

The spread of anti-establishment politics across Central and Eastern Europe may hold lessons for West European countries.

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/08/29/the-spread-of-anti-establishment-politics-across-central-and-eastern-europe-may-hold-lessons-for-western-european-countries/

29/08/2013

A number of European countries have witnessed increasing support for anti-establishment parties, most notably in Italy, where Beppe Grillo's 'Five Star Movement' gained over 25 per cent of the vote in this year's elections. [Seán Hanley](#) and [Allan Sikk](#) write that while such movements may be new to Western European politics, several anti-establishment parties have experienced similar breakthroughs in Central and Eastern European countries over the last decade. Outlining the results of a study on these parties, they formulate a typology for the conditions under which anti-establishment movements emerge.



The spectacular breakthrough of Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy in February underlined the potential for a new type of anti-establishment politics in Europe: loosely organised, tech savvy and fierce in its demands to change the way politics is conducted, but lacking the anti-capitalism or racism that would allow it to be easily pigeon-holed as the traditional outsider politics of the far-left or far-right.



But for observers of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the dramatic eruption of new parties led by charismatic anti-politicians promising to fight corruption, renew politics and empower citizens is nothing new. Indeed, over the last decade a succession of such parties – led by a colourful array of 'non-politicians' ranging from aristocrats to central bankers, journalists and businessmen – have broken into parliaments in the region.

Some have achieved spectacular overnight success in elections on a scale easily comparable to Grillo's and (unlike Grillo) have often marched straight into government. Some examples include the National Movement for Stability and Progress in Bulgaria in 2001, the New Era Party in Latvia in 2002, *Res Publica* in Estonia in 2003, and, more recently, the Czech Republic's Public Affairs party in 2010, Palikot's Movement in Poland in 2011, Positive Slovenia in 2011, and Ordinary People in Slovakia in 2012. In a new [paper](#), we explore what these parties, which we term *anti-establishment reform parties*, have in common and what drives their success.

Not just the far right

Much of the commentary about the rise of new forms of protest politics has been confused. Some simply view all forms of anti-establishment politics through the distorting lens of the 'rise of the far-right', although as [careful consideration of the evidence](#) shows, the electoral performance of radical right parties in both Western and Eastern Europe has remained distinctly patchy. In Central and Eastern



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Europe the extreme right is largely stagnant or in decline, with the important exception of the Jobbik movement in Hungary.

For some, the new parties are part of a backlash against austerity and economic hard times, after the global downturn and the Eurozone crisis. In an era when traditional ideologies of the left are receding and (at least in Europe) the traditional working class and its organisations are declining, it is unsurprising that protest at the ballot box sometimes takes the form of a surge by unconventional new 'centrist populist' parties. This is especially the case given that some of the biggest losers in the current economic crisis are a generation of networked, well educated and individualist young people. In this view such parties are – to borrow the title of Paul Mason's famous [blog](#) and [book](#) – simply one facet of things 'kicking off everywhere' in a climate of global austerity.

A crisis of politics?

For others, the rise of new anti-establishment parties is the expression of a crisis of politics, not economics. It is argued that the new parties and movements bubbling up from the social and political margins are concerned with accountability, democracy and empowerment, driven by a pervasive disconnect between the governors and governed. Often, especially in newer democracies such as in Central and Eastern Europe, such distrust and disgust is created by the (real or perceived) corruption of established political elites. One earlier [paper](#) exploring the new anti-establishment parties in Central and Eastern Europe even terms them 'anti-corruption' parties.

A fourth, less often heard explanation can be found in academic works on party change and electoral volatility. In this view, most eloquently expressed [by the late Peter Mair](#), the crisis of representative democracy should really be understood in terms of a long decline in traditional party politics. As parties have retreated from civil society and become entwined with the state, they have left increasingly volatile electoral markets, feeding the rise of often short-lived new parties.

In Central and Eastern Europe electoral volatility has been particularly high. The parties that emerged after the fall of communism failed to establish strong organisations and forge strong ties with voters. Such volatility has, as As Grigore Pop-Eleches [convincingly argued](#), led voters to turn to unconventional new parties of all kinds.

Paths to anti-establishment breakthrough

In our paper, we use [Qualitative Comparative Analysis \(QCA\)](#) to examine breakthroughs of anti-establishment reform parties in CEE between 1999 and 2012. We relate their breakthroughs to five potential causes, broadly reflecting the alternative interpretations above: economic hardship; rising unemployment; high levels of corruption; rising corruption; and the previous success of new parties in earlier elections.

QCA allowed us to move beyond broad, blanket explanations and pick out distinct combinations of causes. We found four main contexts which accounted for all but three of our cases of anti-establishment breakthrough. First, there were situations of *corrupt socially painful growth* where rising unemployment combined with economic growth and high levels of perceived corruption. This corresponded to the phase of post-communist reform for some states shortly before their EU accession in 2000-2 (Lithuania 2000, Poland 2001, and Slovakia 2002).

Second, anti-establishment breakthroughs arose in a context of *growth but increasing corruption in unstable party systems*, suggesting that voters turn to new anti-establishment parties even in periods of economic prosperity if there is already a tradition of voting for new parties.

Third, there are situations of *low but rising corruption in periods of economic prosperity*. This pathway suggests that corruption can interact with a benign socio-economic climate to create a favourable context for anti-establishment reformers – perhaps by shifting voters' attention from economic concerns to issues of governance.

The final pathway for anti-establishment parties is *recession and rising corruption in previously stable party systems*. This covers elections in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia in 2010-11. In all three cases the inability of

(some or all) established parties to respond to economic crisis, coupled with de-legitimation by growing concerns over corruption, prepared the way for an anti-establishment reform party.

Rethinking protest parties

Our findings allow some important conclusions to be drawn. First, early debates framing the rise of anti-establishment parties as products of a crisis of politics, or the fallout of recession, are misplaced. Instead, we need to refocus on relationship(s) between hard times, corruption and the travails of established parties.

Second, many of the relationships cut counter-intuitively against expectations. In Central and Eastern Europe, anti-establishment reform parties do not appear to be 'crisis parties'. They have broken through more often in periods of economic prosperity than they have during economic downturns.

Third, we find that party system stability, rather than party system fluidity can be more conducive to anti-establishment party breakthroughs. The stability of established parties may, at least in Central and Eastern Europe, have represented rigidity and ossification, rather than democratic consolidation. This, as the rise of Italy's Five Star Movement already indicates, may hold particular lessons for some Western European states. Finally, we find that in many contexts changes in perceived corruption matter more than levels of corruption. Rising corruption in a low corruption environment has been notably effective in mobilising voters behind anti-establishment reformers.

While diverse, these paths suggest that a new breed of anti-establishment reformers has appeared and these movements have, until now, been incompletely understood. Their growing success has potentially far-reaching consequences for party systems and party-based democracy in both Western and Eastern Europe.

This article draws on the authors' paper, [Economy, corruption or promiscuous voters? Explaining the success of Anti-Establishment Reform Parties in Eastern Europe](#), which is being presented at the ECPR General Conference in Bordeaux on 5-7 September. A version of this article also appeared at Seán Hanley's personal [blog](#).

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