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# One More Time? Parties' Repeated Electoral Entry in Younger Democracies

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**Abstract:** *Why and how parties continue contesting elections ("repeated entry") is an underresearched question despite its essence for party survival and party-system stability. We study repeated entry in three decades of elections in 10 Central and Eastern European countries using a new dataset that records almost 1,000 entry decisions. Our findings underline the importance of separating between first- and second-league parties based on whether in the previous election a party could obtain representation alone. First-league parties (those that could gain representation alone) almost always contest the next election. Second-league parties (those that could not win representation alone) exit electoral competition quite frequently and adopt more diverse repeated-entry strategies. We find that second-league parties' repeated entry depends on their closeness to the representation threshold, access to resources, and the number of competitors in their niche, but not on institutional constraints or voter dissatisfaction.*

**Verification Materials:** The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures, and analyses in this article are available on the American Journal of Political Science Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/HXQOCI.

Party-system instability is an important feature of many younger democracies with significant consequences for the quality and survival of democracy (Mainwaring 2018). Hence, several studies have focused on explaining the entry and electoral success of new parties in younger democracies (Engler 2016; Hanley and Sikk 2016; Tavits 2008). Yet, to explain whether party systems will stabilize, it is equally important to understand why parties survive. In this study, we contribute to the research on party survival by examining why extant parties continue contesting elections, the phenomenon we label "repeated entry."

We aim to address two challenges that characterize the research on party survival in younger democracies despite several important recent contributions. First, studies predominantly focus on parties' electoral survival as measured by their vote share (Cyr 2017; Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2018; Levitsky et al. 2016; Lupu 2014; Mustillo 2009) or ability to remain represented in the parliament (Chiru, Popescu, and Székely 2021; Zur 2019). However, the fate of parties lies in both the hands of the electorate and party elites. Hence, we must analytically differentiate (also see Spirova 2007) between, on the one hand, voter decisions to support a particular party (assuring parties' electoral survival) and, on the other hand, the elites' calculus to continue contesting elections, that is, repeated entry. Second, the scarce research that does focus on repeated entry in younger democracies only examines one type of strategy at the same time, for example, whether a party will contest the next election in an electoral coalition (Kellam 2017) or merge (Chiru,

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Popescu, and Székely 2021; Ibenskas 2016). We know, however, that parties make a simultaneous trade-off between these and other repeated-entry strategies (also see Spirova 2007).

To address these two challenges, we propose a novel theoretical and empirical approach consisting of three components. First, we suggest an innovative typology of repeated entry based on three conceptual dimensions (candidates, label, and organization) that lie at the heart of most definitions of political parties. Subsequently, we use this new typology to first explain whether parties contest the next election in the first place and in any form (i.e., independently, in an alliance, in a shadow alliance or as a merger) versus ceasing electoral activities (i.e., hibernation). In a second step, we zoom in on the specific repeated-entry strategies chosen.

Second, we argue that scholars of party survival should distinguish between what we label first- and second-league parties. First-league parties are defined as those that obtained sufficient electoral support in the previous election to obtain parliamentary representation on their own. Second-league parties, in turn, acquired at least 1% of the votes but were unable to secure representation, or to do so independently.

Third, to explain first- and second-league parties' repeated entry, we develop an innovative theoretical framework. We take the well-known model of strategic entry as our starting point (Cox 1997; Tavits 2006; 2008). This model was developed to explain the emergence of new parties. We make one crucial addition to adapt it to repeated entry. That is, contrary to new parties, those deciding about repeated entry have information on their past electoral support. Based on bounded rationality theory (e.g., Bendor et al. 2011; Kahneman 2011; Simon 1955), we propose that this level of support relative to the representation threshold is the key heuristic in parties' repeated-entry calculus. We hypothesize that first-league parties almost always enter the next election: they infer from their past ability of gaining representation on their own that they will be able to obtain representation again. This, however, is not the case for second-league parties. Therefore, this set of parties is theoretically most interesting (also see Cyr 2017), which is why our hypotheses primarily focus on their repeated entry. Again in line with bounded rationality theory, this choice should crucially depend on how far they are below the representational threshold. Additionally, we consider contextual factors like electoral institutions and interelectoral developments (voter discontent and presence of ideologically similar parties) as well as party's access to key resources that may affect their repeated-entry calculus.

We test our hypotheses using a new dataset that we collected ourselves on 961 repeated-entry decisions in 10 younger democracies from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) from 1990 to 2021. We first confirm that first-league parties are more likely to contest the next election than second-league parties. In fact, there are hardly any cases of non-repeated entry or "hibernation" among first-league parties. Second-league parties, however, do hibernate. And if not, they make a more complex calculus where all different repeated-entry strategies become relevant. We find empirical evidence for several of our hypotheses: second-league parties are more likely to contest the next election the closer they are to the representation threshold, the fewer competitors there are in their ideological niche, and the better their access to public office resources.

Our core contribution is that studies on repeated entry and/or party survival should adapt their theoretical frameworks and empirical strategies depending on the league a party belongs to. First- and second-league parties make a fundamentally different trade-off regarding whether and how to repeatedly enter electoral competition.

## Conceptualizing Repeated Entry

Before we proceed with our new theory, it is useful to clarify how our main phenomenon of interest "repeated entry" relates to "party survival." The latter is increasingly used in political science; yet scholars attach different meanings to it. As said, some define survival as the electoral survival of parties (Cyr 2017; Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2018; Levitsky et al. 2016; Lupu 2014; Mustillo 2009; but see Spirova 2007). However, others refer to survival as the elites' decision to continue contesting elections (e.g., Bolleyer, Correa, and Katz 2019; van de Wardt, Berkhout, and Vermeulen 2017). This is also our topic of interest. In terms of the different thresholds of party lifespan identified by Pedersen (1982) (declaration, authorization, representation, and relevance), we study whether parties manage to stay above the threshold of authorization: whether they will contest the next election. To stress that we solely focus on the decision-making of political elites, throughout we speak about repeated entry rather than party survival.

That being said, the literature on repeated entry mostly limits itself to explaining whether a party continues to run as an independent organization (e.g., Bakke and Sitter 2015; Bolleyer, Ibenskas, and Bischoff 2019; van de Wardt, Berkhout, and Vermeulen 2017). Yet

scholars increasingly acknowledge that they can do so or stop doing so in different ways. For instance, they can run in an electoral alliance, or they may merge or dissolve (e.g., Bolleyer, Correa, and Katz 2019; Spirova 2007; van de Wardt and van Witteloostuijn 2021). While these studies offer important contributions, their typologies remain "free-floating" (Collier, LaPorte, and Seawright 2012, 225) in that they lack an explicit anchoring in underlying conceptual dimensions. The absence of a consistent conceptual framework leads scholars to talk past each other, creating the risk that some important types of repeated entry are not studied. A more rigorous description would especially be needed in younger democracies where repeated-entry strategies are more diverse.

To address this gap, we propose a new typology of repeated entry. It consists of three dimensions capturing whether: (1) the party's leading candidates run again in the next election, (2) the party label reappears in the next election, and (3) the party contests this election as an independent organization.

The first dimension taps into the most minimalist definition of a political party as a team of candidates seeking public office (Downs 1957). We focus on the leading candidates only, as they have the best chances of winning public office. We distinguish between the situation in which at least one leading candidate runs again and instances where none of them do. Although it could be useful to know the exact number of leading candidates that runs again, our minimum definition captures the essence behind the definition of parties as vehicles for bringing candidates into office. To keep fulfilling this function, a party should at least have one of its leading candidates to run again.

