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Rethinking small political parties: from micro to peripheral

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ABSTRACT

It is frequently suggested that ‘micro parties’ are opportunist organisations out to ‘game the system’. These parties are regularly compared with supposed minor parties. There are two problems with this approach. First, attempts to operationalise ‘micro party’ have been ad hoc. Second, comparisons between ‘micro’ and minor parties are erroneous as a party type is being compared with a classification based on the relevance of parties in the party system. In rethinking small parties, the term ‘micro party’ should be discarded as it lacks utility. Parties referred to as ‘micro parties’ should be re-classified, and the classification of parties in the party system needs refinement. In particular, we should include an additional class of party in these classifications, peripheral parties.

Introduction

Concepts matter in political science. Concepts help us to classify, generalise and to test hypotheses. For party scholars, debates about the veracity of party ‘types’, ‘ideal-types’ and ‘families’ have become commonplace. They are the central battleground upon which we challenge and refine one another’s hypotheses and which empirical phenomena are measured against. Despite the centrality of concepts in the party literature, however, we see a burgeoning list of new labels to describe empirical phenomena. This has occurred with little regard for the concepts already in place. The Palmer United Party (PUP), for example, has been described as a minor party (Green 2015b), micro-party¹ (Wanna 2014), protest party (Crabb 2015), personal party (Kefford and McDonnell 2016), right-populist party (Ghazarian 2015), and catch-all party (Robinson 2015). While many of these are not mutually exclusive as they describe, for instance, ideological or organisational characteristics, the first two, minor and micro party, logically should be. As I will show, ‘micro party’ is an unnecessary and problematic addition to the existing scholarship. In many instances, the description of these small political parties as micro parties has pejorative undertones with micro party appearing to mean sub-optimal (Grattan 2014; Green 2014a; Johnson et al. 2015b: 1).²

Carefully considering what terms we are using and how they relate to existing concepts is important for a number of reasons. First, while ‘micro party’ is employed with increasing regularity, little thought has been given to how and why the term has been operationalised the way it has. As a result, it is often used in ways which are not only contradictory, but
also in ways which conflate the literature on party types with that on party systems. Second, small political parties are here to stay. At the federal level in Australia, the major party vote has declined significantly (Green 2013b). While the first major electoral reforms since 1984 were implemented for the 2016 federal election, small parties are unlikely to disappear. With evidence of de-alignment and electoral volatility found across the democratic world (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000), Australia is not a deviant case. By using concepts grounded in the comparative politics literature, Australian phenomena can be placed in an international context, adding to our analysis and understanding. Third, greater conceptual clarity will improve our capacity to understand why small political parties are forming in different institutional, structural and cultural environments. For instance, how the institutional environment that these small parties emerge in shapes the type of party which emerges remains an important question.3

This article begins by examining the relevant literature on political parties, large and small. The history of the micro party concept is traced, including how it has been used in the scholarship. As demonstrated, the way micro party is currently used in the scholarly literature frequently reflects a form of conceptual stretching, is often contradictory, and fails to build on prior knowledge. Rethinking the way we describe and classify political parties is therefore important as there is significant confusion and contradictions evident in the literature. In doing this, three solutions to the problems identified are proposed in this article. First, the micro party label should be dispensed with. Second, those parties referred to as micro parties, because they have exploited loopholes in the electoral system, should be re-classified to the family of parties referred to as ‘electoralist parties’. Third, the classification of parties in the party system should be revised to improve clarity and reduce ambiguity. This includes adding an additional class of parties beyond major and minor parties. Throughout the article, what Müller-Rommel (1991: 7) refer to as the ‘conceptual definitional approach’ in dealing with small parties is followed; this is the ‘question of defining what small parties are and how to classify them’. This approach is utilised while also considering other relevant concepts, such as minor and major party, to improve the analytic and empirical utility of all concepts used (Gering 1999).

Small, minor or micro?

