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# A theoretical framework for analyzing the electoral fate of new political parties in the European Parliament

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# **A theoretical framework for analyzing the electoral fate of new political parties in the European Parliament**

## **Abstract**

Every national election a large number of new parties run for office, and usually only a small number of them actually gain enough votes to enter parliament. What makes these few successful new parties different from all the others that try in vain?

Several potential explanations for this have been suggested by previous research, focusing on everything from the formal electoral rules, through ideological demands among voters to the strategic response from the established parties. Other theories focus on the strategies of the new parties themselves.

One potential strategy for new parties is to start at another level in the political system, since national elections are generally perceived to be more difficult for new parties than sub-national or European elections. It has been well established that non-established parties do well in European elections, but we know far less about the consequences this has for elections at the national levels.

This paper brings together these strands of research and formulates a testable theoretical framework for studying new party entry into national parliaments, with particular focus on the possibilities European elections offer for new parties. The paper argues that focusing on parties that have entered the EP and are attempting to enter their national parliament is both theoretically interesting and practical from a methodological standpoint.

The paper argues that new parties' entry (or non-entry) into national parliaments should be analyzed by looking at the parties' resources, political projects and the political opportunity structure. The paper then goes on to outline how these could change for a party gaining entry into the European Parliament, and how this needs to be taken into account when studying new parties that have "taken the route through Brussels".

**Keywords:** political party, new party, elections, European Parliament

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## Introduction

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Every election a large number of parties run for office, and usually only a small number of them actually win representation. Most of these are parties that are already represented in the parliament but once in a while a new party gains enough votes to enter parliament. What make these few successful new parties different from all the others that try in vain? This paper deals with the issue of how we can explain new party entry. The focus is on entry into national parliament, since most existing research is focused on that level, but much of the theory is applicable to any level in the political system. The paper also explicitly brings in a multilevel approach by discussing how the European Union factors in to the prospects for new parties in the western European party systems.

Throughout history political scientists have taken different views on political parties. For a long time parties or political factions were seen as a disruptive and divisive force that should be discouraged (Sartori, 2005:3-12). This has changed, parties are now seen as an indispensable part of modern democracies, and the concern has rather become a lack of party attachment among voters and a decline in party stability. In this context the study of new parties becomes important, both as an expression and a measurement of party instability. It is also important in understanding more about political parties themselves, how they are formed and how they develop.

Whether party systems are stable or not is a hotly debated subject among political scientists. For a long time the conventional wisdom was that party systems, at least in Western democracies, were in fact frozen (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). The developments of the past few decades have called this conventional wisdom into question. In the period 1960 to 1998 Peter Mair counted more than 140 new parties that contested national elections in twelve Western European states,<sup>1</sup> and the vast majority of these appeared after 1979. As we will see

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<sup>1</sup> The member states of EU15, excluding Greece, Portugal and Spain since those countries were not democratized in 1960.

later the question of how to count new parties is not unproblematic, but no matter the exact number of new parties most political scientists would probably agree with Mair in the assessment that “... the party systems of the European member states, and in the Western democracies more generally, have become substantially more fragmented over the past two decades” (Mair, 2000:30)

This paper is part of a study that aims to investigate those parties that enter parliament without having done so before, be it a single mandate in a single election. All parties have been new once, and change in party system is usually due to the appearance of new parties. If we wish to understand this part of party system evolution we need to know both why new parties are formed, why some of them manage to enter parliament while most do not and finally why an even smaller number survive in the long run and/or become established parts of the party system. This study focuses on the intermediate step. This is a crucial step in a new party's development, since there is a large difference between being a parliamentary or extra-parliamentary party.

## What is a new party?

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Before turning our attention to how entry can be explained a discussion of what we mean by ‘new party’ is needed. While this might seem quite straightforward there are two main problems. First of all a party's status as ‘new’ is not static. It is ‘new’ when it is first created but at some point becomes ‘old’. Secondly, the parties themselves are not static. Splits, mergers, ideological shifts and name changes are frequent among both old and new parties, and this raises the question of how big these changes have to be in order for a party to be considered to be new again. New parties can be influenced by existing or defunct parties, even if they are not formed directly from existing parties. Another possibility is the presence of politicians and activist from other parties (Barnea and Rahat, 2010:7).



A look at previous research shows that many ways of identifying new parties have been used. Some focus on when the party was founded<sup>2</sup>, or when the party first appears as an electoral alternative,<sup>3</sup> others on finding qualitative differences between new and old parties. These are similar to the two definitions of ‘newness’, one chronological and one relative, offered by Barnea and Rahat “The chronological definition points to a prerequisite – for something to be new, it must be recent. The relative definition, on the other hand, touches on the core issue. It entails that for something to be new it must be ‘other than the old’, it must be ‘different’. Therefore, to define the ‘new’ we must distinguish it from the ‘former’, ‘old’ or ‘pre-existing’” (Barnea and Rahat, 2010:5). The relative definition emphasizes that ‘new’ parties must be distinct from older alternative. In other words a ‘new party’ cannot simply be an old party under a new label.

Different choices might be suitable for different studies. A more or less arbitrary date of foundation is suitable if we want to compare parties that have existed for a relatively short time with those that have been stable for several decades, for example in order to study theories on frozen party systems. The relative definition is useful if we wish to look at degree of stability in a party system for example. Both of these definitions share the problem of being static, once a party has been classified as ‘new’ it seemingly stays that way forever. For a study that looks at new parties over time this is a problem.

One way of solving that problem would be to apply a strict ‘first time running’ definition. While this would be suitable if we wanted to study how parties perform or act if they have never contested an election before, in a study of new party entry into parliaments a few ‘failed attempts’ must be allowed without the party being reclassified as ‘old’. If a party is only seen as ‘new’ in the very first election it contests we would likely find very few empirical examples of new parties in parliament. This is very much in line with Lago and Martinez’s (2011:13) findings that most new parties that enter Spanish regional parliaments are in fact parties that have run and failed before, a group they call *previous losers*.

