

BOOK REVIEW

## Political Entrepreneurs: The Rise of Challenger Parties in Europe

By Catherine E. De Vries and Sara B. Hobolt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. 336pp. \$29.95 (Hardcover)

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The volume by Catherine De Vries and Sara Hobolt proposes an appealing framework to understand the process of political change in Western European party systems, through the conflict opposing challenger and dominant parties. Political change stems from a competitive struggle between those actors that aim to innovate the political competition and those fighting to keep the status quo. If this sounds familiar, that is perfectly fine. Indeed, the authors seem to adjust the Elmer Eric Schattschneider's lesson to contemporary party systems (see the classic *The Semisovereign People*, 1960). The *conflict of conflicts* of the American *maestro* of Political Science is precisely a *meta*-struggle on the contents and the rules of the political game: insiders will try to safeguard their advantages from the rapacious newcomers, while the latter will try to conquer their voters by introducing new issues or alternative ways to do politics.

The theory of political change proposed by the authors conceives the political market as an oligopoly, where some actors – the dominant parties – exercise their dominance by controlling a larger market share (i.e. votes) than that of their rivals. Challenger parties, thus, may attempt to capitalize upon the discontent against the ruling oligopoly. However, how can we distinguish the challenger innovators from the *archaic* dominant parties? The authors' take is to differentiate the two categories on the basis of governmental participation. Indeed, challenger parties would be more likely to push for innovation to improve their strategic positions within their party system. Conversely, dominant parties are already controlling the system and, thus, any political innovation could undermine their consolidated power.

In order to strengthen their dominance, dominant parties tend to move closer to the centre of the political spectrum to appeal to the largest number of voters (*distinctive convergence*), they present themselves as skilful and competent problem-solvers (*competence mobilization*) and they tend to collude by under-politicizing those issues on which they are not perceived as competent (*issue avoidance*). Each of these strategies involves some risk epitomized by a smooth process of dominant parties' indistinguishability that may open the door for the success of challengers. Challenger parties innovate the system by politicizing those issues that dominant parties tend to neglect, and by exhibiting a high degree of anti-establishment rhetoric to further stress their distance from the dominant parties they aim to replace. The potential for political change, theorized by the authors, emerges from the interaction of dominant and challenger parties' strategies.

The authors use rich and diverse data sources (case studies, supply-side and demand-side data) to corroborate the fact that challengers tend to adopt issue entrepreneurship and anti-establishment strategies more often than dominant parties (*chapters V and VI*). The most compelling section of the volume deals with the consequences of challenger party strategies: are the issue and rhetorical entrepreneurship rewarding for challenger parties? The authors show that voters who consider the issues sponsored by challengers as important and who hold anti-establishment views are more

likely to support challenger parties. When the dominant parties' oligopolies start to creak, then the successful challengers contribute to the fragmentation of the party systems. This new equilibrium broadens the choices available for voters, boosting their mobilization. However, the presence of powerful challengers also endangers governmental stability by jeopardizing the party-government functions and – eventually – decreasing the quality of Western democracies (*chapter 8*).

The authors masterfully alternate between quantitative analysis, case studies and anecdotes from the economic markets providing not only a rigorous analysis but also engaging storytelling on the transformations of Western party systems. In the last decade, several studies have investigated the ability of specific party families to challenge their national party systems. However, the growing fluidity of contemporary party systems reveals that even the members of the *same* family might play very different roles within their respective party systems, ranging from the dominant integrated parties to the fringe challengers. This volume, building on the tradition of the strategic approach on party competition, frames these challenges in a dynamic fashion, acknowledging that also a challenger party can acquire a dominant position within its national party system.

Nonetheless, the volume stands on a hazardous assumption: that challenger parties are those actors who have never experienced a ride in the governmental arena. Even if non-governing parties are more likely to pursue issue entrepreneurship and anti-establishment strategies, these strategies are also abundantly adopted by parties who had previously experienced participation in government. Looking at populist parties, 40.9% of them participated in national governments [see the excellent article by Mattia Zulianello in *Government & Opposition* 4(2), 2020]. Nevertheless, these parties continue to undermine the rules of the game of their party systems. This problem is even more acute if we try to apply Hobolt and De Vries framework to Central Eastern European countries. How is it possible, indeed, to explain the transformation of the Hungarian party system, if FIDESZ has not been classed as a challenger since 1998? In this respect, the volume itself reveals this tension in a case study paragraph: the authors considered the FPÖ as a challenger party (pp. 172–175) while according to their definition it should be considered as a dominant party since 1983. To be fair, the authors also propose the interpretation of their governmental threshold as a continuous variable. However, this is not systematically tested all along the book and it still does not solve the theoretical knot: parties can challenge their party system also *after* their governmental participation and we have no reason to assume that a party who never governed should *ipso facto* challenge its party system.

The authors borrowed their insights on party system's dominance and innovation from the economic organization literature (pp. 46–49). The analogies between political and economic market are always appealing, but they tend to deform the properties of party competition. Once Sartori argued that 'it is an extraordinary paradox that social sciences should be ever more prompted to explain politics by going beyond politics' (see his classic article in *Government & Opposition*, 1969: 214). The conquest of the governmental arena is an outcome of party competition. The fact that several challenger parties have been unable to join their national cabinets might represent a by-product of their *otherness* that should be investigated by looking at challengers' ideological, strategical and rhetorical differences *vis-à-vis* their competitors. In this respect, the strategies pinpointed by the authors (i.e. anti-establishment rhetoric and the issue entrepreneurship) are great starting points. However, they should be used as defining properties, rather than as a probabilistic set of behaviours linked with non-governing parties.

In conclusion, De Vries and Hobolt offer an original interpretation of the process of erosion of the *old politics*. Despite some reservations on the operationalization of challenger parties, the volume has the merit of detaching the challenger potential from the *usual suspects* (e.g. populist and radical right parties) and instead linking it to the party's ability to innovate political competition by introducing new issues and embracing an innovative rhetorical repertoire. Undoubtedly, the book will boost the debate within the scholarship on challenger parties and thus is keenly suggested to all scholars and *aficionados* that want to explore the transformations of party competition in Western Europe.

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