Small political parties, like their larger cousins, have been compared and classified to one another in a variety of ways. While differences do exist, small political parties have traditionally been distinguished from larger political parties based on whether they would be able to form government or become the major party of opposition (Fisher 1974; Jaensch and Mathieson 1998). The consequence of this, of course, is that parties which are very different from one another are classified as minor parties. This is also not a new problem for party scholars. Over 50 years have passed since V.O. Key (1964: 254) argued that ‘minor party is not a useful analytical concept, for such parties are diverse’. Despite this, there is a substantial degree of diversity in the literature on small parties. Some scholars have focussed on the difference between small and very small parties (Blondel 1990; Mair 1991; Novák and Cassling 2000: 28–29), while others have built classification schemes and typologies in order to explain the origins and reasons for small party formation (Key 1964; Richmond 1978). In his classic work on the topic, Key (1964)
differentiated between transient and doctrinal minor parties. Smith (1991) meanwhile, devised a tripartite framework consisting of marginal, hinge and detached small parties dependent on their position on a left–right ideological spectrum. Australian parties have also been classified. Richmond (1978) devised three categories: secessionist, aggrieved minority and doctrinal to classify Australian parties. Jaensch and Mathieson (1998), building on the work of Richmond (1978), devised 13 categories which could be used to classify small parties in Australia.

While the etymology of micro party is unclear, its use is extensive and growing. For example, in the international scholarship, it can be found used about parties in: South Africa (Booysen 2006; Steytler 2004), Portugal (Freire 2004; Lobo 2006), the United Kingdom (Renwick 2015; Wilder 1998), Ireland (Bolleyer 2012; Coakley 2010; Murphy and Farrell 2002), Mexico (Baer 1990) and beyond (Henriksen 1980; Hwang and Mechan 2010; Leongomez 2006; Vachudova 2008). In the Australian scholarship, micro party appears to have entered the vocabulary in the aftermath of the 1999 NSW state election. This makes sense as many of the tactics employed by small political parties during the 2013 federal election were successfully pioneered in that NSW Legislative Council contest (Green 2014b). From 1999 onwards, micro party has been used, for example, by Sawer (1999), Williams (2001), Orr (2002), Sawer (2005), Smith (2006) Spies-Butcher (2007), Bartlett (2009), Hoffman and Costar (2010) and Ward (2011). Yet this use still remained largely sporadic. Since the 2013 federal election, however, micro party has been used with increasing regularity. One simple measure of this increase can be seen when the regular post federal election analyses are examined. In Julia 2010: The caretaker election (Simms and Wanna 2012), micro party was mentioned once (Thompson and Robinson 2012: 175). In contrast, in Abbott’s gambit: The 2013 Australian federal election (Johnson et al. 2015b), micro parties are referred to on 32 separate occasions, spanning nine chapters.

While the increased use in Australia is unsurprising given the outcome of the 2013 federal election, there have been surprisingly few attempts to define or conceptualise what exactly a micro party is. This helps to explain why there is so little agreement as to whether individual parties are or are not micro parties. For instance, while some scholars definitively place PUP in the micro party camp (King 2015; Rootes 2014; Wanna 2014), others refer to PUP as a minor party or separate PUP from those they consider a micro party (Bartlett 2015: 217; Economou 2015: 351; Gauja 2015; Green 2015b: 72). The most common way micro party has been operationalised is in regards to their behaviour, namely the attempt by some of these parties to exploit now closed electoral loopholes to their advantage. These parties were, it was argued, ‘gaming the system’ via the Group Voting Tickets (GVTs) (Grattan 2014: 409; Green 2015a). Johnson et al. (2015a: 1), in discussing the results of the 2013 election said, ‘brand new parties formed on the cusp of the election garnered support and almost unknown candidates fronting micro parties won seats in parliament due to some tactical gaming ploys’. Manning and Phiddian (2015: 161) meanwhile observed, ‘A plethora of minor and micro parties, all keen to harvest preferences, saw Senate ballot papers expanding to the size of a small tablecloth.’ Gauja (2015) and Orr (2002) moved beyond the ‘gaming the system’ description, although in quite different ways. According to Gauja (2015: 26), micro parties are ‘small political parties with limited popular support that are able to secure seats in parliament as a result of preference trading’. While Orr (2002: 576) defines micro parties as those ‘parties not
represented in any Parliament, even under PR – these parties tend to be ephemeral and attract no public funding’. The international literature, considering the extensive use of the term, is equally lacking. Booysen (2006: 733), in focussing on the South African case, argues that micro parties are ‘The ideologically diverse grouping of parties with national support of below 2%.’ Mair (1991: 43–44), in showing ‘the extent to which the electoral fortunes’ of small parties has evolved, classifies parties by size but also includes the number of elections contested. In doing so, Mair (1991: 43–44), aims to separate enduring parties, large and small, from parties which have contested one or two elections or which usually receive less than 1 per cent of the vote. These parties Mair (1991: 44) refers to as ‘ephemeral or micro-parties’. Building on Mair’s (1991) framework, Coakley (2010: 507–08) distinguishes between established and ephemeral minor and micro parties with electoral support of 1 per cent used to determine if a party is minor or micro and three elections used as a baseline to determine if the party is ephemeral or established.

