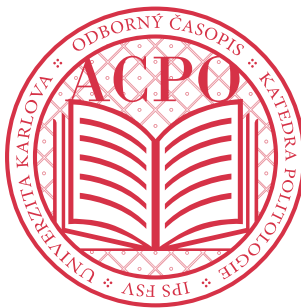


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## Editorial: The Digitalization of Intra Party Politics. The Participation vs. Centralisation Dilemma

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### 1. The digital transformation of political parties and its implications for democracy

With the emergence of the internet, it was inevitable that political parties would adopt web-based technologies and digital tools to organize political activities, communicate with the electorate, and mobilize supporters. At the turn of the millennium, seminal research by Rachel Gibson, Helen Margetts and Pippa Norris was instrumental in theorising and comparatively analysing several dimensions that were substantially transformed by Information and Communication Technologies, as well as their political consequences (Gibson and Ward 1999; Margetts 2006; Norris 2001). By that time, party websites emerged as the cornerstone of digital campaigning, predating the transformative rise of social media and Web 2.0, characterized by interactivity and user-generated content (O'Reilly 2005). Over the past two decades, the digital landscape has evolved rapidly, ushering in sweeping changes on a global scale.

The scholarly research focusing on the digital transformation of political parties has analysed the main external and internal dimensions and features of the phenomenon, as well as its multi-faceted organisational and political implications. As already stated, the seminal research mostly turned its attention to the transformation of the external communications and campaigning through party websites and evolving social media. For some time, this field was mostly dominated by political communication studies (Norris 2003; Lilleker 2011; Vaccari 2013). By the mid 2010s, the emergence of new political parties that were intensively using digital tools for internal purposes substantially changed both the political landscape and the academic conversation. The development of digital Organisational Political Platforms (OPPs) replicating social media tools pointed out the relevance of new research avenues that were not properly explored before. New forms of internal digital membership, participation and deliberation were identified (Scarrow 2015; Borge and Santamarina 2016; Blum and Zuber 2016; Vittori 2020; Gherghina 2024), and that led to a wider debate on how digital technologies were transforming political parties as organisations. On the one hand, new party models (cyber parties, digital parties) and subtypes (networked parties, platform parties) were suggested and extensively discussed (Boyd 2008; Gerbaudo 2019; Lioy et al. 2019; Deseriss 2020b). On the other hand, the literature has tried to theoretically establish and comparatively assess the different dimensions or *pillars* involved in such processes. That has paved the way for larger comparative studies analysing which parties have been more advanced (and in which dimensions) in their digital transformation (Raniolo and Tarditi 2020; Fitzpatrick 2021;

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Barberà et. al. 2021; Sandri et al. 2024, González-Cacheda and Cancela, 2024). Close research strands have turned their attention to the politics of (party) platform design and its implications for participation. An emerging literature has pointed out the relevance of the different affordances and system design in facilitating or restricting the members involvement in the party activities (Deseriis and Vittori 2019; Biancalana and Vittori 2021; Fitzpatrick and Thuermer 2023). Towards the end of the 2010s, the focus of the scholarly research has shifted again. The Cambridge Analytical scandal, Trump's protagonism in US politics, the emergence of new radical right parties around Europe, and the advent of Artificial Intelligence has put democratic backsliding at the centre of the academic research on digital party politics (Wolkenstein 2022). Democratic Innovations have stagnated and been overshadowed again by emerging research on the impact of social media and political communication in the quality of contemporary democracies (Jungherr et al. 2020; Dommett, et al. 2024).

These transformations have mostly fuelled debates over the internet's impact on democratic participation. On one hand, scholars like Tolbert and McNeal (2003) or, more recently, Fischer and Gilardi (2023) argued that digital tools have the potential to enhance inclusivity, reaching previously marginalized groups and expanding participation (mobilisation thesis). On the other hand, critics like Margolis and Resnick (2000) or recently Lev-On and Haleva-Amir (2018) contend that digital technologies often replicate or even exacerbate existing inequalities (normalisation thesis). The overarching reality, however, is that digital innovations have intensified the recognition that democracy is not an inherent state but a fragile construct requiring constant cultivation and vigilance. While early scholarly research was more inclined to highlight positive impacts of digital technologies for political participation and democracy, by the end of the 2010s the mood has turned more pessimistic. As Chambers observes, "the diagnosis in both the popular press and scholarly research is that the digital revolution has been anything but good for democracy" (Chambers 2024: 177).