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<sup>2</sup> Mair (1999) simply defines a new political party as one that has begun to contest elections after 1960. For the purpose of removing irrelevant parties he added the criteria that a new party should have run in at least two national elections and that it should have received at least one percent of the votes in at least one of these elections.

<sup>3</sup> In a study of European elections Hix and Marsh(2007:500) define a new party as one that gained votes in EP elections without winning any votes in the preceding national election or only run in European elections. This compares quite well to what Barnea and Rahat (2010:7) call *assuming newness with reservations*

This leaves using some sort of electoral threshold. If we wish to study how individual new parties fare in elections it is appropriate to set the cut off at representation in the parliament. This represents a significant change in a party's status.<sup>4</sup> Even if there has been an existing party organization, one or more failed attempts to enter parliaments the party is still new to the parliamentary arena. Even a single seat in a parliament will make a difference and give a party new opportunities, even potentially the opportunity to influence national policies (Sikk, 2006:50). Lucardie (2007:285) argues that a party without seats in parliament is peripheral, and contrasts this with the "successful new parties" that have won seats in Parliament. Both the conventional wisdom and much of the previous research suggest that parliamentary and extra-parliamentary parties face very different conditions in national parliamentary elections. Among others, Ellinas (2010:15) argues that 'electoral breakthrough' is a defining moment for a new party.<sup>5</sup>

A definition of 'new party' is thus *any party participating in national parliamentary elections that is previously unrepresented in the national parliament*. Once a party has entered the national parliament<sup>6</sup> it is thus no longer considered to be new.

An additional complication in distinguishing between 'old' and 'new' parties is as previously mentioned that many new parties have roots in old parties. Depending on how it was founded a new party might not be new at all, except in name, and research also shows that the origins of a party play a large role in explaining how well it does (Mair, 1999:216-217).

The definition of 'new party' stipulated in the previous section does not distinguish between new parties with ties to old parties and 'truly new' parties. While the existing research offers several potential solutions to this<sup>7</sup> there are theoretical reasons to be careful with stipulating

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<sup>4</sup> Not everyone agrees with this. Harmel and Svåsand (1993:71) argue that a party remains in the first phase of party development until it has more than a 'handful' of parliamentary representatives. Ellinas (2010:15) also defines 'electoral breakthrough' as a defining moment for a new party, but uses Sartori's 'threshold of relevance' to draw the line of breakthrough.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Ellinas uses a stricter definition of electoral breakthrough, demanding not only that the party is represented in the parliament but also that it is relevant according to Sartori's (2005) definition.

<sup>6</sup> Note that this *only* includes the national parliament, since that is the focus of the study. A party might enter a local or regional parliament, or the EP and still be considered new at the national arena.

<sup>7</sup> In his study on new political parties in the Baltic states Allan Sikk defines genuinely new political parties as those that are "not successors of any previous parliamentary parties, have a novel name as well as structure, and

too strict criteria for ‘genuine newness’. By defining parties with strong links to the past as ‘not new’ we would make the assumptions that this type of tie to the past always affect the new party *in the same way*. We also assume away the possibility that a party leader with political experience could be either an asset or a burden to the new party, depending perhaps on voters’ opinion of him or her. Even if the new party is in fact only ‘old wine in new bottles’, the voters still need to be convinced that this new party is a good option. In forming a new party, even if it is in name only, the party leaders make the choice of losing party name recognition, losing voters identifying with the old party label and all the formal rights that befall parliamentary parties. There are two main reasons for taking this risk; leaders from a popular party wish to capitalize on this popularity by setting up their own party or leaders from an unpopular party set up a new party in order to distance themselves from an unpopular organization. To continue the ‘old wine in new bottles’-analogy; if the old wine was good, voters need to be both informed that it is now available in new packaging and convinced that the content is still as good. If the old wine was bad voters need to be convinced that having a new bottle will make it better, or convinced that the content is in fact different. So rather than excluding any effect of ties to the past by adopting a strict definition of what constitutes a new party we should include political experience in the model.

This, combined with the broad theoretical and empirical ambition of this project suggests that it is appropriate to use only very minimalist demands of ‘genuine newness’. The focus should be on the electoral options offered to voters. Voters primarily identify parties through their labels, so a new label should be considered a new option. Of course this does not mean that any name change should be counted as a new party, since adding or subtracting a single word might not change the label so that it is not recognizable to voters. While it is thus necessary to elaborate a more clear criteria for a label change, a more precise definition of a new party is thus *any party participating in national parliamentary elections that is previously unrepresented in the national parliament under its current party label*.

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do not have any important figures from past democratic politics among its major members” (Sikk, 2006:56). A similar, but less strict definition, is offered by Barnea and Rahat (2010:9); “a party that has a new label and that no more than half of its top candidates (top of candidate list or safe districts) originate from a single former party”. In their view this is a useful threshold definition to distinguish between old and new parties, even though they view ‘party newness’ as a scale rather than as a dichotomy between new and old.



## New parties in research

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The research on new parties can be divided into two main strands. The first deals with the question of why and how new parties are started; the second with why and how some new parties survive while others do not. These are both important questions, and each needs to be answered if we are to find a comprehensive understanding of new parties and of party system change in general. The first is concerned with what motivates individuals to start organizations and to choose the format of starting a new party. The second is concerned with the external environment this new party encounters, both in form of institutions, other parties, media and not least the voters, and with internal factors in the party once it has been formed.

This paper is concerned with the question of new party entry into parliament. This can be seen as a part of the answer to the question of new party survival. Gaining representation in a parliament is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for a party's long-term survival, but it can certainly be very important. With representation in parliament the party will gain important resources and without representation it can normally not hope to influence policy. It will thus need some other reason for voters and members to continue supporting it, which might be very difficult in the long run.

