

Book Review: Political Entrepreneurs: The Rise of Challenger Parties in Europe by Catherine E. De Vries and Sara B. Hobolt

In Political Entrepreneurs: The Rise of Challenger Parties in Europe, Catherine E. De Vries and Sara B. Hobolt examine the rise of challenger parties in European politics, positioning them as political entrepreneurs that use innovative strategies to undermine the dominance of established political parties, leading to the fragmentation of the existing political system. Redirecting attention to the challenge that new party formations pose to the political spectrum, this book successfully refreshes the literature on political parties through its timely new approach, writes George Kordas.

Political Entrepreneurs: The Rise of Challenger Parties in Europe. Catherine E. De Vries and Sara B. Hobolt. Princeton University Press. 2020.

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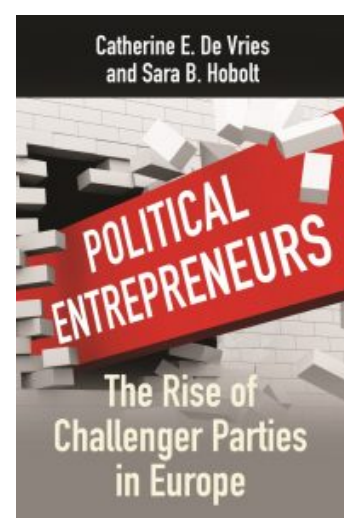
After more than a decade of crises, European politics has experienced incredible transformations, continuing what researchers have described as the de-alignment of once stable Western European political systems. Even though no one can fully assume how this will reshape European politics, we have a fact that cannot be underestimated: the emergence of new political players. Their entrance onto the political field has caught researchers' interest and inspired attempts to explain the reasons for their appearance.

[Political Entrepreneurs](#) targets such political players, naming them 'challenger parties'. Authors Catherine E. De Vries and Sara B. Hobolt highlight the challenge that such new political parties present to the mainstream political system. They import the meaning of 'entrepreneurs' to political science in order to better understand these parties' structures and the transformations after their political entrance.

Political Entrepreneurs consists of four parts and nine chapters, covering every aspect of challenger parties' political behaviour. While the authors focus on Western Europe, they take advantage of the wealth of data available, using expert, post-election and manifesto data to measure what makes such parties compete against more mainstream forces.

The introductory chapter focuses on political de-alignment theory, highlighting it as the main challenge for the political spectrum. The authors understand de-alignment as the interaction between political outsiders and mainstream parties. Therefore, De Vries and Hobolt propose a theory of political change, based on the forces of dominance and innovation. By drawing an analogy between the market of industrial organisations and that of political parties, the authors' interest lies in transformations to the political market. As they explain, the political market can be viewed as an oligopoly – a structure in which a few parties dominate. When that oligopoly weakens, dominant parties attempt to safeguard their power, while challenger parties act as political entrepreneurs, attacking the dominant parties. Such attacks represent innovation by importing new issues to the political agenda or by using anti-establishment rhetoric, achieving the political system's fragmentation.

For an in-depth clarification of the meaning of challenger parties, De Vries and Hobolt return to the literature on political parties. Notwithstanding the importance of existing scholarship on party families, programmatic strategies as well as the relationship between populism and political parties, the two authors acknowledge the literature gap when the discussion turns to challenger parties. Therefore, they suggest we have to base our differentiation of dominant and challenger parties on their governmental participation.



To better sketch the historical roots of challenger parties, De Vries and Hobolt utilise the waves theory to cover twentieth-century Western Europe. The result represents a much broader framework for understanding the Western European political scene. The first wave starts with the appearance of social democratic parties in the early twentieth century. The second wave is identified during the 1970s with the rise of green parties, while the third wave occurs after the 1980s and is linked with the electoral rise of populist radical-right parties.

Innovation plays a prominent role in the strategy of challenger parties. According to the authors, innovation can be split into policy and rhetorical innovation; while rhetorical innovation is linked with anti-establishment discourse, policy innovation is known as issue entrepreneurship. Combining both of these, challenger parties can successfully target mainstream parties' dominance, claiming political market power. Focusing on the definition of market power in politics, the authors distinguish between exogenous and endogenous sources of that power. While exogenous (external) sources consist of electoral rules, endogenous (internal) ones are distinctive convergence, competence mobilisation and issue avoidance.

The second part of the book focuses on parties' dominance and dominance strategies: the endogenous sources outlined in the book's first part. The authors highlight the characteristics that present a significant barrier to challenger parties' electoral success. As they explain, in systems where partisanship remains high, challengers cannot gain voter loyalty. The authors avoid the classic definition of partisanship, focusing instead on measuring the extent of possible voter switch between existing parties. They base their argument on the assumption that the more voters switch between existing parties, the less significant their loyalty to them is.

