In 2011 a flamboyant politician by the name of Pim Fortuyn shook up Dutch politics. With his signature Italian suits, his striking rhetoric and anti-establishment appeal, Pim Fortuyn shattered the Dutch political marketplace. According to Fortuyn, mainstream parties had left the country in a state of disarray. “Prime-minister Kok is a disaster and the purple coalition devastated the country”. He portrayed himself as the saviour that could heal the country: “I do what I say, and say what I do. At your service.”

Although Pim Fortuyn was assassinated and his political party collapsed after his death due to infighting, Fortuyn would cast a long shadow on Dutch politics: the dominance of mainstream parties of the left and right was broken, and political entrepreneurs were on the rise.

Dutch politics became increasingly volatile and unpredictable. A case in point is the 2019 Provincial elections. Never before in Dutch electoral history did the winning party an election receive a smaller vote margin, less than 15 per cent of the vote.

In other European countries, the major parties of the left and right are also losing ground. Mainstream political parties were long regarded as being at the helm of stable, democratic and efficient government. Yet today, their membership is in decline and their ‘reign’ is challenged by political entrepreneurs.

Political entrepreneurs skilfully exploit political dissatisfaction. They do so by branding mainstream political parties as archaic organisations that largely out of touch with ordinary people and their problems.

In 2019, the newly formed Brexit Party under the leadership of Nigel Farage caused a political earthquake in British politics by becoming the largest party in the European Parliamentary elections. Under the charismatic leadership of Farage and standing on a single-issue platform
of a “hard Brexit” the party reached an enormous success, less than five months after the party was founded.

We also see political entrepreneurs on the left of the political spectrum, for example the Greens are doing well in many European countries. Election upsets have become more frequent.

Against the backdrop a crucial question emerges:

**Are we witnessing a crisis of democracy?**

Do increasingly volatile voters, declining public confidence in mainstream parties, and the electoral rise of political outsiders represent a democracy gone mad?

Has Democracy turned into Democrazy?

While we by no means should be sanguine about current developments, today, I want to provide reasons for being hopeful even in a time of apparent darkness. I do so by relying on research that I have recently completed with Sara Hobolt from the London School of Economics and Political Science for our book *Political Entrepreneurs: The Rise of Challenger Parties in Europe* forthcoming with Princeton University next year.

I want to remind us all that democratic institutions have many self-righting and stabilising capacities. I will make three points.

First, current developments are not new. Oftentimes before have political entrepreneurs shaken up politics during the last century, and many commentators and experts then claimed that democracy was in crisis. Democracy proved robust.

Second, the rise of challenger parties made governing more challenging, it has also increased representation. Voters today believe that there is more on offer politically and therefore engage more with politics than before.
Third, mainstream political parties are resilient. They are not merely victims of current developments, but have the agency to reinvent themselves. Some of them are doing this already.

So, while we by no means should be complacent about the future of democracy, I will try to convince you that we should become fatalist and think that all is lost.

Before I make my three point, an important caveat is in order. I talk about the rise of challenger parties as competition to mainstream parties. Yet, there are also challenges to mainstream parties from within, think of the British prime minister Boris Johnson within the British Conservative Party or US president Donald Trump in the Republican parties.

These challenges inside parties are much more challenging for liberal democracy. This is because as a British prime minister or US president can change the rules of the game in order to win. Yet, it is important to remember that these challenges are mostly restricted to systems with electoral rules that favour two parties and are highly disproportional. While I am less optimistic about the resilience of parties and institutions in the US and UK, they are not the norm in continental Europe.

Let me come to my first point. The change we are currently experiencing in Europe not a novel phenomenon.

We have witnessed political entrepreneurs tearing up the conventional rulebook of politics before. They whip up polarized sentiments and take aim at the political establishment as a whole. Indeed, one of the most mainstream of party families, the social democrats, were challengers when they first emerged in the late nineteenth century across Western Europe.

Social democrats campaigned on a radical platform of universal suffrage for the working classes and a promise of a brighter socialist future, and it was only later once they had achieved wide-spread electoral success that they become the catch-all parties of parliamentary and executive dominance.

During the 1960s and 70s, we also saw the rise of challengers. Think in the Netherlands of D66, the Pacifists or the Boerenpartij. These movements rebelled against the classic left-right
politics of economic growth and centralized decision-making. They mobilized against the political cartel much like the leader of Forum for Democracy, Thierry Baudet today.

Hans van Mierlo, the founder of D66 declared in the 1967 electoral campaign that D66 was founded to “blow up the Dutch political system”. Commentators talked about a crisis of democracy then like now.
So, we have witnessed parties seeking to disrupt the established ways of doing politics before. Some were very successful, others less so.

But why does it feel so different this time? One reason for this is that change always feels more significant when you are living through it. There is always a temptation to focus on the developments that break with the past rather than those that remain the same, and to focus on negative development rather than positive ones.

**Political change is just part of democracy, just like entrepreneurs driving innovation on the economic market place.**

We are familiar with the disruptive influence of companies, such as Apple or Tesla, that successfully challenged the market power of the dominant players, such as Microsoft or Volkswagen. These disruptive entrepreneurs introduce new products, new ways of doing business and try to defy the brand value of dominant competitors.

