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# Anti-Establishment Parties and Voters' Responses in Post-Communist Europe

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## Abstract

Starting with the third decade of post-communism, the emergence of many anti-establishment parties in Central and Eastern Europe reshaped the political landscape. Political parties remain key actors through their functions of representation, but it is unclear how they respond and adapt to recent challenges and developments. At the same time, the behavior of voters in such agitated times remains a puzzle. This special issue aims to outline several theoretical models of party and voter adaptation to the political realities, and to identify and explain various ways in which anti-establishment parties promote their discourse and how voters respond to it.

**Keywords:** political parties, populism, voters, electoral support, campaign

## Introduction

The first two decades of post-communist party politics were characterized by several broadly shared features. In terms of elections, the most common features were unstable political competition, high electoral volatility, and many entries and exits from the parliamentary arena. At a more general level there was high personalization of politics, cartelisation of politics, problematic political representation, incomplete implementation of the rule of law, and persistence of corruption including the use of patronage and clientelism (van Biezen, 2003; Webb and White, 2007; Grzymala-Busse, 2008; Kopecký, Mair and Spirova, 2012; Berglund, Ekman and Deegan-Krause, 2013; Gherghina, 2014).

However, starting with the third decade of post-communism, the emergence of many anti-establishment parties reshaped the political landscape. They brought new challenges to the process of representation and provided voters with a number of new alternatives in political competition. This development could be seen as a potential problem. While political parties are essential to representative democracies, too many of them can be harmful to democracy. The more parties there are running for election, the more difficult it is for the voters to make up their minds. The more parties there are in parliament, the more difficult it is to form stable government coalitions. Moreover, the more frequent the turnover of governments, the more likely it is that the political system slides into a state of decision-making paralysis or, in the worst case, eventually results in a form of authoritarian rule.

This special issue in *Problems of Post-Communism* covers some of these elements and aims to achieve two scholarly objectives. At the theoretical level, this collection of articles attempts to outline a few theoretical models of party and voter adaptation to the new political environment. Discussions of this topic often centre around empirical matters much more than around general arguments and theoretical explanatory models. Therefore, one of this special issue's aims is to enrich the theoretical debate about the validity and applicability of old theories as well as the emergence of new theories explaining the adaptation strategies of post-communist parties. New theoretical avenues are explored to provide important explanations for the ways in which voters respond to the discourse of anti-establishment parties. The collection of articles includes a number of novel contributions to the literature on party-voter

linkages in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe. These are illustrated especially in the first three articles of the special issue.

At the empirical level, the special issue strives to identify and explain various ways in which anti-establishment parties promote their discourse and how voters respond to it. The contributions highlight a variety of settings that range from a shift in political discourse (the article by Dragoman) or the adoption of a new campaigning strategy (the article by Voda and Havlik) to organizational developments (the article by Winclawska et al.) or voters' attitudes (the article by Zagórski and Santana). In this sense, the contributions cover both the supply and the demand side, exploring the interactions between these, which is visible in particular in Gherghina and Bankov's article. The articles cover a broad range of countries in the form of case studies on Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland and Romania, alongside a comparative article covering several countries in the post-communist region. The articles draw mainly on primary data collection, thus bringing an important contribution to the study of anti-establishment parties and voters' reactions. The following lines highlight the ways in which each article contributes to the theoretical and empirical objectives of the special issue.

In the first article on "Exit or Voice: Abstention and Support for Populist Radical Right Parties in Central and Eastern Europe," Piotr Zagórski and Andrés Santana analyze the individual-level factors that differentiate between those choosing voice (vote for populist radical-right parties) and exit (abstention from voting) in the 2019 European Parliament elections. Despite the growing literature on populist radical-right parties, the relationship between turnout and populist voting remains understudied, especially for Central and Eastern Europe. Their findings show that anti-immigration and Eurosceptic attitudes increase the odds of voting for populist radical-right parties instead of abstaining, like in Western Europe. Zagórski and Santana explain this by the mainstreaming of populist radical-right parties in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland. The "populist establishment" (Enyedi, 2020) is a key innovation of the populist radical-right parties in Central and Eastern Europe. This type of discourse channels public discontent toward the EU, minorities, judges, or liberal elites.

Another theoretical dimension of public support for populist parties is presented in Petr Voda and Vlastimil Havlik's paper on "The Rise of Populists and Decline of Others: Explanation of Changes in Party Support in the Czech Republic". Analyzing long-term effects of changes in external conditions on the support for populist parties, the paper confirms the importance of political dissatisfaction for the rise of populist parties. At the same time, this effect is limited by the presence of other protest parties. While the evidence of the effects of the economic context is mixed, the analysis indicates the importance of time and of election campaigns in particular. Voda and Havlik point to the importance of campaign dynamics, the party system setting, and incumbency in assessing support for populist parties in Central Europe. These findings are important for the development of theoretical models on populist voting.

