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RESEARCH NOTE

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PROPHETS, PURIFIERS AND PROLOCUTORS

Towards a Theory on the Emergence of New Parties

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ABSTRACT

The foundation and electoral success of a new party can be attributed mainly to three factors: (1) its political project, which should address problems considered urgent by substantial sections of the electorate; (2) its resources: members, money, management and mass media exposure; and (3) the political opportunity structure: positions of other relevant parties as well as institutional, socio-economic and cultural conditions. These factors, however, affect different types of new parties differently. 'Prophetic' parties, which articulate a new ideology, are successful if the ideology can be linked to latent or 'subterranean' traditions, provided they can mobilize sufficient resources. 'Purifiers', which refer to an ideology that has been betrayed or diluted by established parties, and prolocutors, which represent interests neglected by established parties, depend mainly on the political opportunity structure and specifically the position of established parties with respect to salient cleavages and issues, as well as on the electoral system.

KEY WORDS ■ new parties ■ party competition ■ party formation

Newcomers are rarely given a warm welcome, especially when they claim their share of scarce resources. This applies to parties as well as people. New parties have to negotiate many hurdles before they win a seat in parliament, let alone a share of governmental power. In most party systems, only a few new parties make it to parliament, while a majority fall along the wayside. The purpose of this article is to discuss the factors causing the electoral success of the happy few.[1]

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A Relevant Political Project

The first condition founders of a new political party have to meet is the articulation of a clear and convincing *political* project which addresses social problems considered urgent by a significant number of voters. The term 'problem' implies an actor-orientated approach; institutionalists, functionalists and behaviouralists may prefer terms like 'social strain' or 'stress' instead (see, for example, Daalder, 1966; Pinard, 1975; Hauss and Rayside, 1978; Jaschke, 1987; Hug, 1990). However, the problem need not be as objective as these terms suggest. Objective conditions like a shortage of housing, mass unemployment or environmental pollution are perceived as social problems by most people in contemporary Western Europe, but are accepted as 'the way things are' in other places or at other times. The perception of social problems is embedded in ideological or cultural assumptions about society and human nature. Thus, very few social problems exist in either fatalistic or individualistic cultures, whereas they abound in egalitarian cultures, to use the typology of Thompson et al. (1990).

The social problems have to be translated into political issues with political solutions. Solutions to problems like a shortage of housing can vary from specific measures like building 100,000 houses to abstract ideas about the transition from capitalism to socialism. The former solution – proposed by a Dutch party named 'Safe Traffic and 100,000 houses a year' (*Veilig verkeer en 100.000 woningen per jaar*) in 1963 – appears pragmatic but is inevitably embedded in an implicit ideology, very likely the dominant ideology at the time, or a mixture of prevailing ideologies.[2] Quite often, the people preparing a new party claim to do away with all outdated ideologies and to represent only certain interests or advocate certain issues. Yet even the project of building 100,000 houses implies ideas about the role of the state and the economic order: a classical *laissez-faire* liberal, for example, would not even regard this as a political project but as a business plan.

I propose to call this type of party, which tries to articulate particular interests without reference to an explicit ideology, *prolocutors*. Usually, a prolocutor party will represent groups neglected – or perceived by the groups themselves to be neglected – by established parties, because they lack numerical or economic weight: ethnic minorities, farmers, senior citizens, peripheral regions. Often, this type of party disappears from the scene as soon as it has managed to put the interests of its clients on the political agenda – if not before that. Yet if the prolocutor parties last long enough, they may deviate from their original ideology and develop their own particular mixture of ideas. This happened to the Dutch Farmers' Party (Boerenpartij), founded by discontented farmers in the late 1950s, which turned into a populist conservative party in the 1960s.

