of them can legitimately claim to have specified what democracy in modern societies means in actual practice.

The market model of democracy has been dubbed by its advocates the "realistic theory of democracy," as if any idea of democratic participation that went beyond what this model provides were inherently utopian, incapable of coming to terms with the complex realities of modern-day societies. Originally developed in the work of Josef Schumpeter and Anthony Downs, the market model postulates that a political system satisfies the conditions of democratic legitimacy so long as it meets one minimal requirement: the individual voter must have the opportunity to choose between at least two sets of competing political elites.[6] The model says nothing about the connection between elite policies and the real interests, motives and intentions of the ordinary citizen, nor does it specify the extent to which citizens should be given a chance to participate in the decisions that elites make once they are in office. As its name suggests, the market model takes its cue from classical economic theory, which assumes a market in goods and services where self-interested individual decisions are automatically harmonized to achieve the general welfare. Applied to politics, the model holds that the mere presence of a choice among elites is sufficient to meet the democratic desideratum that political action should yield policies likely to maximize the common good of society.

Although political elites, in competing for the favor of the electorate, may be pursuing only their own private interests in power, prestige, and income, they presumably cannot succeed in doing so unless they present to the public, and then subsequently carry out, a program of political action that a potential majority would be willing to support as an expression of its own political interests. If the invisible hand of the elite and voter market is to effect such a convergence of conflicting interests, one central condition has to be met: access to information. To be sure, the extent to which potential voters will in fact try to obtain information about electoral alternatives and the records of the elite candidates depends on how great the benefits are that they expect to reap from the victory of the party they prefer. And this is exactly the reason why the available information about the candidates' electoral platforms, previous accomplishments, and

records has to be comprehensive, reliable, easily accessible and complete. Otherwise the price individual voters would have to pay in time and effort to make informed judgments would be far too high. If such information were not generally available, even this minimal model of democracy could not live up to its own self-proclaimed standards of legitimacy. So, although it has reduced requisite participation levels to an absolute minimum, and assigned no significant role to public deliberation and consensus, the market model must meet very high standards for providing reliable information about the reality of politics to the public.

The model of participatory democracy is a type of representative and highly institutionalized democracy which puts a premium on sustained and significant participation in decision-making on the part of a large number of active citizens at all levels of the political system's institutions, but especially at the intermediate level of political parties, associations and grass-roots initiatives emanating from civil society.[7] According to this model, a prerequisite of claims to legitimacy in a democratic society is that the citizens themselves not only participate in elections, but also formulate and defend their own interests in whichever organizations, political parties or committees they see as most appropriate and promising. When it comes to decisions affecting society as a whole, civic leagues such as interest groups, associations, grass-roots citizens' lobbies, churches and parties must occupy the middle ground between the political and social systems. It is these associations that have to provide opportunities for the vast majority of citizens to participate in a sustained way in democratic decision-making even at the highest levels. There must also be opportunities for people to have a say in the decisions that affect their everyday lives and work environments, for example in the voluntary associations of civil society and grass-roots initiatives, in social and political self-help projects at the local level, or through workplace democracy along the lines practiced in some countries such as Germany, Sweden or France.

To make democratic participation a reality, social and political organizations have to accommodate their members' demands to have a say; but at the same time, the citizens themselves must be willing to participate. This model of democracy may therefore be further distinguished from the market model in that it foresees permanent active participation in all kinds of political organizations, and, in addition, the creation of forums for direct communication among the participants in and around the relevant organizations. Rather than merely

providing centers for obtaining and processing information, organizations would – according to this participatory model – try to deliberate with the hope of achieving consensus about the goals and approaches of action in common.

The third model, grass-roots democracy or "civil society" as a compehensive concept for the polity can be distinguished from that of participatory democracy in at least one key respect: the former does not expect much in the way of democracy from institutions or big organizations, such as parties and the political system. Instead, democratic participation and decision-making are supposed to be confined, in the final analysis, to the domains of civil society and the life-world, where the smaller scale insures that unrestricted citizen involvement and supervision of decision-making are still possible.[8] The only way to generate a democratic commonwealth on a larger scale, whether for society as a whole or even the entire globe, would be through horizontal networking among the many grass-roots citizens' lobbies. Even though the notion of a global network of such grass-roots citizens' lobbies ("civil society") is familiar to the advocates of this model, they still see in civil society the true arena for democratic deliberation and decision just because it is local. Those who attend neighborhood assemblies can have a dialogue about goals and approaches, and find ways to implement and oversee the decisions they have reached. Even more than in the model of participatory democracy, the actual practices of processing information, forming judgments, and deliberating to reach a consensus shift to the level of small circles of engaged citizens. Of course, these citizens are just as dependent on accurate information about politics and society on a macro-level, as are those whose actions are addressed to the more formal institutions of the political system. Focus on the opportunities for face-to-face communication does not rule out – indeed it even presupposes – the possibility that the participating citizens can acquire wide-ranging information about the political system from the mass media.

