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# New Kids on the Block

The Potential of New Parties in Europe

Franziska Fislage

They are the New Kids on the Block – the new political parties[1] in Europe. They describe themselves as being new and different. Some of them have achieved electoral victory in no time at all. The reasons for their success are varied and country-specific, but they also reflect a general shift in society. These parties not only change the party landscape, but also pose new challenges for the established parties. What does this mean for the future of party democracy and what opportunities do these changes afford to the established political parties?

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In Ukraine, the 2019 elections took people by surprise in various ways. The first of these was the election of Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelensky as president. Zelensky was already in the public eye, but not in politics. Instead, he was previously a comedian and actor who played the lead role in a TV comedy series called Sluha Narodu (Servant of the People). In the show, he plays a history teacher who levels criticism against Ukrainian politicians and ends up being elected the country's president. The next surprise was that Zelensky's party, also called Sluha Narodu, became the strongest party in the Ukrainian parliament. A party that was formed just one year before elections as the successor to the Party of Decisive Change, and that most people had never even heard of a few weeks prior to the election, succeeded in mobilising enough support in the first ballot to win the election.[2]

However, Sluha Narodu is not the only new party to join Ukraine's political scene. In addition to Sluha Narodu, before the parliamentary elections in 2019, the political party Holos was set up by a well-known Ukrainian musician, Svyatoslav Vakarchuk.[3] But Ukraine is not the only country to see the emergence of new parties in recent years. Some of them won astonishing electoral victories – from directly entering parliament to winning the election and forming a government. These primarily include parties such as Podemos and Ciudadanos in Spain, ANO 2011 in the Czech Republic, NEOS in Austria, the Five Star Movement in Italy, SMC in Slovenia and La République en Marche (LREM) in France. The initial lustre and success of some of these new parties may have faded, but others have managed to hold their own or assert themselves in their respective party systems and put pressure on established parties. And there is no end in sight: The trend towards founding new parties that rapidly transform the party landscape is set to continue, so existing party systems will (and must) stay in motion.

**The Old New**

Of course, the formation of new parties is not a rare phenomenon. In fact, ever since the formation of party systems over a century ago, new parties have been set up time and again; otherwise there would be no explanation for the multitude of parties that exist in many European countries today. Many of these former newcomers can now look back on a decades-old tradition and have become an integral part of their country's party system. What is new, however, is the speed with which new parties can now achieve success. In many cases, when a new party is set up, it may only be a few years – or less – before that party enters parliament, or even takes over the office of president. The life cycle of political parties has taken on a new pace. The speed with which society is changing is impacting on the party landscape – in much of Europe, at least.

In the past, new parties and movements generally spent years in the shadows with no seats in parliament and minimal reach. To begin with, most parties had to content themselves with being part of the extra-parliamentary opposition.

The first steps towards establishing themselves inevitably entailed internal power struggles, quarrels over its direction, debates and discussions about positions and programmes, building nationwide structures and, last but not least, critical scrutiny by established parties and the public. During this "apprenticeship", they had to establish stable, democratic decision-making processes, lay the foundations for their programme, build up their party organisation and try their hand at election campaigning. Learning the tools of the trade was just as important as minorities within the party learning to accept majority decisions on party issues. This process was not always straightforward and could drag on for many years before culminating in initial victories at local level. In Europe, certain parties have established themselves with great success, whereas others, such as the Pirate Party, were quickly relegated to the political sidelines following the initial euphoria and failed to gain a political foothold over the medium-to-long term.

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In the past, parties and movements that lacked internal structures and clear organisation were scarcely perceived as serious competitors to the established parties. And even if they managed to enter parliament, they normally sat on the opposition benches as opposed to participating in government. Many parties had to spend years in opposition before winning the kind of election victory that would allow them to participate in government – usually as a junior partner at best. Today, many of these early stages in establishing a party seem to have fallen by the wayside.

**Social Change as a Catalyst**

In Europe, a number of new parties have demonstrated that it is no longer unusual to win an election at the first attempt and it is possible to enter parliament shortly after being formed. It is even possible for a party to participate in government after participating in its first election. This is linked to a wave of change in society that has acted as a catalyst and favoured such developments – developments that have benefited new parties and movements, in particular.