There are generally three types of studies that deal with new party. First of all there are a large number of case studies of either individual parties or individual countries. Second, there are those that study the success of a particular type of party (usually far right, but sometimes green or regional). Lastly there are those that try to formulate general hypothesis or identify general mechanisms of new parties in general. The first two approaches can, but need not be, mutually exclusive with the third approach. It all depends on the motivation for the case study. Some choose a particular county or type of party because they are interesting in explaining that case in itself, others because they find the case representative or otherwise useful for finding or testing general mechanisms that are true of all parties. I argue that the goal must be to find a theory that can explain new party entry in general. If the special circumstances pertaining to parties from a certain party family or in a specific context

influence chances of entering parliament this should be discovered as a result of empirical testing, rather than assumed beforehand, and if possible worked in to the general theoretical framework.

## Explanations for new party entry

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*Previous studies of the rise of new parties have identified two broad sets of explanations: the first focuses on shifting electoral demands, i.e. the emergence of new political issues due to socioeconomic change (e.g. Inglehart, 1990); the second line emphasizes political opportunities – that is, the response of established parties towards changing demands (e.g. Hug, 2001; Meguid, 2005), and the permissiveness of institutional arrangements that govern the supply of new parties (e.g. Willey, 1998). (Selb and Pituctin, 2010:147-148)*

Several political scientists have attempted to bring together several of these perspectives. Paul Lucardie (2000) points to three main factors that determine new parties success; the party's political project, its resources and finally its political opportunity structure. This framework is well suited for the purpose of analyzing new party entry, since it is not developed for any specific type of new party and is flexible enough to be used to measure party success in several ways, including entry into parliament. Using the framework for this purpose, however, requires that the three concepts resources, political project and political opportunity structure be defined in a way that is relevant to specifically new party entry. As Ellias (2010:8-9) points out different factors are important at different stages of party development.

This is the task of the next section. The three factors are broken down into their component parts and, with the help of the extensive literature that exists on these topics, the relevance of each for the study of new party entry is discussed.

## *Resources*

Resources include not only money, but also members, media exposure and leadership (Lucardie, 2000:179). Lucardie (2000) finds a correlation between resources and number of votes in the Netherlands. The correlation is not very high, but Lucardie argues that without a minimal amount of these resources it is not possible for a party to win any seats. Resources are thus a necessary condition for a party to win seats. This means that controlling, or rather limiting, access to resources for new parties might be a very effective strategy the established parties. This one of the central arguments of the cartel party theory, that argues that established parties design systems of government financial support and other resources, as well as the electoral system, in a way that benefit themselves and make it as difficult as possible for new parties (Katz and Mair, 1995). However, in doing this, especially too overtly, the established parties run the risk of seeming unfair or even corrupt and thus open themselves up to attack from anti-establishment parties.

## **Money**

Public financing is more important for new parties than for established parties, since the former do not have access to resources from membership fees or easy access to loans. Some countries give general grants to parties before elections, others reimburse parties after elections depending on the results of the election (Scarrow, 2006). Spending money on a campaign in a system with reimbursement after the election is a risky strategy for new parties unsure of their success, and also requires that the party can gain temporary access to funds to run their campaign with. “Established parties may be able to borrow money ahead of the election in anticipation of reimbursement, but few lenders are likely to invest in parties without a track-record” (Scarrow, 2006:625).

While the forms of public funding can be more or less advantageous for new parties most scholars agree that state subsidies are relatively more important for new parties compared with established parties, since the latter have access to other forms of money and resources. “In countries where the payout threshold is significantly lower than the electoral threshold, political parties which fail to win legislative seats may nevertheless receive a vital infusion of funds that will allow them to return to fight another day. The presence of a lower threshold to receive public funding also gives small parties an alternate, and more easily obtainable, marker of success.” (Scarrow, 2006:624)

There are thus two factors with regard to money that are important to look at, first of all *access to public funding/party subsidies* and secondly if the party has *access to other sources of revenue*.

### **Members and Activists**

Traditionally members have been a vital part of any political party. A large membership was both legitimizing and more or less a requisite for achieving electoral success. Membership fees were an important source of revenue, members volunteered during election campaigns and so on.

In the last decades this has perhaps begun to change. Party membership is in a steady decline across most of Western Europe (Mair and van Biezen, 2001) and parties have access to other types of funding. On the other hand, there are some signs that the meaning of party membership is changing. While opening up for membership recruitment through the Internet for example might increase the number of members it is questionable if these members are willing to fill the functions members have traditionally had in parties.

Jon Pierre and his colleagues argue that new parties are not dependent on large memberships: “The often ‘over-night’ electoral successes of newly formed parties demonstrate that access to the media, not an elaborate grass-roots organisation, is the key precondition for becoming a party in parliament. While traditional parties first built an organisation and then became successful in the electoral struggle, new parties frequently proceed the other way around; electoral success brings public subsidies, which in turn may be used to build a regular party organisation.” (Pierre et al 2000:15)

At the same time it should also be self-evident that no party can run an election campaign without at least some committed supporters that volunteer their time. And should the new party be successful in the election they will at the very least need someone to fill their seats, something that at least far right parties sometimes have problems with (Art 2011) Access to

campaign workers also becomes more important if a party does not have much money (Ellinas 2010:7), which might certainly be the case for many new parties.

The discussion above indicates that *members* in the traditional meaning might not be the only relevant resource for a new party; a measure of *activists* should also be included.

## Media

Writing on the rise of far right parties Antonis A. Ellinas notes the importance of the media: “During their earlier phase of development, smaller parties need the media to publicize their views to national publics. The media can help small parties communicate their message to much broader audiences than their organizational or financial resources would otherwise allow. Moreover, they can confer legitimacy and authority to political newcomers, and they can dispel voter doubts about their electoral viability. In this sense, the media control the gateway to the electoral market” (Ellinas, 2010:3)

The importance of media attention for new parties can be argued about in two different ways. One way to look at it is that for a new, unknown actor any publicity is good publicity. In other words it is (only) the amount of attention given the party that is important. The other way is to look at the attitude/framing of the media attention. This is often mirrored in discussions about how the media should deal with extremist parties. For example van der Pas and her colleagues speculate that one reason that coverage of Gert Wilders in the Dutch media tended to go down after increases in public support for his party, contrary to their expectations, is that journalists did not want to help him by giving him visibility (van der Pas, et al, 2011). The opposing argument to this is that ignoring these will only give them a sense of martyrdom and that the course of action should be to counter their arguments.