## Minimal requirements for political communication

All of these models are compatible with the normative claims of Western democracy even though controversies might arise concerning their feasibility. They all concur in stipulating that comprehensive, reliable information about – and drawn from – the political and

social systems has to be made available. What distinguishes them is the extent to which they insist on having something more: an additional public space for dialogue, deliberation, and consensus-building. All of them assume that citizens will have complete, undistorted information about the most important political issues as well as about the intentions and programs of the political actors who represent them. The participatory and civil society models, respectively though in different ways, further assume that there should be an extensive system of opportunities for participants to communicate and try to achieve consensus, and that they should have a role in shaping decisions about the political affairs that concern them.

Party democracy is the most prominent and widespread form of participatory democracy, at least in terms of how the latter is described by political science and is generally supposed to work in Western Europe.[9] In respect to political communication and the public sphere, party democracy unquestionably requires a political culture of information, one that conveys to the citizen an appropriate understanding of the programmatic alternatives elaborated by competing parties. In this regard the notion of party democracy differs little from the pure elite competition models proposed by "realistic" democratic theory. Yet, as Sarcinelli has shown, it also offers something else: the opportunity for internal, semi-public and public forums in which face-to-face communication and political deliberation are possible.[10] For party members and non-members alike, such forums have a public significance that goes far beyond any mere PR function they may otherwise possess. Above all, party democracy offers an opportunity of still greater value to its own members and even (albeit in a less robust form) to the members of organizations within the intermediary sector and civil society that lobby the parties: the chance to combine political communication with political decision-making in an institutional setting. To be sure, this latter point is most persuasive in the case of parties that participate in government, although even opposition parties offer similar opportunities in a weaker form. They too must offer programs that reflect the views of members and fellow-travelers. In a democratic system the opposition programs may some day become official policy, so members can indeed hope to influence political decision-making even before their chosen party actually participates in a governing coalition. For all these reasons functioning party democracies have an essential influence on the quality of political communication. Not only do they presuppose high-quality communication, but they can

also help initiate it. This would be much less true of the American party system, since parties there are weaker and far more dependent on the campaign contributions of wealthy donors and interest groups, and in any case rarely offer coherent programs.

Social scientist Friedhelm Neidhardt has described three functions that public communication has to fulfill at an appropriate level if there is going to be a genuinely democratic public sphere, regardless of how broadly or narrowly one understands the meaning of democracy.[11] First, it must exhibit transparency; that is, every citizen needs a chance to see and understand what is going on in politics and the crucial social processes that are related to it. Information has to be comprehensive, accurate and reliable. Second, Neidhardt adds a validation function. Citizens who are so inclined should be able to evaluate the validity of their own positions in light of the relevant but different opinions, themes and stocks of information that others hold. Finally, public communication has an orienting function. The public realm should encourage an interplay among different sources of information and argument. Their juxtaposition will give rise to public opinion, which can then provide individual citizens with a clear point of orientation for their own views.

A structure of public, political communication that does not adequately fulfill these basic functions may still contribute something to the integration of the social system by bringing certain common themes into wide currency, thus reinforcing the social ties among disparate individuals. It may even contribute something to the perpetuation of a society with democratic institutions and to this extent apparently serve the interests of democracy. Nevertheless, it deprives these institutions of the very political communicative culture they need to make good on their democratic aspirations in actual practice. Thus, public communication in a democracy has to be tailored to the distinctive logic of the political process that takes place in the larger context of society, despite its characteristic method of seizing the public's attention by selective presentation and abbreviation of content. For citizens can only acquire relevant information from the media about policies that concern them if the media depict the political process in all its diverse dimensions and facets. Though the mass media never occupy the whole of the public sphere they contribute tremendously to its shape and play the central part in its making. Thus, their role in and for democracy must consist in making appropriate political information and evaluation possible for all citizens. If public communication in a society cannot, in principle, fulfill

this condition, then no one can make a serious claim that it is democratic. In any event guarantees of free elections and the elite competition that they enable do not suffice to make good the promise of democracy.

## Political logic

The importance of the logic of the political process for political communications within a democracy is not simply due to any dogmatic claims for correct representation that may be raised by political scientists, but for another obvious reason. To the extent that its characteristics are fairly closely approximated in any given situation, the logic of the political process inevitably implies a certain standard of how the media should report about politics. These are what we may call the conditions of appropriateness for political reportage. For whatever construction the media code may try to impose on the political events to be represented, however much it may attempt to transform them, in the end the logic of the events themselves has to shine through in the media's finished product. A radically constructivist position that disputes this simple requirement is not only inadequate as a theory; it also runs aground on empirical reality. Empirical investigations made by the Dortmund research project have shown unambiguously that the constructivist claims are incorrect.[12] The most diverse kinds of political stage-management carried out by the media can indeed be more or less appropriate to their subject matter in the sense just described. What then is the essence of this political logic that appropriate media coverage is supposed to capture?