While each of these attempts to operationalise the micro party concept has some redeeming qualities, theoretical and conceptual problems remain. According to Dowding (2016: 194), ‘Concepts should be as non-normative as possible.’ Many of the recent attempts to operationalise the micro party fail this criteria and this suggests that the ‘big party chauvinism’ that Henry Mayer (1980: 345) described still exists today. In contrast to this, the Gauja (2015) definition deals specifically with important recent events in Australia. However, preference trading is not only a trait of those parties posited as micro parties; something Manning and Phiddian (2015) noted. The other issue with Gauja’s (2015) definition is that it is idiosyncratic to the Australian experience. There is significant discussion and debate internationally regarding the best way to understand and classify small political parties, hence there is scope for refinement. Orr’s (2002: 576) definition, made in reference to the 1999 NSW ‘tablecloth’ state election, goes closest to successfully distinguishing these types of parties from minor parties while also allowing for comparison. However, it still lacks the required specificity. The attempts to operationalise what a micro party is in the international literature also require refinement. The way Booysen (2006) has operationalised micro party is entirely arbitrary and made without reference to other relevant concepts. While Mair’s (1991) – and by extension Coakley’s (2010) – framework deals with the differences between minor and micro parties better than Booysen (2006), drawbacks remain. The use of 1 per cent to determine the difference between minor and micro parties, like Booysen’s use of 2 per cent is arbitrary. Moreover, the lack of discussion of relevance and what role these parties play in the party system is problematic. Therefore, while the frameworks of Mair (1991) and Coakley (2010) are also useful starting points, the distinction between the ‘enduring’ or ‘established’ micro parties from their ‘ephemeral’ siblings, conflates smallness with newness.

Party types, party systems and ambiguity

The problems with the way these parties have been dealt with are, as shown, numerous. Many of these problems appear to be a product of attempts to make sense of the proliferation of new and small political parties contesting elections. In an attempt to grapple with the empirical reality confronting them, however, a number of scholars have conflated the party types and the party system literature and the result has been conceptual stretching.
This is when existing concepts are expanded or new categories created to deal with new cases (Collier and Mahon 1993). According to Sartori (1970: 1035), the result of such a strategy is that ‘our gains in extensional coverage tend to be matched by losses in connotative precision’. While the party types literature is a well-known minefield, micro party as it has been operationalised up to this point, only serves to exacerbate these problems and also contributes to ambiguity in the party systems literature. First, if micro party is meant to define those parties whose sole reason to exist is to achieve electoral success, it is an unnecessary addition to the vocabulary. Classifications already exist to deal with this type of party. Second, micro party cannot become a catch-all term which describes parties which receive a small percentage of votes. This does not improve our understanding of these organisations. Third, if it is an attempt to deal with the problems of how to classify small parties in the party system, it fails a number of ‘criteria for conceptual goodness’ (Gerring 1999: 367). Most notably, the concept lacks theoretical and field utility and fails in terms of its differentiation within a ‘field of similar terms’.

These failings are underpinned by scholars not using the concepts already in place. What this has meant is that the literature from which ‘minor party’ and ‘major party’ is derived has been ignored. Minor parties, in the classic party literature, relates to the relevance of those parties in the party system (Sartori 2005). Yet the way micro party has been operationalised is as shown, entirely arbitrary or relates to a party type or sub-type as they have been defined based on their raison d’etre. Accentuating these problems, and adding to the conceptual ambiguity, has been the way the parties referred to as micro parties have been juxtaposed with minor parties (see e.g. Goot 2015: 137; Johnson et al. 2015a: 1; Manning and Phiddian 2015: 161). The confusion generated by this means that there is not only little agreement about what the defining features of micro parties are, but in comparing these parties to other supposed minor parties, the meaning of minor party has also been lost.