*Voter Volatility and Declining Party Loyalty*

Important aspects that contribute to this catalytic effect are the increase in voter volatility and decline in party loyalty. A glance at the most recent elections clearly reveals that core voters are largely a thing of the past. These core voters are being replaced by swing voters. For many years, Central and Eastern European countries were regarded as trendsetters in this respect. Unlike in Western Europe, these countries have invariably experienced high voter volatility. This has led to the formation of numerous new parties. However, voter volatility has come to the fore in Western and Southern Europe over the last few years. Italian political scientists even argue that Western Europe and Eastern Europe are converging in terms of electoral volatility.[4] Regardless of their motives for voting, recent studies on voter migration in Germany reveal that former CDU voters could shift their support to the Greens or DIE LINKE (The Left) in the next election. Conversely, former supporters of DIE LINKE are switching to the CDU and FDP, too.[5] Although it does not depict the norm, it shows how elections are increasingly being shaped by voters' moods and specific issues rather than by permanent ties to one party.

What does this mean for the parties concerned? Voters must be won over anew at every election. Parties can no longer count on anyone's vote. In a podcast called "Alles gesagt?" (Everything said?), Germany's former minister Thomas de Maizière recently drew attention to the extent in which politics is now guided by mood.[6] There is also evidence of this changeability in opinion polls: Before the COVID-19 pandemic, some of Europe's Green parties were at an all-time high.[7] However, the crisis has boosted the popularity of the governing parties that were previously out of

favour in the polls. The important issues of the environment and climate change that defined the pre-Corona era, have faded into the background again.

## Parties have to open up, both in terms of their issues and their social structure.

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The increase in voter volatility also goes hand in hand with a decline in party loyalties. The established parties find it increasingly difficult to attract new members, despite the fact that the younger generation is by no means apolitical, as evidenced by movements such as Fridays for Future. The decline in party loyalty is partly due to the growing individualisation of society, but also to the fact that young people's interest in politics – which is certainly strong – tends to be limited to temporary and issue-specific involvement and generally takes place outside the political parties. It is difficult to motivate politically minded young people to make a clear political commitment and get involved in traditional party politics, which is often perceived as dull and arduous.[8] In an increasingly globalised and individualised society, long-term involvement in associations or organisations appears unattractive and too strong a commitment.

*Weakening of Traditional Battle Lines and the Right/Left Axis*

Another aspect promoting the success of new parties is the weakening of traditional cleavages and the emergence of new divisions. The importance of previous cleavages is fading, especially those of state vs. church and labour vs. capital, which instigated the development of most established parties.[9] As long as these cleavages still existed, voters sympathised with a particular political camp and had correspondingly closely ties to their "social group". Yet, the cleavages that long shaped Europe's party systems are losing their essential characteristics and starting to crumble. This means a Catholic

is no longer necessarily a Christian democrat, and a trade unionist may not be a Social democrat, especially since these two social milieus are themselves undergoing gradual erosion. Nowadays, very few party platforms can permanently secure the cohesion of a political community with a collective identity based on shared social standpoints. The cohesion of a political camp is no longer reflected in a relatively closed subcultural milieu. Political parties have to open up accordingly, both in terms of their issues and their social structure, to ensure they are better placed to represent their voters and members.

New "fault lines" are supplanting previous cleavages that increasingly determine the party landscape and favour the emergence of new parties.[10] Globalisation, the dynamics and speed of which were once again brought to bear by the refugee movements of 2015, is dividing parties and voters into new camps. On the one hand, there are the "globalists" who believe global problems require global solutions and that the nation state is progressively reaching its limits. In the other camp are the "nationalists" who take an increasingly sceptical and critical view of events over recent decades and call for a return to the strong nation state. According to Hooghe and Marks (2018), the eurozone crisis, i.e. the European currency and sovereign debt crisis from 2008 to 2010, and the migration crisis of 2015, were key to the emergence of transnational divisions that have such a major impact within Europe and favour the emergence of new parties.[11]

Wolfgang Merkel (2017) calls this new cleavage "cosmopolitanism versus communitarianism".[12] This is typically described as follows: cosmopolitans are people who have above-average education, above-average income and high human and cultural capital. While they support multiculturalism, they reject assimilation. They are characterised by a high degree of mobility, both geographically and professionally. They could be called the winners of globalisation. The so-called communitarians, on the other hand, are on average less educated and earn

Declining party loyalty: The established parties are finding it increasingly difficult to attract new members – even though the younger generation is by no means apolitical. Source: © Sergio Perez, Reuters.

below average. They feel the pressure of global competition more strongly than cosmopolitans, are neither geographically nor professionally mobile, and regard globalisation and multiculturalism as a threat. People's parties that claim to represent broad swathes of the population may contain elements of both types.[13] It is interesting to note that it is generally human capital (education) and cultural capital that give rise to divisions between cosmopolitans and communitarians, rather than the often discussed economic factors. This creates a new divide at the social level.[14] Societal developments currently witnessed in the US clearly reflect these divisions in society. This new divide also has an impact on the party system because right-wing populists, too, have been able to exploit this battle line to their own ends. Most right-wing populists focus on people's fears about loss of identity or cultural change.