Political processes have a distinctive character that sets them apart from the logic inscribed in the course of processes occurring elsewhere, in other systems of social action.[13] To communicate about politics in an appropriate way means, in the first instance, to understand this logic and never to lose sight of it amid all its transformations by the mass media. This holds true no matter what level we are talking about: international relations, domestic policy, or even politics outside of formal institutions, e.g. interest groups. In order to meet the standards of democratic politics, the mass media have to communicate political events in their own fashion, to bring out the characteristic features of every event they report. And political processes do indeed have a logic all their own, even though the particular factors that reciprocally affect one another – interests, values,

power resources, legitimacy, relevant institutions – can always be weighted differently, or come into play in various ways. Ascertaining and gaging what role the different factors of political logic may play, or what elements of it the public already knows or dismisses as irrelevant, is something that can only be done under the pressure of concrete events. Developing a sense of how to handle these problems, and thus helping citizens understand what may be of special relevance to their range of choices in any given case, is at all events the decisive challenge for mass media that aspire to play a role in creating a democratic public sphere.

## Factors and dimensions of politics

The logic of the political is indeed an indispensable analytical tool for understanding politics, in whatever context it may occur. This is true on a theoretical level because it provides basic concepts and models that enable us to understand, elaborate, and evaluate our observations about politics in ways suited to its intrinsic nature. But it also provides practical guidelines for journalists to interpret events and then communicate their essential features to enlighten citizens about what really transpires in the realm of politics.

Politics in the broadest sense always goes on in three dimensions: *polity*, *policy*, and *political* process. Polity designates the foundations of the commonwealth as definitively established for a given period of time, including its written and unwritten norms and rules. Constitutions and systems of rules regulating the political process form part of the polity as do the political cultures of the different milieus that together make up a political community. Although these constitutive elements always give the political process meaning and direction, even where they are not sufficiently precise to guide decision-making, they frequently lie concealed beneath the surface of day-to-day politics and thus escape the notice of most observers. The recount dilemma that followed the US presidential elections of November 7, 2000 illuminated, as if by a sudden lightning strike, how vital both elements are – the written rules and the ingrained political culture – in enabling us to understand a political event. The antiquated mechanism of an indirect vote via the electoral college, in which most state delegations give all their electoral votes to the candidate who won a plurality in that state, is what first triggered this confusing débâcle. Until the recount crisis very few observers, domestic or foreign, really knew much about these arcane rules. But in any case it was the politi-

cal culture of the United States, or more precisely two cherished principles within it, that permit us to make sense of the whole affair: every vote should count; and the loser should graciously concede defeat. Because these two principles collided during the recount, the political actors, their impetuous staffs and the various courts involved were all forced into sometimes grotesque and self-contradictory positions as they tried to do justice to both at once. Reports that failed to bring all this background knowledge into the clear light of day did more to disseminate misinformation than to clarify events. It is a matter of journalistic discretion to decide just how much of the taken-for-granted framework of action needs to be presumed, omitted or made explicit. In the individual case that decision can be sensibly reached only when one knows precisely which factors are involved and in what ways. Although they too are subject to change, and thus often the targets of political decision-making, these factors still limit what political actors can attempt to do.

Except in borderline cases of vacuous, merely symbolic action done for show, politics in the broad sense always involves a policy dimension. This is the effort to find solutions for politically defined problems by means of programs for action, which identify and apply the means that seem best suited to handle them. As a rule, interests and values shape our ideas about the appropriate solutions to problems, and give us a way to choose a preferred alternative from among the many possibilities.

The third dimension encountered wherever politics goes on is that of the political process, i.e., the effort to gain official acceptance of one's chosen program of action. Within a given context of action, diverse actors will advance various interests, try to make them appear legitimate by citing convincing reasons for adopting them, and pursue strategies of compromise, consensus-building, or rallying a majority behind their programs. For the actors, the point is to use a range of political resources to enhance the likelihood (given the limits of what they can reasonably hope to achieve) that their proposed solutions will be officially adopted. Among the resources that count politically are socio-economic power, publicity, prestige, money, threats of sanctions, claims to legitimacy that might garner public support, and, now more than ever, the media charisma or appeal of the main political actors, especially salient in an age of media democracy.