Parties that refer explicitly to ideological projects can be divided into two types. One type clings to an existing ideology, which it feels is diluted or betrayed by one (or more) of the established parties. Quite often, the

founders of this type of new party were dissident members of an established party which revised its traditional ideology. This can happen when the established party adopts a more moderate programme, but also when it shifts to a more radical position. When European Social Democratic parties dropped Marxist tenets and moved towards the political centre in the 1950s, left-wing dissidents often broke away and set up radical parties like the Socialist People's Party in Denmark or the Pacifist Socialist Party in the Netherlands (Van der Land, 1962; Logue, 1982). And when social democratic parties in Britain, Denmark, France, Luxembourg and the Netherlands shifted to the left in the 1970s, moderate groups broke away and founded more 'pure' social democratic parties (Lucardie, 1991). In either case, the new parties claimed to defend and 'purify' the original ideology of their reference party; even if they began to deviate surreptitiously or unwittingly from it as time went on. Hence I would like to call this type *purifying parties* or *challengers*, to borrow the term introduced by Thomas Rochon for a very similar kind of party (1985).

A new party need not stick to old ideologies, however. New ideologies may develop around new issues, like the ecological crisis or tensions between traditional culture and immigrant cultures. This will occur especially when established parties appear to ignore or neglect these issues (again, in the eyes of the concerned citizens). Rochon calls this type of party 'mobilizers' but does not distinguish them from the prolocutor parties discussed above. To make this distinction clear, I prefer the term *prophetic parties*.[3]

To distinguish new issues and ideologies from old ones is more simple in theory than in practice, however. Some ideologies that appear new at first sight turn out to be updated versions of rather old recipes. Thus it seems an open question whether parties of the New Right have developed a new ideology or rehashed ethnocentric nationalism mixed with economic liberalism (see Ignazi, 1992). In a similar vein, one could question the appropriateness of the term 'New Left' (see Lucardie, 1980). Moreover, founders of new parties often brew their own cocktail of old and new ideological elements. For example, the Natural Law Party (founded in many European countries as well as in Canada and the USA around 1992 by leading members of the Transcendental Meditation movement around Maharishi Yogi) derives inspiration from the ancient Indian Vedas as well as from modern science and ecology (Lucardie, 1995: 134–5; Natuurwetpartij, 1998). Occasionally, the mixture of ideology seems too opaque and confounded to make sense to anyone outside the party founders. This *idiosyncratic* or *personal vehicle* (in Rochon's terms) type of party may serve to solve the personal problems of the founders, rather than any significant social problems.

Thus one can distinguish four types of new parties, depending on the kind of political project they pursue: prolocutors, purifiers (or challengers), prophets and personal vehicles (or idiosyncratic parties). Rochon expected the challengers to be more successful in the short run than the prophetic parties and prolocutors. The latter had to develop a new political identity,

whereas challengers could appeal to an existing identity. In the long run, however, once the 'mobilizers' had carved out an electoral niche for themselves, they would do better. The Dutch data Rochon used appear to confirm his hypothesis. Replications in 1989 and 1994 lead to some qualifications, however (Lucardie, 1990, 1995). In the first place, Rochon did not distinguish between prolocutors and prophetic parties. Whereas the latter do develop an ideological identity, the former tend to disintegrate before they do so.[4] In the second place, he did not look at parties that participated in elections without winning any seats at all. Many prophetic and prolocutor parties never enter parliament but die at its doorstep, so to speak.[5] In the third place, even if Rochon were right about the Dutch parties, his conclusions may not apply to other countries. Perhaps Dutch political culture favours prophetic parties – as a legacy of its sectarian Calvinist past? I return to this criticism – which might be voiced against my hypotheses as well – later.

Sufficient Mobilization of Resources

New parties may need ideologies not so much to win voters as to recruit members (yet cf. Fisher, 1974: 169–71). Members are only one important resource for a new party. A party needs resources in order to develop a political organization; without them, its project will remain a political fantasy in the head of its *auctor intellectualis*. The resource mobilization approach was borrowed from economics by students of social and political movements, often in a critical reaction against structural and functionalist explanations (see Zald and McCarthy, 1979; Lapeyronnie, 1988). However, it may be applied to new parties, especially in their early 'proto-party' stage, when they cannot easily be distinguished from social movements. In the 'proto-party' stage, it is often unclear whether the organization will participate in elections – thus becoming a 'real' party – or develop into a pressure group, political club or social movement. As Lapeyronnie (1988: 603) points out, social movements mobilize resources in order to enter the political system and take part in the decision-making process – which is exactly what new parties try to do as well.