The second dimension speaks to the presence of the party's label in the next election. Party label is an important feature of established definitions of political parties. For example, Sartori defines a party as "any political group identified by an official label that presents at elections" (1976, 63). This dimension can take on three values. First, a party can run on its own label. Second, a party can run as part of an electoral alliance that uses a label distinct from the ones of its component parties. In this case, voters are not able to choose the party's label on the election ballot; yet the labels of the parents "behind" the alliance label are known. Mostly, the labels of alliances combine the labels of the constituent parties. Even if this is not the case, the labels of the parent parties are likely referred to when the alliance is covered in the media. The third possibility is that the party's label cannot be derived from the ballot. This could either be because it does not run at all or because it runs candidates on the label of another party as part of an alliance deal. In that case, voters will less likely be aware of the parties where those candidates come from. It would also seem to media that these candidates are running on the label they currently endorse.

The third dimension relates to definitions of political parties as organizations. Janda defines a political party as "an organization that pursues the goal of placing its avowed representatives in government positions" (1980, 5). Existence as an organization also lies at the essence of Aldrich's definition, which refers to a party an "institutionalized coalition, one that has adopted rules, norms and procedures" (1995, 283–84). Thus, we distinguish between the situation where a party contests the next election as an independent organization as opposed to being encapsulated by a larger party organization, or having disappeared completely.

Some of the types presented in Table 1 are well established in other studies. Independent entry and hibernation represent two extreme ends of repeated entry. In case of hibernation, we use a "Yes / No" label to express that this means that a party no longer contests elections. It therefore no longer passes Pedersen's (1982) authorization threshold, crucial to our concept of repeated entry. The party may still pass the declaration threshold (if it still exists and continues to declare its intention to participate in elections), but this is less important for our purposes. Repeated entry through an alliance allows the party to run its candidates and preserve the independence of its organization, even if the party must compromise on having to run under the alliance's label (even though the party labels are likely to be mentioned in the election campaign, as discussed above). Mergers occur when two or more parties merge before the next election and give up their organizational independence and labels. We also use the merger category to describe situations in which a smaller party loses its organizational independence and label as a result of being taken over by a larger competitor, while the latter preserves its label and undergoes only minor organizational changes (and therefore can be considered as having entered independently).

Our typology not only provides a significant contribution by organizing the above-mentioned types into a coherent conceptual framework, but we also identify types that are often neglected in the literature. A first example is shadow electoral-alliance entry, where a party runs candidates on another party's label. We find that this is a prevalent strategy for small parties in CEE. A second, often neglected type, is repeated entry as vehicle for another elite group. This refers to situations where a party's leading candidates are replaced by a new elite

**TABLE 1 Typology of Repeated Entry**

| Conceptual Dimensions | | | Conceptual Type of (Non-)Repeated Entry | Operationalization in Empirical Analysis | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Repeated Entry of Leading Candidates | Repeated Entry of Party Label | Remain an Independent Organization at Time of Next Election | | Category on Binary DV | Category on Multinomial DV |
| Yes | Yes | Yes | Independent | Repeated entry | Independent |
| Yes | As part of an alliance | Yes | Electoral alliance | | Alliance |
| Yes | No | Yes | Shadow electoral alliance | | Shadow alliance |
| Yes | No | No | Merger | | Merger |
| No | Yes / Part of an alliance | Yes / No | Repeated entry of label as vehicle for other elite group | No cases in dataset | No cases in dataset |
| No | No | Yes / No | Party ceases to exists as an independent organization and/or to participate in elections | Hibernation | Hibernation |

*Notes*: The first three columns denote the three dimensions of repeated entry, while the fourth column depicts the resulting repeated-entry type. Subsequently, the fifth and sixth column show how the repeated-entry types are translated into scores on our binary and multinominal dependent variables.

group. Multiple combinations with the other two dimensions are possible, which is why we use labels with two options: the new elite group can either run independently under this party label that formerly belonged to a different group, or it can run as part of an electoral alliance. Also, it can maintain the party organization, or it can merge with other parties. While this type does not appear in our data, it is likely a prevalent strategy among very small parties (below we refer to them as third-league parties), falling outside of this article's scope. Nonetheless, this category is of theoretical relevance for research on repeated entry.

Our new typology of repeated entry has important resemblances with research on party newness or novelty. Both structural or origins indicators (e.g., party merger or electoral alliance) and party attributes (e.g., party label, candidates, and organization) used for evaluating party novelty (Barnea and Rahat 2011; Emanuele and Chiaramonte 2018; Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015; 2020; Hug 2001; Sikk and Köker 2019) play an important role in our typology. We also concur with authors who exclude ideological change from evaluations of party organizational continuity (Borbáth 2021).

We use our new typology to construct two dependent variables. First and foremost, we conceptualize repeated entry dichotomously distinguishing between hibernation (non-repeated entry) and the different repeated-entry types (i.e., independent, alliance, shadow alliance, and merger). However, we also examine our theoretical argument based on different repeated entry types as conceptualized in Table 1. In the online supporting information (Appendix A, p. 2–3), we present examples for each type.

## Explaining Repeated Entry: Bounded Rationality Framework

We build on the model of strategic entry (Cox 1997) to develop our theoretical framework on repeated entry. While this model has been successfully applied to the entry of new parties in established and younger democracies (Tavits 2006, 2008), we believe that, with some adaptations, it can also be used to study the *repeated entry* of existing parties.

The theory of strategic entry assumes that new parties are started by instrumentally rational elites who care about maximizing their vote share in the short run to enjoy the spoils of office and/or achieve policy goals (Cox 1997; Tavits 2006). The latter implies that the model is particularly well-suited for studying party entry and repeated entry in CEE, where parties are more frequently formed by political entrepreneurs (as opposed to societal groups) and assumed to be more office seeking than their Western European counterparts (Kselman, Powell, and Tucker 2016, 342).

According to the model, a new party decides to run if the benefits of holding political office (b) times the probability of electoral support (p) equals or exceed the costs of entry (c). Thus, parties enter only if $pb \geq c$. Regarding

the benefit of office, Tavits (2006, 104) assumes that new party elites are driven by the monetary rewards and prestige from public office. The costs of entry depend on the institutions regulating ballot access as well as the restrictiveness of electoral thresholds (Tavits 2008). Regarding the factors that enhance new parties' perceived electoral viability, Cox (1997, 170) argues that new party elites will derive this from the presence of party labels. Once party labels have been established and proven electorally viable, new candidates will be deterred from entry. If this argument holds, we can thus expect high entry rates, also of nonviable parties, in the first elections after a country's democratic transition. Yet, since the establishment of party labels is mainly a matter of time, we should observe that the propensity of miscalculation (entry of nonviable parties) will later diminish.

The theory of strategic entry has considerable merits. Foremost, it offers an integrated framework to study new party entry and success. Nonetheless, we believe that the role of uncertainty and incomplete information is still undertheorized. Even though Tavits (2006; 2008) and Cox (1997) both acknowledge that in younger democracies, it is more difficult for party elites to estimate their electoral viability, they do not explicitly discuss how parties deal with these uncertainties.