Politics always takes place within these three dimensions, and in the interplay of the factors at work in each one. It is undoubtedly true that the concepts we use to characterize these factors are analy-

tic: constructed by scientific observers for the purpose of explaining the course of political events. Still, we can think of them as quasi-empirical concepts, since they can be checked against experience, modified and refuted. They epitomize and cross-relate factors at work in the real world, ones that emerge and influence the political process itself. We can call the ensemble of these three dimensions, along with the factors they describe and their patterns of interaction, the logic of politics, as distinguished, say, from the logic of economic or cultural processes. That logic is always at the center of the structure and dynamics of political events, but it has to be employed with due regard to the variety of empirical circumstances. One can never just mechanically apply a model that has been preconceived and specified down to the last detail. An appropriate journalistic account of political reality, selective and stage-managed as it invariably always will be, needs, nonetheless, to represent in some way or another the relevant features of the political logic of the events it relates to. This is a basic requirement for its appropriateness.

## Instructive borderline cases

Some of the most interesting aspects of political logic, both for enabling us to understand it more precisely and for getting a firmer grasp of actual political events, are those that involve borderline cases in which one dimension of the political seems to be missing. There are two clearly defined situations in which the policy dimension appears to have lost its constitutive role and therefore ceased to have any relevance in shaping the course of political events: the cases of revolution and civil war. In both instances a significant portion of the citizenry abandons the commonwealth's established system of political order. Citizens who cling to the old system may receive violent treatment from those who intend to establish a new order outside the erstwhile rules of the game. Thus within the always limited, frequently quite short span of time that a revolution lasts, there are in a sense two rival commonwealths contending with each other in the territory previously occupied by a single unified, formerly legitimate association. The point of their conflict is for one or the other to introduce a new order of things: new procedures, norms, and goals that will be binding on all concerned. Within each of these rival groups, of course, binding norms and rules do prevail, even in the period of transition. But the questions of whether the feuding groups can continue to live together in a shared political commonwealth, and which

of the competing sets of rules will eventually prevail, may remain unresolved for quite some time. In this sense, then, even in a situation where the form and content of the polity is a bone of contention, and the generally binding framework of order is temporarily put out of commission, the polity dimension remains in effect for each of the groups involved. At the same time, the polity dimension becomes one of policy, i.e., it becomes a controversial issue that has to be resolved. Polity thus seems to play a peculiar double role in the constitution of the political process, though only for brief periods.

## The standard case of issueless politics

There are some political systems in which, strictly speaking, no political process at all seems to be taking place. These include all systems that have developed strategies to avoid politics. When they are operating in accordance with their own intrinsic standards, such systems feature a single center of power and decision-making that is insulated from public discussion, discourages the inclusion of multiple actors from outside the leadership cadre, and is immune to the mandates of critical public opinion. In place of a political process, decisions are made by fiat, both to identify what problems require solution, and to specify which potential solutions are acceptable. There are in this respect structural parallels among the several different strategies of politics avoidance: ethical traditionalism, technocracy and fundamentalism. In the twentieth century, totalitarian systems such as German National Socialism and Stalinist Communism practiced structurally similar forms of the fundamentalist strategy. In the heyday of Stalinism the dictator alone decided which policy proposals would make it onto the agenda, which implementation strategies would be selected, which interests were to be consulted, and which opinions and values were to be considered or ignored. From all outward appearances it was impossible to discern any sort of regular political process going on. There were no signs that alternative courses of action were ever weighed, different actors allowed to submit their plans, or various strategies of action and social power-resources permitted to mobilize. At most, only vestigial forms of the political process remained, and these only at the very center of political power. However, a reconstruction of events based on research in the primary sources always reveals that a regular political process was indeed going on all the time, albeit largely hidden from the eyes of outside observers. In the media democracies of our own age cases

of so-called "issueless politics" are becoming increasingly common.[14] The notion of issueless politics refers to stage-managed events that lack in real terms what has been publicly proclaimed as their policy dimension. For example, when a government official calls a press conference in the capital with great media fanfare and declares that this or that issue is going to be "a top priority," he has in fact just staged a political event devoid of the usual characteristics of the policy dimension: a plan of action with a specific content and problem-solving approach that can be critically examined.

The same pattern may be observed in the case of a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the opening of a new factory in a region of high unemployment, to which media representatives have been invited. The rituals and images are designed to create the impression of a causal link between political action and reduced levels of unemployment, even though the political actor who is the beneficiary of the stage-managed "media event" may actually have done nothing at all to bring the factory to the area, or even have lived up to his self-proclaimed goal of pursuing effective job-creation measures. In a notorious American example of issueless politics, the 1988 Republican presidential candidate, George Bush Sr, successfully associated his Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis, with a convicted killer named Willie Horton, who had been given a weekend furlough in Dukakis' home state of Massachusetts and was then rearrested on a second murder charge. Even though Bush had no specific plan for crime reduction, and even though Dukakis had not created Massachusetts' parole program or had anything to do with Horton's release, Bush's campaign staff still managed to create the impression that Dukakis was somehow "soft on criminals," which undoubtedly contributed to Bush's subsequent victory.

