

Political Expectation Failure Toward a Unified Theory of Democratic Instability

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Abstract

Contemporary democratic systems across the world are experiencing a convergent crisis: declining institutional trust, rising populism, persistent voter dissatisfaction, and the systematic failure of political actors to meet citizen expectations. Existing explanations for this crisis remain fragmented across disciplines — political scientists document the empirical patterns, cognitive scientists model the individual mechanisms, and systems theorists describe the structural dynamics. This article proposes a unified theoretical framework, *Political Expectation Failure Theory* (PEFT), that integrates these three levels of analysis into a single coherent account. Drawing on Roger Schank's cognitive theory of script-based expectation, Catherine E. De Vries' empirical research program on political dissatisfaction, and complexity science's models of non-learning systems, we argue that modern democracies constitute institutionalized systems of expectation failure without closure — structures that not only fail to resolve expectation mismatches but actively reproduce them as political resources. We further argue that the unit of democratic analysis must shift from the institutional to the cognitive-collective level, and that citizen-level reflective instruments represent the next frontier for democratic theory and practice.

Keywords: expectation failure, democratic theory, cognitive politics, complexity, populism, institutional trust, script theory, De Vries, Schank

1. Introduction: The Convergent Crisis of Democratic Expectation

Something has gone structurally wrong with democratic governance. This observation is no longer controversial — it is documented across continents, across political cultures, and across methodological traditions. Voter turnout declines, institutional trust erodes, challenger parties rise and fall without producing resolution, and citizens report persistent dissatisfaction with democratic performance even in systems that, by conventional metrics, function adequately (Norris, 2011; Foa & Mounk, 2016; Inglehart & Norris, 2019).

The standard explanations are well-rehearsed: economic inequality, cultural backlash, elite disconnection, media fragmentation, the erosion of social capital. Each captures something real. Yet each also fails to explain why the crisis is *self-reproducing* — why corrections attempted within the existing framework tend to generate new forms of dissatisfaction rather than resolution.

This article proposes a different starting point. We argue that the fundamental unit of democratic order is not the institution, the party, or the citizen preference, but the *expectation* — and more specifically, the management of the gap between expectations and perceived political reality. When this gap is systematically produced and systematically unexploited for learning, the result is what we term *Political Expectation Failure* (PEF): a structural condition in which democratic systems

continuously generate, violate, and politically exploit citizen expectations without ever achieving cognitive or institutional closure.

This is not a new empirical claim. The empirical documentation is already available, most comprehensively in the research program of Catherine E. De Vries (2007–2026). What is new is the theoretical integration: we connect De Vries' political science findings with Roger Schank's cognitive architecture of expectation and script failure (Schank & Abelson, 1977; Schank, 1982, 1999), and with complexity science's understanding of systems that lack adaptive feedback (Gunderson & Holling, 2002; Stacey, 2010). The result is a unified theory with explanatory power at three levels — cognitive, political, and systemic — and with implications for democratic design that current frameworks cannot reach.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the cognitive foundations of expectation in political behavior. Section 3 reconstructs the empirical landscape of political expectation failure through De Vries' corpus. Section 4 introduces the formal structure of PEFT. Section 5 analyzes why democratic systems fail to learn. Section 6 examines the role of political entrepreneurs as failure exploiters. Section 7 considers implications for democratic theory and identifies citizen-level reflective instruments as a future research direction.

2. The Cognitive Architecture of Political Expectation

2.1 Scripts, Schemas, and Expectation

The cognitive foundations of expectation theory were developed most systematically by Roger Schank and Robert Abelson in their landmark work *Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding* (1977). Their central claim was that human comprehension and action are organized around *scripts* — stereotyped sequences of events that encode what normally happens in familiar contexts. A script does not describe what will happen; it encodes what *should* happen. It is, in essence, a formalized expectation structure.

When reality deviates from script, the cognitive system registers a *failure*. Schank (1982) identified several types of script failure and argued that each triggers a distinct cognitive response: explanation, reminding, generalization, and ultimately script revision. In this model, failure is not merely disruptive — it is *epistemically productive*. Failure is the engine of learning.