We propose that bounded rationality theory could fill this gap. Bounded rationality theory proposes that humans are cognitively constrained in many ways and that the impact of these constraints increases the more difficult the choice problem at hand (Bendor et al. 2011). Arguably, the calculation of whether to form a new party or to keep contesting elections can be complex for a significant share of parties. While information on the costs of ballot access may be readily available, it is much more difficult for elites to estimate their future electoral support.

This is clearly illustrated in Figure 1 where we show the proportion of political parties (both new and existing) that did not win parliamentary representation in each election in our dataset. As shown, the proportion that ends up without any seats is substantial. And since we only consider parties that gained at least 1% of the votes in the previous election, we are still underestimating this "miscalculation rate." While Hungary depicts a downward trend in miscalculation, this does not hold for the other countries. In most cases, miscalculation rates are consistently high; yet they fluctuate over time in a nonsystematic way. These consistently high miscalculation rates can be referred to as bounded rationality showing through (Simon 2019). So, contrary to expectations that uncertainty diminishes as party systems age (Cox 1997; Tavits 2008), uncertainty and miscalculation remain important phenomena. Therefore, a bounded rationality approach towards repeated entry is clearly warranted.

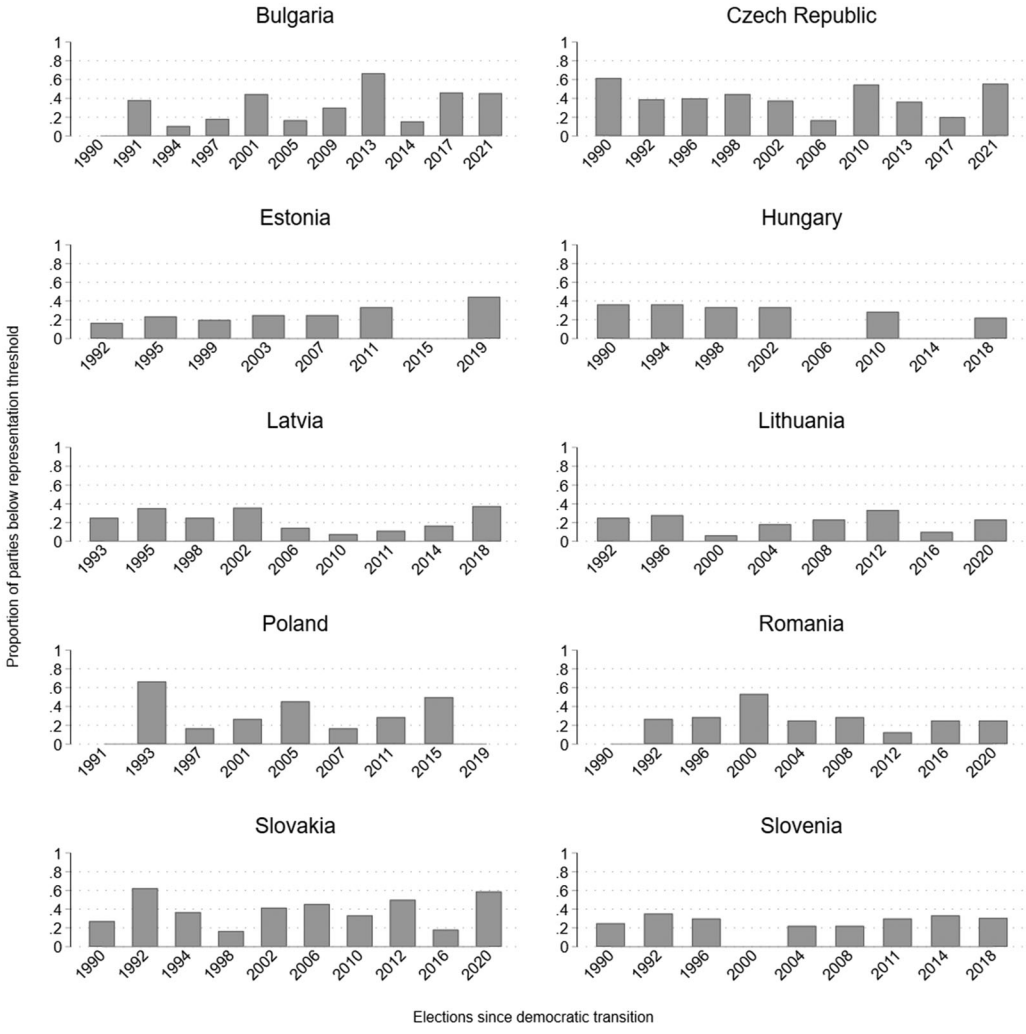
We believe that this can fruitfully be done within the $pb \geq c$ framework originally developed to understand *new* party entry. While perceptions regarding p and c likely differ between new and nonnew parties and between different types of nonnew parties, each party makes its calculus about whether it will run based on these same parameters. The crucial difference, however, is that, as opposed to new parties, extant parties can use their previous electoral support as a proxy for p. This use of heuristics is part of bounded rationality theory. Below we use this logic to explain why parties with reasonable levels of electoral success (and thus, a high perceived value for p) almost always run in the next election. For electorally unsuccessful parties, the outcome of the $pb \geq c$ calculus will be more variable.

## First, Second, and Third-League Parties

Bounded rationality theory argues that when individuals or groups are confronted with uncertainty and complex choices they will rely on heuristics. These heuristics are shorthand guides to rational action that are prone to give reasonable results (Kahneman 2011). More specifically, we expect that parties rely on the satisficing heuristic, stating that actors compare their past performance against an aspiration level (e.g., Bendor et al. 2011; Simon 1955). We propose that all parties seek parliamentary representation: in terms of bounded rationality theory, this is their aspiration level. As explained above, this would be a valid assumption, especially for CEE party elites (Kselman, Powell, and Tucker 2016, 324). Yet, whether a party should contest the next election in an attempt to reach this aspiration level is a decision involving uncertainty. We suggest that party elites reduce this uncertainty by comparing their past electoral performance to the representation threshold. Here we propose to distinguish between first- and second-league parties.

First-league parties are those who acquired sufficient electoral support in the previous election to win legislative representation on their own. Second-league parties, in turn, are those who did not. This second league includes parties that contested the election alone, but that ended up below the electoral threshold; it includes parties that contested the election in a coalition, but that did not win any seats; and lastly, it includes parties that gained seats through their participation in an alliance, but that would not have been able to gain any seats under the hypothetical situation where they would have run alone.

**FIGURE 1 Proportion of Parties that Did Not Win Representation**




*Notes:* In Bulgaria 1990, Estonia 2015, Hungary 2006 and 2014, Poland 1991 and 2019, Romania 1990, and Slovenia 2000 all parties that we consider (i.e., those that obtained at least 1% of the votes in the previous election) gained representation.

The latter entails that some second-league parties have (limited) parliamentary representation and, in few cases, are minor partners in coalition governments. Nevertheless, we propose that only first-league parties are clearly performing above the aspiration level: They not only gained parliamentary representation, but their performance was such that they did or could have done this independently. Hence, they are more likely than second-league parties to infer that their chances of passing the representation threshold again are sufficiently high, which makes them likelier to run.

*H1: (First- versus Second-League Hypothesis)*: First-league parties have a higher probability of repeated entry than second-league parties.

