

Classifying Asian Party Systems: Sartori's Typology in Comparative Perspective

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Section A. Sartori's Typology

The main innovation of Sartori's (1976) typology was to combine a traditional focus on the number of parties (e.g. Duverger, 1954; Bondel, 1968; Rokkan, 1968) with a more competition-centred approach (e.g. Dahl, 1966; LaPalombara and Weimer, 1966) that took into consideration the ideological distance between the polar opposites of the party system (Mair, 1997). Such a combination between format (i.e. fragmentation) and mechanics (i.e. polarization) of the party system allowed him to distinguish seven different party system types. Leaving aside the two non-democratic ones (i.e. one-party and hegemonic) as well as what he considered to be a "residual category" (i.e. atomized), we will focus on what he called "predominant", "two-party", "moderate" and "polarized" pluralist systems (Sartori, 1976: chapter VI).

As follows from Figure 1 in the main text, which synthesizes Sartori's typology, the main distinction between two-party and moderate pluralist systems, characterized both by centripetal patterns of competition and a rather low ideological distance between the parties, is in their number. Thus, while in two-party systems only two relevant parties exist, alternating in government in a wholesale manner, in moderate pluralist systems parties need to colligate in order to govern, forming stable majority coalition cabinets. Polarized pluralist systems differ from the two previous categories "not only because of the degree of fragmentation but also because [of their] larger ideological distances, antisystem parties, bilateral opposition to the mainstream, and the prominence of centre parties in the governmental arena" (Enyedi and Casal Bértoa, 2020: 5). As a result, they are characterized by multipolarity, political immobilism, irresponsible opposition, and centrifugal competition (Sartori, 1976: 132–144). Last but not least, predominant party systems are not characterized by a particular number of parties or ideological formula, but by the ability of one party to monopolize the governmental arena.

Section B. Sartori's critics and the classification of European Party Systems since 1848

Four are the main critics to Sartori's typology. First of all, the overcrowding of the moderate pluralist type. For example, looking at the classification of all European democratic party systems since 1848 made by Casal Bértoa and Enyedi (2021: 215; see Table A1), the only surviving polarized party systems in Europe would be Czechia, Finland, Italy, Latvia and Serbia.¹ The moderate pluralist category, in contrast, would include up to 15 party systems (Albania, Andorra, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Spain and Sweden).²

Secondly, while "[t]he Sartori model assumes a close link between fragmentation and polarization: the higher the number of parties, the higher the ideological distance in the system" (Enyedi and Casal Bértoa, 2023: 35), this does not, in fact, seem to be the case.³ Indeed, the number of fragmented party systems that are not polarized (e.g. Estonia, Kosovo, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia) and those that are highly polarized but not extremely fragmented (e.g. Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Greece, Moldova, Portugal, Romania) is higher than the number of polarized pluralist party systems (see above).

Thirdly, such conflation of party systems mostly into one single type makes the typology less appropriate to the task of identifying dynamics and making distinctions within the current world. In this context, and already implicit in Sartori's (1976) work, it is clear that not all systems included in the "moderate pluralist" category behave the same: namely, their mechanics – to use Sartori's expression – are very different. Thus, some, like Luxembourg or North Macedonia, have more the logic of what Blondel (1968) called a "two-and-a-half" party system, others, like Finland and San Marino, behave more like the Dutch party system, where traditionally three different party families (socialist, liberal and conservative) alternated in government. Still others, as in Moldova and Norway, are characterized by the opposition of two ideologically inimical blocs of parties.

Finally, and most importantly from the empirical point of view, such an accumulation makes party system change, understood as change "from one class or type [...] into another" (Mair,

¹ Although recent elections in Belgium and the Netherlands would put both systems into the same category (Casal Bértoa, 2024).

² Malta and the United Kingdom would constitute the only current examples of bipartism, while the predominant category would contain only one case, namely, Georgia.

³ A comparison of the two variables using Casal Bértoa and Enyedi's (2022) dataset rendered a rather weak correlation of 0.2.