I argue, in line with Ellinas, that for a new party any attention is important, since they might lack the resources to make their existence or political project known to the public in any other way. In light of this the *amount of media attention* given to the new party should be seen as an important part of its resources. This is a simple measure of quantity,<sup>8</sup> along the view that

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<sup>8</sup> In his study Ellinas measures if the party is given more or less attention from the media than should be warranted, given its size.

all press is good press.<sup>9</sup> We should also look at if the new party is given *access to free broadcasting time*.<sup>10</sup> This could be important for a new party both because buying broadcasting time is very expensive, and might thus not be a viable option for a party with limited resources, but also because it might have an important legitimizing effect (Ellinas, 2010:3). Parties that are covered by such rules are seen as “real parties”.

The inclusion of media into the ‘resource category’ is not uncontroversial, in many similar studies it is found in the ‘political opportunity structure’. The argument is that the media treats new parties differently in different contexts. While this is undoubtedly true, this assumes that *all* new parties are greeted the same by the media. Imagine a new green party and a regional separatist party, would they be treated the same way by the media culture? By looking at media exposure as a resource we bring it back to the level of the individual party. There is another reason for choosing this approach, as well as focusing on amount rather than tone of coverage; one of the main problems for new parties is a lack of visibility. In the word of Alan Sikk (2006:28-31) they need to break through the “visibility filter”. In this case it is credible to argue that all press is good press. “Simply put, the media is a political resource that can lift marginal parties from obscurity and push them into the political mainstream” (Ellinas, 2010:7)

In recent years more attention has been given to alternative forms of communication, such as social media (blogs, Facebook, Twitter). While this might be an important tool for many parties, especially new ones that lack other resources, mainstream media still acts as an important gatekeeper. Sikk (2006) argues that parties today face little difficulties in distributing their message, but that it has become increasingly difficult for parties to get voters to pay attention to their message. And it is fairly self evident that “[a] new party ... cannot attract any supporters if they do not know that it exists, and it is unlikely to attract many if they do not know what it stands for (or against)” (Harmel and Svåsand, 1993:72). In order to stand out amongst all the other information that voters are subjected to a new party has to break through the ‘visibility filter’ (Sikk 2006:28-31). Attention given to a party online should thus not be included in the measure of media as a resource, since this is something that all new parties have access to.

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<sup>9</sup> The framing of the media coverage will be discussed further under Political Opportunity Structures on page 14.

<sup>10</sup> This includes both time for political ads and inclusion in televised debates on public broadcasters.



## Leadership

The importance of leaders in political parties in general has gained substantial interest from political scientists. For new parties it is often argued that the leader might be especially important, by attracting attention or putting the new party's issues on the agenda for example (cf. van der Brug and Mughan, 2007:44).

A new party does not have the benefit of being the 'traditional' representative of any particular social group nor any record of successful governing or opposition to fall back on when trying to persuade voters to vote for it. First of all the voters need to actually be aware of the party and its political project, it needs to break through the 'visibility filter'. But the party also needs to convince voters that it can in fact carry out its political project, that the party can either govern or can gain enough influence in parliament to carry out the promised changes. This is where the new party's leader might make an important difference. A charismatic, or indeed controversial, leader should increase the party's visibility. If the leader appears trustworthy, competent and so on voters will likely be more inclined to vote for an untested party. Many leaders of new parties are in fact not untested themselves, it is not uncommon for politicians to leave established parties and set up new ones with themselves as the central figure (Barnea and Rahat: 2010). The advantage of this is that the leader can credibly claim political experience, as well as useful contacts and so on. Leadership should thus be looked at in two ways; both in terms of *charismatic leadership*, which is unfortunately notoriously difficult to measure<sup>11</sup>, and in terms of *politically experienced leadership*, for example measured by looking at if any of the party leaders have been members of parliament before.

### *The political project*

Every political party has some sort of overall goal, a vision of the good society, a group of policies it wishes to implement or something similar.<sup>12</sup> This is its political project. A party

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<sup>11</sup> This could for example be done by looking at whether the party has a leader that voters know and/or like, since the argument made here is that visibility and trustworthiness etc. are the two important advantages a leader can bring to a new party.

<sup>12</sup> There is of course extensive discussions of what parties really want, starting with Downs's (1957) assumption that office is the primary goal and developed by for example Müller and Strom (1999) The argument here is not that the political party is what the party *really* wants, simply that all parties tend to have some sort of project that they present to voters for their consideration, be it an extensive ideological program or simply a promise of competent, uncorrupted management.

needs a political project that "addresses social problems considered urgent by a significant number of voters" (Lucardie, 2000:176). The project might be connected to an existing ideology, develop a new ideology or focusing on issues that interest a segment of the population without any references to ideology.

Sikk (2011) argues that the definition of a political project can be much wider than suggested by for example Lucardie. 'Newness' can in itself be a political project. The new party does not differ from the established parties ideologically but rather argues that they represent a new style of politics, with better or less corrupt leaders. "Newness as a project has some very advantageous properties for political parties. It promotes the cause of change, but in an indistinct direction, thus having the potential to appeal to broad groups of the more or less discontented." (Sikk, 2011:14) Barnea and Rahat (2010:13-14) hypothesize that the advantages of being perceived as 'new' might even cause politicians from established parties to form parties that are new in name only in order to win voters dissatisfied with the existing parties.

The political project must be sufficiently interesting or important to attract a substantial part of the electorate. At the same time it must be distinct from the projects offered by parties that are already in parliament. If a new party does not manage to retain ownership of a new issue it is far less likely that the party will manage to enter parliament based on this issue for example.<sup>13</sup> In a similar way it should be much more difficult for a new party to successfully take up an ideological position already occupied by an established party, regardless of whether we are talking about a green ideology, social democracy or right wing extremism. This points to the fact that the new party's political project is an important component in explaining new party entry, but not independently of the political/party system as a whole. The impact of the political project is conditioned by the response of the established parties. It is also an argument for using the concept political project rather than party family.