## Explaining Second-League Parties' Repeated Entry

Since we hardly expect the absence of repeated entry by first-league parties, the rest and lion share of our hypotheses exclusively focuses on second-league parties. Yet, in advance, we would like to clarify that we exclude *third-league parties*: those with less than 1% of the vote. Practically, it would be difficult to gather reliable data on all these very small parties. And even if reliable data would be available, we expect that a substantial share of third-league parties aspires to other goals than parliamentary representation (e.g., the advocacy of policy ideals or maybe even playing pranks). Since the main

assumption of our model is that all parties aspire parliamentary representation (see above), third-league parties therefore offer an inappropriate testing ground for our framework.

## Probability of Electoral Success: The Role of Past Electoral Performance

To understand second-league parties' repeated entry, as in Hypothesis 1, we expect the satisficing heuristic to be key. Except for second-league parties that acquired representation through an electoral alliance, the vast majority of second-league parties is performing below its aspiration level of having parliamentary representation. Yet there is significant variation across these parties as to how far removed they are from achieving this. Parties that fell just short of the threshold could still expect to win legislative representation in the next election. In contrast, parties whose electoral support was very much below the threshold are likely to infer that they are unlikely to gain representation and that they should pursue their interests in another way.

*H2 (Representation Threshold Hypothesis)*: A smaller difference between the party's vote share in the previous election and the threshold of representation increases the probability of repeated entry.

## Costs of Repeated Entry

Our first two hypotheses are motivated by the notion of backward-looking decision-making where parties compare their past electoral performance to their aspiration level. Yet bounded rationality models increasingly propose that organizations may be backward and forward looking at the same time (e.g., Chen 2008). Hence, we can also expect party elites to consider their political environment and changes in this environment that could affect their future electoral viability. Specifically, we expect them to act upon the restrictiveness of electoral institutions affecting the costs of repeated entry and interelection developments (also see Spirova 2007).

Starting with the repeated-entry costs, information on electoral institutions and institutional reforms is clearly available to political elites. Therefore, (increased) costs of accessing the electoral ballot are likely considered in the repeated-entry calculus (Van Cott 2005), as they both impede a party's ability to enter electoral competition in the first place and to contest many electoral districts (cf. Van Biezen and Rashkova 2014). Similarly, higher electoral thresholds increase the cost of winning a seat (Tavits 2008). From the theory of strategic entry, we know that higher entry costs decrease the entry of new parties (Cox 1997; Tavits 2006, 2008). Extending this logic to repeated entry, we expect that parties will more likely run in the next election if electoral institutions will be in place in this election that lower the costs of entry.

*H3 (Institutional Restrictiveness Hypothesis)*: More restrictive electoral institutions in the next election decrease the probability of repeated entry.

## Probability of Electoral Success: The Role of Interelection Developments

Additionally, interelection developments (Spirova 2007) could shape a party's expectations about its future electoral success. A key explanation for the electoral success of new political parties is voter disappointment with the performance of parties (Engler 2016; Hanley and Sikk 2016; Roberts 2014; Tavits 2006). Instead of supporting existing opposition parties that often have tarnished records from earlier legislative terms, many voters may look for new and "fresh" faces to deal with unsatisfactory economic performance, prevalent corruption, and high inequality—or at least use new parties as a way to punish the incumbents for their poor performance (Pop-Eleches 2010; Sikk 2012).

Similarly, we expect that second-league parties can credibly present themselves as new alternatives to first-league parties. Due to their small size (often they are extra-parliamentary parties), they are unlikely to be held responsible by voters for poor policy outcomes. Thus, they should be likelier to run again when voter dissatisfaction is higher.

*H4 (Discontent Hypothesis)*: Higher voter dissatisfaction increases the probability of repeated entry.

Next, the density of a party's niche in the party system could affect perceptions of its future electoral support.[1] Previous research on consolidated democracies has shown that parties are less likely to persist, the more ideologically similar competitors they face (van de Wardt, Berkhout, and Vermeulen 2017). It is an open standing question whether this also applies to CEE party systems where, in comparison to Western Europe, fewer voters are able to place themselves and the main parties on the left-right ideological scale and where the ideological distance between voters and the parties they

[1]Ideological niche density is not to be confused with the well-known concept of a niche party (e.g., Meguid 2008). We focus on the number of competitors that are of the same party family as the focal party and not on whether this focal party is niche or mainstream.

support is higher (Ibenskas and Polk 2022; Van der Brug, Franklin, and Tóka 2008). Nonetheless, there is evidence that voting on specific policy issues (e.g., European integration) is stronger in postcommunist democracies (De Vries and Tillman 2011). Hence, second-league parties that do not face any or very few competitors with similar policy positions can expect to benefit more from an outburst in issue voting on the policies that provide them with a positional or competence advantage. Conversely, parties that face multiple competitors in their policy space will perceive that the chances of increasing their electoral support remain slim. Therefore, we expect that parties will be less likely to run in response to higher density in their ideological niche.

*H5 (Niche Density Hypothesis)*: A higher number of parties in the ideological niche of the party decreases the probability of repeated entry.

### Probability of Electoral Success: The Role of Party Resources

Lastly, parties' expectations about future electoral success may depend on their access to resources. Financial resources, well-developed organizations characterized by numerous activists and elites, media access, and patronage may all contribute to a party's electoral success (Cyr 2017; Silva 2022; Tavits 2013). As such, we expect that second-league parties that have better access to key resources are more likely to contest elections again.

*H6 (Resource Access Hypothesis)*: Better access to resources increases the probability of repeated entry.

We do not formulate hypotheses for the third component of our model: the benefits of public office. Analogous to the theory of strategy entry, we expect that parties are driven by the prestige of public office, which is assumed to be the same for all parties (Tavits 2008, 116).

## Data, Methods, and Operationalizations

### Case Selection

Our sample contains 10 CEE countries. Within the broader set of postcommunist democracies, these countries have the longest histories of democracy after the fall of communism. Therefore, they are the most suitable for studying repeated entry in early and later states of democratic development. Our dataset covers 91 elections and spans the full period from a polity's first election after its transition to democracy until 2021. Hence, it is the largest dataset hitherto available on repeated entry in CEE. Table A1 (pp. 4–16 in the online supporting information) lists the parties included in the analysis.

We collected the data on repeated entry and most independent variables ourselves based on various sources listed in Table A2 (pp. 17–35 in the online supporting information). We coded the repeated-entry decisions of all parties that received at least 1% of the vote in the previous election. As explained above, this threshold (excluding third-league parties) does not yield selection bias. Many of these parties may be driven by other goals than parliamentary representation, and therefore, they are not a suitable testing ground for our hypotheses.

To operationalize our concept of second-league parties, we require data on parties' electoral support. While this is straightforward for parties that contested the election independently, for parties in electoral alliances, we estimate individual vote shares as the product between (1) the vote share of the alliance and (2) the ratio between the number of seats obtained by an individual party and the number of seats gained by the alliance as a whole. For electoral alliances that did not win legislative representation, the vote share of individual parties is estimated by dividing the electoral support of the alliance by the number of parties involved in it. In line with our definition of second-league parties as parties unable to obtain parliamentary representation on their own, we then compare the parties' vote shares with the national legal threshold applied in that election. If a party's vote share is below this threshold and above 1% of the vote, it is coded as second league. National legal thresholds have been applied in all but two elections (Poland 1991 and Romania 1990). For these two elections, we coded all extra-parliamentary parties with more than 1% of the vote as second league.