1997: 51; see also Casal Bértoa, 2023), almost impossible or extremely rare. Thus, for example, the United Kingdom would be considered as having been a two-party system since the end of WWI, when the party system experienced an important change in its dynamics after the Great Depression, especially due to the decline of the Liberal party (Mitchell, 2000). Similarly, Italy would continue to be a case of polarized pluralism, when we know it experienced an important change in 1994 with the collapse of the Christian-democracy and, more recently, in 2018 with the rise of the “Five Star” Movement (Calossi and Cicchi, 2018).

Table A1. Fragmentation and polarisation in 65 European party systems

	Polarisation<15		Polarisation≥15	
Parliamentary fragmentation<4	Albania	Malta	Austria II	Moldova
	Andorra	Montenegro	Bulgaria	Portugal II
	Austria I	North Macedonia	Cyprus	Romania
	Croatia	Norway	France I	San Marino I
	Georgia	Poland II	France IV	San Marino II
	Germany II	Portugal I	Greece II	Turkey III
	Greece I	Spain I	Greece IV	
	Hungary	Spain III		
	Iceland	Sweden		
	Ireland	Turkey I		
	Liechtenstein	Turkey II		
	Luxembourg	United Kingdom		
Parliamentary fragmentation≥4	Belgium	Latvia I	Armenia	Italy
	Denmark	Lithuania	Czechia	Latvia II
	Estonia I	The Netherlands	Czechoslovakia	Russia
	Estonia II	Poland I	Finland II	Serbia
	Finland I	Slovakia	France II	Spain II
	Greece III	Slovenia	France III	Ukraine
	Kosovo	Switzerland	Germany I	Yugoslav Kingdom

Note: Polarization is measured here according to the percentage of votes received by “anti-political-establishment” parties, as defined by Abedi (2004).

Source: Casal Bértoa and Enyedi (2021: 215).

Section C. Democratic Party Systems in Asia: New Dataset, Classic Operationalization

In order to test how well Sartori’s and other alternative typologies work outside Europe, we make use of a new dataset that includes 24 different party systems in 17 Asian democracies⁴ between the conclusion of the Second World War and the end of 2020 (Casal Bértoa and Lee, 2021). Among the continuously democratic party systems, we include Japan since 1952, India since 1967, Philippines and South Korea since 1988, Sri Lanka since 2000, Indonesia since 1999, East Timor since 2002, Malaysia and Nepal since 2008, Mongolia and Taiwan since 1992, Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan since 2010, Myanmar since 2016, and Bhutan since 2018. In some of these countries, democracy had already collapsed once after independence (e.g. Myanmar in 1957, Malaysia in 1968, Sri Lanka in 1981). The same can be said of Bangladesh (in 1974), where democracy has always been short-lived (it collapsed again in 2006, after just 15 years). Other countries with rather short democratic periods included in the dataset are 1973-1977 and 1988-1998 in Pakistan, 1992-2013 in Thailand, and 1999-2001 in Nepal. All in all, the dataset covers 137 elections and 236 cases of government formation in 73 years.

Trying to avoid the subjectivity of Sartori’s counting rules, and in order to operationalize the format (i.e. fragmentation) of the party system, we use Laakso and Taagepera’s (1979) “effective” number of parliamentary parties: $ENPP = 1/\sum s_i^2$, where s_i is the proportion of seats of the i^{th} party. Building on Mainwaring and Scully’s (1995) seminal work, we classify party systems with an ENPP between 1.8 and 2.4 as two-party, those with an ENPP between 2.5 and 3.9 as belonging to “limited pluralism”, and the ones presenting an ENPP equal to four or larger as part of the “extreme pluralist” category. Finally, predominant party systems are those with an ENPP smaller than 1.8.