Extending their research, De Vries and Hobolt then focus on dominance strategies. They define distinctive convergence as the parties' shift to the political spectrum's centre to attract a larger group of voters. Such a strategy is connected with Anthony Downs's rational choice theory and Otto Kirchheimer's catch-all party theory. Issue avoidance is connected with the dominant parties' ability to control the political agenda, thus avoiding negative issues. Competence mobilisation is the last dominance strategy, in which the incumbency advantage separates challenger parties.

The third part of the book is directed at innovation, and more specifically its policy aspects, already defined as issue entrepreneurship. Drawing parallels with firms, De Vries and Hobolt present how specific issues could result in gains or losses for the parties that adopt or ignore them. To better clarify the importance of issue entrepreneurship, the authors offer us three case studies from Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands. Through these, they cover Western European political transformations since the 1970s and present how that transformation is connected with the appearance of new – post-materialist – issues on the political agenda, like environmental issues and nuclear disarmament. The authors explain that issue entrepreneurship creates profit-loss behaviour on the part of political parties. Parties map their policies, focusing on the relation between their electoral gains and the final cost of their decisions. Such behaviour has a direct effect on their political market position.

De Vries and Hobolt also focus on innovation's second aspect: anti-establishment rhetoric. Such rhetoric can, at the same time, attack opposing parties and defend the party's issue entrepreneurship in the political market. Drawing from the literature on populism, the authors define anti-establishment rhetoric as a discursive style or form of communication directed by political outsiders against political elites. Anti-establishment rhetoric contains four aspects: antisystem (directed against the current broken and unresponsive political system); anti-political elite (directed against the existing, 'irresponsible' political elite); antitechnocratic (directed against technocratic forms of governance as undemocratic and unresponsive); and generic anti-elite (a broader anti-elite position, directed at politicians as well as capitalists and big business). The authors use party manifestos, provided by the Manifesto Project Database (MARPOR), to measure whether a party applies anti-establishment rhetoric.

The last part of the book, 'Transformation', follows the shifts that challenger parties bring to the electoral field. Here, De Vries and Hobolt highlight what they expect from their theory, focusing primarily on what they define as voter appeal: voters' positive response to challenger parties' innovative strategies. The last empirical chapter of the book raises the issue of political market fragmentation and how it affects the political scene, presenting readers with three more case studies. By analysing the appearance and the electoral gains of Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the problems of forming a government in Belgium and the Netherlands, the authors clarify how challenger parties can affect political life and even play a core role in government formation.

Rather than a conclusion, the book ends with a ‘future scenarios’ chapter. Here, the authors construct three scenarios regarding the political market’s future. Using three case studies from the Netherlands, Greece and Spain, the authors name fragmentation, replacement and reinvention as the three most possible future scenarios. The authors describe fragmentation as the diffusion of power in the political marketplace, resulting in political instability, as more parties appear. Replacement sketches those innovation strategies the challenger parties are using against dominant ones in order to dethrone them. Finally, reinvention focuses on parties’ abilities to transform themselves in a changing and challenging electoral landscape. If they succeed, dominant parties will survive the challengers’ threat.

Political Entrepreneurs attempts to merge many theories regarding party competition to capture the altered political scene in Europe. To succeed in this aim, De Vries and Hobolt focus on Western Europe, which has consolidated political systems. Despite that empirical limitation, the authors’ attempt to consider the political game as akin to a competition between companies offers the reader the opportunity to follow their train of thought – what is at stake is how this will escape the narrow borders of Western Europe. Applying De Vries and Hobolt’s theory of political change and challenger parties to new democracies (such as post-Communist countries) or post-colonial countries (such as African nations) could help us clarify further the nature of the political game and the peculiarities of the political market. Another future direction for researchers to follow is to interview challenger parties’ leaders to see how the theory applies to party members.

De Vries and Hobolt’s *Political Entrepreneurs* redirects the discussion to the challenge that new party formations pose to the political spectrum. Covering and utilising an impressive bibliography in their research, they offer readers an innovative approach to the theory of political parties. Attempting to capture a broad audience while simultaneously attracting political experts, political scientists and entrepreneurs, the book offers us a timely approach to the way our politics are constructed. Moreover, it suggests that our world has to be seen as a more complex field. With *Political Entrepreneurs*, De Vries and Hobolt have successfully refreshed the literature on political parties, making the field more appealing to new researchers.

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