Classifying parties based on the rationale for their existence, is not problematic in itself. Indeed, Diamond and Gunther (2001) refer to this as the ‘functionalist’ approach. What is problematic, however, is that as part of the theorising about what these parties are, it is the strategies these parties employ which has formed the basis of the classification. If Australian political scientists want to use a functionalist approach to classification, it is the goals of the party which are important and which allow scholars to compare how and why Australia’s political parties are different, if at all. Classifying these parties based on whether they are acting strategically by engaging in preference harvesting has very little empirical or theoretical utility due to how idiosyncratic it is to the Australian experience. Moreover, a party type has to tell you something about the party, usually about its organisation, ideology or goals, otherwise we end up with concepts stretched and strained so much that they become ‘vague and amorphous’ (see e.g. Sartori 1970: 1034). Indeed, Sartori (1984: 60) argued that we become prisoners to the words that we use to define things so we had better pick well. In this instance, the lexical choices that have been made have not worked. While ‘major’ and ‘minor’ imply importance or relevance, ‘micro’ just means small. Duverger (1969: 283) suggested that, ‘Classifications based upon size or strength are always arbitrary … However it is justifiable if it corresponds to the facts, if differences of size are differences in kind’. The micro party, as it is currently operationalised, does not allow us to better understand these differences.
Conceptual refinement

To improve how we understand and compare small political parties both as individual units and as part of the party system, it is important to refine the way we operationalise these parties. This refinement can be completed without the need for new typologies or new party types. As will be shown, parties considered micro parties can easily fit into existing party types. While a minor adjustment to party system classifications can yield significant improvements in conceptual clarity. Revising the classification classes in the party system literature is vital considering it is the conflation between party types and party system relevance that is ubiquitous in the micro party literature. Before outlining what I am recommending, then, it is important to state what I am not doing. I am not classifying party systems nor am I proposing changes to the plethora of schemes used to classify party systems. I am first and foremost making explicit the classes within the party systems classification and amending one of these classes. This is consistent with what Collier et al. (2012: 222) describe as one of the central goals of concept formation; refining and clarifying meaning. In addition, I am recommending the following: (1) the micro party label be abandoned as it has limited empirical or theoretical utility; (2) parties referred to as micro parties be re-classified; (3) parties in the party system determined to be less relevant than minor parties are referred to as ‘peripheral parties’. To demonstrate the utility of these recommendations, I use examples from Australia and beyond.

The first step in reducing this ambiguity is to re-classify those parties referred to as micro parties. The proliferation of new party types, which have little connection to the existing scholarship, are unquestionably problematic (Manwaring 2016). As discussed, one of the core problems with the way the micro party has been conceptualised in the Australian context is that it is so specific to one particular set of behaviours in one specific institutional setting that it reduces any ability for the concept to be used in the comparative literature. Parties have been classified and typologies created based on organisation, ideology, functions, as well as combinations of all of these and beyond (Diamond and Gunther 2001). Focussing solely on the electoral strategies these parties use, which many scholars have, is clearly problematic. However, re-classifying these parties using the existing literature is relatively straightforward. These small parties which, it has been argued, put ideology to one side and work together to have one of their numbers elected (Green 2013a, 2016), have one primary goal: election to parliament. Hence, if these parties are going to be classified based on their organisational goals, they fit best within the ‘electoralist party’ genus from Diamond and Gunther (2001: 25), or the ‘vote-seeking’ type of parties, as articulated by Wolinetz (2002). Indeed, Green (2013a) has previously referred to these organisations as ‘front parties’ and this aptly describes some of the parties who contested the 2013 federal election as well as the 1999 NSW Legislative Council election (Smith 2006: 134–38).