This architecture has profound implications for political cognition. Citizens do not approach political institutions as blank slates. They approach them with dense, historically accumulated scripts: about what governments should do, what politicians should say, how elections should function, and what policy changes should produce. These scripts are not consciously articulated — they operate as background expectations, activated automatically when political stimuli are encountered.

2.2 The Political Script and Its Layers

We propose that political scripts operate at three nested levels:

Procedural scripts encode expectations about political process — elections should be fair, debates should be substantive, promises should bear some relationship to action. These are the most widely shared and most resistant to revision.

Performance scripts encode expectations about policy outcomes — economic growth should improve living standards, healthcare systems should deliver care, security policies should produce safety. These are more variable across citizens and more sensitive to personal experience.

Relational scripts encode expectations about the relationship between citizens and political actors — representatives should listen, institutions should respond, collective decisions should reflect collective values. These are the deepest and most emotionally charged layer of political expectation.

Violations at each layer produce different types of political response. Procedural violations produce legitimacy crises. Performance violations produce protest voting and policy-specific dissatisfaction. Relational violations produce the deepest and most persistent forms of alienation — the sense, documented extensively by De Vries (2018, 2020), that "the system" no longer operates in citizens' interests at all.

2.3 Expectation as Comparative and Constructed

A crucial insight from both cognitive science and political behavior research is that expectations are not absolute but *comparative*. Citizens do not evaluate political performance against an ideal standard; they evaluate it against a *reference point* — typically derived from prior experience, neighboring systems, or elite-constructed narratives.

De Vries (2018) demonstrated this formally in her *benchmark theory* of European public opinion: citizens evaluate EU performance not in absolute terms but relative to national benchmarks derived from domestic experience. This is precisely the cognitive architecture Schank describes — expectations are scripts derived from prior successful instances, and failure is deviation from those instances, not from some abstract ideal.

This comparative structure has critical political implications. It means that expectation failure is always *relative* — it depends on the reference frame being applied. Political actors who can shift or manipulate reference frames can therefore induce or suppress the experience of expectation failure without changing objective institutional performance at all.

3. The Empirical Landscape: De Vries' Research Program as Documentation of PEF

3.1 Overview

The research program of Catherine E. De Vries, spanning from her early work on Euroscepticism (2007) to her forthcoming *Symfonie van Onvrede* (2026), constitutes the most comprehensive empirical documentation of political expectation failure yet produced. While De Vries does not use this theoretical vocabulary, her findings map systematically onto the cognitive framework outlined above. This section reconstructs her corpus as a longitudinal account of PEF across European and comparative contexts.

3.2 Phase I: The Architecture of Political Expectations (2007–2014)

De Vries' early work focused on the formation and differentiation of political expectations. Her 2007 article, "Sleeping Giant," identified latent but powerful expectations about European

integration among electorates previously assumed to be disengaged — documenting what we would now call *dormant scripts*, activated when political circumstances made EU performance salient.

Subsequent work on party competition and ideological positioning (De Vries & Hobolt, 2012; Van de Wardt, De Vries & Hobolt, 2014) demonstrated how political actors actively shape the expectation landscape. Parties do not merely respond to citizen expectations — they *construct* them, by framing what citizens should anticipate from political outcomes. This corresponds precisely to the script-construction phase in Schank's model: the precondition of failure is the existence of a structured expectation.

3.3 Phase II: The Mechanics of Expectation Failure (2015–2020)

The second phase of De Vries' research shifted from formation to breakdown. Her foundational book *Euroscepticism and the Future of European Integration* (2018) established that EU dissatisfaction is driven not by objective institutional performance but by perceived deviation from nationally-derived benchmarks. This is a textbook instance of script failure: the EU's performance is measured against a script derived from domestic political experience, and deviation from that script generates withdrawal of support.

The 2018 article "What Causes Economic Perceptions?" deepened this finding by demonstrating that political behavior responds to *perceived* rather than objective economic conditions — confirming that it is the subjective discrepancy between expectation and experienced reality that drives political behavior, not the underlying material conditions themselves.

Political Entrepreneurs (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020) introduced a crucial additional mechanism: the strategic exploitation of expectation failure by challenger parties. Successful challengers identify expectation failures — gaps between what citizens anticipated and what institutions delivered — and amplify rather than resolve them. This transforms expectation failure from an accidental byproduct of institutional imperfection into a *deliberately cultivated political resource*.