More specifically, new political parties with a populist rhetoric met and fuelled the critical attitudes of citizens towards the political establishment. Similar political parties existed in the post-communist region in the past (Minkenberg, 2002; Gherghina, Miscoiu and Soare, 2013; Pirro, 2015; Mudde, 2017). Also this development is similar to the overall political trajectory of the last decade in the West. However, the diversity of anti-democratic or anti-elitist parties in recent times is increasing dramatically, and challenges the usual principles of representation (Minkenberg, 2015; Pirro, 2015; van Kessel, 2015; Gherghina and Fagan, 2021; Gherghina and Soare, 2021). The rise and fall of such parties not only increased the competitiveness of

elections, but also incentivized mainstream parties to change their approach. In this period, established political actors faced an important erosion of support, losing elections or being unable to join coalition governments as often as they used to. A supplementary indicator of this dynamic at the institutional level in Central and Eastern Europe is the occurrence of several early elections. These peculiarities of anti-establishment parties in the post-communist region compared to those in the West are covered by three articles in this special issue. These are the comparative analysis authored by Zagórski and Santana, the Czech case study signed by Voda and Havlik, and the insights into the Romanian case provided by Dragoman.,

At the individual level, a particular type of political leadership with authoritarian tendencies has a strong appeal to the public in several countries. This focus on leadership happens at a higher rate than before and is highly convergent with a nationalist discourse (Batory, 2016; Fomina and Kucharczyk, 2016; Hanley and Vachudova, 2018). This shift takes place in parallel with the personalization of politics, a process through which persons – usually the party leaders – are associated with political institutions; they become recognizable faces and anchors of identification. Even in those post-communist countries once characterized by stable patterns of competition such as Hungary or the Czech Republic, the last decade brought to the fore the personality of leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Andrej Babiš who changed the public discourse (Batory, 2016; Antal, 2019; Gherghina, 2020).

These two major types of challenges are likely to affect political parties and voting behavior. In most post-communist countries, political parties remain key actors in domestic politics through their functions of interest aggregation and representation. This happens in spite of many features that would indicate a low importance of parties in decision-making. Namely, people have little confidence in parties and politicians, the levels of partisan loyalty are minimal, the membership rates remain quite low, and the patterns of competition continue to be quite unstable (Millard, 2004; Enyedi and Casal Bértoa, 2011; Gherghina, 2014; Závecz, 2017; Gherghina, Iancu and Soare, 2018). In this challenging environment, it remains unclear how parties respond and adapt to the developments outlined above. One of these is the incertitude about voting behavior. Some voters react positively to the anti-establishment discourse (e.g. Hungary or Poland), while others punish such actors, allowing them only episodic presence in parliament (e.g. Bulgaria or Romania).

Yet another gap in the literature is addressed by Sergiu Gherghina and Petar Bankov in their article “Who Follows the Referendum Campaign? The Effect of Political Interest and Media Use in Bulgaria”. The content of referendum campaigns and their effects on voters has been broadly covered in the literature. However, there is little information about who follows the campaigns. To address this issue, Gherghina and Bankov analyze what determines that people who vote in referendums pay attention to the actual political campaign. The analysis focuses on the 2016 referendum in Bulgaria, and uses individual-level data from an original public opinion survey. The findings indicate that high interest in politics and the use of traditional media increased the level of campaign following. Online news consumption and political participation had a lower positive effect.

The article of Dragoș Dragoman focuses on a newly formed party in Romania - the “Save Romania” Union – that achieved important electoral results in both national elections in which it competed (2016 and 2020). The central argument of the contribution is that the party emerged as an important political actor by reviving old populist themes in a radical manner. The article proposes a new concept of *recombinant populism* that reflects the party’s ability to reconnect anti-communism, an old populist theme specific to the first stages of post-

communism, with contemporary anti-corruption campaigns. As such, it mixes the most salient political issues from the Romanian post-communist transition with a solid anti-elitist and anti-establishment orientation. This combination is appealing to specific segments in the electorate, which placed the party as third in parliament.

The special issue concludes with a paper by Maria Winćławska, Anna Paczećniak, Barbara Brodzińska-Mirowska and Michać Jacuński on “Party Management from the Perspective of Party Members: Evidence from Poland”. The article deals with the problem of managing party organizations from the perspective of party members. Using the concept of participatory management, the authors seek to unveil the profile of party members associated with this type of management. The analysis is conducted on a large dataset of 2,500 members coming from six Polish political parties. The results show that the members assess party management more positively when they are more actively involved in the party and when the members perceive they can influence the party decisions. The results have important implications both for the intra-party dynamics and for the inter-party competition.

This special issue shows that the emergence of anti-establishment parties is a dynamic phenomenon that has several competing explanations. The legacy of communism continues to some extent to influence politics and certain societal issues in the region (Berglund, Ekman and Deegan-Krause, 2013; Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2017). For example, political competition is structured around different issues in countries that have experienced decades of communist rule. Rather than being structured by proper political cleavages, party-voter linkages in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe seem to be increasingly determined by a number of issue-divides such as nationalism, corruption, family values, abortion, LGBTQI+ rights and, more recently, anti-immigration. As illustrated by most articles in this special issue, anti-establishment parties have obviously gained from this development. At the same time, the special issue brings important evidence showing that issue divides are not the only part of the story. The complex interplay between political parties and voters is nuanced and includes several components. On the supply side, the party organization, discourse, incumbency and the way in which they conduct campaigns play a role in their appeal to the population. On the demand side, voters’ pre-existing attitudes towards salient issues, political interest, and engagement in politics influence their responsiveness to party messages. Several country-specific characteristics such as the revival of old themes, party system format, or the media environment are also valid explanations and deserve further exploration.

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