This sort of symbolic "placebo politics," deliberately crafted to take advantage of the laws of media influence, creates the illusion that concrete programs of action have been or will be carried out, when in terms of "real" instrumental action nothing whatever has been done.[15] In such cases the policy level is converted into an element in the political process, in which the goals are acquiring legitimacy, safeguarding one's own power, and lulling the public into complacency about existing problems. There is no serious effort to make policy. Political matters are limited to the levels of polity and the political process, while the dimension of policy, paraded for its value as show, has been subordinated to the broader objectives of gaining legitimacy and playing down real problems. It may not always be

possible to determine in specific instances whether the policy dimension has become entirely irrelevant or only partly so, but it plays no constitutive role at all in cases of political action such as the ones described above. Nevertheless, it is characteristic of issueless politics that the policy dimension should be acted out or simulated, so that, in the minds of most observers, it will seemingly continue to play the same constitutive role that it normally would. This borderline case demonstrates that, at least in the ordinary understanding of legitimate politics, the policy dimension cannot be omitted. It remains an indispensable component of political claims to legitimacy under all circumstances. It is a mark of the emergence of modern media democracy that this borderline case has acquired increasing salience, and has by now become a recurrent feature of politics, the illusory quality of which the average observer usually has trouble seeing.

The domain of political reality has dynamic factors at work in it that roughly correspond to the three dimensions of the political. These factors can be defined and partly described by means of those dimensions, and thus reconstructed in theory. When we get into detailed cases, we may find that they have been given varying linguistic and taxonomic expression; different authors will not always describe them in the same ways or the same words. Still, when we shift from words to their referents, we find a widely shared consensus in political science about the factors that are always involved in the real course of politics. The ways in which they unavoidably interact with one another shape the characteristic logic of the political. As long as media constructions claim to convey political realities, rather than merely serving as the occasion or excuse for empty media events staged by the media or by politicians themselves, they must shed light on the strands of political logic at work in them. That is one prerequisite for their factual accuracy that can never be circumvented, no matter how cleverly media experts may tweak their political themes.

## Party democracy

Pluralist democracy is multi-party democracy, regardless of whether its normative claims and public self-interpretation tend to follow the minimalist market model, i.e., the economics-derived theory of democracy, or a participatory understanding of it. The European democracies, in contrast to the US political system, all see themselves as participatory party democracies. European parties are not simply

organizations that mobilize for elections and then go dormant, like American parties. Through their membership organizations and the mediating role they play between civil society and the political system, they are supposed to ensure a continuing effective participation of a large number of active citizens in the process of political opinion-formation in the periods between elections.[16] Thus, vital and democratic political parties are at the center of participatory democracy as it is claimed by European political theory and publics.

## Norms and claims of multi-party democracy

In none of its developmental phases has party democracy in Europe ever quite lived up to its reputation, whether the barbed descriptions by its critics or abstract models elaborated by scholars. The German case is revealing because of extensive legislation in the matter. Through much of German history until World War II, critics clung to the authoritarian maxim that parties would only wreck the state if they should ever acquire any real influence in – or over – it. The state was understood in the tradition of Hegel as having its own unique responsibilities which it could carry out properly only if it occupied a position above society. That is why, even as late as the Weimar Republic's constitution, parties are mentioned only as entities that had to be kept at arm's length and isolated, symbolically at least, from the sphere of legitimate state business. The reality of party activity in the Weimar Republic never matched these constitutional pretensions. But at the very end of the Republic, in the final stage of democracy's collapse, the president of the Reich did try to save the state, or so he thought, by wresting power from the traditional parties and handing it over to a party – actually a movement – that would never tolerate any rivals. That organization, which aspired to be both a party in the old sense and yet to rise above all parties, was determined to put an end to democracy, along with the other parties that had sustained it, as thoroughly and rapidly as possible once it had the power to do so. The history of the newly established democracy of the German Federal Republic was initiated in a conscious break with the traditions of the authoritarian state and the old anti-party sentiments, and as an opening toward the democratic standards of other Western democracies.

Germany's new Constitution, the Basic Law, did recognize political parties, but the applicable provisions seemed to assign them only

a modest role. The historic tension between the classical liberal and the modern pluralistic democratic roles of political parties is still evident in some of its provisions. Article 21 expressed the expectation that the parties would help shape the formation of public opinion on political matters. They were the only organizations in society to be granted such a constitutional privilege. Yet that privilege appeared to conflict with Article 38, which provided that deputies in the parliament should not function as the representatives of parties, but should instead represent the entire nation and be accountable solely to their own consciences. These clauses of Article 38 seemed to exempt the deputies from any legally binding control by the parties, a conclusion which has led to heated debates in political science and constitutional jurisprudence about the tension between the two Articles.