> **Social divides are also increasingly causing tensions within the parties themselves.**
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In this context, it is also important to mention the fact that these new divides are also increasingly leading to tensions within the parties themselves.[15] The refugee debate of 2015 and how this was conducted within Germany's established parties, including the DIE LINKE, and within parliamentary factions such as the CDU/CSU, is a good example of this.

The disappearance of previous cleavages and the emergence of new fault lines, on the basis of which new parties emerge, means the right/left axis is gradually losing significance. Many of the new parties are trying to break away from this dichotomy and often even adopt post-ideological positions. In many cases, new parties straddle both "left" and "right" positions. This enables them to mobilise voters from the most diverse social milieus but makes it more difficult to categorise them according to the

traditional right/left axis. The new parties in particular are increasingly operating on a liberal/illiberal axis and are forming alliances beyond the old right/left dichotomy. In Greece, for example, the left-wing populist party Syriza joined with the right-wing populist ANEL during the eurozone crises to form a government coalition (now voted out). In Italy, the left-wing populist Italian Five Star Movement joined forces with the right-wing populist Lega, which is now once again in opposition. Such coalitions are based less on common substantive positions than on shared beliefs regarding their political opponent, with the latter usually being an established party or "the establishment" as such.

**The New New**

In addition to these general developments, a number of country-specific factors also fuel the success of new parties. It often comes down to a loss of trust in political institutions. Lack of transparency, nepotism and corruption are keywords. But crisis phenomena also favour the founding of new parties. In addition, the electorate no longer believes the established parties have the capacity to solve problems. This is where the new parties come in; they try to offer an alternative with new faces and new accents.

It is with breath-taking speed that the new parties achieve electoral success. The mood of the times catapults them to the surface or takes them higher still. However, this is often done without a policy programme, party structure or organisation. Instead, it is individuals, such as the Italian comedian Giuseppe "Beppe" Grillo or the Polish rock musician Paweł Kukiz, who are founding protest or anti-establishment parties; or it is specific issues, such as the fight against corruption, that enable new parties to garner attention and temporary support. The speed with which one issue supersedes the last results in new parties that appear and disappear because they lack the policies and organisational framework to gain a more permanent foothold in the party system.

Many new parties give the impression of being different, and indeed they are in some respects. As mentioned earlier, especially the new parties are keen to position themselves outside the confines of traditional ideologies. They also espouse new methods of communication. At first, they might not even call themselves a party, so as to distinguish themselves from the other parties. New parties also tend to be very active on social media. Much of their communication also takes place on platforms where the party organises and members can be actively involved – if they actually have members.[16] The fixed membership principle that we are used to in traditional parties is no longer commonplace. For example, supporters of the party La République en Marche express their support by registering on the website to get up-to-date information. In Austria's NEOS, citizens do not require party membership to stand as candidates for first place on the federal list (passive voting right), and no party membership is needed for participation in the first stage of the pre-election procedure (active voting right).[17]

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In addition, new parties often consist mostly of people who have entered politics from other careers. This makes it easier for new parties to present themselves as new and different from the established parties, and to attract new voter groups. It is also a way of distancing themselves from professional politicians in the established parties. Although this openness to political newcomers may also be regarded as an asset for democracy, their lack of political experience may be a problem, especially in times of crisis. The new parties are often closely identified with a single leader. This strong leadership figure is usually tantamount to a lack of internal party structures. On many occasions, the leader is the person who founded the party. However,

if this person leaves the party, its supporters often follow suit.

This lack of structure can be one of the prevalent weaknesses of new parties. They barely have time to establish and structurally organise themselves before entering government. When a crisis hits, this makes them more vulnerable than the established parties. LREM's handling of the "yellow vests" has borne witness to such structural problems. This can be devastating not only for communication in times of crisis, but the lack of horizontal and vertical structures may also hamper successful policymaking.[18] Apart from party organisation and structure, new parties often lack a policy programme because they are focused on a single issue. This is not enough to ensure their survival in the party system in the medium-to-long term. And if new parties are charged with government responsibility, this can quickly jeopardise their success and cause a drop in approval ratings. As a result, new parties can quickly find themselves back on the sidelines.

In summary, the main characteristics of new parties are as follows:

- They are a crisis phenomenon caused by corruption, nepotism, lack of transparency or loss of confidence in established parties and institutions.
- They are characterised by a strong leadership figure.
- They often describe themselves as a movement instead of a party, and thus try to consciously differentiate themselves from the established parties.
- They often consist of political newcomers and people who have entered politics from other careers.
- Their structures and policy programme are initially weak.
- They achieve rapid electoral success.