The resource mobilization perspective seems consistent with a rational, actor-orientated approach, even if one rejects the narrow, economistic or utilitarian cost–benefit calculations practised by some of its advocates (see Fireman and Gamson, 1979). The notion of 'resources' can be broadened to include not only money and material goods, but also personal skills and contacts, publicity, even commitment to ideological values (Freeman, 1979: 170–4). However, broadening the notion too much makes it meaningless, as Lapeyronnie (1988: 604) warns.

The kinds of resources that are available to actors depend on the social and political system and its development. In systems without a consolidated

party system and without an independent civil service, new parties are often founded 'from the top down' by regional or national government leaders who use government jobs and services as the main resources to win voters. This seems to have been the case in parts of Eastern Europe after 1989, but it also happened in many American cities in the 19th and 20th centuries (Perkins, 1996; Shefter, 1994). If an independent civil service prevented massive use of patronage, elites had to use other means to mobilize voters, such as support from the established churches – often given only reluctantly, as the Catholic or Protestant parties which they founded tended to free themselves from the control by Conservative elites as well as church leaders (Kalyvas, 1996). New parties may also be founded 'from below' by activists in oppositional social movements. Thus labour movements gave birth to many socialist parties in Europe during the late 19th century, while 'new social movements' of environmentalists, pacifists and feminists often acted as midwives in the birth-process of green or left-libertarian parties around 1980 (Kitschelt, 1988; Müller-Rommel, 1993: 147–61). Other new parties, however, lack all of these resources and depend only on the commitment of a few dedicated members, the personality of their leaders and the 'free publicity' the latter manage to attract. Even so, they may still win a few seats in parliament, under fortuitous circumstances, as shown by the sudden success of the senior citizen parties in the Dutch elections of 1994 or the Lega Lombarda and Northern League in Italy (see Ruzza and Schmidtke, 1993; Van Stipdonk and Van Holsteyn, 1996).

While a new party needs at least some resources to inform its potential voters about its projects, sufficient resources do not guarantee electoral success. This is demonstrated by the failure of the relatively rich Natural Law Party in Western Europe and North America in the 1990s; and by the rather late success of the Dutch Socialist Party (SP) which, in spite of large funds and thousands of members, tried five times in vain to enter parliament before it finally succeeded in 1994 (Voerman, 1994; Lucardie, 1995: 138, 142). However, a combination of sufficient members, publicity and funds seems a necessary (if not a sufficient) condition for success.[6] In other words, in order to win seats, a new party needs a minimal number of members, a minimal campaign budget and a minimal amount of publicity. Once a minimum quantity of resources has been mobilized, other factors become more important: the political project and the political opportunity structure.

Political Opportunity Structure

If people develop a relevant political project and manage to mobilize sufficient resources, they will probably build a 'proto-party': a political organization that might evolve into a political party (Pedersen, 1982). Alternatively, the proto-party could become a political pressure group, a political club or think-tank outside the party system, or even a faction within

an established party. The choice depends to some extent on the available resources, but above all on the *opportunity structure* of the political system. This also determines to a large extent whether a new party wins seats and power or remains a fringe party without any members of parliament. The term 'political opportunity structure' was first used in studies about social movements, but was applied to the rise of green parties by Herbert Kitschelt (1988) and later by Ferdinand Müller-Rommel (1993: 93–8). Yet similar ideas had already been hinted at by Fisher (1974: 153–72). Even an actor-orientated approach cannot do without some kind of structural or environmental variable: actors do not determine their own fate completely, no matter how hard they try.

The notion of a political opportunity structure is rather broad and must be specified more precisely. Kriesi (1995) distinguished four aspects: formal access to the state; informal procedures and dominant strategies (some would call this political culture); interest associations, and the configuration of power in the party system. Although he writes about new social movements, again one might substitute 'new parties' here, with some qualifications.

Formal access to the state is usually more open in federal systems like Switzerland or Germany, and more restricted in centralized states like France or the Netherlands. Federalism offers a new party more opportunities to develop a regional base before trying its luck at national elections. In his comparative analysis of green parties, Müller-Rommel (1993: 118–20) finds they do better in federal systems than in centralized states.

Political elites can facilitate, tolerate or repress new parties and new social movements by formal as well as informal procedures, like party registration, subsidies and allocation of broadcasting time on public channels – not to mention manipulation of the electoral system. As one might expect, a single-member-plurality or 'first-past-the-post' electoral system offers few political opportunities to new parties, unless they cater to particular regional interests (like the Canadian Bloc Québecois or the Scottish National Party). Comparative analyses of election data by Arend Lijphart (1990) and by Matthew Soberg Shugart (1992) seem to confirm the proposition, even if both authors warn that the effect of the electoral system should not be overestimated. Other formal institutions, such as a presidentialist regime, may also affect the opportunities for new parties – probably in a negative direction, as presidential elections tend to foster polarization and concentration of parties.

Apart from formal institutional barriers like registration procedures and electoral thresholds, new parties have to deal with informal procedures and cultural barriers. Political cultures may be more or less conformist, tolerant or indifferent with respect to newcomers. More specifically, mass media may nip a new party in the bud by ignoring or ridiculing it when it tries to enter the political arena; large interest associations and social movements may be more or less reluctant to establish contacts with new and small parties. In a different sense, however, political culture can help particular new parties if

they tap historical traditions and 'subterranean' ideologies that may have been neglected or repressed by established parties in recent years. For example, nationalism has strong historical roots in countries like France, Germany and the Flemish part of Belgium, but not in the Netherlands and England. Because of its association with fascism and national-socialism it was frowned upon in all of these countries after 1945; yet it was resuscitated in Flanders, France and, to a lesser extent, in Germany in the 1980s, while it has remained marginal in England and the Netherlands, due to the different 'cultural opportunity structures' (Winkler, 1996: 41–2).

Another important aspect of the opportunity structure concerns salient cleavages in society. Thus a prophetic party will try to articulate or even construct a new cleavage. Socialist parties articulated class conflict and Catholic and Calvinist parties politicized religion in the 19th century, while green parties may articulate postmaterialist values today. A purifying party depends more on existing cleavages: if established parties shift their position with respect to these cleavages, because of changing interests of the party elites or external pressures (from social change), they may create political space for newcomers. Thus the already mentioned Dutch Socialist Party entered parliament in 1994 after the Labour Party had shifted towards the centre and alienated some leftist working-class voters (Voerman, 1994; Van der Steen, 1995). The decline of the Catholic and Calvinist 'pillars' – which linked political, educational, professional and other social organizations – in the Netherlands also created opportunities for several new and 'pure' Catholic or Calvinist parties, such as the Roman Catholic Party of the Netherlands (Rooms-Katholieke Partij Nederland, RKPN) and the Reformed Political Federation (RPF) (Lucardie, 1986: 74–8). Of course, established parties will try to prevent a new party from succeeding by 'stealing' planks from its platform, or by depicting its project as subversive and dangerous, immoral, too expensive or simply impossible to realize.

Finally, political and economic events such as a leadership crisis in an established party, rising unemployment or inflation might be regarded as part of the political opportunity structure – though 'political conjuncture' seems a more adequate term here. In his classical study on new parties in Canada, Pinard (1975: 247–50) referred to economic deprivation resulting from unemployment and 'the shrinking economic position' of small businessmen and farmers as the main factor explaining the rise of the Social Credit party in Quebec, in combination with the weakness of the established opposition party, the Conservatives, in the province. However, in an extensive analysis of English constituencies from 1979 to 1987, Eagles and Erfle (1993: 100) found no significant correlations between unemployment and support for third parties. Perhaps more important than objective unemployment figures are subjective perceptions of the economic situation and beliefs about the responsibility of government for this situation. Mrs Thatcher may have convinced English voters that unemployment should be blamed on individual failure or unfair competition from foreign countries