These controversies featured three distinct positions. Some scholars supposed that there was no conceivable alternative to the parties' dominance in molding public opinion, so they interpreted the restrictions in Article 38 as an attempt to strengthen the hand of party representatives in parliament against potential efforts to impose internal discipline on them. Others insisted that the individual deputy's role should be seen in light of the liberal tradition, in which the parliament was an assembly of local dignitaries, and the parties were limited to supplying help and organizational support in the process of shaping public opinion on political matters. A third position saw the tension-laden relationship between the party function and the personal discretion of the deputies as one that the Constitution had deliberately tried to foster. The Basic Law was then supposedly creating a framework within which the two aspects of a deputy's role would provide mutual stimulation, while also checking and balancing one another.

Gerhard Leibholz, a justice on Germany's Constitutional Court but also a political scientist who has done much to shape emerging paradigms of constitutional jurisprudence on this issue, proposed a persuasive "realist" interpretation. In his view the law should take into account the reality of the influence of parties on politics such as we have observed it up through the 1990s. According to his analysis political parties in the complex territorial states of our time supplied the modern equivalent of plebiscitary democracy. By voting for a given party, the people were allegedly deciding on a choice of a direction among competing policy-alternatives, and thus entrusting their advocates with the task of translating their choice into practice, with

as few revisions as possible, in the form of legislation and government action. On this interpretation the democratic role of parties was primarily a matter of presenting concrete alternatives clearly spelled out in their programs, and only secondarily of recruiting and overseeing the personnel who would be responsible for implementing them.

Underlying Leibholz' notion of democracy, i.e., that parties offer policy direction in a *de facto* plebiscite, is the surmise that the profound pluralism of values and interests that characterizes modern society is in principle insuperable.[17] Given a permanent division over values, the only way to safeguard a degree of popular control inherent in the tradition of direct democracy is to make sure pluralism is reflected in what competing parties offer to voters, and that the formation of opinion at the level of the state faithfully articulates the pluralistic interests of the electorate. Under these circumstances society as a whole can be represented only when the various parties govern in turn, with the opposition supplanting the previous governing party and its programs after a reasonably short interval. This model attaches such great significance to the interplay of majority and minority, the alternation of parties in power, and thus the clash of clear programmatic alternatives, precisely because it interprets democracy in light of the parties' plebiscitary function. As understood by Leibholz, elections in a party democracy are not supposed to be choices among persons, but among the concrete policies they endorse.

## Constraints and deficits of party democracy

Party democracy as practiced in most European societies until recently did correspond, though only in rough approximation, to the image of it discussed above. Yet even in its prime party democracy suffered from two major defects. First, the party leadership always had the upper hand over the rank-and-file as well as the party apparatus. At no time did the parties ever simply function as discursive communities capable of transmitting their articulated will to the political system. Second, it was never the case that a program unambiguously adopted in a plebiscite could just be rammed through the parliament and government. The alternative programs presented to the public were always rather unspecific, although those in most European party democracies did consistently exhibit clear-cut differ-

ences on certain points. All this meant that many if not most of the policies that the parties actually enacted as binding decisions once they got into power had never previously been tested in the clear light of public attention and controversy. Furthermore, in a political system with proportional representation such as Italy, Sweden or Germany, majorities can usually only be formed through coalition-building. Far-reaching compromises thus had to be made to accommodate the interests and ideas of the coalition's junior partner, which entailed that few voters (of the coalition's largest party) could ever discern in the actions of the new parliament and government the sort of policies for which they thought they had given a wholehearted mandate. Despite these reservations it remains true that the choice among parties is usually a selection among alternative policy directions.

Among the advanced Western democracies one might hesitate in applying this thesis to the United States party system. There parties are essentially local and state organizations with only weak and intermittent ties to national party committees. The latter have no way to impose a common program or set of policy principles on the local and state organizations or – even more important – on the candidates who run under the party's banner. Each candidate is a political entrepreneur who relies on his or her own staff and fund-raising skills to rise to prominence and win primary elections. Once a candidate has captured the primary election and represents a major party, he or she may get some help from party officials, but many candidates continue to count far more on money and support from wealthy individuals, interest groups, or their own private fortunes. They tailor their campaign themes and message to what they think local and state voters want to hear, not to the principles of the national party. Only at presidential nominating conventions does a major political party craft an official "platform"; even here, however, candidates are free to ignore it and often do. Thus, the American electorate tends not to think of political candidates as embodying general policy positions and programs; rather voters respond to the candidates' personalities, their specific promises, and their claim to be able to bring "pork barrel" benefits back to the State or Congressional district. American politicians generally win elections by getting hospitals, dams, military bases and government contracts for their district, not by running on principles.