The next step is to deal with the way parties are classified within the party system. The party systems literature is diverse and includes classification schemes which simply count the number of parties (Duverger 1969), to those which deal with the relative size of parties (Blondel 1968). Yet, of all the party system frameworks developed, it is that of Sartori (2005) which remains the most famous and widely used. While there are a number of methods for deciding which parties to count as part of the party system (Wolinetz 2006), it is the rules for relevance Sartori (2005: 108) devised which remains the dominant
approach. According to these rules, a minor party can be considered relevant, no matter how small it is, if it has either coalition potential or blackmail potential. Clearly, then, classifying parties based on size is problematic as very small parties can influence and shape party competition. The example of Ricky Muir and the Australian Motoring Enthusiasts Party (AMEP) since the 2013 federal election can help to illustrate this point.

AMEP had a very limited program for the 2013 federal campaign. Issues related to motoring, for example, road safety and driver education was the extent of the platform. It had 10 candidates stand for the Senate across the country, eventually receiving 0.5 per cent of first preferences (AEC 2013). By most measures, AMEP was a very small political party. From 1 July 2014 when Muir’s term in the Senate began, he was part of a loose voting bloc with PUP. From this point until the end of the agreement on 24 November 2014, Muir along with PUP had the potential to be a part of coalitions that passed legislation and were in a potential blackmail position. Whether AMEP should be classified as relevant in this period will be dependent on the classification scheme adopted. Nevertheless, it should be apparent from this discussion of AMEP that the strategies the party used to get elected has no bearing on how it is classified within the party system using this classification scheme (or any other that I know of).6

To further illustrate the point, the example of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) is worth considering. UKIP and its leader, Nigel Farage, have become well known far beyond the borders of the United Kingdom. UKIP, it has been suggested, could have as many as 40,000–45,000 members (BBC 2015; Keen 2015: 11). The party won 26.8 per cent of the vote in the 2014 European Parliament elections and currently has 22 representatives in the European parliament (UKIP n.d.). The party also received 12.6 per cent of votes across the UK in the 2015 national elections. While these numbers are impressive, UKIP only has one representative in the House of Commons.7 Using Sartori’s (2005) party system rules for relevance, UKIP would not be included as part of the UK party system.8 Again, the point here is that electoral results by themselves do not determine how parties are classified in the party system.

While Sartori’s (2005: 108) rules for relevance are therefore extremely helpful in allowing us to classify minor parties,9 they have not solved all the problems in the literature. In particular, they have not reduced the ambiguity between the party and party systems literature. This confusion remains because the different classes of parties in party system classifications have not been explicitly operationalised. While referring to those parties deemed ‘irrelevant’ to the party system may be an acceptable practice when the goal is to analyse and compare party systems, it has contributed to the conceptual minefield in the broader party literature. Whether we use the Sartori scheme or any other classification scheme, there has always implicitly been three classes of parties in the party system and therefore a typology; major parties, minor parties and ‘irrelevant’ parties.10 To improve our understanding of small parties and to reduce ambiguity, refining and explicitly operationalising the classes which parties can be classified to as part of party system analysis is vital as it will reduce confusion and conflation between the party type and party systems literature. This is especially important in light of a significant increase in the number of new parties emerging as a result of de-alignment and fragmentation across liberal democracies. Referring to these parties as ‘irrelevant’, or something similar severely limits our capacity to understand what is going on within the party system and beyond. Moreover, party system classification schemes, such as that by Sartori (2005), were created at a time...
when party systems were still stable. What may have been considered relevant then, may not be sufficient today and this update is certainly required considering that the classification of parties in the party system is inexorably linked to the frameworks used to classify party systems.

In making this typology explicit, rather than implicit, I also need to refine the title and description of one of the classes of parties in the typology. In doing this, I have three objectives in mind. First, I follow the directions of Gerring (1999: 370) who argues that the resonance of concepts are ‘often fulfilled by reference to nearby terms’. Second, I am seeking to reduce confusion between the party type and party systems literature. Third, and related to the previous point, I am seeking to refine and clearly operationalise the class of parties previously referred to as ‘irrelevant’ to improve our ability to analyse and understand these parties. Within this typology, major parties are the easiest to deal with and where no major changes are required. I use the Jaensch and Mathieson (1998: 10) definition as the basis for the way I operationalise what a major party is. The minor party and the ‘irrelevant’ class are those which have created confusion and need to be more clearly operationalised. The first step in refining this typology is to think about what separates the classes. As minor parties are included in the party system but are not parties of government, their relevance is still derived from their veto, blackmail or competition shaping potential. The class of parties below this, therefore, do not have these properties but may still have parliamentary representation. These parties, which were previously referred to as irrelevant, should instead be referred to as ‘peripheral parties’. Unlike the micro party concept, which has become an amorphous catch-all term, the peripheral party has clear empirical boundaries which were already defined within the implicit typology used by party system scholars. Important in this regard is that a classification of peripheral, similar to major and minor, relates to the relevance and importance of the party, not the size of the party. The party system typology therefore consists of the following three classes of parties:

- **Major parties** are parties which regularly can be expected to form government in their own right or which can regularly be expected to become the biggest party out of government.
- **Minor parties** are parties which are not regularly expected to be able to form government on their own, or to be the biggest party out of government. They still, however, play an important role in the party system. They could hold balance of power or veto positions, have coalition potential or, dependent on the electoral system, could shape party competition.
- **Peripheral parties** are parties which have no effect on the party system. They may have parliamentary representation and/or play an important role in the polity. However, they will not have blackmail or coalition potential.

The flexibility of this minimalist classification scheme should have a threefold effect. First, it is easily transferrable to different party and electoral contexts. Second, it will allow the concept to be combined with other concepts used in the party scholarship. While these are invariably limited by the classification scheme adopted, peripheral parties could be ‘single-issue’, ‘personal’ or ‘frivolous’ as per the Jaensch and Mathieson (1998: 27) classification scheme just as minor or major parties could also fit these categories. Third, it will ensure that individual party classifications can easily be changed
as their role or the system around them changes. As is shown below, the party system changes not just following election results. Fourth, it should also allow the niche party literature to be incorporated into discussions about the party system. The way that mainstream parties respond to niche parties and the salience of the issues that niche parties emphasise in individual party systems, according to Meguid (2005) and Wagner (2012), can shape coalition potential and party competition.

With the classes of parties within the party system revised, to illustrate how the above framework can be utilised, I will classify the parties in the Australian Senate at the time of writing. The classification given to parties within the party system can quite obviously change dependent on context. When the scheme is applied to the Australian Senate in recent years this becomes clear. As is evident from Table 1, significant changes in the make-up of the Senate occurred between 1 July 2011 and 15 March 2015. During this period a federal election occurred, two senate terms expired and significant upheaval occurred within PUP.12 This volatility led to changes in the composition of the Senate. If the above classification scheme was used to analyse the Australian party system during this period, it could be said that in the period 1 July 2011 up to 1 July 2014 the Australian party system was relatively straightforward consisting of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Liberal Party as major parties and the National Party and the Greens as minor parties. However, following this it became increasingly fragmented. Indeed, from 15 March 2015, each party with representation in the Senate would be counted as ‘relevant’. Notwithstanding the parties of government, the remaining parties would therefore be classified as minor parties as each had some level of blackmail potential due to the 39 votes required for legislation to pass the chamber.

The tripartite distinction between major, minor and peripheral parties in the typology is equally applicable to party systems shaped by electoral systems with greater proportionality. While in the examples used above, the veto potential of parties in the Australian Senate has often been the factor which has determined the relevance of these parties, elsewhere this will not be the case as the Australian party system is, in comparative terms, a powerful upper house. In legislatures based on greater proportionality, it can be expected that ‘relevance’ would have more to do with the coalition-bargaining potential of parties and, hence, the capacity of these parties to shape party competition. In Sartori’s (2005: 108) terms, this is when a party alters ‘the direction of party competition – by determining a switch from centripetal to centrifugal competition’. Nonetheless, whether the Sartori scheme for determining relevance is used or any other scheme, the point is that relevance is dependent on context and the institutional environment these parties find themselves in.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>From 1 July 2011</th>
<th>From 1 July 2014</th>
<th>From 16 March 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coalition</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DLP</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUP</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMEP</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family First</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>LDP</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

