What are the principal goals of political parties?

The goals of a political party would correspond with what the party would seek to achieve as an actor dealing with politics. However, the theories concerning this are not homogeneous when explaining the behavior of political parties. This essay will use Strøm & Müllers (1999) article as a starting point, describing the theories of the policy-seeking, office-seeking and vote-seeking parties. The characteristics of the catch-all and the cartel party will also be briefly described and discussed, with focus on the political goals of the parties.

As an introductory to Strøm & Müllers (1999) models concerning party goals and behavior, it could be useful to point out the fundamental role of the rational choice theory. Using the rational choice theory, we would assume that parties act rationally according to a set of well-defined preferences and intentions. Taking this in consideration they would seek to maximize their own utility (Muller 2003: 230).

A policy-seeking party would want to have as much impact on the public policy as possible. They are focused on their ideology, and would seek to make a difference and work towards their political goals. The policy-seeking model assumes that citizens of democracies support a certain political party exactly because these parties make a difference and have something they want to achieve (Støm & Müller 1999: 5). However, compromising is often necessary. In order to get in an influential position, a party must often be willing to give sacrifices on the expense of their party policy for example when a coalition is formed after an election (Mueller 2003: 280).

The theory of the office-seeking party can be seen as an adversary to the policy-seeking party model. The goal of an office-seeking party would be to get in control over as much of the executive branch as possible. It is reasonable to assume that an office-seeking party often would operate with underlying motives. It could be to affect public policy by being represented in the office, or to use their position to gain power in the future. Once in office, a party would have, or think they have, an advantage for the next election, using their
incumbency to get recognized among the voters. Being in office could make a difference, but it’s certainly no guaranty for future success (Strøm and Müller 1999: 3-23).

The third model to be presented is the vote-seeking model. This model explains a party’s behavior in the way that parties seek to maximize their votes. According to this model, a party principal goal would be to win elections – their policy would play a purely instrumental role in politics (Downs 1957: 27-28).

It would make sense to empathize the differences between the types of goals a party would operate with. Strøm & Müller (1999) separates a party’s intrinsically goals from their instrumentally goals, which relates to the three different types of models. As presented in the policy-seeking model a party would act as they do, because they care about their politics – it’s an intrinsically goal. A vote-seeking party on the other hand could be characterized as instrumental, meaning the votes it selves won’t give the party any power, but they can be used effectively to get in a powerful position. An office-seeking model could be operating with both intrinsically goals, basically meaning they want to get in office, but also instrumentally goals. If a party seeks office because they believe it would help them in future election and they do have political goals they want to achieve, their goals of getting in the office would be of instrumental character (Strøm & Müller 1999: 8).

The three models presented are just basic assumptions, not a picture of reality. There are matters that the presented models do not regard, especially if we consider the theory of rational choice. In real life most parties would be complex organizations, not a unitary actor, which the models assume. It is a fact that conflicting interest exists within a party, not to mention the role of the party leader. The leadership would not only affect party behavior by its political decisions, but more selfish motives could also be susceptible to have an influence. A party leader could for example be concerned whether or not he will be reelected, how to maintain a good reputation or he could in extreme cases be an “entrepreneurial party leader” who gets into politics to benefit private goods (Strøm & Müller 1999: 12-14). For example Siv Jensen, leader of the Norwegian progress party, got criticized for using public subsidies to pay for her own personal trainer, although her own party backed her up, and emphasized the value of having a party leader with good health.

The party system could also affect party strategies. The vote-seeking model could be useful looking at a two-party system. USA elections stand out as a current example, with two steps
of vote-seeking; a candidate would first have to compete for nomination within the party, to then compete among the parties. Seeking votes is essential.

Looking at the difference between two party- and multi party systems, Downs (1957) presents an interesting theory. Downs claims that while parties in a multi party system will try to difference from each other’s ideology, the parties in a two party system will try to adjust and move closer to each other’s ideology. For a party in a two party system, it will be rational to seek more votes by making the political platform vague and ambiguous (Downs 1957: 115).

Vague and ambiguous politics is something that can be related to the catch-all parties. A catch-all party is unlike the normal mass party model not a link between the state and the civil society, but stands between the state and the civil society where their role is to act as a broker. This type of party would seek votes by diluting the ideological distinctiveness of the party and try to apply to a wide specter of citizens. Corresponding with the vote-seeking model, the principal goal of a catch-all party would be to win the election. Questions concerning social amelioration could also be mentioned as an important goal, but this could be used instrumentally (Katz & Mair 1995: 8-19).

From the theory of catch-all party develops the theory of the cartel party; a party which becomes absorbed by the state, and acts as an agent of the state. All parties would participate in government, gaining structural support from the state. Within the cartel party theory politics becomes a profession itself. Goals of political parties are more self-referential, electoral competition is professionalized, capital-intensive and effective (Katz & Mair 1995: 16-20).

So what are the principal goals of political parties? It would be reasonable to assume that most parties do want to make a difference; they do operate with a certain agenda, and do have certain political goals they want to achieve. However, in order to reach these goals they need power to carry through, and the most effective way to get to power is to get the citizens vote at elections. Because of that it would be hard to see a party as purely policy-seeking, especially in a multi party system when compromises often has to be made. (Today’s Norwegian government could be used as an example, now disagreeing on immigration policy.)
The vote-seeking model could as described, make sense in a two party system. However, votes are just a mean, and vote-seeking wouldn’t be the goal itself in most cases. Like Downs vote-seeking model, a catch-all party would want to collect as many votes as possible. But even if their ideology is diluted and ambiguous in order to apply to as many voters as possible, it does play an important role for the party, unlike how Downs formulate his theory.

Finally, the theory of cartel parties brings a new way to look at political goals. Politics becomes more professionalized and politics is a goal in its own.
Literature:


