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What constitutes a new party? The lack of a standard operationalization and the way forward

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This mini-review examines scholars' responses to the question, "What constitutes a new party?" It proposes a path out of a situation in which there is no one standard answer to this question, or even a dominant answer. The absence of a standard or dominant answer creates an interesting setting for theoretical and methodological creativity. At the same time, the situation is problematic: with no agreed answer, large n studies that differ in how they define and operationalize party newness are not comparable. And because political parties are central actors in democratic politics, this situation negatively affects comparative politics research. An agreed answer (or answers) is especially critical for studies that analyze stability, continuity, and change of party organizations, party systems, and the political system as a whole. This article reviews the approaches to party newness and identifies their main features. No one approach seems to be substantially preferable to the others. Thus, the way forward is to establish a database that will include the data already produced on party newness. Such a database will enable comparison of the different codifications and measurements and systematically examine their similarities and differences.

KEYWORDS

political parties, new parties, party newness, party research, party age

This mini-review proposes a path out of a situation in which there is no one standard answer to the question "What constitutes a new party?" (neither is there even a dominant answer). With no agreed answer, large n studies that differ in how they define and operationalize party newness are not comparable. Because political parties are central actors in democratic politics, this situation negatively affects comparative politics research. An agreed answer (or answers) is especially critical for studies that analyze stability, continuity, and change of party organizations, party systems, and the political system as a whole.

This article starts with an explanation of the problem of defining party newness. It then reviews the various approaches to identifying and defining party newness. Finally, because no single approach seems substantially preferable to the others, the article suggests that the way forward is to establish a database that will include the data already produced on party newness. Such a database will enable comparison of the different codifications and measurements. Such systematic comparison will help to identify a coordinated path forward.

The problem

Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2020, p. 30) draw on two stories to exemplify the difficulty in defining the newness of political parties. One is ancient and refers to Plutarch's "Ship of Theseus," whose parts were replaced, one after another, over time until nothing original remained. It could be asked: "Is it still the same vessel or is it something new? And how should we think about the novelty of a second ship that might be created using all the materials discarded from the original?" In their second example, they describe how, in their study of new parties in Slovakia in 2012, 2014, and 2015, they found themselves repeatedly interviewing the same politician representing different parties.

These anecdotes illustrate the problems that researchers encounter when they want to determine whether a party is new (for example, when they calculate electoral volatility using the Pedersen, 1979 index) or to determine its age (to study the relationship between age and other characteristics, such as populism or intraparty democracy). Party newness is also central to studies of party system innovation and stability. More newness is perceived to indicate innovation and instability; less newness is seen as indicating "freezing" and stability.

An examination of the extant literature on the question, "What constitutes a new party?" bears out that there is no one standard answer, or even a dominant answer. As Doring and Regel (2019, p. 100) note when presenting their extensive political party database, *Party Facts*, "There is no established operationalization of a new political party within the research community that allows us to define and code new parties coherently."

It is no surprise that new parties are hard to define and measure; they are multifaceted and dynamic creatures. Key (1942) suggested that parties have three faces—in government, in central office, and in the electorate. This approach to parties as multifaceted raises a slew of questions, such as: Is a party new when it is composed of new politicians (and how many should that be for the party to be called new in these terms)? When it has a new organization (formally or practically)? When it has new voters (and how many should be new to be called new in these terms)? Or maybe all of the above? Maybe two of them (and why)? What about relabeling? To complicate things further, parties like to present as new because newness is seen as an asset, especially when facing skeptical and alienated voters (Sikk, 2011; Avina, 2024).

The lack of a standard or dominant answer creates an interesting setting for theoretical and methodological creativity. Case studies and focused comparisons may even benefit from different approaches to answering this question, for example, when a party is found to be "new" in terms of its organization but not in terms of the people who holds positions in its organization and in its name. At the same time, another party might be found to be new in terms of its apparatus and representatives but not its organization (Šarovec, 2019). However, the lack of an agreed definition complicates the undertaking of large n studies.

With no agreed answer, large n studies that differ in the way they define and operationalize party newness may not be comparable. For example, a comparative study of electoral

volatility that views a new party as one that has a different name from parties that existed before is likely to identify, overall, much higher levels of electoral volatility or party system instability than a study that sees the new party as one that differs from former parties in name, leader, and candidates. It is due to this complication that the present article proposes a path out of the situation in which there is no one standard or dominant answer.

Political science inherently features debates centered around conceptual, theoretical, and methodological disagreements. Yet it also possesses standard operationalizations or at least conceptual anchors. In large n studies, the contested and complex concept of democracy, for instance, is usually conceptualized using Dahl's nominal definition and measured using one of the existing democracy indices, such as Freedom House or V-Dem. While these indices differ somewhat, they are generally similar and usually come to the same coding (Lührmann et al., 2017). This is not the case for new parties.

The (too?) many answers

Emanuele and Chiaromonte (2018) identify no less than nine different sets of indicators that scholars have proposed and used to identify parties' newness (for a review of the various approaches, see also Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020). Some scholars suggest an inclusive definition that sees a relabeling of the party name, new alliances, mergers, and splits as elements that justify calling a party new. Others are more restrictive, such as those who see only minor splits and parties whose organization was built from scratch as new parties (Bolleyer, 2013).

If one adopts an age-based conception of newness (Bolleyer, 2013), then one must ignore nuances—or at least acknowledge the fact that they are forced to arbitrarily decide on a specific cutoff point—to decide on a single particular date in which the party was born. Barnea and Rahat (2011, p. 311) propose—in addition to a more nuanced perspective on party newness—a simple dichotomous criterion that can serve as a cutoff point: "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." Yet there is a price in applying such a simple criterion: "Using a clear and unambiguous cut-off point between new and old parties would mean that we fail to see the empirical nuanced picture" (Beyens et al., 2017, p. 397).