The mechanics (i.e. polarization) of the party system are measured using the “political polarization” variable from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database (Coppedge *et al.*, 2023). The higher the value on this measure, the higher the level of political polarization. We classify those countries with a score of 0 or higher as polarized, while those below 0 are considered to be non-polarized (see also Lee and Casal Bértoa, 2025). While we are aware that “political

⁴ Following common knowledge (Carey and Hix, 2011; Elgie, 2011; Mershon and Svetsova, 2013), only countries/periods with a score of at least 6 in the Polity V index (Marshall and Gurr, 2021) are considered to be democratic.

polarization” is not exactly the same as “ideological polarization”, the variable Sartori referred to in his typology, V-Dem’s indicator does capture well the mechanics of a party system: with centrifugal patterns of competition being typical of politically polarized party systems. It is therefore not surprising that party systems classified by Sartori as “polarized pluralist” (e.g. Chile, French 4th Republic, Italy, Spanish 2nd Republic, Weimar Republic) present high levels of political polarization. Conversely, those that are part of the “moderate pluralism” category (e.g. Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Switzerland, West Germany) do not.

Section D. A New Party System Typology: Summary of Different Structures of Inter-party Competition and Party System Types in Asia

Casal Bértoa and Enyedi (2021) new party system typology distinguishes eight different types of party systems, clustered into five groups. First of all, in the unipolar group, there are *dominant* and *grand coalition* party systems. In the former, a process of government formation tends to be dominated by a single party without any other party coming up as a challenger for a long period of time (e.g. Botswana), whereas in the latter, the two primary parties that are ideologically distinct build a pragmatic cooperation (e.g. Liechtenstein). Second, in the bipolar category, there are *two-party*, *two-bloc* and *two-plus-one* systems. The first two are those where just two parties (e.g. United States) or two blocs of parties (e.g. Norway) alternate in government. In the last, “competition [r]evolves around a left-wing and a right-wing alternative, both of them containing, and significantly shaped by, the middle party” (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2021: 15), or bloc, without which government formation is not possible (e.g. North Macedonia). While a moderate level of competition is expected in two-party and two-plus-one systems, there might be a high level of polarization in two-bloc party systems. Third, in the tripolar category, each of the three parties or blocs of parties has a similar size and can constitute the government on their own (e.g. Lithuania). Fourth, a party system that belongs to the multipolar category has more than three poles (e.g. Iceland). Lastly, in the so-called *centre-based* category (e.g. inter-war Czechoslovakia), “the governmental arena is monopolised by centrist parties in the presence of at least two more poles, usually occupied by anti-systemic and/or anti-establishment political parties” (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2021: 15).

Table A2. Structure of inter-party competition in ten East and Southeast Asian democracies (1948-2020)⁵

Party system	Period	Structure of inter-party competition	Type	Dominant type (% years)
<i>Bangladesh I</i>	1973-1974	AL	Dominant	Dominant (100)
<i>Bangladesh II</i>	1991-2006	AL+JP vs. BNP+JI	Two-bloc	Two-bloc (100)
<i>Bhutan</i>	2018-2020	DNT vs. DPT	Two-party	Two-party (100)
<i>East Timor</i>	2002-2016	<i>Freitlin</i> vs. PD+Oth.(+CNRT+FM)	Two-bloc	Two-bloc (78.9)
	2017-2020	CNRT – PD(+PLP+KHUNTO) - <i>Freitlin</i>	Two-plus-one	
	1967-1976,	INCR/	Dominant	

⁵ Only the most relevant parties, i.e., those “that played a significant role in forming governments or in challenging the governments from opposition” (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2021: 76), are listed,