3.4 Phase III: Diffusion, Persistence, and Structural Embedding (2020–2026)

Recent work in De Vries' program demonstrates that expectation failure has moved beyond episodic crises into structural embedding. Articles such as "Geographies of Discontent" (Cremaschi, Inglehart & De Vries, 2024) and ongoing ERC-funded research on public service decline show that expectation failures now cluster spatially and socially, creating persistent zones of institutional alienation that are qualitatively different from temporary dissatisfaction.

The forthcoming *Symfonie van Onvrede* (2026) treats the rise of the radical right as the cumulative political expression of decades of unresolved expectation failure — a political system's immune response, pathologically amplified because the underlying condition was never treated.

Taken together, De Vries' corpus documents three empirical claims that are central to PEFT:

1. Political expectations are structured, comparative, and vulnerable to failure
2. Democratic institutions systematically fail to resolve expectation mismatches
3. Political actors exploit rather than repair these mismatches, perpetuating the cycle

4. Political Expectation Failure Theory: A Formal Synthesis

4.1 Core Definitions

We define *political expectation* as a cognitive script — held by a citizen or population — encoding what political institutions, actors, or processes should deliver under specified conditions. Political expectations operate at procedural, performance, and relational levels (Section 2.2) and are constructed relative to reference benchmarks rather than absolute standards.

We define *political expectation failure* (PEF) as the subjectively experienced discrepancy between a political expectation and perceived political reality — a script violation in the political domain that triggers cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses including dissatisfaction, protest, withdrawal, and radicalization.

We define *Political Expectation Failure Theory* (PEFT) as the integrated framework that explains how political systems generate, violate, exploit, and fail to resolve political expectations, producing systematic institutional instability.

4.2 The PEF Cycle

PEFT proposes a four-phase cycle that characterizes modern democratic systems:

Phase 1 — Expectation Construction

Political actors (parties, governments, media) construct and calibrate citizen expectations through electoral promises, policy narratives, and institutional communications. This phase establishes the scripts against which performance will be evaluated.

Phase 2 — Performance Deviation

Institutional performance deviates from established expectations. This deviation may be objective (policies fail to deliver promised outcomes) or perceptual (changing reference frames shift the baseline against which performance is measured). In complex political environments, some degree of deviation is structurally inevitable.

Phase 3 — Failure Exploitation

Rather than generating institutional learning and script revision, expectation failures are captured by political entrepreneurs who amplify the perceived gap between expectation and reality. Challenger parties build electoral support by making existing failures more salient and by constructing new expectations that incumbents are structurally unable to meet.

Phase 4 — Non-Resolution

New political actors gain power on the basis of alternative expectation sets, which they also fail to meet — partly due to structural constraints, partly because the expectation sets themselves were constructed to be unachievable, and partly because the institutional environment does not support the kind of reflective learning that would enable script revision. The cycle returns to Phase 1.

4.3 The Critical Divergence: Why Democratic Systems Do Not Learn

In Schank's cognitive model, expectation failure triggers a learning sequence:

expectation → failure → explanation → reminding → generalization → revised script

In democratic systems as described by PEFT, the sequence is truncated:

expectation → failure → political mobilization → new expectation → repeated failure

The critical missing element is *closure* — the cognitive and institutional process by which a failed script is revised into a more accurate model of reality. We identify four structural reasons why democratic systems fail to achieve closure:

Incentive misalignment: Political actors gain from exploiting failures, not from resolving them. Resolution reduces electoral differentiation; failure amplification increases it.

Temporal mismatch: Democratic cycles (typically four to five years) are poorly aligned with the time scales on which complex policy interventions produce observable results. Citizens evaluate performance at the wrong temporal horizon.

Cognitive asymmetry: Citizens hold implicit scripts but lack instruments to make those scripts explicit, compare them with reality, or revise them systematically. Political actors exploit this asymmetry.

Institutional rigidity: Democratic institutions are designed for stability, not learning. Constitutional frameworks, procedural norms, and bureaucratic structures resist the rapid adaptation that learning from failure requires.