Litton (2015) differentiates between a thin conceptualization that aims to define party age and a thick one that measures rates of newness. There are, indeed, measurements that are clear cut, and thus enable us only to determine whether a party is new or not new, and that allow us to assess their birth year and hence their age as well. However, any measurement of newness can also be used for the same purpose when one determines a specific threshold within the given analysis. Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2020) hold that it is possible to measure newness on a continuum and when there is a need for a binary coding (new or not new) to examine one or even several thresholds for newness.

Thus, as an alternative to a binary approach, or as an addition, scholars propose viewing newness on a continuum that stretches from a genuinely new party on one pole to a totally veteran party on the other. An example of this approach is Barnea and Rahat's (2011) framework, which lists eight indicators for party newness that cover the three faces of the party. This framework is useful for examining a single party's newness and exposing its nuances (Beyens et al., 2017), though it is improbable that a large n study could relate to all these nuances.

Some scholars suggest coding parties in large n studies before each election and measuring their newness either by looking at several indicators and weighing them together to create a "newness index" or by looking at a specific element that captures the phenomenon. Kosowska-Gastol and Sobolewska-Mysłik (2023)—inspired by several earlier attempts to capture party newness—propose an aggregate multidimensional party newness index that includes six indicators (party name, legal status, party leader, elite, candidates, and ideology). Implementing their proposed measurement of the complicated Polish realm makes the case for looking at newness on a nuanced continuum. But their measurements demand considerable expertise and investment, and conducting such cross-national comparative analysis requires establishing a project on the scale of the Political Party DataBase (Poguntke et al., 2016) to meet these high standards.

Litton (2015) devised a two-dimension continuum to assess party newness. One relates to party attributes (i.e., program, leader, name, and their combinations) and the other to party structural affiliation (start-up, split, merger, joint lists, etc.). She insists that measurements of newness should be made in each electoral cycle and that the concept of party age should be forgone when using her approach; "party novelty is a non-cumulative quality that reflects the degree of change within a party in terms of its structural affiliation and its trademark attributes within one electoral cycle" (Litton, 2015, p. 714). Nevertheless, one can still use her indicators, set a threshold, and decide through it on the date of birth of new parties (one may even add a mid-category of re-born parties).

Sikk and Köker (2023) identify party newness by measuring the turnover in electoral candidates. Their approach is elegant and parsimonious, and their logic of seeing candidates as a "political gene" makes sense. After all, it captures the basic standard definition of political parties as groups of people who organize to compete for public posts. Moreover, unlike the non-binary approaches presented above, their measurement is not ordinal but numeric. As they demonstrate, getting candidates' lists seems viable, and calculating differences in their composition can be dealt with through automated computerized analysis.

The various operationalizations of party newness differ in the criteria they use and emphasize. Yet, in general, all but Sikk and Köker (2023) offer sets of criteria that can be accumulated to create ordinal scales of newness or used to define a threshold for calling a party new, and thus determine its date of birth and age. Sikk and Köker (2023) offer a single measurement that creates a numerical scale that can also be used to define a threshold for calling a party new. The reviewed scholars give a clear map for reliable measurement and also make a case for the validity

of their approach and measurements. Some seem to set realistic criteria regarding data availability and accessibility, and some also ardently endeavor to make the case that their approach is feasible and viable.

While Sikk and Kökers (2023) approach enjoys the advantage of offering a numeric scale (rather than an ordinal one), it remains to be seen whether their single criterion (level of personal turnover) indeed captures (or at least satisfactorily correlates) with the various dimensions of parties' newness. Thus, as elaborated below, the way forward is not to make the case for one specific approach but to directly compare the approaches.

The current state of party newness measurement and the way forward

In the current state, in which there is no agreed definition of newness, the proper way is to choose the criteria that fit the given research, be explicit and transparent about this choice, and justify it. Emanuele and Chiaramonte's (2018) study of party system innovation, in which the share of votes of new parties is a central measurement, is an example of this approach. The two scholars clearly acknowledge the existence of many alternative approaches to party newness and attempt to locate their choice in this complex universe. This is a legitimate path that makes the case for the reliability of their measurement and its validity. Yet, it leaves the problem of comparability unsolved. In another study, Emanuele and Sikk (2021) propose a separate, different analysis of what they call "genuinely new parties."

The way forward, then, is to establish a database that will include the data that scholars have already produced on party newness. The integration of datasets would be challenging. Yet, it is only through coping with expected challenges (different sampling and data harmonization, for example) and unexpected ones that we can move forward in the quantitative study of new parties and party newness. Moreover, on the path used for overcoming these challenges, we might gain new insights into party politics, for example, through identifying different concepts of newness in different polities. The result would be a harmonized dataset enabling scholars to research new party and party newness on the scale that datasets such as the V-Party and Political Party DataBase datasets enable. Even if a standard operationalization procedure (singular or plural) cannot be achieved, we will all drink from the same fountain.

An integrated database will enable comparison of the different codifications and measurements and systematically examine their similarities and differences. It will also allow the simultaneous use of several measures that focus on specific aspects of newness or give them different weights. In addition, it will enable the determination of party age by using different approaches and various thresholds. Hopefully, such an effort will prompt scholars to fill the empty cells. Through comparison, we can estimate the tradeoff between validity and precision, on the one hand, and viability and feasibility, on the other, and get closer to adopting a standard for operationalization. Scholars would be

able to use party newness as an independent variable and also examine the relationships between the different forms of party newness.

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