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# The structural breakthrough of new parties in 21st-century Europe: a qualitative comparative analysis

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The rise of new political parties in Europe over the past two decades has fundamentally transformed the political landscape, challenging the dominance of established parties and reshaping electoral dynamics. This study investigates the emergence of new political parties in 21st-century Europe through a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). We identify and analyze the conditions for their electoral performance, revealing that no necessary conditions were found for new parties' structural breakthrough. Our findings indicate that multiple pathways contribute to the rise of these new parties. The results show three distinct solutions, each combining political, institutional, and economic factors in different ways. However, across all identified causal pathways, the most influential factors appear to be political in nature, particularly a pervasive lack of trust in established parties. In contrast, institutional factors and economic downturns appear to have a less substantial impact on shaping outcomes. By examining these varied trajectories, the study sheds new light on the structural dynamics driving political developments in contemporary Europe and the challenges faced by traditional parties in adapting to a changing electoral landscape.

### KEYWORDS

electoral performance, European politics, new parties, party system change, qualitative comparative analysis

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, numerous examples of new parties achieving success have emerged (e.g., [Bértoa and Enyedi, 2021](#); [Chiaromonte and Emanuele, 2022](#)).<sup>1</sup> This trend appears to be a widespread phenomenon affecting both established democracies and newer democratic regimes. It represents a double-edged reality: while new parties rise and flourish, established parties face relative decline and diminishing influence. Despite their varied programmatic and

<sup>1</sup> Although most studies on this topic treat the terms "success" and "performance" to examine discrete events occurring at a specific point in time, we adopt a medium-term perspectives associated to the repeated (or frequent) entry of relevant new parties. Our focus is on the sustained ability of new actors to enter and establish themselves within the party system, rather than isolated electoral breakthroughs. Therefore, while our outcome variable focuses on new party electoral performance, this measure simultaneously captures party system permeability: sustained electoral performance by new parties necessarily reflects the degree to which established party systems are open to new entrants. Thus, high aggregate new party performance indicates a permeable party system, while low performance suggests institutional and political barriers that inhibit new parties from gaining electoral traction. In the text, we use "performance," "success" or "structural breakthrough" as synonymous.

ideological positions, as well as differing organizational structures, new parties aim to challenge mainstream actors by shaping the political agenda, influencing public opinion, and gaining institutional significance in parliamentary and governmental settings (Bolleyer, 2013; Deschouwer, 2008; Emanuele and Sikk, 2021; Hino, 2012).

Evidence from Western Europe indicates that new parties have been instrumental in driving changes within party systems (e.g., Emanuele and Chiaramonte, 2018; Lisi, 2019). In this regard, the trajectory of advanced democracies mirrors a key characteristic of Eastern European countries, which are marked by the consistent success of new political forces (Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020). There exist multiple explanations for this phenomenon that range from short-term dynamics associated with specific (internal or external) shocks to long-term structural transformations, such as the erosion of mainstream parties' support or the rise of new cleavages (see Casal Bértoa and Rama, 2020). However, to date there is no cross-national research that examines in a comprehensive way the conditions associated to new parties' structural breakthrough, especially if we look at remarkable variations experienced by European democracies throughout the 21st century. During this period, most studies have addressed the Great Recession as a critical juncture that fundamentally prompted the electoral performance of new parties (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019; de Vries and Hobolt, 2020). However, this view suffers from a 'myopic' interpretation of such phenomenon, failing to capture structural transformations occurring in European party systems over medium-long term time span.

New parties' electoral success exhibits a puzzling pattern that challenges conventional crisis-driven explanations. While scholarship has traditionally linked new party success to periods of acute economic or social upheaval, empirical evidence reveals successful breakthroughs occurring across varying contexts—both during times of crisis and periods of relative stability (Chiaramonte and Emanuele, 2022; Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020). This temporal distribution of new party success suggests that immediate economic or social disruptions alone cannot fully account for their electoral achievements. Understanding why new parties manage to enter and succeed in party systems even under seemingly unfavorable conditions thus represents a critical puzzle in contemporary European politics. This study aims to unravel this paradox by examining the structural conditions that enable new party performance beyond moments of crisis.

Despite the growing relevance of new parties and increasing attention from the scholarship, extant research on new parties has adopted a party-level or election-centered perspectives (e.g., Lago and Martínez, 2011; Lucardie, 2000; Otjes and de Wardt, 2023; Vidal, 2017). At the systemic level, comparative analyses have emphasized primarily the role of party system institutionalization and party competition. However, the relationship between party system institutionalization—commonly operationalized through electoral volatility or levels of partisanship—and new party breakthrough presents a significant methodological challenge that has been overlooked in much of the existing literature due to the fact that they are intrinsically endogenous. Indeed, institutionalization can facilitate or hinder new party success, yet the emergence and electoral traction of new parties simultaneously reshape and often erode institutionalization itself. Because the two processes function as both causes and consequences of one another, their co-evolution generates a feedback loop that conventional explanatory models struggle to disentangle. This complexity suggests the need for an alternative analytical strategy, one that reduces reliance on assumptions about a country's democratic

trajectory and instead prioritizes explanatory mechanisms less vulnerable to endogeneity.

We argue that to more fully understand the rise of new actors in the last two turbulent decades, we need to adopt a comprehensive approach that includes not only a more diverse set of factors, but also systematic cross-country differences. In addition, research must move beyond Western-centric perspectives and short-term analyses of new party success. To address these gaps in the literature, this paper aims to address the following research questions: What combination of factors explains the structural breakthrough of new parties in the 21st-century Europe? How significant are economic, institutional, and political conditions in shaping the electoral performance of these emerging political forces? To answer these questions, we rely on an original dataset on the electoral share of new parties covering both Western and Eastern European democracies over the period 2000–2022.

The definition of what constitutes a “new party” remains subject to considerable scholarly debate. This study adopts an inclusive approach, following Harmel and Robertson (1985, p. 405) broad conceptualization of new parties as “all those that have been added to a country's original party system”.<sup>2</sup> As our research focuses on examining the structural dimensions of party system change, we include new parties across the ideological spectrum, with varying institutional positions and origins, including those emerging from party splits. To ensure analytical parsimony while maintaining substantive relevance, we establish a threshold criterion: our dataset includes only those new parties that secured at least 1% of votes in legislative elections. This threshold typically corresponds to parliamentary representation in many systems and aligns with established methodological approaches in comparative research on party system dynamics (Bolleyer, 2013; Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020). This operational definition enables systematic cross-national comparison while capturing meaningful political actors that have achieved a minimal level of electoral relevance.

This paper seeks to make two main contributions to the existing literature. The first is to provide a comprehensive study that account for new parties' performance in European politics throughout the 21st century. While there are valuable empirical studies on party system change over the last decades, most works focus on specific party families, especially populist parties, radical right forces or anti-establishment actors (e.g., Hanley and Sikk, 2016; Ortiz Barquero et al., 2022; van Kessel, 2015). Although we acknowledge that the concept of ‘new parties’ encompasses a wide variety of political formations, our choice is justified because we aim to examine the phenomenon at a structural

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of brevity, it is not feasible to examine the advantages and disadvantages of the various definitions and operationalizations of new parties here. For a review see Rahat (2025) and Emanuele and Chiaramonte (2019). Our conceptualization of new parties must be distinguished from other related but distinct political phenomena in the literature. While new parties may sometimes overlap with categories such as niche parties (which occupy distinctive policy spaces neglected by mainstream parties), challenger parties (which contest the dominant political consensus), or anti-system parties (which fundamentally oppose the existing political order), these classifications capture different analytical dimensions. A new party, defined by its temporal emergence in the party system, may or may not exhibit these characteristics. Conversely, established parties can function as niche, challenger, or anti-system actors while having long histories within their respective party systems. This conceptual clarification is crucial as it allows us to focus specifically on the dynamics of party system entry and success, rather than on particular ideological or strategic positions that parties might adopt.

level—that is, to assess the extent to which party systems are more or less permeable to systematic change through the emergence of new actors (Harmel and Robertson, 1985). As a consequence, this study adds to this literature by examining all new parties that have emerged during the last two decades. Our focus on structural conditions through long-term averages necessarily brackets the question of timing—when and why particular new parties break through at specific moments. While existing studies have already examined these conjunctural factors and critical moments of rupture in party system change, our analysis complements this literature by identifying the underlying structural conditions that determine party system permeability.

This study advances this research field by moving beyond conventional demand-side explanations that predominantly link new party success to economic crises or short-term shocks. By developing a more comprehensive analytical framework, we identify structural factors that condition new parties' electoral performance across different contexts and timeframes. This approach reveals how institutional configurations, party system dynamics, and political opportunity structures systematically shape the prospects for new party breakthrough, independent of immediate economic or social disruptions. In doing so, we advance our understanding of new party success as a phenomenon embedded in broader patterns of political change rather than merely a response to temporary perturbations in the political market. To achieve this goal, we use a qualitative comparative approach based on the fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) methodology (Ragin, 2008), allowing us to identify the combination of factors that have led to new parties' structural breakthrough.

The paper starts with examining the theories and key determinants that account for the electoral performance of new parties. After providing an overview of the dataset compiled for this analysis, we explain the research methods employed for the empirical analysis. Then, we present the results of the fsQCA. The conclusions summarize our findings and discuss the implications of party system change and the transformation of party politics in the 21st century.

## Explaining the electoral performance of new parties in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

The analysis of new parties is one key component of party system change. As such, the process of electoral dealignment and the successful emergence of challenger parties since the 1970s have fostered a growing interest in this old topic (e.g., Bolin, 2014; Harmel and Robertson, 1985; Hino, 2012; Hug, 2001). The significant cross-national variation documented in this scholarship has catalyzed the development of different theoretical approaches. Overall, the literature on new party success has developed along two main analytical dimensions: demand-side and supply-side explanations. Demand-side factors focus on voter characteristics and attitudes that create opportunities for new political actors. Among these, economic perceptions and evaluations of system performance have proven particularly significant (e.g., Hernández and Kriesi, 2016; Vidal, 2017). Similarly, political attitudes such as institutional distrust, euroscepticism, and populist orientations emerge as crucial predictors of support for new parties (de Vries and Hobolt, 2020; van Hauwaert and van Kessel, 2018). Supply-side explanations, in contrast, emphasize party-level characteristics that enable new formations to capitalize on these

opportunities. Research has consistently demonstrated the electoral significance of charismatic leadership and distinctive programmatic offerings, particularly during the breakthrough phase (Arter, 2016; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). However, the factors explaining breakthrough differ from those determining long-term survival. This distinction highlights the importance of differentiating between conditions facilitating initial success and those enabling entry and consolidation within party systems.

Empirical analyses at the party level have highlighted how structural conditions shape opportunities for new party success. In their study of the Low Countries, Beyens et al. (2016) demonstrate that the interplay between societal transformations and institutional settings critically influences new parties' electoral fortunes. Specifically, the weakening of traditional party-voter alignments, combined with emerging policy demands unmet by established parties, creates favorable conditions for new political entrepreneurs. The permissiveness of proportional representation systems further facilitates their entry by lowering electoral thresholds (Bolin, 2014; Powell and Tucker, 2014).

Economic crises or failures to provide positive policy outcomes have long been associated with increasing citizens' support for new parties (Bochsler and Hänni, 2022; Marcos-Marne et al., 2020). Indeed, studies using both aggregate and individual level data found a significant association between economic performance (e.g., unemployment and inflation) and the success of challenger or new parties (Hernández and Kriesi, 2016; Hobolt and Tilley, 2016). Empirical analyses on the success of new populist parties confirm the importance of economic hardship for the success of new parties (e.g., van Kessel, 2015). In particular, Hanley and Sikk (2016) found that both unemployment and economic downturns help explain the trajectories of anti-establishment parties in Central and Eastern Europe.

Another important set of explanations relates to political factors. Academic literature widely supports the view that support for new parties is an expression of dissatisfaction with the general functioning of the political system (Vidal, 2017; Webb and White, 2007). Looking at populist parties' performance, van Kessel (2015) found that perceived responsiveness is crucial to understand the success of this party family. This concept entails two key dimensions: corruption and confidence in representative actors (parliaments and political parties). Overall, new parties may find a fertile ground for their electoral breakthrough when there is a generalized growth of distrust (or indifference) to traditional politics, political organizations or leadership (e.g., Katz and Mair, 2018; Pippa, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000). Performing a QCA analysis on several European countries, Fernández-García and Luengo (2019) found that high levels of distrust in parties are important conditions that determine anti-establishment parties' electoral success, especially when combined with dissatisfaction of the economic situation, while corruption has been shown to facilitate the rise of challenger parties in Eastern Europe (Hanley and Sikk, 2016).

Turning to contextual factors, scholarly research underscores the importance of institutional dimensions in shaping new parties' breakthrough. This body of work, drawing on the concept of political opportunity structure, highlights how specific institutional features can facilitate the mobilization and success of insurgent parties. In particular, this strand of research focuses on the openness (or "permissiveness") of political institutions. One of the key institutions identified by the "political opportunity structure" literature is the electoral system, which constrains voters' choices and shape their party preferences (Lago, 2021; Willey, 1998). More permissive electoral systems

are considered propitious for new parties to emerge and persist. Hug (2001), for example, considers the threshold of representation for understanding the emergence of new parties. Other studies focus on the degree of proportionality and found a significant impact on the rise of new actors (Lago, 2021; Laroze, 2019). QCA studies have further substantiated these findings in examining the electoral success of populist (van Kessel, 2015), radical right (Ortiz Barquero et al., 2022) and anti-establishment parties (Fernández-García and Luengo, 2019) across multiple national contexts. Overall, there is consistent evidence that confirms a positive relationship between the permissiveness of electoral institutions and the electoral success of new parties.

An equally significant aspect of the political opportunity structure lies in government dynamics. Previous research indicates that the composition of government coalitions—namely when there is a coalition or convergence between mainstream left-wing and right-wing parties—can create favorable conditions for the emergence of challenger and anti-establishment parties (Fernández-García and Luengo, 2019; Veugelers and André Magnan, 2005). However, when examining newly formed parties specifically, we contend that government composition may be less salient as a determining factor. Since many new parties emerge from factional splits and strategic calculations within existing political formations, cabinet stability and duration appear to be more decisive factors in explaining their electoral breakthrough. There are several mechanisms that, directly or indirectly, explain why government stability is crucial for understanding the emergence of new parties. First, the durability of governments leads individuals to believe that mainstream parties are not able to adequately address their concerns and to represent their interests (Sikk, 2012; Tavits, 2007). Instability can also be interpreted as an indicator of the incapacity of a cabinet to solve the country's problems and to address effectively key challenges. This dissatisfaction can create an opening for new parties to emerge, offering alternative policies or more credible leadership. Indirectly, government instability is also linked to policy failure and a negative performance (Fortunato and Loftis, 2018). In addition, government composition and patterns of party alternation in office play a crucial role in shaping citizens' satisfaction with democracy (Otjes et al., 2025). Finally, government instability is also often associated with scandals or factional disputes. Power struggles and internal conflicts can facilitate the formation of new parties, as divisions within parties often lead some members to break away and create new formations. In other words, new parties may capitalize on public discontent and advocate for different approaches or solutions.

Taking this literature review into account, our overall expectation is that the electoral success of new parties cannot be explained by a single factor; rather, a combination of different conditions is likely to account for the positive performance of new parties. Based on this perspective, we argue that new parties show different trajectories across distinct countries, combining economic, political and institutional conditions.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, we develop specific hypotheses about how these conditions may contribute—individually and in

combination—to the breakthrough and performance of new parties in 21st-century Europe.

*H1.* Adverse economic conditions are associated with stronger electoral performance of new parties, especially when combined with political dissatisfaction.

*H2.* High levels of political distrust and corruption contribute to stronger electoral performance for new parties, especially when combined with a favorable political opportunity structure.

*H3.* A favorable institutional situation (permissive electoral system and government instability) increases new party performance when accompanied by economic failure or political discontent.

## Methods and data

Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) stands out as a suitable method for examining the electoral performance of new parties at the macro level, particularly when considering cross-country variations. This approach excels in addressing the intricate nature of political phenomena by embracing causal complexity and configurational thinking (Ragin, 2008; Rihoux and Ragin, 2009). QCA allows for multiple pathways to similar outcomes across different national contexts. This improves our understanding of new parties' electoral performance, which often results from unique combinations of factors rather than isolated causes.

One of QCA's key strengths lies in its ability to bridge the gap between qualitative case studies and quantitative variable-oriented research. In particular, we use fuzzy-set QCA (fsQCA) because it allows for degrees of membership in sets, rather than just binary “in” or “out” classifications (as in crisp-set QCA). In fsQCA, conditions and outcomes can have values between 0 and 1, representing partial membership, which provides a more nuanced way of capturing complex social phenomena. This balance is crucial when analyzing new parties across diverse political landscapes, where both detailed contextual understanding and broader patterns are equally important. Moreover, fsQCA is well-suited to handle the limited diversity often encountered in cross-national comparisons, where the number of cases (countries) may be relatively small.

In essence, fsQCA provides a robust framework for analyzing the complex, context-dependent factors influencing new parties' electoral performance across countries. It allows researchers to uncover patterns and combinations of conditions leading to success or failure while maintaining sensitivity to the unique aspects of each national case, making it an invaluable tool for comparative political analysis. Indeed, a number of studies employ fsQCA to investigate the electoral success of political parties, though most tend to focus on particular types of parties, such as populist, radical, or niche parties (e.g., Fernández-García and Luengo, 2019; Ortiz Barquero et al., 2022; van Kessel, 2015).

To empirically investigate this phenomenon, we have compiled an original dataset drawing from ParlGov records.<sup>4</sup> Our dataset captures

<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge that there may be other factors contributing to the structural breakthrough of new parties. However, including too many conditions in a QCA analysis can be counterproductive. A high number of conditions increases the number of logical remainders, making the analysis more complex and potentially harder to interpret. Moreover, an excessive number of conditions can lead to overly complicated results, which may not be easily explained within the framework of existing theories (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> See <https://parl.gov.fly.dev/>

the electoral performance of new parties in general elections across 31 countries, covering the period from 2000 to 2022. The unit of analysis is the country level. In constructing this dataset, we first identified new parties based on our conceptualization. For the purposes of this work, we consider a new party as one that is genuinely new or that results from splits with another party (see [Otjes and de Wardt, 2023](#)). Following [Harmel and Robertson \(1985\)](#), we also include those parties that, regardless of their age, achieve parliamentary representation for the first time after 2000. We then calculated the average vote share these parties achieved in each country over the studied timeframe. This approach allows us to quantify to what extent party systems are open to new political entrants on a national scale and in the medium term, providing a robust measure for cross-country comparison.<sup>5</sup> A party is coded as new from its first national election appearance and remains in our dataset as long as it continues to contest national elections, allowing us to examine patterns of persistence and institutionalization among new political actors.

In the following sections, we outline the primary research method employed to examine the conditions accounting for new parties' electoral performance. We detail the data sources used to operationalize these conditions and the decisions made regarding data calibration. For most conditions and outcomes, we utilize the "direct method" of calibration. This involves defining three qualitative anchors: one for full membership (1), one for full non-membership (0), and a crossover point (0.5). Using a logarithmic function, the fsQCA 4.1 software calculates fuzzy set membership scores for each case based on the specified conditions and outcomes ([Ragin and Davey, 2022](#)). [Table 1](#) outlines the thresholds selected for the fsQCA analysis, and the rationale behind these choices is explained in the following paragraphs. These decisions were grounded in both theoretical and substantive considerations, evaluating the theoretical significance of the values and examining the distribution of cases within the individual conditions. [Appendix Table A2](#) provide more detailed information about the data and calibration process regarding individual conditions.

In calibrating the fuzzy-set scores, we adopted a nuanced approach to address the complexities inherent in our empirical dataset. Rather than relying on external benchmarks, we derived our calibration thresholds from the dataset itself, with an important modification: we excluded the lowest and highest values to mitigate the impact of extreme outliers. This decision was rooted in both methodological considerations and the substantive nature of economic and political dynamics. Extreme values can disproportionately influence the calibration process and potentially obscure more generalizable patterns. By trimming these outliers, we aimed to create a more robust and representative calibration that better captures the typical range of economic or political experiences across our cases. This approach allows for a more nuanced differentiation between cases in the middle range, where subtle variations might be most relevant for new party breakthroughs. Furthermore, this method helps to address potential measurement errors or exceptional circumstances that might have produced extreme values, ensuring that our analysis focuses on the more structurally

TABLE 1 Conditions in the fsQCA.

Conditions	Description	Calibration	Source
NEWPP	Average (combined) vote share of new parties in national elections between 2000 and 2022	1 = 9.6% 0.5 = 4.7% 0 = 0.9%	Parlgov
THRESH	Proportionality of the electoral system (electoral threshold)	1 = 37.5 0.5 = 5.8 0 = 0.7	<a href="#">Gallagher and Mitchell (2008)</a>
GOVDUR	Average length of time a government remains in office (months)	1 = 56 0.5 = 34.5 0 = 21.4	Parlgov
UNEMP	Levels of unemployment (average)	1 = 11.2% 0.5 = 4.5% 0 = 2.9%	OECD
ECOGROW	Levels of GDP growth	1 = 4.2% 0.5 = 2.1% 0 = 0.2%	OECD
CONFPAR	Levels of confidence with political parties	1 = 35.6% 0.5 = 18.7% 0 = 9.8%	Eurobarometer
CORRUP	Levels of perceived corruption (0–100, reversed)	1 = 57.5 0.5 = 38 0 = 10.5	Transparency International (Corruption Perception Index)

relevant economic, institutional or political conditions. The resulting calibration, we argue, offers a balance between sensitivity to empirical variation and resilience against undue influence from anomalous data points, thereby enhancing the validity and generalizability of our findings regarding the role of different conditions in new parties' electoral performance. To enhance transparency, a partial truth table summarizing the main configurations and outcome values after calibration is included in the [Appendix Table A3](#).

## Outcome: electoral performance of new parties

The main dependent variable (outcome variable) considered in this study is based on the electoral performance of new parties. As the QCA is aimed at assessing cross-national, and not cross-temporal variation, the average percentage of the vote for new parties in each country is taken as a measurement for the outcome variable. As for the period, the analysis ranges from 2000 to 2022. This timeframe is meaningful for two reasons. The first is that it enables a more robust comparison between Western and Eastern Europe, facilitating the identification of structural conditions that distinguish the two regions. By the early 2000s, many Eastern European democracies had largely consolidated their political

<sup>5</sup> The total number of new parties considered for the empirical analysis is 135. A full list of parties is available upon request. For Western Europe the final list overlaps to a large extent to Emanuele's dataset on new party (available here: <http://www.vincenzoemanuele.com/dataset-of-party-system-innovation.html>). [Appendix Table A1](#) and [Appendix Figure A1](#) provide more information on the number and type of new parties across countries and regions.

systems, moving beyond the initial flux that characterized the immediate post-communist transition. This stabilization allows for a more equitable analysis, as party systems across both regions had achieved a degree of maturity, providing a firmer basis for comparative study. Therefore, analyzing elections since the turn of the 21st century is assumed to lead to a more meaningful pan-European comparison. Second, this period was characterized by two important critical junctures, namely the financial and economic crisis at the end of the 2000s and the immigration crisis in the mid-2010s. These are important events that may have influenced the emergence and performance of new political parties. Yet it is worth noting that not all countries have been equally hit by these crises (e.g., [Hutter and Kriesi, 2019](#); [Lisi, 2019](#)).