The total number of second-league observations (i.e., party-election combinations) is 467; they represent 298 unique political parties.

### Model Specifications

We operationalize the dependent variable *Repeated entry* in two ways. First, we use a binary dependent variable (hibernation = 0; all forms of repeated entry = 1). Second, we use a five-category dependent variable (independent entry; alliance entry; shadow alliance entry; merger entry; hibernation). Table 1 summarizes the coding of both variables.

To evaluate Hypothesis 1 (First- versus Second-League Hypothesis), we simply test whether the propensity of repeated entry (the binary dependent variable) differs across first- and second-league parties.

To test Hypothesis 2 (Representation Threshold Hypothesis), we subtract the vote percentage needed to pass the national legal threshold applied in election t from a party's vote share acquired in election t. A score of zero denotes that a party just about managed to secure parliamentary representation. Since our dependent variable captures whether a party will run at t+1, this independent variable is constructed based on the electoral support at t.

Hypothesis 3 (Institutional Restrictiveness Hypothesis) is tested by constructing an index of institutional constraints that considers, at election t+1, the values of (1) the legal electoral threshold, (2) the vote share threshold that a party requires to pass in order to get statutory state funding, (3) the ratio of the number of signatures required to present candidates in all electoral districts to the size of the electorate (expressed as %), (4) the ratio of the monetary deposit to run in elections to the country's GDP. To construct an index, we rescaled each variable to 0–1 by dividing it by the highest value observed in the sample.

As for Hypothesis 4 (Discontent Hypothesis), our main models consider the unemployment rate, as this particularly preoccupies voters and is arguably the most important economic performance indicator of postcommunist democracies (Tavits 2008, 119). Based on yearly data, we computed the average yearly unemployment rate between t and t+1. To ensure that the cause precedes the consequence, the current election year and all years preceding the year of the next election are included in the average, but not the next election year itself. We also conduct robustness checks with alternative measures of discontent: levels of corruption, satisfaction with democracy, and GDP per capita.

Hypothesis 5 (Niche Density Hypothesis) measures the number of parties belonging to the same ideological niche as the focal party at t. Having more ideological neighbors should decrease the propensity of repeated entry at t+1. To code ideologically similarity, we count the number of parties belonging to the same party family as the focal party. We take the square root of density to account for the skewed distribution of this variable.

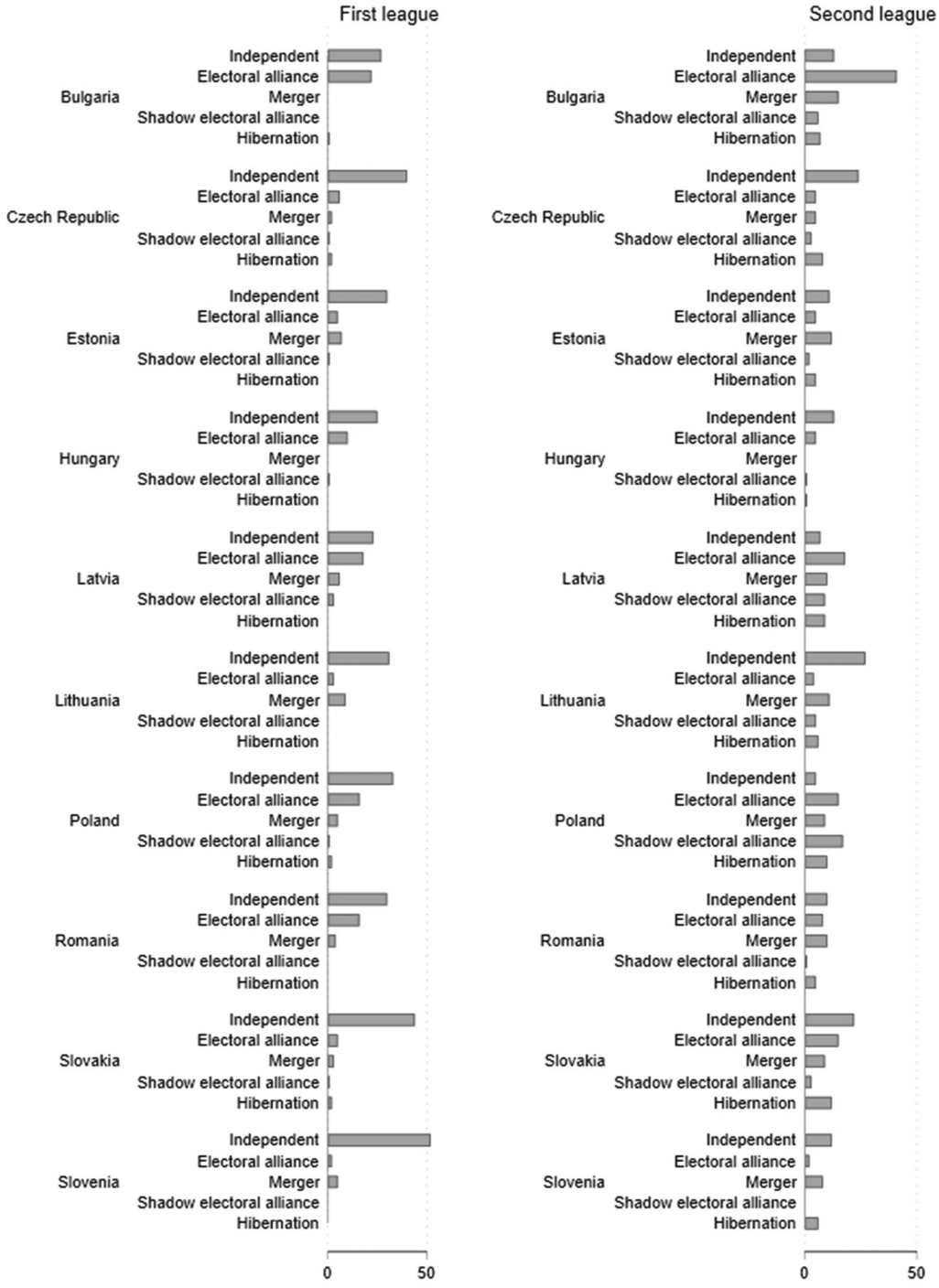
Lastly, the main measure for testing Hypothesis 6 (Resource Access Hypothesis) is a single index that combines information on the focal party's eligibility for public funding (1 if eligible for funding; 0 if otherwise) and access to legislative representation and government status (1 if the party has access to both; 0.5 if only legislative representation; 0 if neither of the two). As mentioned above, a small share of second-league parties has parliamentary or even executive representation. Parties scoring higher on this index should have more substantial financial resources, media visibility, and patronage opportunities. While the scores of the resources index depend on parties' electoral support, they are also related to institutional factors (availability of state funding and thresholds to access it) and party strategy (e.g., second-league parties with limited popular support may gain legislative representation by forming electoral alliances with other parties and gain access to government by negotiating skillfully in postelection party bargaining). As discussed in the results section, we further conduct robustness checks that differentiate between these two components of the index, and we also examine the effect of organizational resources.

In addition, we include controls. At the party level, we consider whether a party is communist, ecological, ethnic, or radical right (1, 0 if otherwise). These parties are more likely to be policy seeking and, as such, to pursue "vertical interest aggregation" (Luna et al. 2021) by representing well-defined interests or groups in society. We expect that such parties are less likely to hibernate despite a relatively marginalized existence in the second league. Next, we use two dichotomous variables to tap into the organizational origin of parties: whether they are formed because of splits or mergers (genuinely new parties are the reference category).