As has been pointed out above much of the research on new parties only deal with a certain 'type' of party. Among scholars studying the rise of far right parties there is an on-going debate over whether this should be explained with the same factors as success for other parties

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<sup>13</sup> This argument is closely related to Meguid's (2005) theory on established parties' response to new parties on new issues, which will be discussed in more detail further on

or if special mechanisms explain far right support (eg ref!). My belief is that there is a large amount of overlap between party ‘types’ and political projects. Single issue parties will tend to have a new issue as their political project, green parties to develop new ideologies, extreme left/right parties to be ideological purifiers and so on. Sikk’s (2011) concept of ‘newness as a political project’ is virtually synonymous with populist and anti-establishment parties. The advantage of studying political projects rather than party types is that it also takes the rest of the party system into account.

To take an example: a religious party might be able to enter parliament if there is a sufficient number of voters that wish to see such a party in parliament. If there are already several other religious parties the new party however faces a more difficult challenge. If we study political projects the party might be a “prophet” in the former case and a “purifier” in the latter. Were we to study party type the classification would likely not change. Another example is the often-studied extreme right parties. They are said to face legitimacy issues, resulting in fewer votes. The question is if this legitimacy problem is unconditional on the rest of the party system? Extreme right parties are often defined in terms of absolute ideological or policy positions (ref!). Hypothetically though there could be two parties with exactly the same absolute position, but one of them is the most extreme party in its political system while the other is more moderate than an even more extreme party in its political system. Would these two parties really be seen as equally (un)legitimate by the voters in their respective political system?

By choosing to include political project, defined in terms of *new group issues*, *new ideology*, *refinement of an existing ideology* or *anti-establishment agenda*<sup>14</sup> into the analysis we do not only look at the content of the new parties’ ideology or issues, we also get an indication that this project must be put into the context of other political parties. An additional measure of party type or family is thus not necessary.

### *The political opportunity structure*

The concept political opportunity structure is useful, in that it points to the importance of the surrounding context for the new parties. While the first two factors, resources and political

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<sup>14</sup> These correspond to Lucardie’s three categories prolocutors, prophetic parties and purifying parties, and to Sikk’s concept of ‘newness as a political project’. I prefer these terms because they describe the political project rather than the party.

project, is at least for the most part under the new party's control the political opportunity structure is much more external, and the new party generally have to accept it as it finds it. The risk with using a concept such as opportunity structure is that it is tempting to stretch it until it covers everything that might possibly affect the new party's chances. It is thus most important to be clear with what we mean by it in the context of this specific study. It is for example *political* opportunity structure, not general opportunity structure; therefore it is focused on those factors that affect the political landscape that the new party faces.

A good starting point is to look at Lucardie's definition of political opportunity structure. It is comprised of formal access to the state, the political culture and salient cleavages in society (Lucardie, 2000:180-182).<sup>15</sup> Many political scientist agree that these or similar factors are very important in explaining new party entry or success. For example Kitschelt (2006:282) argues that "[p]arty formation then results from the interplay between the formal and informal barriers to entry into the game of electoral competition movement entrepreneurs encounter and the intensity of hitherto unrepresented political interests in the existing spectrum of political parties."

### **Formal access to the state**

An important aspect of formal access to the state is the *number of elections that a party can participate in*. Sikk (2006:49) calls this 'alternative access points'. More access points means that a new party has alternative arenas to develop support. Formal access also involves the formal rules, including election system, party registration requirements, funding for political parties, and access to public broadcasting (Lucardie, 2000:180). The last two have already been discussed in the section on the new parties' resources.

The effect of electoral rules is one of the most studied and debated areas of political science. There is an abundance of methods for measuring these effects (Ruiz-Rufino, 2011:267-268). When it comes to election systems Sikk (2006:49-50) argues that proportional elections systems do not have to be as advantageous for new parties as is commonly believed, it depends on how the party's support is distributed geographically. Single member districts

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<sup>15</sup> Lucaride also includes 'economic and political events'. While one-time, unpredictable events certainly can play a part in explaining the success of a new party (consider the success of Lijst Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands following the murder of the party's leader), it is difficult to include them in any sort of predictive model. They are in their nature quite random.

might actually mean that fewer votes are needed in order to gain representation, provided that the new party's support is concentrated to one area. A comparison between several studies on the effects of electoral system actually shows very unclear relationship between the degree of proportionality of a system and entry of new parties (Selb and Pituctin, 2010: 148-149). Instead of attempting to categorize electoral systems based on supposition of which is better for new parties a better alternative is to use a measure of the *necessary share of votes needed to win one seat in parliament*. A good example of this is the aggregated threshold function (Ruiz-Rufino, 2011), which combines several factors<sup>16</sup> into a measurement of how difficult it is for a party to gain for example one seat in parliament. As Ruiz-Rufino (2011:265) points out *legal thresholds* also need to be taken into account. A final important aspect of the formal rules is, as mentioned above, *registration requirements for new parties*.

### **Political culture**

Political culture can both help and hinder a new party, depending on how the mass media treat it and the attitude interest associations and social movements take towards it. By adopting a welcoming attitude these actors can give the new party legitimacy, both in the eyes of voters and potential members/activists. Parties faced with a hostile political culture can try to turn this to their advantage if they claim to represent an ideology that is repressed by the established parties (Lucardie, 2000:180-181). Research has shown that this can be an effective strategy, depending in part on how the established parties respond (Abedi, 2004). Sikk (2006:25-26) also includes the voters in the political culture and argues that the political culture might benefit new parties if voters have experienced new party success before and thus are more open towards new parties or if the volatility in the system is high. If the measure of media attention above only focused on the amount of attention, the focus here is on tone. We should thus look at if media, interest groups and social movements take a *welcoming or hostile attitude towards the new party*. We should also include a measure of *entry of new parties in previous elections* since this captures voters' attitudes towards taking a chance on a new party.