The outcome variable is operationalized by calculating the average vote share of new parties in the parliamentary elections in each country between 2000 and 2022 (see [Appendix Table A1](#)). If there is more than one new party in a single country, the vote share of these parties is aggregated. In almost all countries, four or more national elections have been held throughout this period. Parties are coded as new based on their first appearance in national legislative elections, regardless of any prior participation in regional, local, or European Parliament elections. This means that a party contesting national elections for the first time is classified as new even if it previously competed at other electoral levels. This coding decision merits justification on both practical and theoretical grounds.

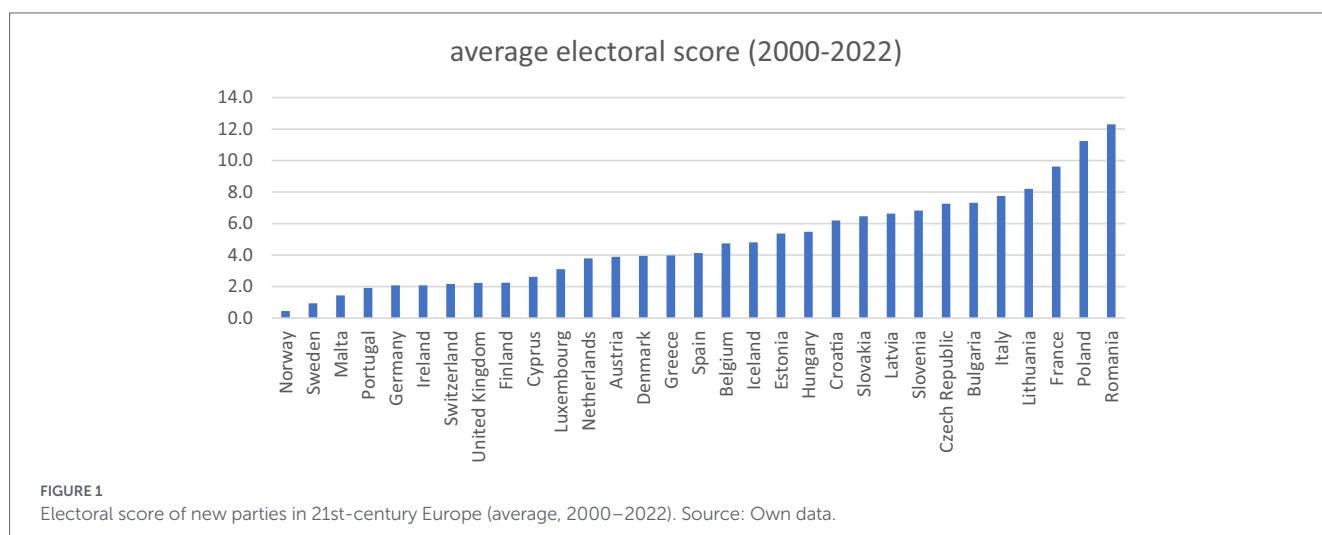
From a practical standpoint, focusing exclusively on the national level ensures consistency and comparability across our sample of European countries, which exhibit considerable variation in the structure and salience of subnational politics. Regional elections differ substantially across countries in terms of timing, competitiveness, party system fragmentation, and institutional relevance, making systematic cross-national comparison challenging. Similarly, while European Parliament elections are held simultaneously across EU member states, turnout levels, campaign dynamics, and the degree to which they serve as “second-order” contests vary considerably ([Reif and Schmitt, 1980](#)).

From a theoretical perspective, our focus on national-level debuts aligns with our interest in understanding new party emergence as a phenomenon that challenges established national party systems. National legislative elections remain the primary arena of party competition in parliamentary democracies, where government formation

and policy-making authority are determined. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that this operationalization does not capture an important dynamic identified in the literature: the potential spillover effects whereby participation in European or regional elections may serve as an incubator for parties that subsequently enter national competition. Research by [Dinas and Riera \(2017\)](#) demonstrates that EU elections can increase the national vote shares of small and new parties through mechanisms such as enhanced media visibility, organizational development, and voter familiarization. Similarly, regional elections may provide new parties with opportunities to build grassroots support, test campaign messages, and develop experienced candidates before launching national campaigns.

Our coding approach means that parties benefiting from such spillover effects are still classified as “new” in their inaugural national election, even though they may possess organizational and electoral resources that distinguish them from parties making their first appearance in any electoral arena. While we do not systematically incorporate this dynamic into our analysis—doing so would require comprehensive data on regional and European electoral participation that is not uniformly available across our sample—we recognize that prior sub-national or European electoral experience represents a potentially important contextual factor that may condition how new parties perform in national elections. Future research could fruitfully explore whether new parties with prior electoral experience at other levels exhibit different trajectories of success and institutionalization compared to parties making their electoral debut at the national level.

To calibrate the raw data, we omitted the highest and lowest values to define full membership and full non-membership. A country is considered to have obtained full membership in the outcome if new parties have won more than 9.6 per cent of the vote on average. This represents the second highest score in our dataset. If this situation is met, it can be argued that new parties have become an important phenomenon in a given country. Although there have been countries in which individual new parties gained a much higher vote share in the past (for instance, several newly formed parties that emerged in the Netherlands after the 1970s, or new forces in Italy following the collapse of the First Republic), an average (combined) vote share of more than 9 per cent for new parties is observed only in two countries, namely Poland and Romania (see [Figure 1](#)). Any electoral score



surpassing this upper threshold is classified as an “outlier” in our analysis, representing exceptional performance beyond the typical range.

The chosen crossover value is 4.7 per cent of the vote, which is the average after omitting the lowest and highest values in the dataset. This means that countries with an average “new parties share” of more than this threshold are considered to be “more in than out.” If we look at the empirical data from European countries, evidence suggests that this is usually the threshold that ensure parliamentary representation for new competitors. By contrast, when the average vote share of new parties is below 4.7 per cent, these actors remain relatively marginal in their respective party systems. The threshold for full non-membership is set at 0.9 per cent of the average vote, indicating a near-total absence of support for new parties at the national level. Two Nordic countries, Norway and Sweden, are close to this scenario. In these cases, newly formed parties in the 21st century have been unable to significantly break through the party system, unlike in other European countries.

## Causal conditions

### Economic factors

We look at two economic conditions expected to enhance the chances of new parties’ breakthrough: economic growth (ECOGROW) and unemployment (UNEMP). Periods of economic crisis has both direct and indirect effects on citizens’ behavior, affecting not only their living conditions but also public discontent with incumbents. A negative economic performance also creates a sense of social crisis which may lead voters to look for political alternatives.<sup>6</sup>

To operationalize economic performance, we set the threshold for full membership at a 4.2 per cent growth in a country’s gross domestic product (GDP). The minimum threshold (“fully out”) is set at a near zero increase (0.2 per cent increase in GDP). We set the crossover point at 2.1 per cent annual change in GDP. Although we are aware that the effects of growth might become visible with a slight delay, we consider the average for the whole period, since we are interested in the overall trajectory of a country’s economy.