<i>India</i>	1980-1988	INCI		Dominant (48.1)
	1977-1979	JP+Oth. vs. JPS+INCUI vs. INCI	Tripolar	
	1989-1997	JD+Oth. vs. INCI vs. BJP+Oth.	Tripolar	
	1998-2013	INC+Oth. vs. BJP+Oth.	Two-bloc	
	2014-2020	BJP+Oth.	Dominant	
<i>Indonesia</i>	1999-2003	PDI-P+PKB+Golkar+PPP+PAN	Grand coalition	Tripolar (45.5)
	2004-2013	PD vs. Golkar vs. PDI-P	Tripolar	
	2014-2020	PDI-P+PKB+NasDem - Golkar+PPP - Gerindra+PD+PAN	Two-plus-one	
<i>Japan</i>	1952-1954	LP vs. JDP	Two-party	Dominant (63.8)
	1955-1998	LDP	Dominant	
	1999-2020	LDP+NKP vs. DJP+Oth.	Two-bloc	
<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>	2010-2014	AM vs. SDPK vs. R vs. AZ vs. AN	Multipolar	Multipolar (100)
	2015-2020	AM vs. SDPK vs. BB vs. KR vs. RAZ	Multipolar	
<i>Malaysia I</i>	1957-1968	UMNO+Oth.	Dominant	Dominant (100)
<i>Malaysia II</i>	2008-2014*	UMNO+Oth.	Dominant	Dominant (70)
	2018-2020	PKR+DAP+Oth. - Bersatu – UMNO+PAS+Oth.	Two-plus-one	
<i>Mongolia</i>	1992-2003	MPP vs. MNDP+MSDP	Two-bloc	Two-bloc (41.4)
	2004-2005, 2008-2011	MPP+DP(+Oth.)	Grand coalition	
	2006-2007, 2012-2015	MPP - NNP+CCP+MRPR+MP(+Oth.) - DP	Two-plus-one	
	2016-2020	MPP	Dominant	
<i>Myanmar I</i>	1948-1957	AFPFL	Dominant	Dominant (100)
<i>Myanmar II</i>	2016-2020	NLD	Dominant	Dominant (100)
<i>Nepal I</i>	1999-2001	CPNUML vs. NC	Two-party	Two-party (100)
<i>Nepal II</i>	2008-2020	CPNM vs. CPNUML vs. NC	Tripolar	Tripolar (100)
<i>Pakistan I</i>	1973-1977	APAL vs. PPP	Two-party	Two-party (100)
<i>Pakistan II</i>	1988-1992	PPP vs. PML+NPP+JI	Two-bloc	Two-bloc (100)
	1993-1998	PPP+PKQP(+PMLJ) vs. PMLN(+ANP+MQM)	Two-bloc	
<i>Pakistan III</i>	2010-2017	PPP+ANP+PMLQ+MQM+Oth. – PMLF(+JUIF) – PMLN(+NPP)	Two-plus-one	Two-plus-one (72.7)
	2018-2020	PMLN+Oth. vs. PTI+Oth. vs. PPP+Oth.	Tripolar	
<i>Philippines</i>	1988-2020	PDPL vs. PMP vs. Lakas vs. LP	Multipolar	Multipolar (100)
<i>South Korea</i>	1988-2002	MDP+ DPP(+ULD) vs. DJP(+RDP)	Two-bloc	Two-party (54.5)
	2003-2020	NFP vs. MKP	Two-party	
<i>Sri Lanka I</i>	1948-1951	LSSP+Oth. vs. UNP+Oth.	Two-bloc	Two-bloc (100)
	1952-1981	SLFP+Oth. vs. UNP+Oth.	Two-bloc	
<i>Sri Lanka II</i>	2000-2018	SLFP+Oth. vs. UNP+Oth.	Two-bloc	Two-bloc (100)
	2019-2020	SLPP+SLFP+Oth. vs. UNP+Oth.	Two-bloc	
<i>Taiwan</i>	1992-2020	KMT vs. DPP	Two-party	Two-party (100)
<i>Thailand</i>	1992-2000	NDP vs. PDP vs. NAP vs. DP vs. TNP	Multipolar	Multipolar (52.9)
	2001-2005***	TRT+NDP(+NAP+TNP) vs. DP	Two-bloc	
	2011-2013	PTP+TND+Oth. vs. DP	Two-bloc	

* Non-democratic between 2015 and 2017, inclusive.

** Non-democratic between 2003-2005 and 2009-2014, inclusive.

*** Non-democratic between 2006 and 2010, inclusive.

Notes: + = and, - = or, () = appeared/disappeared later on; vs. = versus; Oth. = Others.

Source: Lee and Casal Bértoa (2021); Adeney et al. (2021).