This article had four main goals. First, the history and breadth of scholarly usage of the term ‘micro party’ was identified. Its use is extensive and expanding. Second, the problems with the way ‘micro party’ has been operationalised was discussed. These problems were theoretical, conceptual and comparative. The established and extensive set of theories on party systems has been ignored, concept formation has occurred in an ad hoc manner, evidence of conceptual stretching and straining exists and the potential for comparative research has been limited. Third, solutions to these conceptual problems were provided. Disentangling the confusing (and often contradictory) attempts to theorise these parties was part of this process. ‘Micro party’ has been discarded as it lacks empirical and theoretical utility. Parties referred to as a ‘micro party’ because they used GVTs to their advantage were re-classified to the family of parties referred to as ‘electoralist parties’. The typology to classify parties in the party system has been made explicit and modified to reduce confusion between the party type and party system literature. This refinement led to the creation of the ‘peripheral party’ class within the typology. Fourth, the ability of this typology to effectively deal with a changing party system was shown by analysing recent changes in the composition of the Senate.

While small political parties are increasingly receiving the attention they deserve in the party literature, many questions remain. As this article has shown, thinking through and theorising the relationships between related concepts can improve not only the utility of those concepts, but also improve our understanding of observable empirical phenomenon. Concepts, no matter how abstract, help us to analyse systematically the way institutions such as parties, for example, can evolve and change. In this instance, clarifying the scholarship on small political parties has also improved the analytical and theoretical utility of the minor party class of parties, which has long been viewed as lacking analytical precision (Key 1964: 254). The use of micro party has been symptomatic of broader issues in the party scholarship. Concept formation has largely occurred without much reference to the existing scholarship. Relationships between new and old concepts are rarely articulated. Getting our concepts right is important for a number of reasons. First, it can help improve comparison. Second, longitudinal analysis is important. If we are not precise with our concept formation and lexical choices, it will make it harder for scholars in the future. Third, improved description is essential for theory building and subsequent causal studies. This article will hopefully prompt others to challenge the theoretical foundations that we use to understand political parties.

Notes

1. While ‘micro-party’ is also used, ‘micro party’ is used so it is typographically consistent with minor party and major party.
2. While not professional academics, Antony Green and Michelle Grattan have both played prominent roles in discussions about the role of micro parties and on Senate voting reform.
3. The argument commonly made in relation to the Senate is that increasing numbers of very small parties have emerged as their capacity to preference harvest and to ‘game the system’ has become well known (Grattan 2014; Green 2014a).
4. This is some debate about the blackmail criteria and how this should be understood (Evans 2002: 156; Wolinetz 2004). Sartori (2005: 109) discusses this in terms of the way anti-system parties shape party competition but also argues, ‘the blackmail potential of the electoral party
finds its equivalent in the veto potential, or indeed, the veto power, of the parliamentary party with respect to the enactment of legislation’. The approach I therefore take is close to that of Jaensch and Mathieson (1998: 14) and the explanation given by Ware (1996: 408) who argues that Canada’s New Democratic Party certainly was not an anti-system party, yet still had blackmail potential ‘even though it is not the kind of blackmail Sartori had in mind’.

5. There are party system classifications which do include size as criteria, but this is still related to relevance as it is about the relative size of parties compared to one another (Ware 1996: 161). And, again, these are party system classifications, not a classification of the parties in the party system.

6. Similarly, whether Senator David Leyonhjelm from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was elected because voters were confused by the similarities between the name of the LDP and the Liberal Party is irrelevant when classifying these parties in the party system.

7. Clearly, the UK’s use of the single member plurality electoral system plays a key role here.

8. UKIP would also be classified as a ‘peripheral party’ using my criteria explained further along.

9. Sartori does not actually distinguish between which parties are major or minor parties once they are deemed relevant and other schemes which weight each party according to size such as that by Laakso and Taagepera (1979) do not either.

10. As discussed, in other schemes, these parties are given no name whatsoever, but I use the Sartori scheme to demonstrate that there has always been a typology, it has just not been explicit.

11. One of the primary criticisms of the Sartori (2005) classification scheme is that, as it is 40 years old, it is dated and due to fragmentation, the majority of party systems now resemble the ‘moderate pluralism’ category.

12. On 24 November 2014, PUP’s Tasmanian Senator, Jacqui Lambie, declared she would become an Independent and following this, on 14 March 2015, PUP’s QLD Senator, Glenn Lazarus, decided he too would become an Independent. In addition, PUP was part of a loose voting bloc with AMEP during this period that also collapsed. See Kefford and McDonnell (2016) for more on this.

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