The calibration of unemployment rates into fuzzy-set scores followed a similar methodological approach to that used for economic growth, prioritizing empirical grounding while mitigating the influence of extreme outliers. We derived calibration thresholds from the dataset itself, excluding the highest and lowest unemployment values to ensure a more representative range. This trimming of extremes is particularly pertinent for unemployment data, which can be subject to short-term fluctuations or measurement discrepancies across different national contexts. By focusing on the more central distribution of unemployment rates, we aimed to capture the structural labor market conditions most relevant to new party breakthroughs, rather than potentially anomalous situations. This calibration strategy allows for a nuanced differentiation between cases with varying levels of unemployment, while also accounting for the possibility that extreme labor market conditions might operate through different causal mechanisms. We

set the maximum threshold for full membership at 11.2 per cent, with the lower threshold for full non-membership (“fully out”) at 2.9 per cent. The crossover point is established at 4.5 per cent. The resulting fuzzy-set scores offer a balanced representation of unemployment’s role in our analysis, sensitive to meaningful variations while resilient to potential distortions from outlier cases.

## Political factors

### Confidence in political parties

The data for this causal condition was collected from the Eurobarometer surveys (2000–2022). The original variables are presented as a 4-point scale where 1 means “no trust at all” and 4 “complete trust.” We measure political trust using the proportion of citizens who express high confidence in political parties (CONFPAR). Specifically, we focus on respondents who indicate the top two levels of trust on a four-point scale. The data have been calibrated using the direct method of calibration. Since it is difficult to determine theoretically meaningful anchors with regard to this survey question, the data were calibrated based on the distribution of cases within our dataset. In order to avoid the fuzzy set scores being influenced too much by outlier cases, the full membership value relates to the case with the second largest percentage of distrust. Following the same logic, the lower threshold is equal to the value of the case with the second lowest percentage. The crossover point was determined by calculating the mean score (after having omitted the highest and lowest percentages).

As [Appendix Table A2](#) shows, Nordic countries have the highest level of trust, whereas more recent democracies tend to display the lowest levels. The threshold for full membership in this set was fixed at 35.6 per cent (Netherlands), while the threshold for full non-membership was set at 9.8 per cent (Lithuania). Finally, the crossover point was set at 18.7 per cent to differentiate the intermediate cases that showed higher levels of distrust than trust. Ireland and Germany serve as notable examples of countries that closely reflect this situation.

### Corruption

For the perceived corruption causal condition, we rely on the Transparency International (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index. The TI index is measured on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 represents highly corrupt systems and 100 indicates maximum transparency. We average the index scores across the study period to capture the overall level of perceived corruption in each case. The raw data represent average perceptions of corruption, which were reversed prior to calibration to align with theoretical expectations that higher corruption should facilitate new party electoral success.

Three qualitative anchors were identified to define the calibration points: full membership, the crossover point (fuzzy score = 0.50), and full non-membership. The full membership threshold was set at 57.5, corresponding to Bulgaria’s score, representing a clear case of high perceived corruption. The crossover point of maximum ambiguity was established at 38, corresponding to Portugal, indicating the threshold above which countries are considered “more in” than “out” of the set of highly corrupt political systems. The full non-membership threshold was set at 10.5, Denmark’s score, representing a paradigmatic case of low corruption.

<sup>6</sup> Economic data are sourced from the OECD to ensure reliable cross-country comparisons.

As outlined in [Appendix Table A1](#), Denmark and Finland exhibit the lowest averages of perceived corruption (e.g., higher integrity) among the surveyed countries. In contrast, Eastern European nations, such as Bulgaria and Romania, demonstrate the lowest levels of corruption. Several democracies, including Portugal and Spain, fall into the middle ground.

## Institutional factors

### Proportionality of the electoral system

We use the electoral threshold as an indicator of the proportionality of electoral systems. This indicator quantifies the real barriers to parliamentary entry by incorporating district magnitude, legal thresholds, and assembly size, with higher values indicating greater obstacles for new parties. For calibration purposes, we examine the distribution of electoral thresholds across European democracies during the study period. For Eastern European countries, we calculate the average electoral threshold for the period 2000–2022 to account for electoral system reforms that occurred in these democracies during their post-transition consolidation.

The results (see [Appendix Table A1](#)) reveal three groups of countries based on electoral system proportionality. The full membership threshold (1.0), representing highly restrictive electoral systems, is anchored at the upper end of the distribution. Countries such as France, with its two-round majority system in single-member districts, exemplify cases with very high electoral thresholds that severely limit new party entry. Similarly, the United Kingdom's first-past-the-post system creates substantial barriers to parliamentary representation for new political formations. The crossover point (0.5), denoting maximum ambiguity regarding restrictiveness, is set at the median value of the distribution. This represents moderate proportionality systems where new parties face neither exceptional advantages nor severe disadvantages in gaining parliamentary representation. Countries like Iceland or Poland, with their moderate district magnitudes and legal thresholds, typically fall near this threshold. The full non-membership threshold (0.0), indicating highly permissive electoral systems, is anchored at the lower end of the distribution. The Netherlands, with its extremely proportional system (single national district with a very low electoral threshold of around 0.7%), exemplifies maximum permeability for new parties. Similarly, Denmark's highly proportional electoral system with low electoral thresholds represents a context where new parties face minimal institutional barriers to parliamentary entry. This calibration strategy ensures that our fuzzy-set scores reflect meaningful variation in the political opportunity structure across European democracies, grounded in the actual institutional configurations observed in our cases.

### Government duration rate

Given that most European countries are multi-party parliamentary democracies characterized by coalition governments, we use the cabinet duration rate as a measure that captures both institutional arrangements and the specific political context. This variable measures the duration of new governments or cabinets within a given time period. Relying on data from the ParlGov dataset, we calculate the average number of months a government stays in power. Higher

values correspond to longer durations of governments, suggesting more stable political systems, while shorter durations might indicate political instability or high responsiveness to changing conditions.

The calibration of the government duration rate indicator using the direct method (GOVDUR) relies on empirical data to establish meaningful thresholds. In this case, the calibration is anchored by setting the highest value at 56 months and the lowest at 21 months. This range represents the observed spectrum of government durations across different political systems. The direct method involves using these empirical endpoints to create a scale where 56 months signifies the maximum stability (fully in the set of long-lasting governments), while 21.4 months represents the minimum (fully out of the set). Intermediate values are then calibrated proportionally between these two extremes. For instance, a government lasting 38.5 months might be considered the crossover point, representing neither fully in nor fully out of the set of stable governments. This calibration allows for nuanced comparisons between different political systems, taking into account the real-world variation in government durations. It provides a standardized measure that can be used in comparative analyses, while still reflecting the empirical realities of government stability across different contexts.

## Results

Once sets have been calibrated, the second step of each QCA—both crisp-set and fuzzy-set—consists of the analysis of necessity relations, which should always be conducted before the analysis of sufficiency conditions ([Schneider and Wagemann, 2012, p. 404](#)). With respect to this, as [Table 2](#) demonstrates, no condition (or its non-occurrence, indicated with the tilde ~) is necessary for the outcome (or its non-occurrence). The highest consistency score is 0.88 and it is related to distrust in political parties (i.e., weak membership in the category “confidence in political parties”). Given that the conventional threshold for considering a condition necessary is 0.9 or higher, this result suggests that the reversed condition of confidence in parties (i.e., distrust) does not

TABLE 2 Analysis of the necessary conditions.