At the party-election level, we consider whether the focal party contested election t in an electoral alliance, because such parties are more likely to merge with other parties (in the alliance) (e.g., Spirova 2007). By including the logged age of the party, we control for the fact that more institutionalized parties are more likely to persist. We also control for the possibility that first-league parties that experienced an electoral collapse may be less likely to run again or in different forms. To do so, we include a dummy variable that equals one if a second-league party lost two-thirds of its support (or more) from the previous election which it contested as a first league party (zero if otherwise). Last, we considered whether a party experienced splits (1 if yes, 0 if otherwise) in the run up to election t+1. To ensure that we only include significant splits, a split was only coded as such if the splinter contested election t+1.

Finally, at the election level, we include the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) to control for party-system fragmentation. Next, since some countries use higher legal thresholds for electoral alliances, we include a variable measuring the difference between the threshold for the alliance of two parties and the threshold for a single party. The operationalizations and data sources are further clarified in Table A2 (pp. 17–35 in the online supporting information).

**FIGURE 2 Repeated Entry Trade-off of First- and Second-League Parties**



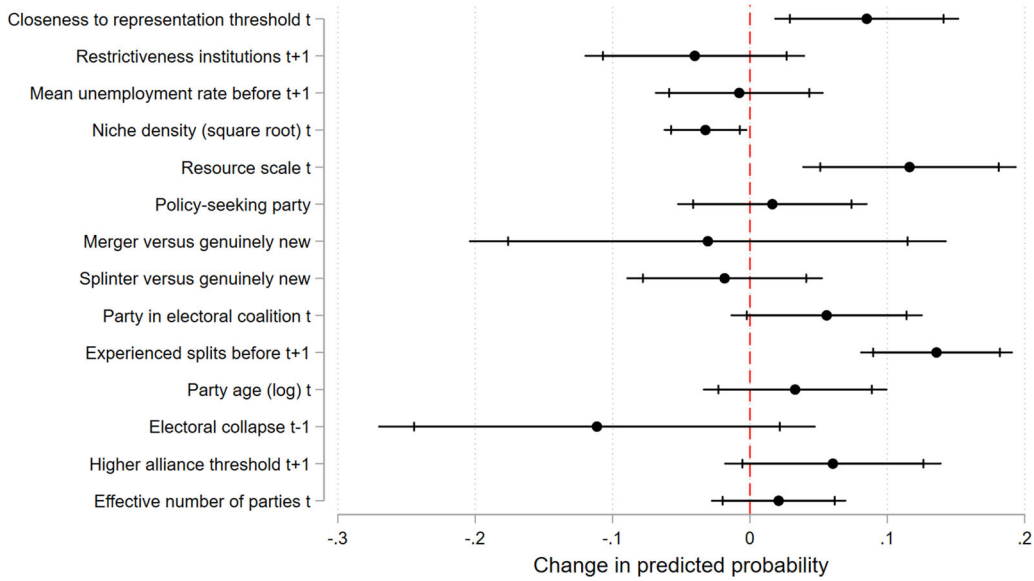

*Notes:* The bars denote the frequencies with which each repeated-entry strategy is observed.

# Results

## Patterns of Party Repeated Entry: First- and Second-League Parties

Before we turn to the hypotheses, Figure 2 depicts first- and second-league parties' repeated-entry strategies. To fully map their choice sets, we focus on our second, more fine-grained dependent variable. As shown, hibernation is an extremely rare phenomenon among first-league parties: we only witness seven cases (1%). The most notable example in terms of electoral strength is the Czech Public Affairs Party. It entered a government

**FIGURE 3 Marginal Effects on the Binary Variable of Repeated Entry**




*Notes:* The *x*–axis denotes the effects of an increase by one interquartile range (continuous explanatory variables) or one unit (categorical explanatory variables) on the change in predicted probability of repeated entry (i.e., independent, electoral alliance, merger, or shadow electoral alliance entry) versus hibernation. The estimates are based on the logistic regression coefficients in Model 1 from Table A4, N = 458 (pp. 39–42 in the online supporting information). Confidence intervals of 90% (inside brackets) and 95%.

coalition after the 2010 election after securing 24 parliamentary seats. Yet, after bribery-related allegations, it ceased electoral activities. This is a highly exceptional case, however. The predominant repeated-entry strategy of first-league parties is independent entry (68% of cases). Alliance and merger entries (21% and 8%, respectively) are moderately popular, while shadow-alliance entry (2%) much less so. As for the second league, a very different pattern emerges. Hibernation is a relevant phenomenon among these parties: this happens in 15% of cases. All repeated-entry strategies are also empirically relevant (independent entry: 31%; alliance entry: 25%; shadow-alliance entry: 10%; merger entry: 19%).

Hypothesis 1 (First- versus Second-League Hypothesis) expresses a more formal test of the fundamental differences between first- and second-league parties. By means of a logistic regression (N = 961, see Table A3, p. 37, in the online supporting information), we find that first-league parties are 12 times more likely ($p < .01$) to run again (as opposed to hibernation) than second-league parties.

In sum, the bar charts above and this significance test fully justify our key argument that both types of parties make a fundamentally different trade-off.

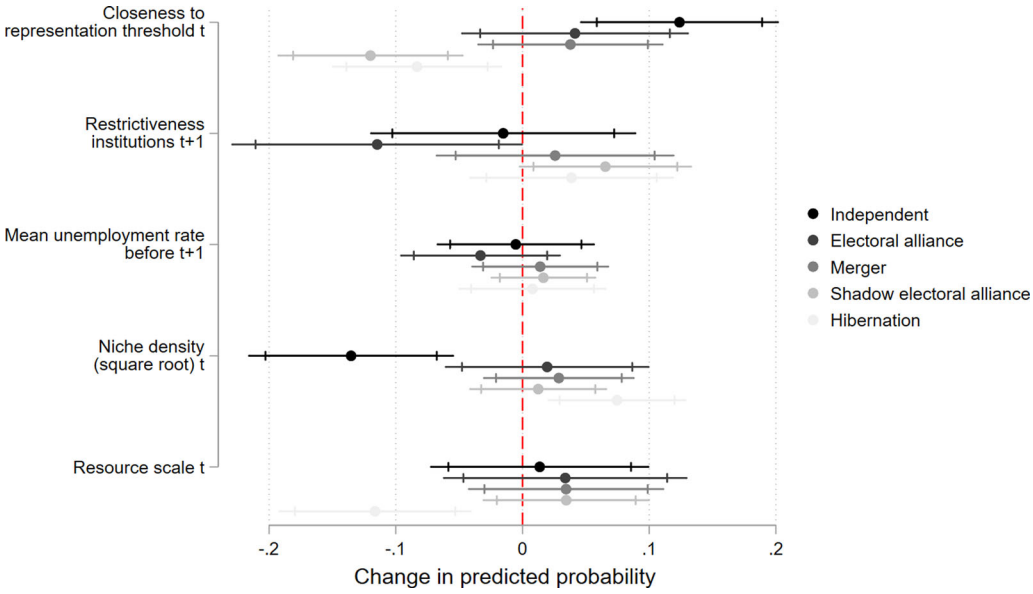
## Explaining the Second-League Parties' Repeated Entry

We now proceed with our hypotheses on second-league parties. Our first analysis examines repeated entry as a dichotomous variable. We present the results for Hypotheses 2–6 in Figure 3 (for full results of regression models see Table A4, pp. 39–42 in the online supporting information). The *x*-axis depicts the change in the probability of repeated entry if a continuous independent variable increases along its interquartile range (IQR). In case of categorical independent variables, the coefficients denote the change in probability between two categories.