**Consequences for the Established Parties**

What do these developments mean for the established parties and for the future of party democracy? Although the new parties are

confronting their long-established competitors with new challenges, these current trends also afford a variety of opportunities to the future of party democracy.

**The more heterogeneous society becomes, the more vital are laborious consensus-building efforts among the parties.**

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The established parties must work harder on their attractiveness if they want to continue playing an important role and ensure the vital stabilisation of the party system. Party democracy is and will remain a way of guaranteeing that views and attitudes of an increasingly diverse society are both reflected and represented. The more heterogeneous society becomes, the more vital laborious and often conflict-laden consensus-building efforts of the parties are. But this means they have to rise to the challenge. Parties need to provide new ways for people to get involved in temporary and issue-specific priorities that are more in line with how they now relate to politics. They also need to stay abreast of new communication methods, otherwise they will be left behind by new parties.

This requires them to carry out the necessary reforms and rethink their outdated attitudes to party work. To date, few established parties in Europe have succeeded in keeping up with the developments outlined above and in creating a suitable (digital) offer for their members and potential voters alike. They have either failed to make the necessary reforms, failed to be sufficiently bold in implementing them, or only realised the need for them when it was too late. Many of the established parties find it especially difficult to attract young people and win them over to their work. It is precisely this failure that benefits the new parties, who claim to be "different". By appearing unconventional, they often manage to mobilise young people who are keen to get involved in party politics, but in new ways.

It is, therefore, clear that these current trends also present an opportunity for the established parties. It is precisely digitalisation and an awareness of the problems and developments highlighted above that are creating unprecedented possibilities. Participation within the party and targeted offers for interested

Shaped by a strong leader: It is not unusual for individuals, such as the Italian comedian Giuseppe "Beppe" Grillo, to found protest or anti-system parties. Source: © Guglielmo Mangiapane, Reuters.

non-members, such as party-political discussion forums, platforms and apps that also have offers for non-members, could increase the attractiveness of established parties as well by heightening their presence. This may provoke certain tensions between interested non-members and longstanding members who want their membership to confer special rights, but an offer for interested non-members does not imply that they enjoy the same status as party members. However, if parties want to adhere to the membership principle in the long term, it is inevitable that they will have to create initial offers for interested persons not yet ready to

commit to full membership. In Germany and Austria, we already witness how the established parties are embracing the digital age, increasingly opening up to interested non-members, and creating issue-specific offers for their members.[19] However, more needs to be done with regard to offers for interested non-members and new members. If specific offers for new members and interested non-members exist at all, these have thus far been limited to opportunities to participate in online events or social media content. Integration such as through separate areas in a party app or platforms is almost non-existent in German and Austrian parties. However, the coronavirus pandemic has boosted the importance of digital technology. It has virtually forced many parties to make greater use of new tools and options for participation, such as online workshops and seminars, and therefore prepare for the future (digitally too).

## There is a growing impression that the key criterion for the election outcome is a certain personality.

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Party work is not the only area where the established parties need to change. There is a growing impression that the key criterion for the election outcome is a certain personality. For the established parties, this means promoting their own young politicians at an early stage and making the "right" choice of candidates. By "right" it is important to remember the German proverb: "The bait has to taste good to the fish. Not to the fisherman." In the past, established parties have all too often ignored new, young faces. Those chosen as candidates often had broad support within the party but were either unknown or unattractive to potential voters – and hence unable to mobilise them. In future, therefore, it will be even more important to integrate voters from the most diverse social backgrounds and make the party membership much more varied.

The established parties will also have to clearly demonstrate their problem-solving skills – especially in times of crisis. This is a major advantage they have over new parties. Established parties can manage crises and provide an anchor of stability that is needed in times of crisis. Thus, established parties must show how their longstanding political experience allows them to recognise and solve the problems experienced by most of the population. Communication is vital in this respect and will become ever more important in an increasingly fragmented society. This includes the use of a variety of communication channels. In an increasingly fragmented and dynamic party system, it is all the more important that the established parties do not lose their ability to connect. This means connecting to society itself, but also connecting and hence forming coalitions with other parties.

This connectivity does not mean they will become like the new parties; however, the established parties should see these developments as an opportunity and a clarion call. They should ask themselves how party democracy can remain the guarantor of success for citizens of the future. Linked to this is the need to constantly explore opportunities for forming coalitions with parties that have never before been an option in this respect. It is inevitable that party systems will change as a result of the new parties and movements. Yet, if the established parties manage to assume a role as anchors of stability in Europe's party systems, which are being shaken up by new political actors, and if they are able to offer solutions to a wide range of problems, then party democracy will have a future based on the premise: strength through flexibility.[20]

*–translated from German–*

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1 This article only refers to parties that have stood in an election, not to new parties that have been formed since then.

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