Conditions	Consistency	Coverage
THRESH	~0.41	~0.63
~THRESH	~0.58	~0.61
GOVDUR	~0.66	~0.55
~GOVDUR	~0.47	~0.60
UNEMPL	~0.69	~0.57
~UNEMPL	~0.44	~0.62
ECOGROW	~0.36	~0.65
~ECOGROW	~0.71	~0.56
CORRUP	~0.73	~0.54
~CORRUP	~0.32	~0.67
CONFPAR	~0.28	~0.69
~CONFPAR	~0.88	~0.58

meet the strict requirement to be classified as a necessary condition. However, the finding also indicates that the condition is frequently, but not always, associated with a high performance of new parties (see [Appendix Figure A2](#) for a visualization of this association and further details). In other words, the outcome can still occur without the condition being present in some cases. The result for corruption, the second-strongest condition linked to new party success, can be interpreted in the same way (consistency score: 0.73).

The fsQCA yields complex solutions that illuminate the multifaceted nature of new parties' structural breakthrough. These solutions reveal that various combinations of political, institutional, and economic factors are equally capable of producing favorable outcomes for emerging political entities (see [Appendix Table A4](#)). This equifinality underscores the intricate interplay between different contextual elements in shaping the electoral performance of new parties. For example, configurations combining distrust in parties, government instability, high perceived corruption and unfavorable economic conditions emerge as sufficient for strong new party performance, but only for small groups of cases. Eastern and Southern European countries are particularly prominent in these densely specified configurations, reflecting the accumulation of multiple crisis-related conditions. Another path identified in the complex solution links low confidence in parties, permissive electoral rules, with high perceived corruption and weak economic performance, capturing highly specific contexts such as those observed in Latvia and Lithuania. Notably, no single factor emerges as universally necessary, reinforcing the context-dependent nature of this political phenomenon. These findings challenge monocausal explanations of new party breakthrough and highlight the importance of considering conjunctural causation. The complex solutions thus provide a nuanced understanding of how diverse political, institutional, and economic conditions can coalesce to create opportunities for new political actors, emphasizing the need for multidimensional approaches in both theoretical frameworks and practical strategies for emerging parties.

[Table 3](#) presents the intermediate fsQCA solution for new party electoral performance (NEWPP). The solution is derived using a consistency threshold of 0.80 and a frequency threshold of one, while restricting counterfactuals to those consistent with theoretically grounded directional expectations. As such, the intermediate solution constitutes the main explanatory result of the analysis, balancing empirical proximity with theoretical plausibility.

The intermediate solution identifies two sufficient configurations, jointly achieving high consistency and substantial coverage of the outcome. Importantly, both configurations share low confidence in political parties (~CONFPAR) as a common condition. This pattern reinforces the findings of the necessity analysis, which showed that low confidence in parties approaches the threshold of an almost necessary condition for new party success. Rather than functioning as a direct causal trigger, declining confidence appears to act as a structural scope condition, enabling different crisis mechanisms to translate into electoral support for new political actors.

The first configuration combines government instability, high perceived corruption, and low economic growth (~CONFPAR \* ~GOVDUR \* CORRUP \* ~ECOGROW). This

TABLE 3 Intermediate solution for high new party performance (NEWPP).

Configuration	Consistency	Raw coverage	Cases
~CONFPAR * CORRUP *~GOVDUR *~ ECOGROW	0.84	0.29	Poland (0.74, 0.98), Romania (0.71, 1)
~CONFPAR *~THRESH * UNEMPL	0.81	0.44	Italy (0.68, 0.86), Czechia (0.70, 0.83), Slovakia (0.66, 0.74), Lithuania (0.69, 0.89), Latvia (0.65, 0.76), Bulgaria (0.62, 0.83)

(1) Solution Consistency: 0.82; Solution Coverage: 0.46. (2) Consistency cutoff = 0.80; (3) Only cases with solution membership  $\geq 0.50$  are reported.

pathway captures contexts of compound political and economic crisis, in which both governing capacity and economic performance are under strain. In such settings, established parties face challenges to both their legitimacy and competence, creating particularly favorable conditions for new parties to mobilize protest-oriented and reformist electorates. Empirically, this configuration is illustrated by cases such as Poland and Romania, where prolonged economic stagnation coincided with unstable governments and high-profile corruption scandals, weakening traditional party alignments and facilitating the electoral breakthrough of new political formations. This path aligns with works of political opportunity structures and party system change (e.g., [Fernández-García and Luengo, 2019](#); [van Kessel, 2015](#)), which highlight the importance of dissatisfaction, distrust and instability to trigger new party entry. The high consistency (0.84) of this pathway indicates that when all three conditions are present together, new party sustained breakthrough is highly likely.

The second configuration links low confidence in parties with high unemployment and low electoral thresholds (~CONFPAR \* UNEMPL \* ~THRESH). This pathway highlights the interaction between socioeconomic distress and institutional opportunity structures. High unemployment generates demand for political alternatives, while permissive electoral rules lower the mechanical and psychological barriers for new parties to enter the electoral arena. Countries such as Croatia, Czechia, and Lithuania exemplify this configuration, where economic hardship translated into electoral success for new parties in institutional contexts that reduced entry costs. As in the first configuration, unemployment alone is insufficient; its effect depends on a broader context of eroded confidence in established parties and favorable institutional conditions.

The second pathway represents the most parsimonious and generalizable configuration, combining demand-side distrust with supply-side institutional openings. With the highest coverage (44%) of all pathways, this configuration explains the largest share of new party success cases and crosses regional boundaries, appearing in both Western and Eastern countries. This pathway exemplifies the interaction between voter grievances and

institutional catalysts that lies at the heart of party system change. Low confidence in parties creates the motivation for voters to defect from established options, while low electoral disproportionality provides the institutional opportunity for new parties to translate votes into seats.

The dominance of this pathway in post-communist democracies merits careful interpretation. These countries share not only a legacy of weak party system institutionalization (Casal Bértoa and Mair, 2012; Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020), but also a backdrop of pervasive corruption scandals, dissatisfaction with governing parties and frequent government turnover. Romania and Poland are two notable examples of this situation, but Slovenia and Croatia also follow this route. Overall, the pathway's coverage of 43.8% indicates it explains a substantial portion of high new party performance cases, making a crucial mechanism in understanding party system change.

Taken together, the intermediate solution suggests that new party success arises not from isolated political, economic, or institutional factors, but from specific combinations of crisis and opportunity, all embedded in contexts of declining confidence in the party system. These findings underscore the conjunctural logic of party system change and caution against monocausal explanations of electoral volatility.

The results challenge conventional wisdom regarding the deterministic impact of economic factors. In particular, economic performance provides counterintuitive results. Countries can experience severe economic distress while maintaining party system stability if electoral rules prevent new party entry or if established parties successfully manage economic narratives. In addition, economic growth thus proves insufficient to stabilize party systems when political institutions—particularly party-society linkages measured through confidence—remain weak. The key insight is that economic conditions represent moderating rather than determining factors, requiring political and institutional conditions to translate material grievances into party system change.

Following Schneider and Wagemann (2012) recommendations for enhanced QCA, Figure 2 presents the fit between fuzzy-set membership in the solution term (x-axis) and fuzzy-set membership in the outcome (y-axis) for intermediate solutions. The diagonal line represents perfect consistency, where predicted membership equals observed outcome membership. Points above the diagonal indicate cases where the outcome exceeds the solution's prediction (underprediction), while points below indicate the solution overpredicts the outcome (overprediction). Points clustering near the diagonal demonstrate good model fit.

The intermediate solution (Figure 2) shows strong overall fit with consistency of 0.854 and RMSE of 0.112. Most cases cluster appropriately in two quadrants: the upper-right quadrant contains high-membership cases (Romania, Poland, Lithuania, France, Italy, Bulgaria, Czech Republic) where both solution and outcome exceed 0.5, confirming these countries follow the identified pathways to new party success; the lower-left quadrant contains low-membership cases (Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Malta, Finland, Luxembourg) where both solution and outcome fall below 0.5, confirming stable party systems. This distribution validates the solution's ability to distinguish between party system stability and change.