We find strong evidence for Hypothesis 2 (Representation Threshold Hypothesis), stating that parties will be more likely to contest the next election if they find themselves closer to the representation threshold. If this variable increases along its IQR (i.e., the distance is reduced from −3.4 to −1.6), the probability of repeated entry increases with 0.085 ($p < .05$) or 9%. This is a sizable effect.

We now turn to the costs of repeated entry. In line with Hypothesis 3 (Institutional Restrictiveness Hypothesis), parties are less likely to contest the next election if more restrictive institutions are in place in this election. Yet, the effect is statistically insignificant ($p > .1$).

**FIGURE 4 Marginal Effects on the Five–Category Variable of Repeated Entry**




*Notes:* The *x*–axis denotes the effects of an increase by one interquartile range in explanatory variables. Confidence intervals of 90% (inside brackets) and 95%. The estimates are based on the multinomial regression coefficients in Model 1 from Table A5, N = 467 (p. 42 in the online supporting information). For the IQRs for the controls see Figure A2 (p. 46).

Regarding the interelection developments that can affect elites' expectations of electoral success, we find no evidence for Hypothesis 4 (Discontent Hypothesis). As denoted by the insignificant coefficient, second-league parties are *not* more likely to contest the next election in response to higher unemployment rates. Regarding alternative discontent measures, Figure A1 (p. 45 in the online supporting information) demonstrates that only higher levels of corruption based on one of the two measures used significantly increases repeated entry. However, the alternative corruption measure, satisfaction with democracy, and GDP per capita have no significant effects. These results cast doubt on the notion that second-league parties expect to benefit from voter dissatisfaction.

Hypothesis 5 (Niche Density Hypothesis) is, however, firmly supported by the analysis. If the number of parties in the focal party's ideological niche increases along its IQR (i.e., from 2 to 3), the probability of repeated entry significantly decreases with .032, or 3% ($p < .05$).

Finally, we find strong support for Hypothesis 6 (Resource Access Hypothesis), stating that parties will more likely run in the next election if they have access to more resources. Specifically, the probability of repeated entry increases with 0.116 ($p < .05$), or with 12%, if resource access increases along its IQR (i.e., from 0 to 1). Again, this is a sizable effect.

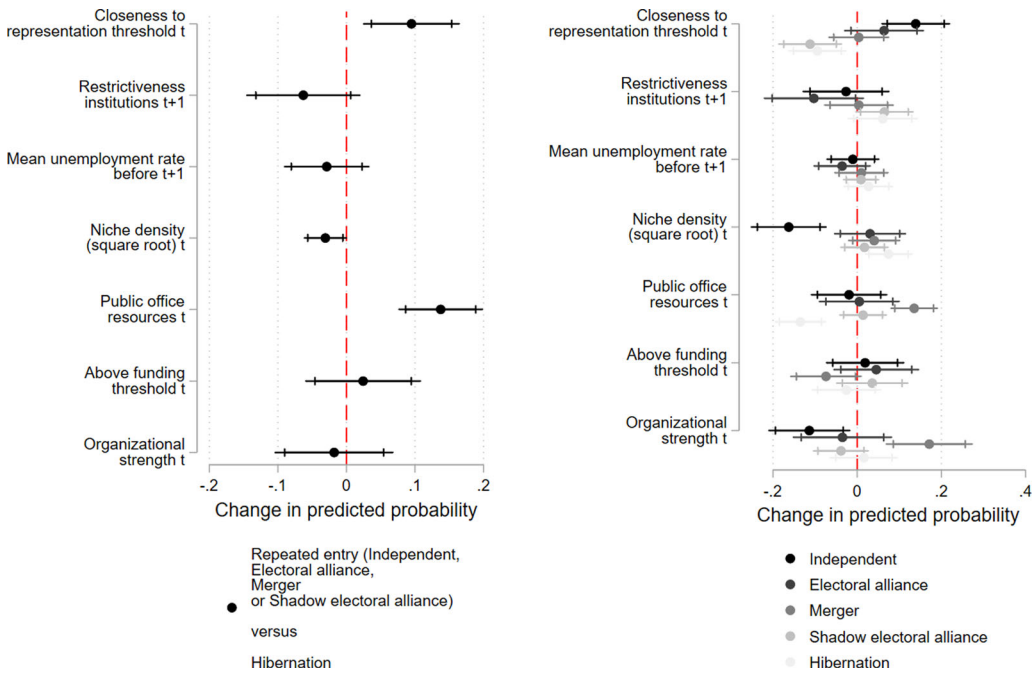
In sum, a party's distance to the representation threshold, the density of its ideological niche, and access to resources shape second-league parties' repeated entry. Discontent with the performance of first-league parties and restrictive electoral institutions, however, fail to matter.

Regarding the controls, we only find that repeated entry is more likely if parties experienced splits in the run up to this election. This may appear counterintuitive. Yet, the multinomial regressions in Figure A2 (p. 46 in the online supporting information) reveal that splits only increase the propensity that a party will merge or enter a shadow alliance. Hence, the positive association between repeated entry and splits may be attributed to the fact that such profound transformations often come with internal party dissent where disagreeing factions decide to break away from the parent party before the change takes place (e.g., Ceron 2015, 137).

## Distinguishing between Different Types of Repeated Entry

Our theoretical framework primarily aims at explaining whether a party will contest the next election in any form or hibernate. Yet to gain a better understanding of how our independent variables affect the different

**FIGURE 5 Unpacking the Resource Scale and Exploring the Effect of Organizational Strength**




*Notes:* The *x*–axis denotes the effects of an increase by one interquartile range (continuous explanatory variables) or one unit (categorical explanatory variables). Confidence intervals of 90% (inside brackets) and 95%. The estimates are based on the multinomial regression coefficients in Model 3 from Table A4 (pp. 39–42 in the online supporting information) and Model 2 from Table A5 (pp. 42–44). N = 435 and N = 444, respectively.

repeated-entry types, we fit multinomial regressions using the five-category dependent variable (see categories in the last column of Table 1).

The results reveal that smaller distance to the representation threshold (H2) significantly increases independent entry and decreases hibernation in the next election. So this is what mainly drove the significant effect in our analysis with the binary dependent variable. Yet, Figure 4 does reveal a negative effect on shadow-alliance entry, which is considered repeated entry in the binary analysis above. It is intuitive that smaller distance to the representation threshold only significantly increases independent entry but not any of the other types requiring parties to coalesce with other parties: parties likely have lower incentive to give up part of their autonomy if they are close to obtaining representation on their own.

Next, niche density (H5) only significantly decreases the probability that a party runs again independently, and it increases hibernation. Thus, in line with research on established democracies, we find that niche density drives parties out of business (van de Wardt, Berkhout, and Vermeulen 2017). Yet, it is striking that our findings imply that party-system fragmentation is only reduced through hibernation rather than that it induces cooperative strategies like (shadow) alliance formation and mergers. Our explanation for this is that parties in the younger CEE democracies tend to be less rooted in society (e.g., Casal Bértoa 2013) and have shorter-term horizons (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2020), meaning that the costs of hibernation and new party building are lower for political elites.