Acronyms: **Bangladesh I:** AL = Awami League; **Bangladesh II:** AL = Awami League, BNP = Bangladesh Nationalist Party, JI = Islamic Congress, JP = National Party; **Bhutan:** DNT = Bhutan United Party, DPT = Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party; **East Timor:** CNRT = National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction, Freitlin = Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor, FM = Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor-Change; KHUNTO = Kmanek Haburas Unidade Nasional Timor Oan, PD = Democratic Party; PLP = People's Liberation Party; **India:** BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party, INC = Indian National Congress, INCI = Indian National Congress (Indira), INCR = Indian National Congress (Requisitionists), INCU Indian National Congress (Urs), JD = Janata Dal, JP = Janata Party, JPS = Janata Party (Secular); **Indonesia:** Gerindra = Great Indonesia Movement Party, Golkar = Party of Functional Groups, NasDem = National Democratic Party, PAN = National Mandate Party, PD = Democratic Party, PDI-P = Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, PKB = National Awakening Party, PPP = United Development Party; **Japan:** DJP = Democratic Party of Japan, JDP = Japan Democratic Party, LDP = Liberal Democratic Party, LP = Liberal Party, NKP = Justice Party; **Kyrgyzstan:** AM = Ata-Meken Socialist Party; AN = Dignity; AZ = Fatherland; BB = Political Party of State Unity and Patriotism "Bir Bol"; KR = Kyrgyzstan; SDPK = Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan; R = Republic; RAZ = Republic/Fatherland (merger of R and AZ); **Malaysia I:** UMNO = United Malays National Organization; **Malaysia II:** Bersatu = Malaysian United Indigenous Party; DAP = Democratic Action Party, PAS = Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PKR = People's Justice Party, UMNO = United Malays National Organization; **Mongolia:** CCP = Civil Will Party-Green Party; DP = Democratic Party (merger of MNDP = Mongolian National Democratic Party and MSDP = Mongolian Social Democracy Party); MP = Motherland Party; MPP = Mongolian People's Party, MPRP = Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party, NNP = New National Party; **Myanmar I:** AFPFL = Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League; **Myanmar II:** NLD = National League for Democracy; **Nepal I:** CPNUML = Communist Part of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), NC = Nepali Congress; **Nepal II:** CPNM = Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), CPNUML = Communist Part of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), NC = Nepali Congress; **Pakistan I:** APAL = All-Pakistan Awami League; PPP = Pakistan People's Party; **Pakistan II:** ANP = People's National Party, JI = Islamic Party, MQM = Muttahida Quami Movement, NPP = National People's League, PKQP = Pakhtunhwa Quami Party, PML = Pakistan Muslim League, PMLJ = Pakistan Muslim League (Junejo), PMLN = Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), PPP = Pakistan People's Party; **Pakistan III:** ANP = People's National Party, JUIF = Assembly of Islamic Clerics, MQM = Muttahida Quami Movement, NPP = National People's League, PMLF = Pakistan Muslim League (Functional), PMLQ = Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid e Azam Group), PMLN = Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), PPP = Pakistan People's Party, PTI = Pakistan Movement for Justice; **Philippines:** Lakas = Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats, LP = Liberal Party, PDPL = Philippine Democratic Party-Strength of the People, PMP = Force of the Filipino Masses; **South Korea:** DJP = Democratic Justice Party, DPP = Democratic People's Party, MDP = Millennium Democratic Party, MKP = Democratic Party, NFP = New Frontier Party, RDP = Reunification and Democratic Party, ULD = United Liberal Democrats; **Sri Lanka I:** LSSP = Lanka Sama Samaja Party, SLFP = Sri Lanka Freedom Party, UNP = United National Party; **Sri Lanka II:** SLFP = Sri Lanka Freedom Party, SLPP = Sri Lanka People's Front; UNP = United National Party; **Taiwan:** DPP = Democratic Progressive Party, KMT = Kuomintang; **Thailand:** DP = Democrat Party, NAP = New Aspiration Party, NDP = National Development Party, PDP = Moral Force, TND (TNP) = Thai Nation Development (Thai Nation Party), PTP (TRT) = For Thais Party (Thais Love Thais Party).