Several cases deviate from the expected sufficiency relationship and merit closer attention. In the upper-left quadrant, France and Poland display very high outcome membership despite only moderate membership in the intermediate solution, suggesting that new party success in these countries may be driven by additional mechanisms not fully captured by the identified configurations. Romania shows a similar pattern, combining modest solution membership with strong new party performance. Conversely, Portugal, and to a lesser extent Cyprus, exhibit moderate solution membership but limited new party success, indicating that favorable structural conditions do not necessarily translate into electoral breakthroughs. By contrast, most Eastern

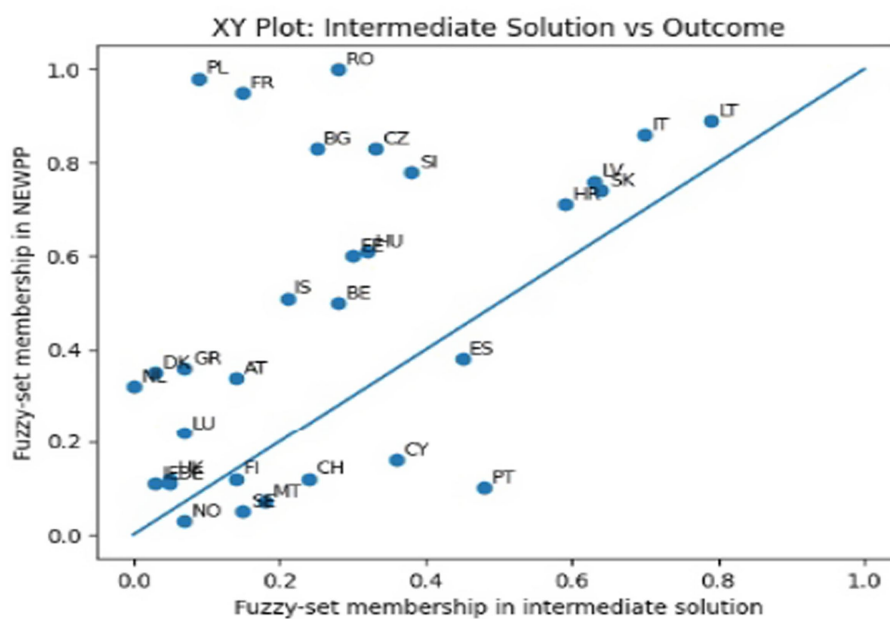


FIGURE 2  
QCA solution fit diagram for new party breakthrough.

European cases, including Romania, Lithuania, and Slovakia, lie close to or above the diagonal, supporting the empirical relevance of the intermediate solution.

Table 4 reports the parsimonious fsQCA solution for new party performance. Unlike the intermediate solution, the parsimonious solution allows the use of all logically possible counterfactuals, including easy counterfactuals, and therefore provides a more abstract representation of the solution space. In line with standard practice, it is presented here as a robustness check rather than as the primary explanatory result.

The parsimonious solution identifies a larger number of simpler sufficient paths, while maintaining substantial overall coverage of the outcome. As in the intermediate solution, low confidence in political parties ( $\sim$ CONFPAR) emerges as a central condition across all configurations. This consistency across solution types strengthens confidence in the interpretation of declining party confidence as a foundational element of new party success.

Within this broader scope condition, the parsimonious solution reveals the substitutability of different crisis triggers. New party success is shown to occur when low confidence in parties is combined with either political instability and corruption, high unemployment, or low electoral thresholds. Compared to the intermediate solution, these paths are less densely specified, reflecting the greater permissiveness of the parsimonious minimization. For example, while the intermediate solution associates political instability and corruption with low economic growth, the parsimonious solution suggests that political crisis alone may be sufficient once confidence in parties has eroded.

Empirically, this abstraction encompasses a wider set of cases, including Northern and Western European countries such as Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, where new parties have achieved electoral success despite the absence of severe economic downturns. In these cases, institutional openness or broader dissatisfaction with established parties appears sufficient to facilitate new party entry and consolidation. By contrast, Southern and

Eastern European cases continue to cluster around configurations involving political and economic crisis, consistent with the denser pathways identified in the intermediate solution. Overall, the solutions suggest that once confidence in established parties collapses, a variety of political, economic, and institutional mechanisms can independently support the electoral success of new parties. This finding substantially confirms our expectations.

Having identified the conditions for new party success, we now turn to the negation analysis to examine what configuration of factors maintain party system stability. Following standard QCA practice (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012), analyzing the absence of low new party performance ( $\sim$ NEWPP) provides crucial insights into causal asymmetry and helps validate the sufficient analysis. This asymmetry has important theoretical and practical implications often overlooked in party system research.

The analysis shows that the configurations leading to the absence of new party success differ systematically from those associated with its presence (Table 5). In particular, high confidence in political parties (CONFPAR) emerges as a central element in the explanation of  $\sim$ NEWPP, often in combination with favorable economic conditions and political stability. This contrasts sharply with the solutions for NEWPP, where low confidence in parties functions as a scope condition. Crucially, the negation analysis confirms that the absence of new party success is not simply explained by the absence of crisis. Instead, it reflects the presence of stabilizing configurations in which political legitimacy, institutional closure, and economic performance jointly sustain established party systems.

One prominent configuration leading to  $\sim$ NEWPP combines high confidence in parties with low government instability and positive economic performance (CONFPAR \* GOVDUR \* ECOGROW). This pattern captures contexts in which established parties retain legitimacy and governing capacity, thereby limiting electoral space for new political actors. Countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Switzerland illustrate this configuration, where stable governance and relatively high trust in parties coincide with limited electoral success for new entrants.

A second configuration links high confidence in parties with restrictive electoral institutions (CONFPAR \* THRESH), indicating that institutional barriers reinforce party system closure when voter confidence remains high. In these cases, even moderate dissatisfaction does not translate into viable electoral challenges, as both demand-side and supply-side conditions constrain new party competition.

The negation analysis also reveals a clear regional contrast between the Nordic countries and several Eastern European cases. Nordic democracies such as Sweden, Norway, and Finland consistently align with configurations leading to the absence of strong new party performance, combining relatively high confidence in political parties with stable governance and favorable economic conditions. In these contexts, electoral competition remains largely structured around established party systems, and institutional openness alone is insufficient to generate sustained electoral breakthroughs for new parties. By contrast, many Eastern European countries cluster around configurations associated with strong new party performance, reflecting lower confidence in parties and more volatile political and economic environments. This finding is consistent with studies that link weak party system institutionalization and greater openness to

TABLE 4 Parsimonious solution for high New Party Performance (NEWPP).

Configuration	Consistency	Raw coverage	Cases
$\sim$ CONFPAR * GOVDUR * CORRUP	0.83	0.31	Greece (0.68, 0.36), Italy (0.70, 0.86), Romania (0.71, 1), Bulgaria (0.27, 0.83), Spain (0.53, 0.38)
$\sim$ CONFPAR * UNEMPL	0.81	0.36	Croatia (0.70, 0.71), Latvia (0.77, 0.76), Lithuania (0.81, 0.89), Slovakia (0.64, 0.74), Portugal (0.61, 0.10)
$\sim$ CONFPAR * THRESH	0.79	0.28	Denmark (0.03, 0.35), Sweden (0.15, 0.05), Finland (0.14, 0.12), Luxembourg (0.07, 0.22)

(1) Solution Consistency: 0.80; Solution Coverage: 0.61. (2) Only cases with solution membership  $\geq 0.50$  are reported.

TABLE 5 Parsimonious solution for low new party performance (~NEWPP).