I suggest that there are striking similarities with the way in which political entrepreneurs, like Fortuyn, have mobilized new issues and challenged the competence of mainstream parties through anti-establishment rhetoric.

Challenger parties do not only comprise of radical right populist parties mobilizing immigration and attacking liberal elites, but they include centrist parties, like the En Marche! of current French President Emmanuel Macron, left-wing parties like Podemos in Spain or the Partij van de Dieren here in the Netherlands.

What unites challenger parties is their way of doing politics, their issue entrepreneurship and anti-establishment style, not so much their ideological leaning.
Recent media coverage of challenger parties, especially reports about popular support for the radical right in countries like France, Germany, Italy or Poland, may give the impression that the mainstream of European politics has been almost entirely wiped out. This is far from the truth. To the day, the three traditional party families, the Liberals, Conservatives and Social Democrats are commanding almost three quarters of the vote.

So while we focus much on change, it seems equally important to ask why mainstream parties have proven to be so resilient in a time a great social, economic and political change?

It is important to remember that the strength of challenger parties waxes and wanes over time. Think for example about Green parties that breakthrough in the 1970s and 80s, but declined in the 1990s. Now they are making a comeback due to the increased importance of climate change. Just like mainstream parties, challenger parties face the electoral reality of a fickle and increasingly volatile electorate. An electoral breakthrough of a challenger party may not mean sustained success.

Challenger parties are also very susceptible to sudden change and shocks. The meteoric rise and fall of the List Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands is a case-in-point. This is because they often lack a loyal following, resources, and stable organizational structures. Mainstream parties have more resources, more enduring organizations and cultivated brands that may make them more resilient to short-lived shocks.

This brings me to my second point, change is an integral part of democracy.

The rise of challenger parties has increased political competition. Although mainstream parties are still dominant, they have had a reality check. They cannot sit back and relax. No, they need to fight for every vote of an increasingly fickle electorate.

Increased competition complicates politics. It reduces government majorities in parliament, and makes government formation more complex. But at the same time, the rise of challenger parties has also had clear positive consequences for politics in Europe. Let me mention three.

First, the rise of challenger parties led to greater choices for citizens. This made citizens more likely to care and participate. If voters perceive more difference between parties, their utility
of voting is higher and abstention less likely. Greater political choice increases the ability of voters to vote for a party that represents their ideology, issue positions or group identity. This encourages citizens to participate more.

Second, greater choice due to the rise of challenger parties has also increased citizens’ sense of representation within the system. When citizens have the opportunity to choose a party that represents their views, they feel better represented and that their vote matters more in elections. Also their preferences enter more clearly into the public realm.

Third, the rise of certain challenger parties, like the populist right, have led to counter movements. Think of #metoo, #fightracism or climate strikes and the charismatic leadership of Greta Thunberg. Also, many of us in this room have participated in WOinactie.

These three developments considered as positive signs for democracy.

**This leads me to my last point, democracy is robust.**

Mainstream political parties need not become the fatalities of political change, but can react and reinvent themselves. Much has been made in Europe about the decline of traditional political powerhouses. Secularization and the shrinking size of the working class has led commentators to predict an inescapable decline of social and Christian democracy. In my view, the obituaries of social and Christian democracy have been written prematurely.

In some countries, there seems to be somewhat of a revival of traditional dominant forces that were once proclaimed dead. In recent elections in Austria and Portugal for example, the Conservative Austrian People's Party and Portuguese Social Democrats got almost 40 per cent of the vote, their best electoral showing in decades.

Challenger parties also make mistakes. Think also of the victory of the Labour Party and Dutch European commissioner Frans Timmermans in the 2019 European Parliamentary elections after the Socialist party challenger aired their Hans Brusselmans ad which made fun of Timmersmans but in a way that was perceived as too harsh by Dutch voters.
I want to close by highlighting three important lessons of the rise of challenger parties. These can make us hopeful about the future of democracy.

First, although our attention is often focused on the rise of populist parties, we have historically witnessed waves of many different types of challenger parties, and their electoral fortunes wax and wane. The novelty of challengers wears off after a while, and it makes them vulnerable to shocks. Democracy is remarkably resilient.

Second, many challenger parties will face crucial political tests as they mature. When they gain in strength and enter government, challenger parties have to leave the safety of criticizing mainstream parties from the side-lines or Twitter feeds and become the new insiders. This often sparks off internal power struggles over direction and/or personnel. Perhaps the clearest example of this was the List Pim Fortuyn and now Forum for Democracy.

Third, the rise of challenger parties through increasing political competition has brought many more citizens into the political arena. This is a gain. The positive contribution of challenger parties also exposes the complacency of mainstream parties. It triggers mainstream parties to engage with constructive questions about what voters want and which principles they should be defending.

Rather than shaking off their ideological feathers as many mainstream parties have done in the past, they might re-engage with the values and positions that made them popular in the first place. Some mainstream political parties have used this reality check as a means to reconnect with voters in constructive ways.

The rise of some challenger parties tests the resilience of liberal democratic institutions and the resolve of political parties and citizens to defend it.

While this poses a clear challenge, it also presents an opportunity to showcase our resilience.
In this spirit, I close with the words of one of my favourite poets Maya Angelou:

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.