Section E. Comparison Between Asian and European Party System Types

Table A3. Classification of Asian and European party system types (%)

Type	Asia (1947-2020)	Europe (1848-2019)
<i>Dominant</i>	29.2%	0%
<i>Grand coalition</i>	0%	4.6%
<i>Two-party</i>	20.8%	15.4%
<i>Two-bloc</i>	25%	23%
<i>Two-plus-one</i>	4.2%	15.4%
<i>Centre-based</i>	0%	4.6%
<i>Tripolar</i>	8.3%	18.5%
<i>Multipolar</i>	12.5%	18.5%

Source: Casal Bértoa and Enyedi (2021: 122)

Section F. Party System Change (or its lack) in Asia

When examining the cases of party system change (i.e. change from one type into another), Mongolia is the only Asian democracy to have experience with half of the typology: (1) two-bloc after democratization until the formation of DP in the early 2000s, (2) a grand coalition between MPP and DP in the mid-2000s and later around 2010, (3) the two-plus-one pattern with a centrist bloc composed of various ideologically diverse small parties (e.g. green-liberals, national-conservatives, social-democrats), and (4) the current dominant party system,⁶ characterized by uneven political party institutionalization (Casal Bértoa *et al.*, 2021). In India, the party system started and ended in a dominant mood, with shorter periods of bipolarity (i.e. two opposing blocs between 1998 and 2013) and tripolarity (1997-1979, 1989-1997) in between. Indonesia went from a “catch-all” coalition after democratization to a tripolar structure of competition after direct presidential elections were introduced in 2004 to the current two-plus-one type where the once “hegemonic party” (i.e. Golkar) and the Muslim umbrella party (i.e. PPP) act a hinge between the secular PDI-P and the national-populist *Gerindra*. In Japan the collapse of the four-decades-long dominance of the LDP, formed after the merger of the two main political parties, led to the appearance of a two-bloc party system where the once dominant LDP, in coalition with NKP, is opposed by almost everyone. Most countries where systemic change took place experienced it only once. In some the change was rather smooth (e.g. the party system remained bipolar in East Timor and South Korea), others experienced a more radical form of systemic change, becoming more unpredictable in Malaysia, which abandoned its long-standing dominant structure of competition for a two-plus-one pattern, but a bit more predictable in Thailand, where two opposing blocs put an end to the initially inchoate multipolar party system at the turn of the century. In Pakistan III the main change was the rise of a third pole led by the populist PTI out of the ashes of the previous centrist bloc (see Table A2).

Some, like Bangladesh II, where the FPTP electoral system and the return to parliamentarism after democratization in 1991 facilitated the formation of two alternating blocs led by two big parties (i.e. AL on the left and BNP on the right); Kyrgyzstan, characterized by a combination of tribal and Communist heritage which has hindered the development of a structured party system; Myanmar I, where the AFPFL kept a dominant position until ousted by the army;

⁶ MPP managed to obtain a constitutional majority in both the 2016 and 2020 elections, as well as later the presidency in 2021.

Nepal II, characterized by the competition between three types of socialist parties (the Maoist, the Marxist-Leninist and the social-democrats); Pakistan II, where ethno-regional cleavages and religious divides gave way to the formation of two unstable blocs led by the conservative Muslim League (PML) on the right and the socialist PPP on the left; the Philippines, characterized by the existence of at least four different poles (i.e. democratic socialist, liberal, Christian/Muslim-democratic, populist); Sri Lanka I/II, a country where two inimical blocs (i.e. the social-democratic and the liberal-conservative) have opposed each other since independence; and Taiwan, where the “Chinese cleavage” has structured the party system around two inimical alternatives, the pro-China KMT and the pro-independence DPP; experienced no change in their structure of inter-party competition whatsoever. The same can be said of Bangladesh I, Bhutan, Myanmar II, Nepal I and Pakistan I.

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