Last, better resource access (H6) only significantly reduces hibernation but it does not increase any of the repeated-entry types. To further explore the role of individual resources, in Figure 5 we unpack our resource scale by distinguishing between public office (i.e., having parliamentary representation and being in government) and public funding (i.e., being above the funding threshold) resources. Furthermore, we include organizational strength as a new resource. The latter is measured based on the size of a party's membership base and the size of its party list (see Table A2, pp. 17–35 in the online supporting information, for more information). As shown, only public office resources protect parties against hibernation. So, our evidence for Hypothesis 6 was driven by this type of resources. Hence, access to state funding seems

less important in fostering repeated entry than is often suggested (Casal Bértoa and Spirova 2019). Instead our results support research on new parties in CEE, showing that state funding exerts no effect on their emergence (Van Biezen and Rashkova 2014). As for the different repeated-entry strategies, we observe that public office resources only increase merger entry. The same goes for our new organizational strength variable. Why is that so? Our explanation holds that due to their access to public office resources and their organizational strength, these parties are more attractive to merge with, which subsequently strengthens their bargaining position and their propensity to merge (also see Silva 2022).

If we turn to the hypotheses that were *not* confirmed in our binary repeated-entry analysis, regarding Hypothesis 4, the multinomial regressions again report nonfindings. The unemployment rate exerts no effect on hibernation or on any of the repeated-entry strategies. And as shown in Figure A1 (p. 45 in the online supporting information), the alternative discontent variables also fail to affect repeated-entry strategies in meaningful ways. Last, inconsistent with Hypothesis 3, more restrictive electoral institutions fail to increase hibernation ($p > .1$). Contrary to our intuition, we also find that they significantly decrease repeated entry though electoral alliances.

## Conclusion and Discussion

This article examined what energizes parties in the younger democracies of CEE to continue contesting elections. This question merits scholarly attention as party survival is of paramount importance to understanding party-system stability (Mainwaring 2018). Simultaneously, especially within younger democracies, party survival remains poorly understood, at least when we focus on the calculus of political elites to remain contesting elections, which we label "repeated entry," rather than their electoral success after doing so (Cyr 2017; Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2018; Levitsky et al. 2016; Lupu 2014; Mustillo 2009; Roberts 2014; Seawright 2012; but see Spirova 2007).

To fill this lacuna, we began by presenting a typology of repeated-entry strategies based on three essential elements of what parties are (label, candidates, and organization). Combining the strategic-entry framework (Cox 1997; Tavits 2006; 2008) with the bounded rationality theory (e.g., Kahneman 2011), we subsequently developed an innovative theory on party repeated entry. We theorized that whether a party finds itself in the first or second league (i.e., whether it can infer from its past electoral support that it should be able to gain representation again) serves as a key heuristic driving party elites' repeated-entry decision. We found strong empirical evidence for this hypothesis, as there were hardly cases of first-league parties not contesting the next election.

Consequently, our remaining hypotheses on repeated entry (versus hibernation) focused on second-league parties only. We have provided important insights into the factors that drive their calculus. We found that the closer they are to the representation threshold, the likelier they are to enter in the next election. When we unpacked the different repeated-entry strategies, we found that this is because such parties are more likely to contest this election independently, and they are less likely to hibernate. Another key antecedent of repeated entry is the number of competitors in a second-league party's ideological niche. As for the specific repeated-entry strategies, niche density increases the propensity of hibernation and decreases the odds of independent repeated entry. Strikingly, it did not encourage alliance formation and mergers across parties. A final driver of repeated entry is a second league party's access to resources (see also Cyr 2017). Those with access to public office resources (i.e., parliamentary representation and membership of government) are better protected against hibernation. When we unpacked this resource scale, we also found evidence that parties with these two resources are likelier to merge. Electoral institutions and voter discontent had no effect on parties' repeated-entry calculus.

Our study has important implications. We provide the most comprehensive understanding hitherto available of repeated entry in younger democracies. To date, the most elaborate work on this is Spirova's (2007) insightful theoretical framework. By identifying and linking different (non)-repeated-entry strategies with parties' electoral performance and electoral goals, it shares some commonalities with our approach. However, our study pushes further by providing a conceptualization of repeated-entry strategies, by differentiating between different party leagues, by anchoring the role of past electoral support in bounded rationality theory and by developing explicit hypotheses and testing them in a cross-national comparative study.

Our broader conceptual and theoretical approach also offers several directions for the future study of repeated entry. We argue theoretically, and show empirically, that for first-league parties the substantive focus should be on understanding whether they contest the next election independently, in an alliance, or if they merge. Future research on the repeated entry of first-league parties would be welcomed to build on our theoretical model, and it could theorize on the pursuit of higher aspiration levels than just parliamentary

representation. As we have shown, second-league parties, however, make a fundamentally different trade-off: all repeated-entry strategies are empirically relevant, and hibernation also becomes realistic. Future research could examine how other factors beyond those examined here affect the repeated entry of second-league parties. For example, short- and medium-term effects of such events in a party's life as participation in government and involvement in corruption scandals may affect its repeated entry. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore the drivers of switching between specific repeated-entry strategies (e.g., from alliance to independent entry and back). The systematic investigation of the poorly researched third-league parties would also enrich our understanding of repeated entry. For these "plankton" parties, several strategies like independent entry or electoral alliance entry may not be available. However, other strategies that our theoretical model distinguishes for which we found no cases could become empirically relevant: for example, when elites of an inactive party piggyback into parliament on the list of another party. Yet, future research on third-league parties may need to adapt the background assumption of our model that all parties seek parliamentary representation. Third-league parties may have other goals like the advocacy of pure policies.

In all, our main message is that one cannot assume that first-, second-, and third-league parties are of the same world when it comes to understanding their repeated entry. We empirically substantiate the fundamental differences between first- and second-league parties based on the younger democracies of CEE and their first three decades of party competition after their democratic transitions in the early 1990s. There is every reason to believe that these differences travel to other younger democracies and to advanced democracies. In any democratic system, we find a multitude of parties that must decide whether, and if so, how to contest the next election. While some can infer from their past electoral support that they are likely to secure parliamentary representation, others cannot. This is likely to shape repeated entry in a decisive way in any type of democracy. That is, also in other young or advanced democracies hibernation appears mostly as a second-league phenomenon. While we can cite examples of first-league parties like the Irish Progressive Democrats that hibernated, such examples remain very rare. Even following the electoral collapse of major traditional parties in Peru and Venezuela in the 1990s, described as party-system collapse (Seawright 2012), the electorally decimated but still first-league traditional parties kept running (and some experienced a revival) as long as they were not prevented from doing so by limitation of democratic freedoms. Hence, in addition to opening the blackbox of repeated entry and studying its specific forms, we should abandon the implicit assumption made in many studies on party survival (e.g., Bolleyer, Correa, and Katz 2019; van de Wardt, Berkhout, and Vermeulen 2017) that drivers of party survival are independent of party size. With the theory proposed here, we hope to have set an important first step.

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Appendix A:** Party repeated entry typology
**Appendix B:** Case selection and variables
**Appendix C:** Regression tables and additional figures