### **Response from the established parties**

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<sup>16</sup> These are "electoral formula, a vector that contains the distribution of all district magnitudes into which the county is divided, an integer that shows the total number of districts and the number of seats in the legislative assembly" as well as a measure of the number of potentially seat-winning parties (Ruiz-Rufino, 2011:259).

A new political party needs to identify, articulate or create a salient cleavage in order to gain votes. This cleavage can be existing or new, as we have seen above. The most important way in which the party does this is in formulating its political project. This aspect of the political opportunity structure is highly dependent on how the established parties act, as mentioned above. Unlike the media, interest groups and similar actors the response from the established parties is not only important for the public perception of the new party, it can also affect the new party's chances of appealing to the voters on the basis of its political project. The established parties can inadvertently help the new parties by changing their own positions so that a political space for the new party is created but they will probably attempt to hinder new parties by downplaying the importance of the cleavage or moving their own position so that they take over the new party's position (Lucardie, 2000:181). Meguid (2005) has studied the established parties' responses to niche parties that attempt to compete on a new issue, and identifies three possible strategies that an established party can adopt. A dismissive strategy means that the party tries to make the issue less salient by not taking a position, an accommodative strategy means that the established party attempts to take over issue ownership by moving close to the niche party's position and an adversarial strategy that means that the established party takes an opposing position to the niche party on the issue at hand. Meguid finds that the combination of the two main established parties' strategies is an important factor when it comes to explaining the results for the new parties. Somewhat simplified it can be said that any combination of dismissive and accommodative strategies will result in a vote loss for the niche party and adversarial strategies will result in a vote gain for the niche party. The strategy used by the established parties will however often change as they reassess the threat posed by the niche party. While Meguid does not study cleavages but rather issues, and niche parties rather than all new parties, the reasoning is very similar to Lucardie's. Her empirical results also give credibility to the theory that the response from the established party is an important factor in explaining why some new parties enter parliament and other do not. This indicates that a good way of looking at the importance of cleavages is *the main established parties' response to the political project proposed by the new party*.

### *How does it all fit together?*

A framework of political project, resources and political opportunity structures combine many of the factors needed to explain new party entry in a fruitful manner, and is flexible enough to



be useful in analyzing new parties of many shapes and kinds in many different contexts. The previous section identified the following factors that should be included in a framework for explaining new party:

#### Resources

- access to public funding/party subsidies*
- access to other sources of revenue*
- members*
- activists*
- amount of media attention*
- access to free broadcasting time*
- charismatic leadership*
- politically experienced leadership*

#### Political project

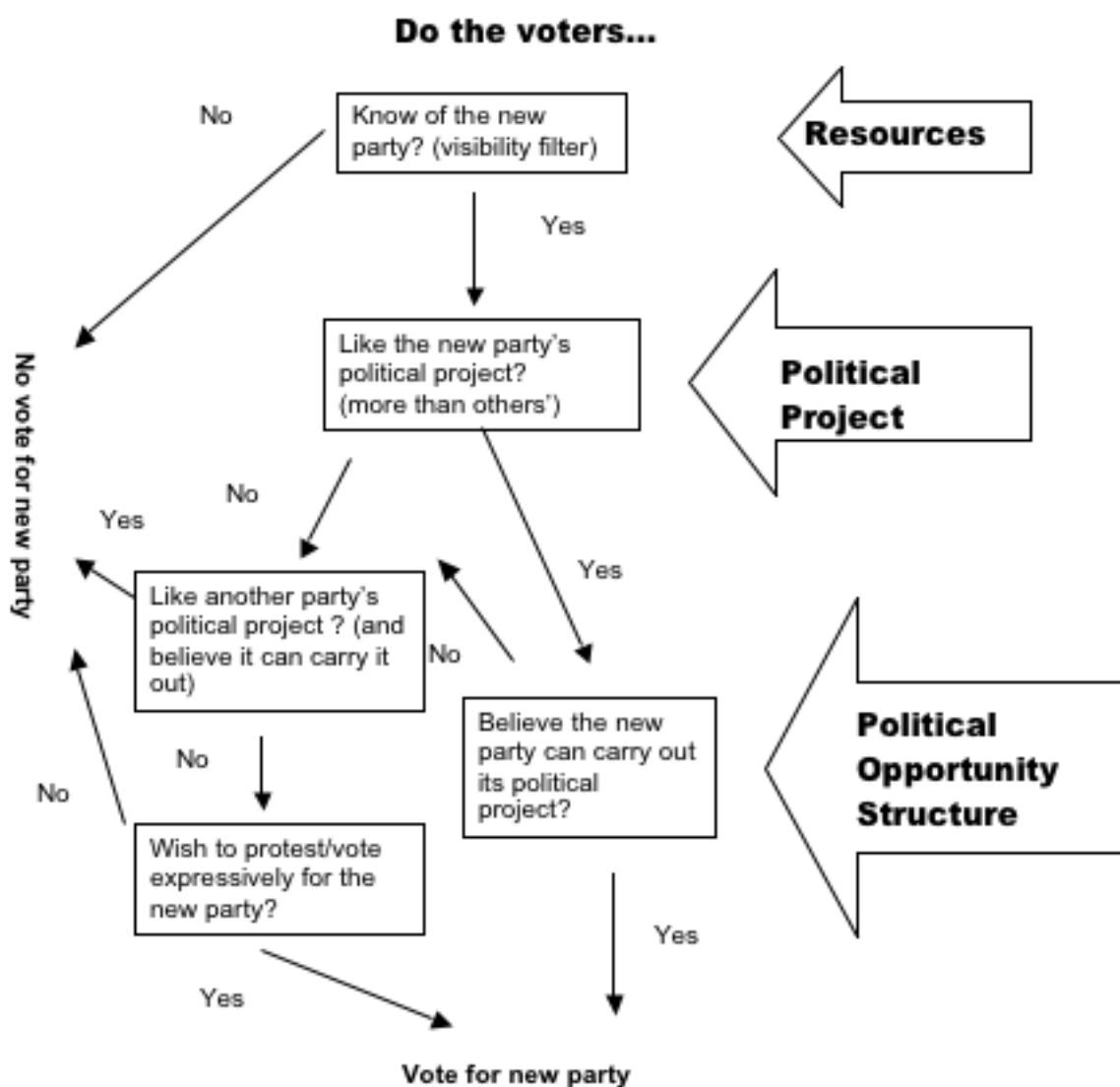
- type of political project (new group issues, new ideology, refining an existing ideology or anti-establishment agenda)*

