

Book Review: *Centrist Anti-Establishment Parties and Their Struggle for Survival* by Sarah Engler

Centrist Anti-Establishment Parties and Their Struggle for Survival

By SARAH ENGLER

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The frequent emergence, rapid electoral success, and fast decline of new political parties have been among the distinguishing features of politics in Central and Eastern Europe over the last couple of decades (e.g., Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015, 2020). In her excellent new monograph, Sarah Engler offers a fresh perspective on this phenomenon, focusing on the group of parties that she terms “centrist anti-establishment parties” (CAPs). According to Engler, CAPs are new parties that seek to appeal to voters not by offering a clear ideological alternative to existing parties but rather by vehemently criticizing established political elites, typically for their alleged corruption, dishonesty, or incompetence. Unlike radical anti-establishment parties, CAPs challenge the establishment while remaining within the mainstream of their party systems.

Such ideologically moderate newcomers have accounted for much of the political change in the post-communist EU member states since 2000. However, while CAPs have been among the most electorally successful new parties in the region, they have also been generally characterized by a failure to maintain stable electoral support over time. Engler’s book focuses on the key question of why some such parties survive, becoming stable and important actors in their party systems, while others do not, dropping out of parliament just as quickly as they emerged. In her endeavour to solve this research puzzle, Engler employs an impressive mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, combining data from expert and voter surveys with insights gleaned from dozens of interviews with party officials, MPs, activists, and country experts.

After introducing the CAP concept in the first chapter of the book, Engler examines the nature of these parties' electoral appeal. Using an original expert survey tracking the salience of anti-establishment and anti-corruption rhetoric of parties in the post-communist EU member states (Engler, Armingeon, and Deegan-Krause 2021), Engler makes a significant empirical contribution by systematically showing how politicizing corruption has been a key element in the electoral campaigns of CAPs that emerged between 2000 and 2016. This part of the book also brings the important finding that these parties may be less centrist than previously assumed, as many combine their non-ideological anti-corruption appeals with relatively distinct liberal or conservative stances on the cultural dimension.

In the third chapter, Engler develops the main theoretical contribution of the book: a framework for explaining the survival of CAPs based on their electoral strategy. She argues that since CAPs initially rely strongly on their novelty appeal to attract voters, they tend to quickly lose their electoral advantage, especially as many of them enter government immediately after their first election. Thus, to successfully retain support in subsequent elections, CAPs must modify their original "pure protest" strategy. To do so, they can choose from three main strategies. First, as part of the *mainstream* strategy, CAPs can drop their anti-establishment and anti-corruption rhetoric, seeking to transform themselves into a mainstream party. Second, they can also adopt the *issue* strategy, which entails dropping anti-establishment rhetoric while focusing on politicizing corruption in an attempt to gain ownership of the anti-corruption issue. Third, CAPs can employ the *reframed protest* strategy, maintaining their original anti-establishment and anti-corruption claims while moving away from the ideological mainstream, for example by adopting a radical-right populist position. Using the latter strategy, CAPs reframe the meaning of "the establishment" to distinguish themselves from other parties on different terms than their original "pure protest" appeal based on novelty and anti-corruption.

In the subsequent empirical chapter, Engler demonstrates that only those CAPs that adopted one of the three strategies were able to survive in the long term. The argument is further bolstered through in-depth case studies of three successful CAPs: the Polish Law and Justice (PiS), the Latvian Unity (V), and the Slovak Direction (Smer), with each case serving as a detailed illustration of one of the three strategies. PiS opted for reframing its protest appeal, transforming itself into a populist radical-right party. In contrast, Unity and Smer both dropped their anti-establishment discourse. Unity focused on anti-corruption, while Smer dropped both its anti-establishment and anti-corruption appeals, seeking instead to become a mainstream party occupying the economically left and socially conservative part

of the political spectrum. Unfortunately, since the analysis stops at the 2020 elections, Smer's more recent shift to overtly far-right sociocultural positions is not covered. In general, while the case studies describe the development of the parties' electoral strategies in detail, the emphasis is primarily placed on party agency. Consequently, it seems that Engler missed an opportunity to explore more deeply how external factors, such as political opportunity structures, impact CAPs' programmatic shifts.

Chapter 6 is perhaps the most interesting part of the book, presenting an innovative study of how the ideological positions of CAPs' voters constrain the parties' ability to successfully change strategies. Relying on voter survey data, Engler demonstrates that an initial electorate that is homogeneous in terms of economic position makes it more likely that CAPs can successfully adopt one of the three strategies. Conversely, a more heterogeneous support base puts the parties at greater risk of losing voters if they change their electoral appeal. The book thus concludes that ideological anchoring is an important determinant of the long-term survival of CAPs, which is unexpected given the supposedly non-ideological nature of their appeal. This finding aligns with earlier research that found that even in the relatively unstable post-communist party systems, ideology still plays a role in structuring party competition (Rovny and Polk 2017).

Overall, the book makes an important contribution to the literature on party politics, providing a new theoretical framework that can be tested in contexts beyond the post-communist region. However, it seems that the focus on electoral strategy does not quite explain the whole story of the success and failure of CAPs. Although Engler argues that these parties are generally underdeveloped organizationally, exploring the potential interaction between certain organizational features of CAPs and their electoral strategies could provide valuable insights into their survival. In this regard, a certain weakness of the book is that it has little to say about the Czech Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO 2011), which competed in its second election after 2016 and is thus not included in most of the analysis. Despite being one of the most successful centrist anti-establishment parties in the region during the past decade, ANO 2011 does not seem to fit clearly with one of the three main strategies for success outlined by Engler. Lacking a coherent ideological position, ANO 2011 is more notable for its strong organizational cohesiveness (as discussed by Cirhan 2023), suggesting that this factor may have contributed to its success.

Nonetheless, these limitations do not detract from the contribution of Engler's monograph as the first book-length study of the CAP phenomenon. Instead, they open up a promising agenda for future research. Still one of only a few studies examining parties in

the entire region from a truly comparative perspective, this book will be a rewarding read for anyone seeking to understand party politics in Central and Eastern Europe.

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