Even in the heyday of party democracy parties were always just one element in a parallelogram of forces; they were never "conveyor

belts" carrying the interests of society directly and undistorted into the highest reaches of state decision-making. Nevertheless, they were the strongest force in the political field, and the actions of their elite actors were firmly bound to the programs and images to which the parties were publicly committed and which their members battled to uphold. If the party leaders had not stuck by their proclaimed objectives, they would never have enjoyed legitimacy in the public sphere or even among the rank-and-file. Even parties without a written program could count on a widespread consensus among the party membership in support of the policies of their leaders.

In a party democracy the parties are the central force in an arena featuring a wide spectrum of other political actors capable of mediating between society and politics. They collate, focus and integrate the interests and values of a majority of community organizations, interest groups and associations, the support of which they can tap and which in turn rely on them as their strongest advocates and defenders in the political system. For example, in the Federal Republic of Germany the associations of employers, farmers, and property- and homeowners have always known that their interests were best served by the CDU. The party likewise recognized that it needed to cater to these interests in order to have a chance of winning a majority, yet it had to blend them into a more comprehensive program in order to avoid having too narrow a political base. The SPD was almost the inverse image of the CDU. It was a partner of the labor unions and tenants' associations, and, indeed, for reasons having to do with its history, it saw itself until the 1980s not simply as a partner of the trade union movement, but as its political arm.

During the entire age of party democracy, the sector of politics in which we encounter intermediary actors, among them notably the churches, has had an important function in the political process. They gave full expression to the interests and values of society, initiated and guided public discourse about how to identify problems amenable to political solution, and to choose the most promising alternatives. Furthermore, they extended their reach in many directions, including into the mass media and social forums, thus helping to shape the public realm in which parties seek majority support for their objectives. The entire network of intermediary actors has always done more than just lobby the parties. It has represented and molded a public space, in which, in the long run, participants could carry on discourses designed to produce results and could generate pressures that might gradually mobilize majorities behind potential solutions

to political problems. This sort of mediating function was thus, at the same time, a way to rationalize, stabilize, and manage conflicts of interest over the long haul.

## The intermediary sector

The networks, organizations and informal arbitration systems of the intermediary sector of politics are thus significant for the quality of the democratic political process not only, indeed perhaps not even primarily, because they channel interests and transmit proposed solutions to problems. Rather, their deeper importance springs from their role as forums, stabilizing factors and sources of energy for the long-term discourses about the definition of problems and alternatives for action. In the different arenas of the political public sphere as well as in the internal debates among their activists and members, they bring up overlooked themes and arguments, respond to the attacks and alternative programs of their opponents, and develop their own answers and counter-arguments in a continuing process. Groups in this sector stand very close to the people who directly and powerfully embody the problems the groups have thematized. They are thus compelled and obligated to keep their noses to the grindstone and deal with those problems, a fact which exempts them from much of the trendiness of everyday public life. In this sense they work to promote the consistency and rationality of public discourse. The description that best fits European party democracy would not so much feature independent parties competing for votes, but would instead highlight the defining role played by the intermediary sector and the parties' dependence on it. The parties may be the main actors in this sector, but they are continually and directly under the influence of expectations, arguments and pressure emanating from the intermediary organizations. The parties thus share the latter's sense of time and duration, as well as their norms of political rationality imbedded in the obligation to justify and legitimize what they are doing *vis-à-vis* well-defined interests and values.

The fact that their membership bases give political parties roots reaching deep into civil society means that interested citizens will have opportunities to take part in the formulation of political programs and to oversee the way these are implemented. In this way they represent a complete cycle of participation embracing all phases of the political process: the interpretation of interests, their integration into

a program designed to promote the general welfare, the selection of personnel to advocate and implement those programs, and finally supervision of the latter's activities as officeholders and representatives charged with implementing the actions contemplated in party discourses. Ultimately it is the parties alone that have the opportunity, assuming they have succeeded in winning office, to translate their programs into official policies, and this accounts for their central position in the system of political institutions. Of course, whether the parties actually succeed in carrying out their programs depends entirely on their level of political/administrative competence. The numerous detailed functions that political science analyses have attributed to the role of parties in democratic systems can in the last analysis be boiled down to just these two.

