

# Book Review: The New Party Challenge: Changing Cycles of Party Birth and Death in Central Europe and Beyond by Tim Haughton and Kevin Deegan-Krause

*In The New Party Challenge: Changing Cycles of Party Birth and Death in Central Europe and Beyond, Tim Haughton and Kevin Deegan-Krause present an in-depth look at how new parties emerge, fight and sometimes die out in the post-Communist democracies of the European Union. This is an excellent piece of empirical work, writes Ben Margulies, offering a valuable reminder of how political science can transcend simple explanations and study our world from different angles.*

**The New Party Challenge: Changing Cycles of Party Birth and Death in Central Europe and Beyond. Tim Haughton and Kevin Deegan-Krause. Oxford University. Press. 2020.**

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Historians will likely refer to the early twenty-first century as an ‘age of populism’ – partly because some pundits become historians. [Populism is a real form of politics](#), and an important feature of our contemporary (dis)order. However, observers too often use the term to refer more broadly to rapid or disruptive political change. This is especially true of countries that seem distant from us, or ‘peripheral’ to the world’s main concentrations of commercial and ideological power.

One of the most visible markers of our unsettled times is the emergence of new political parties. Britain saw two new parties form during the final acts of Brexit in 2019: the Brexit Party and The Independent Group for Change. (Neither exists now in its original form.) The [Dutch election](#) in March 2021 saw three parties enter parliament for the first time, while new parties in [Bulgaria](#) took about a fifth of the vote in April’s polls.

[Peter Mair](#) spoke of ‘ruling the void’, as politicians struggled to govern without mass parties to connect them to their voters. But Mair’s void is not silent. Rather, it is a cacophony, as politicians struggle to build bridges to the electorate, often via new parties, while electors grow more fragmented and unsatisfied.

Tim Haughton and Kevin Deegan-Krause’s new book, [The New Party Challenge](#), is an in-depth look at how new parties emerge, fight and (often) die in the post-Communist democracies of the European Union. It goes beyond populism to talk about electoral dynamics in the round and demonstrates *how* political instability plays out in the life of a country, its leaders and its voters. Though the book’s conclusions are not automatically transferrable to other parts of the world, the volume is an excellent piece of empirical work, with a strong base in existing research and theory. It is a valuable reminder of how political science can transcend simple or fashionable explanations and study our world from different angles.

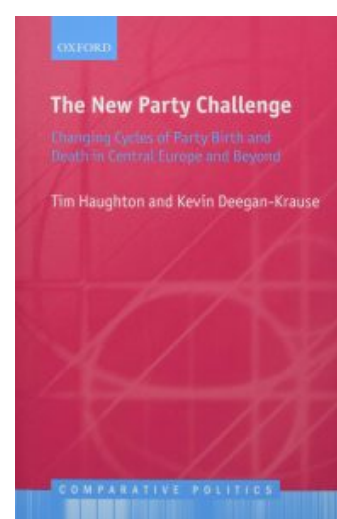




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*The New Party Challenge* looks primarily at the eleven post-Communist states in the EU. These countries have long struggled with ‘the void’ between voters and politicians because political parties there tend to be newer. They tend therefore to have fewer members and scantier roots in society. Parties in post-Communist countries may not have developed stable rules about how they relate to each other or what they stand for: what political scientists call a ‘party system’. As a result, it has been quite common for new parties to suddenly emerge in the post-Communist EU, even before the Eurozone crisis or Brexit.

What Haughton and Deegan-Krause do is demonstrate how new parties actually emerge in the Central and Eastern European context, while connecting their empirical observations to wider theories and research about party systems. They then tie their findings into broader developments in party politics.

Haughton and Deegan-Krause’s model rests on three main observations. Firstly, post-Communist EU states have ‘seen the breakthrough of numerous new parties’. What unites these parties is not ‘populism’, but their ‘novelty, anti-corruption appeals and the celebrity of their party leaders and founders’ (208). These parties may be founded by a successful businessman (like Prime Minister Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic), a celebrity (like musician Paweł Kukiz in Poland), a former civil servant or a popular local politician. Frequently, they will bear the leader’s name, at least for a while (Kukiz’15; the parties of Miro Cerar and Marjan Šarec in Slovenia). Though populist parties share many of these characteristics, new parties are not always populist.