#### Political opportunity structure

- number of elections the a party can participate in*
- necessary share of votes needed to win one seat in parliament*
- registration requirements for new parties*
- welcoming or hostile attitude towards the new party*
- entry of new parties in previous elections*
- the main established parties' response to the political project proposed by the new party*

However, simply listing factors that can have an effect is hardly a testable theory; the factors need to be linked. In the end, they are all concerned with explaining why a sufficient number of voters make the somewhat risky choice of voting for a new party. This can be conceptualized in several steps, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Explaining voters' decision to vote for a new political party



An alternative way of grouping these factors is to look at those that primarily require that we study the parties themselves, i.e. the resources and the political project<sup>17</sup>, and those that primarily require that we study the parties' surrounding environment, i.e. the political opportunity structure. Both are necessary for explaining why some new parties enter parliament and others do not.

We have now identified a useful theoretical framework that we can use to investigate differences between those new parties that enter parliament and those that do not, at different

<sup>17</sup> The political project is in a way an intermediate. We need to study the party itself to find out what its project is but also the other parties to find out what type of project it is.

stages in process of voters' decision to vote for the new parties. Now, however, we face a problem that all research on new parties must come to term with. How do we identify the negative cases, those new parties that did not enter parliament but that conceivable could have (cf. Hug, 2000)? This is where the European Parliament elections come in.

## Bringing in the European level

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Most of the research on new political parties has one thing in common; it's focused on the national level. While it is true that the national level is generally regarded as the most important level it is not the only electoral arena available to political entrepreneurs who want to establish a new party. Among the exceptions from this focus on the national level there are studies of new parties at the local or regional level (cf. Malmström, 1998; Erlingsson, 2005; Lago and Martinez, 2011) As acknowledged by this research one possible strategy is to start at the local or regional level and build support there before attempting elections at the national level (Lucardie, 2000:180).

But for parties in large parts of Europe there is, since 1979, another possible arena in which to establish a new party, the European Parliament. Is there some advantage to be gained from a successful European election for a new political party that wishes to enter national politics? There are some reasons to believe that this might be the case and some anecdotal evidence, both from political scientists and from debates in the media. Parties that have done well in the European elections are expected to gain resources, media attention or legitimacy in the eyes of the voters. A straightforward example of this can be found in a commentary on the 2004 EP elections in Greece, where LAOS won one seat and "thereby also won recognition and public financing. Its chances of survival as a party on the far right of the political spectrum certainly increased." (Mavrogordatos, 2005:1031). There have not, as far as I know, been any systematic studies of this phenomenon.

If we want to learn more about how new parties enter politics in a system with several levels we could study either the interactions between the local and national levels or between the national and European level. The interaction between the European and national levels is

particularly interesting, for a number of reasons. Reif and Schmitt (1980:11) already in their analysis of the very first European elections concluded that “Europe is different”. It is the only supranational election; all other first and second order elections take place within the national borders. There is transnational cooperation between the national parties, for which there are no parallels in the sub-national elections. “Yet these second-order elections are characterized by the same party system and are fought by the same parties as first-order elections, something that makes the relationship between first- and second order elections particularly interesting” (Marsh, 1998:592). At the same time there is much that we do not know about how these supranational elections influence the elections at the national level. For researchers interested in political parties the EP offers the perhaps widest range of parties of any political body. The number of parties represented at any one time has varied, both with the size of the parliament and the number of member states, but the number has steadily increased from about 60 in 1979 to more than 160 in 2009 (Nugent, 2010:193). These parties also represent a wide range of ideologies, from the far left to the far right, from highly EU-sceptical to fiercely pro-EU.

European elections are thus commonly portrayed as second order national elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). This implies, among other things, that voters should be more willing to vote for small parties and more prone to protest voting in European elections. If this is the case it would be logical to expect new parties to do better at the European level, compared with the national level. However, if the ultimate goal of the party is to enter national politics an electoral breakthrough at the European level might not matter if voters go back to supporting their usual parties in the national elections.

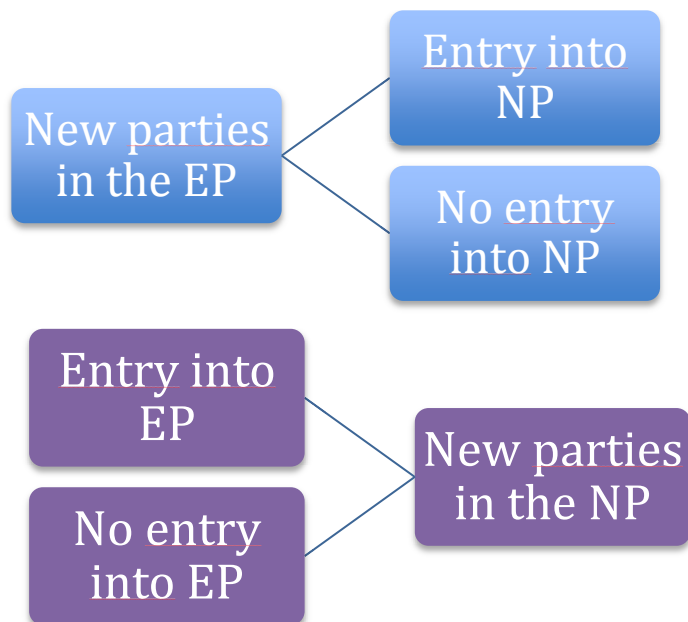
As the examples above have pointed out it is not that simple though, things can change for a party if it does well in an election. If a party enters the European Parliament, it might gain recognition as a viable party, better access to financing and so on. The question is then if these advantages are large enough to overcome the incentives for voters to go back to their usual party?