These four factors combine to produce what we term *democratic non-learning* — a systemic condition in which failure experience accumulates but produces neither institutional adaptation nor cognitive script revision among citizens.

5. Complexity Science and the Non-Learning Democratic System

5.1 Panarchy and the Trapped Cycle

Complexity science offers additional resources for understanding democratic non-learning. Gunderson and Holling's (2002) panarchy theory describes adaptive cycles in ecological and social systems, moving through phases of growth (r), conservation (K), release (Ω), and reorganization (α). Healthy systems complete this cycle: periods of accumulation and rigidity are periodically disrupted, enabling reorganization and renewed growth.

Democratic systems experiencing chronic PEF appear trapped in a pathological variant of this cycle. The release phase — electoral disruption, populist breakthrough, institutional crisis — occurs regularly, but the reorganization phase fails to complete. New political actors take power, but the underlying expectation architecture is not restructured. The system returns to conservation (K) with a new cast of characters but the same fundamental dynamics, until the next release event is triggered by accumulated expectation failure.

This panarchic trap explains a phenomenon that puzzle many political analysts: why populist parties, when they achieve power, frequently reproduce the very failures they campaigned against. The answer is not merely hypocrisy or incompetence — it is structural. The incentive architecture that rewards failure exploitation persists after electoral victory; the institutional constraints that prevent closure persist; and the citizens' cognitive scripts, never having been revised, rapidly generate new expectation failures against the new incumbents.

5.2 Edge of Chaos and Democratic Instability

Stacey's (2010) complexity framework distinguishes between systems operating in zones of stability, chaos, and the "edge of chaos" — the boundary region where creative adaptation is possible but not guaranteed. Contemporary democracies in PEFT-affected states appear to operate at or near this boundary: not stable enough to be self-correcting, not chaotic enough to force genuine reorganization.

This framing explains why interventions within the existing framework — institutional reforms, new electoral systems, transparency initiatives — typically fail to resolve the underlying crisis. They adjust parameters within a system that is already at the edge of chaos, without addressing the fundamental expectation architecture that generates the instability.

6. Political Entrepreneurs as Failure Exploiters: A Systemic Role

6.1 Beyond Rational Choice

Existing accounts of political entrepreneurship (Sheingate, 2003; De Vries & Hobolt, 2020) treat it primarily as a strategic behavior — actors identifying and exploiting political opportunities. PEFT offers a deeper analysis: political entrepreneurs are not merely opportunists. They perform a *systemic function* within the PEF cycle, serving as the mechanism by which accumulated expectation failure is converted into electoral energy.

This function is structurally analogous to what Schank calls *explanation* in cognitive processing — the moment when a script failure is noticed and named. But where Schank's explanation leads toward learning and revision, political entrepreneurship leads toward amplification and mobilization. The entrepreneur names the failure, assigns blame, and constructs a new expectation — but the new expectation is typically no more achievable than the old one, ensuring that the cycle continues.

6.2 The Asymmetry of Failure Construction

A key insight of PEFT is the fundamental asymmetry between *expectation construction* and *expectation revision*. Political actors are highly skilled at constructing expectations — this is the core technology of electoral competition. They are structurally prevented from revising them, because revision requires acknowledging failure, and failure acknowledgment is politically costly in adversarial democratic systems.

This asymmetry is self-reinforcing. The more expectations are constructed without revision, the larger the accumulated gap between expectation and reality. The larger the gap, the more fertile the ground for entrepreneurial failure exploitation. The more successful the exploitation, the stronger the incentive to construct unrevisable expectations in the first place.

6.3 The Globalization of PEF

De Vries' recent work, including *Money Flows* (2024) and research on environmental protest and gender backlash, demonstrates that PEF is no longer primarily a European or Western phenomenon. Global economic integration, digital communication, and cross-border migration have created conditions in which expectation failure in one context rapidly propagates to others, while the political entrepreneurs who exploit it increasingly operate with transnational playbooks.

PEFT therefore has global scope: the same structural dynamics that De Vries documents in European politics are operative — with local variations — across democratic systems worldwide.

7. Theoretical Implications and Future Directions

7.1 Reframing Democratic Theory

PEFT has several implications for democratic theory that challenge dominant frameworks.