Configuration	Consistency	Raw coverage	Cases
CONFPAR * GOVDUR * ECOGROW	0.84	0.33	Sweden (0.72, 0.95); Norway (0.65, 0.97); Switzerland (0.61, 0.88)
CONFPAR * THRESH	0.81	0.29	United Kingdom (0.78, 0.88); France (0.70, 0.05); Malta (0.69, 0.93)
Overall solution	0.82	0.46	Denmark (0.55, 0.65); Finland (0.58, 0.88); Germany (0.60, 0.89); Sweden (0.72, 0.95); United Kingdom (0.78, 0.88)

(1) Consistency cutoff = 0.80. (2) Only cases with solution membership  $\geq 0.50$  are reported.

the success of new parties in the region (Bértoa and Enyedi, 2021; Haughton and Deegan-Krause, 2020). The contrast between the two regions suggests that new party success is not merely a function of institutional permissiveness, but is deeply conditioned by broader patterns of political legitimacy and system stability that vary systematically across regions.

The intermediate solution for the negative outcome (low party performance) confirms the importance of high levels of political confidence (see Appendix Table A5). In practical terms, this suggests that strengthening citizens' trust in political institutions—through transparency reforms, responsiveness, and effective governance—can have a remarkable impact on mitigating disruptive party system dynamics. In particular, the intermediate solution for the absence of strong new party performance (~NEWPP) identifies two distinct stabilizing pathways, both centered on relatively high confidence in political parties, but operating through different mechanisms. The first pathway combines high confidence in parties with political stability and favorable economic conditions (CONFPAR \* GOVDUR \* ECOGROW), capturing contexts in which established parties retain both legitimacy and governing capacity. This configuration characterizes countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Switzerland, where stable governments and positive economic performance limit the electoral space available to new political actors. The second pathway links high confidence in parties with restrictive institutional environments and low unemployment (CONFPAR \* THRESH \* ~ UNEMPL), indicating that institutional closure reinforces

party system stability when socioeconomic pressures remain limited. Cases such as Malta, Ireland, and Germany exemplify this route, where high entry barriers and relatively favorable labor-market conditions reduce incentives for voters to support new parties. This configuration exhibits the highest coverage, indicating that these conditions jointly constitute the most comprehensive pathway to maintaining party system stability. Together, these pathways show that the absence of new party success is not simply the inverse of crisis-driven dynamics, but is produced by configurations of legitimacy, stability, and institutional containment that sustain established party systems across different regional contexts.

## Conclusion

This study sought to identify necessary or sufficient conditions for the structural breakthrough of new political parties in 21st-century Europe, addressing a significant gap in the existing literature. While previous empirical research has largely focused on explaining the success of individual newly-formed parties, it has often overlooked crucial macro-level differences. Furthermore, scholarship has largely relied on empirical studies targeting specific subsets of new parties, and it has also been constrained by a strong geographic concentration in particular regions. The dominant methodological approach has led to oversimplified, context-specific explanations that overlook the complexity of factors driving consistent support toward new party and limit their broader applicability across different political settings. By employing fsQCA, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of the conditions facilitating new party success in the medium term. This methodological strategy allows not only for the identification of complex causal recipes, but also the exploration of necessary and sufficient conditions, providing insights that are both more comprehensive and more readily generalizable than those derived from single-case studies or large-N statistical analyses. This approach not only enriches our theoretical understanding of new party performance but also offers practical insights for political actors and policymakers operating in diverse institutional contexts.

The empirical analysis unveils meaningful results. First of all, low confidence in parties emerges as the most central condition across all countries. The failure of this crucial linkage between citizens and representative institutions can be considered as the main factor accounting for new party success. When established parties lose their legitimacy, voters are more willing to experiment with new alternatives. The relationship is not perfect, but it is consistent and robust. This conclusion contributes to qualifying conventional wisdom, which usually attributes party system change to economic or output failures, on the one hand, or to institutional determinants, on the other (De Oliveira, 2023; Casal Bértoa and Weber, 2019; Casal Bértoa and Rama, 2020).

Having said this, it is also important to remind that a number of configurations and combinations of conditions explain different outcomes. This supports our argument that, ultimately, no single factor can explain new parties' electoral performance and that relevant factors are prone to interact in complex, often

unpredictable ways that diverge from the often simplistic linear-additive assumptions implicit in much of the existing literature.

In particular, the analysis identifies three distinct paths that are sufficient for explaining new parties' electoral performance. First, a climate of widespread party distrust, high levels of perceived corruption, and unstable governments emerges as a key factor, as it creates an environment where voters disillusioned with established parties are more likely to support new actors. Second, the second path consists of widespread distrust in political parties and high proportional systems. Finally, the combination of short party distrust and high rates of unemployment may also lead to above average support for new parties. These configurations highlight the diverse circumstances under which new parties can achieve electoral success. The logic of this solution does not imply that other factors are irrelevant. Rather, it highlights the primacy of political confidence as a foundational condition upon which other factors may build. This result invites us to reconsider the role of democratic legitimacy in party system stability and change, confirming empirical studies on the topic (Lavezzolo and Ramiro, 2018; Otjes and de Wardt, 2023).

Overall, our findings highlight the diversity that characterizes parties' electoral trajectories in 21st-century Europe and lend support to our hypotheses, particularly H2. Indeed, political factors, namely distrust of political parties, emerged as far more significant than previously indicated by existing research. By contrast, the anticipated impact of economic factors—widely substantiated in studies employing micro-level data—was only partially validated. Notably, the results align more closely with the electoral performance of new parties in Eastern Europe, while they only partially account for the limited success of new political forces in Western democracies. Finally, because the outcome captures average levels of new party performance rather than episodic electoral breakthroughs, the findings foreground longer-term and structural factors over short-term shocks, thereby complementing existing analyses that focus on discrete moments of party emergence and offering a deeper understanding of party system permeability.

This study also highlights several promising areas for future research. One important direction would be to explain the path of these new parties. While some successfully establish themselves as influential actors within their political systems, others fail to do so, becoming marginalized or eventually disappearing (Emanuele and Sikk, 2021). Although recent research has identified multiple trajectories of new parties, the causes behind these divergent developments remain insufficiently understood. A comparative analysis of parties that achieved initial success but followed divergent long-term paths could provide valuable insights.

A second interesting development of this research refers to the level of analysis. Our study has focused on new parties' emergence and performance in national legislative elections, treating the national level as the primary arena of party system change in European democracies. Future research could systematically examine whether new parties with prior sub-national or European electoral experience follow different trajectories than those making their first appearance in national elections. In addition, in federal or highly decentralized systems, regional strongholds may provide new parties with crucial resources for sustaining national campaigns during periods of electoral difficulty. Conversely, simultaneous competition across multiple levels may strain the organizational and financial capacity of

emerging parties. Comparative research examining these multi-level dynamics could illuminate the conditions under which new parties successfully navigate the complexities of contemporary European politics.

Another compelling research opportunity lies in examining sociological factors, particularly to what extent new cleavages are likely to drive the breakthrough of new parties. This may necessitate the development of new metrics to assess the strength of these cleavages and their political impact. Finally, a potential topic for further examination would be to investigate how major crisis events (e.g., economic recessions, pandemics, security threats) alter the configuration of conditions favorable for new party breakthrough. This could involve comparing QCA results from periods of relative stability with those from crisis periods.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Author contributions

ML: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

The author ML declared that they were an editorial board member of *Frontiers*, at the time of submission. This had no impact on the peer review process and the final decision.

## Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. This article has used generative AI for language editing, including grammar, punctuation, stylistic refinement, and concise rephrasing of sentences and paragraphs. All analytical interpretations and substantive arguments are the author's own.

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2026.1756370/full#supplementary-material>

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