The second order election theory both as described by Reif and Schmitt (1980) and as used by others tends to be used only to analyze what happens between a national election and a European one. National elections are presumed to come first, and the results from those

elections are typically used to explain or predict the outcome at the EU level (cf. Hix and Marsh, 2007, Reif, 1984). Very little has been written about what the European elections can tell us about the national level, at least on a Europe wide level. The EP-elections are thus generally the dependent variable, that which is to be explained, in most studies that have anything to do with European elections. This one sidedness could either indicate that European elections are the more important or interesting thing to study, which does not go well together with the second order election theory's claim that much more is at stake in national elections, or that there is a widespread belief that European elections have no influence on national elections. However, the very nature of the second order election theory indicates that European elections *should* matter since it claims that European elections are really about the national level. This indicates a gap in existing research. At the same time, the research on the European integration's effect on national political parties, have tended to focus on the effect on established parties (cf. Poguntke et al, 2007; Carter and Poguntke, 2010) (Poguntke, Aylott et al. 2007; Carter and Poguntke 2010) or on the effect on national politics in general (cf Lewis and Mansfeldova, 2006), not on new or small parties.

This points to an interesting avenue of research into new parties. Given the second order election theory we should expect new party entry to be more common in the EP than in national parliaments. By studying the new parties that enter the EP we thus have a larger group of new parties than in any individual national political system, and not all of them will be successful at the national parliament.

Figure 2 Uses for the theoretical framework in the context of the European elections



By studying the electoral fortunes of new parties that have entered the EP we should thus be able both to answer the (largely empirical) question of what actually happens to the new parties – is the EP a shortcut into national politics? - and be able to study the influence of resources, political projects and the political opportunity structure on the new parties attempts to enter the national parliaments.

## The theoretical framework and the European elections

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Earlier a general framework for analyzing new party entry was elaborated, focused around the three factors resources, political project and political opportunity structure. In order to use the framework to specifically study the parties that have entered the EP we need to discuss how these factors might be affected by EP entry.



*Resources* is probably the factor that is most easily affected by what happens at the European level. Winning a seat in the European Parliament will in all likelihood result in more media attention. Member recruitment should be easier if the party is more well-known and an electoral success should inspire party activists. A similar argument could be made about leadership. If a party does well it should be more attractive for skilled leaders, and as Sikk (2006:50) points out winning a seat in a parliament might mean the opportunity for a party's leader to become a full time politician with some administrative support. Party financing is very complex, and has different rules in each country (Sikk, 2006:38) but it is not unreasonable to suppose that access to money should also be made easier by a successful European election either in the form of qualifying for party support or by making it easier for the party to obtain loans or donations.

Parties' *political projects* are not static, and evolve over time. It is not unthinkable that a new party might adjust its political project based on the experiences of the campaign or its time in the European Parliament. The experience of working together with other parties in the supranational party groups might be one potential source of change, as can the experience from the election campaign itself. Taking part in the daily activities in the European Parliament might also help the new party develop their own ideological identity. One study of Europeanization in established parties argues that policy formation processes can be affected by EU-membership (Poguntke 2007) but to my knowledge there are no similar studies on new parties. There is however no clear a priori reason to believe that a seat in the EP would change new parties' political project in a *systematic* manner. One specific type of political projects does deserve extra attention however; those that are mainly concerned with the EU itself.<sup>18</sup> The voter demand for such a project can be expected to be much lower at the national level and the parties in question might not even make the choice to run in the national elections.

The *political opportunity structure* could change in a number of ways. While the electoral rules will not change if a new party gains entry to the European Parliament, other aspects might. The party might automatically pass the registration requirements for the national parliamentary elections for example, and it is important to keep in mind that member states do not normally use the same electoral system for the European and national election. Entry into

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<sup>18</sup>In theory this might include both parties that are positive and negative to the EU, in practice there are only EU-skeptic parties represented in the EP.

the national parliament might thus be more or less difficult from a ‘mechanical’ point of view, compared with the party’s entry into the EP. Neither do the number of alternative access points change, but there is one important aspect to consider, the length of time between the elections. Research shows that the placement of the EP elections in the cycle of national elections plays an important role in explaining the relationship between the results for different types of parties (Marsh, 1998). The expectation is that for new parties a shorter time is preferable. A longer time between elections means having to keep up media attention and motivation among activists for a longer period of time and also gives the established parties time to come up with a strategy to counter this new challenge before the national, first order, election.

The political culture should not change in a systematic matter, except perhaps for the voters’ previous experience with new party entry. The response from the established parties should on the other hand change if a new party gains many votes in the European elections. Meguid (2005) has shown that established parties do adjust their strategies according to how large a threat the new party is seen as. Success at the European level should make a new party more of a threat than it was before, since it has then shown itself to be capable of winning a substantial number of votes in an election. A dismissive strategy in particular might no longer be an option for the established parties.

## Concluding remarks

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This paper has argued that a framework of resources, political projects and political opportunity structure is a fruitful way of analyzing the electoral fortunes of new political parties. By studying the parties in the context of European elections the framework can in fact be used to answer two important questions concerning new political parties. By comparing those parties that managed to take the step from the national to the European arena with those that did not we can find out which factors are important in determining the success of new political parties at the national arena, while avoiding the selection bias that plagues much research in this area. By comparing those parties that entered the national parliament after winning representation at the European level with those that have only been active at the national level we can find out if new parties can in fact gain an advantage by being

represented in the European parliament, taking into account those factors that should systematically change to the advantage or disadvantage of the new party given its entry into the European Parliament. Is it in fact possible for new parties to take a shortcut through Brussels?

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