Critics of political parties beginning with Robert Michels have always managed to uncover deficiencies in their level of internal democracy and social responsiveness, and have magnified them in public discussions.[18] Though much of this criticism is warranted, parties on the whole have succeeded in integrating state and society on the basis of mass participation, and thereby fulfilled their most crucial function. The sometimes devastating critiques of the democratic aspirations of political parties frequently overlook the fact that, even in the best case, parties can do no more than express and reflect the society in which they organize and operate. To the extent that parties intend to meet the expectation that they will provide a democratic linkage between society and state, they need an internal structure that embodies the diverse, unsynchronized, and even contradictory demands of their members. After all, the society these parties aspire to represent in electoral politics displays a wide spectrum of opinion and interest; the parties should do no less. But of course parties must always be capable of refashioning the discourses and contradictions that enliven their inner councils into task-oriented programs of action that most of their members can be counted on to support. That is after all their job as political organizations. Still, public critiques of the party system often overlook the fact that, to the degree that parties take seriously the tasks of interest articulation and integration, they can finally be no more than "parallelograms of forces" repeatedly hammering out common programs in discursive deliberations. Right-wing populists, especially, scornfully interpret as a sign of party failure an aspect that should be seen as the performance of an essential party function: integrating often contradictory social interests into a common program.

## A realistic concept of parties

Derogatory terms like patronage, corruption, self-preoccupation, and gridlock have, with some justification, often dominated public debate over the role of the parties. But if we look more deeply, we find that such criticisms are aimed at the very heart of their function in a democracy. Beyond any specific services they perform for the political process, parties in a democracy have to do four things: select, delegate power to, and oversee their personnel; gradually integrate interests and values into concrete policy designs; reinterpret the tension-filled internal processes of democratic opinion-formation in light of longer-term time horizons; and participate in numerous decisions at the levels of state and society. Only in rare periods when parties are marginalized by their own leadership can a single decision-making authority centralize control over all these disparate activities. As a rule they are more likely to express the tensions, dynamics, and open-ended process-character of the parallelogram of forces emerging from the collaboration and independent-mindedness of a great number of party members at many different levels of decision-making.

Media democracy understood as the colonization of politics by the mass media fundamentally changes the role and mode of operation of political parties. To the extent that parties have to – or perhaps want to – submit to the functional imperatives of the logic of mass communication, their communicative time-frame and center of gravity shift; they respond differently to their political environment. The traditional model of a political party that reaches consensus via extended discussions with many centers of influence in civil society, that allows decisions and programs to mature gradually, and then insists that top cadres stick to them in their representational and concrete policy-making activities, has become practically an anachronism. While parties may nominally and in some aspects of their outward appearance still inhabit the public arena, their mode of operation, their substance, the game in which they are engaged have all been profoundly altered.

## Summary

Democracy is not possible without a functioning political public sphere that puts the individual in a position to decide and act

autonomously. The norms of democratic politics, as they are applied to pluralistic, law-governed polities, demarcate a broad spectrum of possibilities within which there is ample room for different models of democratic participation. There are three theoretical paradigms that enable us to define alternative approaches to participation in real-world politics: the model of *democracy as a marketplace*, the model of *participatory democracy*, and the model of a *democratic civil society*. All of these models are compatible with the normative claims of Western democracy. They all concur in stipulating that comprehensive, reliable information about – and drawn from – the political and social systems has to be made available.

Of course, the political public sphere involves more than just media representation; however, a democracy should still expect of the latter that it will supply appropriate political information, the key input of civic life, to the public sphere and thus promote the process of political deliberation. In this respect the logic of the political has to be considered the one indispensable standard against which the appropriateness of media representation should be measured. Political processes have a distinctive character that sets them apart from the logic inscribed in the course of processes in other systems of social action. To communicate about politics in an appropriate way means, in the first instance, to understand this logic and never to lose sight of it amid all its transformations by the mass media. This holds true no matter what level we are talking about: international relations, domestic policy, or even politics outside of formal institutions, e.g. interest groups.

In order to meet the standards of democratic politics, the mass media have to communicate political events in their own fashion, so as to bring out the characteristic features of every event they report. Thus, public communication in a democracy has to be tailored to the distinctive logic of the political process that takes place in the larger context of society, despite its characteristic method of seizing the public's attention by selective presentation and abbreviation of content. For citizens can only acquire relevant information from the media about policies that concern them if the media depict the political process in all its diverse dimensions and facets. Though the mass media never occupy the whole of the public sphere, they do help define and shape it.

Party democracy is the most prominent and widespread form of participatory democracy in Western Europe. It requires something more than reliable information about political realities: an additional

public space for dialogue, deliberation, and consensus-building must be present. In a properly functioning multi-party democracy political parties are continually and directly under the influence of expectations, arguments and pressure emanating from the intermediary sector and civil society organizations. Political parties share the latter's sense of long political process time, as well as their norms of political rationality imbedded in the obligation to justify and legitimize what they are doing *vis-à-vis* well-defined interests and values. Party democracy is thus a political regime that combines deliberation and political participation.