Secondly, these parties often fail and die out, frequently after a successful first election. The first really successful celebrity party in Eastern Europe, Bulgaria’s National Movement of Simeon II, won 43 per cent of the vote in 2001 and formed a government. It was out of parliament eight years later, winning three per cent of the vote that year – despite being led by the country’s former monarch. Haughton and Deegan-Krause tell the story of Verjamem, a Slovenian party whose founder submitted its registration papers on 24 April 2014. It won its first seat in the European Parliament in May 2014, only to win less than one per cent in the general elections of July 2014. Its leader threw in the towel on 20 August 2014 (188-89).

Thirdly – and this is perhaps *The New Party Challenge*'s most important contribution – new parties breed more new parties. Haughton and Deegan-Krause deploy a bit of novel theorising and considerable empirical evidence to back up this observation. On the theoretical side, they rely on good old-fashioned 'cleavage' theory, which states that parties form by taking advantage of enduring social divides. They propose that in post-Communist EU states, there is a divide between 'old' and 'new' parties, because there is a permanent dissatisfaction with the corruption, incompetence or ineffectiveness of the political class. 'New' parties come into being, claiming to be competent and clean.

This is not exactly a cleavage as the authors of cleavage theory meant it: in its classic form, cleavages are deep divides over values, identities or material interests, like class conflict. But Haughton and Deegan-Krause provide strong empirical evidence for their theory. They show that once Central and Eastern European voters begin choosing new parties, they often continue to do so even if their first choice falters. This creates a 'new party subsystem', in which an often-changing cast of parties appeals to a somewhat stable group of dissatisfied voters.

Why do new parties so often falter? They often lack organisational ballast, the network of branches and activists that give a party institutional continuity and a reason for voters and donors to commit. The authors describe trying to visit new party offices in many parts of the region. At one party office in Ljubljana, the Slovenian capital, they were told 'It's not really worth it, I'm the only one here.' Another new party in Estonia had its offices next to a Tallinn massage parlour (124).

New parties also rely heavily on their founding leaders, which can be a problem if those leaders prove to be corrupt or become unpopular or tired. They also struggle to come up with detailed appeals and identities. Newness is a perishable commodity, and once an anti-corruption party enters government, it is hard to stay uncorrupted.

The book relies on an ambitious array of empirical findings. The authors map vote flows in multiple European countries, at the aggregate and (for Slovenia and the Czech Republic) individual levels. They use simulations to demonstrate that their vote flow models would produce party systems that resemble the real ones in Central and Eastern Europe. They also make ample use of expert surveys. At the same time, they also utilise entertaining anecdotes from their field research (and the third season of *Borgen*), which are well chosen to illustrate their points.

*The New Party Challenge* tries to extend its findings to other parts of Europe and the wider world. This chapter, the second to last, mostly lacks the sort of empirical evidence that made the 'new party subsystem' story so compelling (except in the section on Iceland). In some sections, it reads more like a review of party-system developments than an explanation for them. Haughton and Deegan-Krause do an excellent job of theorising their 'new party subsystem' and showing that it exists empirically. Without that context and data, however, it is unclear whether their findings really say as much about, say, Israel (where new party formation has always been a feature of the party system), Peru (where most of the old parties imploded in the 1980s and almost all the parties are 'new') or Mexico (where MORENA's appeal is definitely anti-corruption, but also has significant socio-economic content).

Haughton and Deegan-Krause finish their work with a discussion of whether new parties help or hurt democracy. They argue that new parties tend to encourage greater responsiveness to public concerns, but at the cost of short-termism – partly because new parties tend to fade away so quickly. New parties can confuse the choices available to voters, and they are hard to hold accountable because they often die young. 'If new party founders expect a short life [...] it may encourage behaviour that undermines accountability,' like increased public spending (243).

We often seem to be living in a permanently chaotic political environment. Former institutions have decayed, and little seems predictable. Too often, we resort to easy labels or simple explanations for why this is – populism, 'media bubbles', inequality. What good political science does is complicate those pictures, showing us other angles for understanding our new political environment, and finding patterns that give us some purchase on it. *The New Party Challenge* is good political science.

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