rather than on her own government. Yet occasionally the 'political conjuncture' does favour new parties. A clear example, which cannot be easily explained otherwise, seems to be the sudden emergence of senior citizen parties in the Netherlands in 1994 (Van Stipdonk and Van Holsteyn, 1996). It was followed by their almost equally rapid demise in the following 4 years. In 1994, the established Dutch parties had neglected or underestimated the growing concern of elderly people over their pensions, but by 1998 they had learned their lesson.

In the future, perhaps 'chaos theories' will help us to take into account the enormous variety of short-term incidental factors that contribute to the success of new parties (cf. Brown, 1995: 48–9); for the time being, the theory about the emergence of new parties remains incomplete and 'under construction'.

Conclusions

The following propositions have been discussed here.

1 New parties need a political project that caters to social problems perceived as important by significant numbers of voters in order to win support.
2 A new party aiming at (ideological) 'purification' of an established party seems more likely to win one or more seats in parliament than a 'prophetic' party trying to mobilize voters for a new ideology or new political issue, at least in the short run; in the long run, prophetic parties may be more successful.
3 New parties will fail to win seats if they cannot mobilize at least a minimum amount of resources, specifically: a certain number of members, a certain sum of money, some mass media attention and effective leadership. Jobs (patronage) and support from mass organizations are not necessary but are very helpful resources, too.
4 A single-member-plurality system or 'first-past-the-post' electoral system offers few political opportunities to new parties, unless they cater to particular regional interests; whereas proportional representation systems are more hospitable for parties that cater to (neglected) national interests or ideologies.
5 New parties – especially prophetic parties – will be more successful if they tap historical traditions and ideologies that may have been neglected or repressed by established parties in recent years.
6 New parties – especially purifiers – will more often win a seat if established parties change their position with respect to salient cleavages; prophetic parties have to articulate or construct new cleavages.
7 All new parties, but especially a 'prolocutor' representing particular interests without an explicit ideology, depend on the 'political conjuncture':

economic and political events that affect the position of established parties and create political space for newcomers.

Empirical and historical data from the Netherlands have illustrated the hypotheses, but comparative research is required to test them. Some of the hypotheses presented here may have little validity elsewhere. The Dutch tradition of religious tolerance and institutionalized ideological pluralism (pillarization) may help purifying parties and to a lesser extent prophetic parties. The same tradition may reduce the chances for idiosyncratic parties and prolocutors that lack ideological roots. Comparisons with different as well as somewhat similar countries are needed to provide answers to these questions. Thus, research about new parties may throw more light on differences between political cultures, as well as between party systems.

Notes

1 The ideas developed here result from study of the literature and from research in The Netherlands carried out by the author since 1989; they will subsequently also be tested in research in Canada and Germany.
2 In fact the above-mentioned Dutch party seemed committed to a liberal ideology, and cooperated closely with a party called the Liberal Union; neither ever won a seat in parliament.
3 Also because the term 'mobilizer' may be confusing, as practically all (new and old) parties try to mobilize voters.
4 The Dutch Farmers' Party survived for about 23 years, but the other prolocutor parties that held seats in the Dutch parliament after 1945 disintegrated within 5 years (the two senior citizen parties which entered the Dutch parliament in 1994) or even 2 years (the Nederlandse Middenstandspartij, a small-businessmen's party which was founded in 1970, won two seats in the Dutch parliament in 1971 and fell apart in 1972).
5 This happened to eight out of nine 'mobilizers' (prolocutors and prophetic parties) in 1989 and to eight out of ten 'mobilizers' in 1994.
6 Correlations between votes on the one hand and membership, publicity and campaign funds of new Dutch parties on the other hand were significant but not very high in 1994 (Lucardie, 1995: 137–8).

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