First, it suggests that the standard focus on *preferences* as the fundamental unit of democratic analysis is misplaced. Preferences are downstream of expectations — they are formed, expressed, and revised within expectation structures that democratic theory largely ignores. A theory that operates at the level of preference aggregation will always fail to explain how preferences are constructed and why they systematically diverge from institutional capacity.

Second, PEFT challenges the Schumpeterian model of democracy as competitive elite selection (Schumpeter, 1942). If political entrepreneurs function primarily as failure exploiters — constructing and amplifying expectation mismatches for electoral gain — then elite competition does not drive democratic improvement. It drives the opposite: the deepening of expectation failure as a structural condition.

Third, PEFT questions the standard relationship between information and democratic quality. Much democratic reform theory assumes that better-informed citizens make better political choices. But if the problem is not lack of information but *lack of cognitive instruments for expectation reflection* — the ability to make one's own scripts explicit, test them against reality, and revise them — then information supply without reflective infrastructure produces not better democracy but better-armed expectation failure.

7.2 The Unit of Democratic Analysis

PEFT implies a fundamental shift in the unit of democratic analysis: from the *institution* to the *cognitive-collective*. Democratic systems are not primarily institutional arrangements; they are shared cognitive architectures — distributed networks of expectations, reference frames, and scripts — that are instantiated in institutions but not reducible to them.

This reframing has precedent in deliberative democratic theory (Habermas, 1996; Dryzek, 2000) and participatory approaches (Barber, 1984), but PEFT grounds it more precisely in cognitive science and gives it systemic content. The question is not merely how citizens can participate more, but how the *expectation infrastructure* of democracy can be made more reflexive — capable of the kind of script revision that Schank identified as the productive response to failure.

7.3 Toward Citizen-Level Reflective Instruments

If the core problem of contemporary democracy is the absence of closure — the inability to move from expectation failure through explanation to revised scripts — then the design challenge for democratic theory is clear: how can citizens be given instruments for *expectation reflection*?

This is a genuinely new research frontier. Existing civic technologies — voting aids, deliberation platforms, citizen assemblies — operate at the level of preference expression and aggregation. They

do not address the prior question: what does the citizen actually expect, where did that expectation come from, is it realistic, and how should it be revised in light of experience?

We propose that the development of *citizen expectation instruments* — tools that help individuals and communities make their political scripts explicit, compare them with reality, and engage in supported revision — represents the next significant frontier in democratic theory and practice. Such instruments would operate at the level of individual cognition while producing collective effects: as citizens develop more reflexive and accurate expectation structures, the political market for unrevisable expectation construction becomes less profitable, and the structural incentive for failure exploitation begins to diminish.

The theoretical specification of such instruments, and the empirical investigation of their effects on the PEF cycle, constitute a research program of significant scope — one that bridges cognitive science, political theory, complexity science, and democratic design in ways that no existing framework supports.

8. Conclusion

This article has proposed Political Expectation Failure Theory (PEFT) as a unified framework integrating cognitive science, empirical political research, and complexity theory into a coherent account of contemporary democratic instability.

The argument rests on three pillars. First, political order is fundamentally organized around citizen expectations — cognitive scripts encoding what political institutions should deliver. Second, modern democratic systems are structured to produce, violate, and exploit these expectations without achieving the closure — the script revision — that Schank's model identifies as the productive response to failure. Third, the result is not episodic instability but a self-reproducing structural condition: institutionalized expectation failure without closure.

Catherine De Vries' research program provides the most comprehensive empirical documentation of this condition yet available, demonstrating across two decades of research that expectation mismatch drives political dissatisfaction, that political entrepreneurs exploit rather than resolve this mismatch, and that the consequences are deepening, spatially clustering, and globally diffusing.

The implications are significant. Democratic theory must shift its fundamental unit of analysis from the institution to the cognitive-collective — the shared expectation architecture that institutions instantiate but do not exhaust. Democratic reform must address not merely institutional performance but the expectation infrastructure within which performance is evaluated. And democratic design must begin to develop the citizen-level reflective instruments that would enable the kind of learning from failure that democratic systems currently structurally prevent.

The crisis of democracy is, at its cognitive core, a crisis of expectation without reflection. The path forward requires tools for reflection that democratic theory has not yet produced.

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