## **2. Intra-party digital innovations and their consequences: facilitating participation vs. promoting centralization**

The relevance of digital technologies as a factor shaping party organization has increasingly been debated by the academy (Gibson, Nixon and Ward 2003; Gibson and Ward 2009; Barberà et al. 2021; Sandberg 2022). This research strand has been dominated by optimistic and pessimistic approaches on the impact of technology in party organizations. Techno-optimistic approaches have pointed out how new Information and Communication Technologies might act as an enabler of internal participation, hence promoting intra-party democracy. Techno-pessimistic views have highlighted how digital tools are being increasingly appropriated by the party leadership in a process that tend to increase oligarchic tendencies such as the centralization of power or the personalization of the political leadership. Identifying specific political impacts in one or the other direction has somewhat concealed the interactions between them. As we will point out, this is the main message of this introduction and the starting point of this Special Issue.

A growing number of publications focusing on the digitalization of intra party politics has highlighted how more and more parties around Europe (and beyond) are using digital tools to promote deliberation, participation and access to decision making processes. The steppingstones of this process have been, on the one hand, the re-conceptualization of party membership and, in the other one, the introduction of Organizational Participatory

Platforms (OPPs). While party membership has for long time been a blurred concept (van Haute 2009; van Haute and Gauja 2015), the introduction of new digital tools and the advent of social media platforms has substantially contributed to redefine it. Scarrow's seminal work has indeed contributed to better understand and conceptualize those changes and to promote comparative research on multi-speed membership (Scarrow 2015). On the other hand, as already stated in the previous section, the literature on the features and embedded affordances of the OPPs employed by different political parties has highlighted how they shape the way party members and activists participate internally (Deseriis 2017; Deseriis and Vittori 2019; Deseriis 2020a; Biancalana and Vittori 2021; Fitzpatrick and Thuermer 2023).

Since the mid 2010s, there has also been an increasing number of publications examining how digital democratic innovations might be facilitating internal political participation. Many of this literature has been based on case studies or small n comparisons from the Five Star Movement, Podemos, the Pirates or the Green parties. The use of political platforms for deliberative purposes was one of the first strands of research to be explored (Borge and Santamarina 2016; Meloni and Lupato 2023). That said, the emphasis that many of the new parties have placed on direct voting enhanced by digital means has also caught the academic attention. Some research has indeed focused on the specific rules and guarantees of digital voting in political parties (von Nostitz and Sandri 2021). Other papers have provided evidence on specific procedures such as party primaries or party referenda. Interestingly, the empirical and comparative conclusions of this research strand have pointed out the limitations of digital technologies in enabling meaningful participation, high turnout levels, or avoiding participatory fatigue (Bálint 2017; Vittori 2020; Deseriis 2020a; Biancalana and Vittori 2021; Villaplana et al. 2023). More broadly, the literature has also explored the relevance of digital decision-making tools to promote effective inclusiveness or transparency, in many cases reaching pessimistic conclusions on the participatory possibilities of such tools (Deseriis 2017; Deseriis 2022; Tronconi and Bailo 2024; Villaplana et al. 2023).

The main alternative research strand on the consequences of introducing digital tools for organizational and participatory purposes is connected to the extensive literature on oligarchic tendencies in party organizations. Some of the seminal contributions on this academic literature have pointed out how introducing digital tools to promote intra-party democracy have generated new forms of disintermediation. Many of such digital tools are designed to individually and directly connect party members and affiliates with the party leadership. That leads to an erosion of the power and relevance of intermediary party agencies and elites (Biancalana 2022). Consequently, some authors have suggested the advent of hyper-leaderships and new party models as a defining feature of digital party politics (Gerbaudo 2019; Lioy et al. 2019). That said, it is important to point out that most of this literature has been based on the formation period of new parties such as Podemos, the Five Star Movement or the Pirates, which might lead to distorted conclusions on the potential oligarchic tendencies produced by digital technologies in political parties.

Fragmented assessments on the potential participatory or centralizing impacts of digital technologies in the internal organization of political parties have somehow downplayed a major theoretical development in this field: the need to understand both impacts as part of the main organizational dilemma that the digital transformation is posing to all political parties. It is perfectly understandable that for analytical and methodological reasons most of the empirical research has been focusing on one or the other dimension of the dilemma, but to fully comprehend such phenomenon both elements need to be jointly

assessed. In this regard, the participation-centralization dilemma connected to political parties' adoption of digital technologies for organizational purposes is not very different from other key trade-offs identified by the literature on the formation and institutionalization of political parties (Duverger 1954; Panebianco 1988; Bolleyer 2013). While some seminal contributions in this field have somehow pointed out similar insights (Bennett et al. 2018; Gerbaudo 2019; Lioy et al. 2019; Biancalana and Vittori 2021), we believe that the argument behind this Special Issue has not been clearly stated by the literature, so far. We hope that this might be a good opportunity to strengthen future dialogues and synergies between the theoretical and comparative research from party politics and digital politics.

### 3. Contributions in this Special Issue

It is a distinct privilege to guest-edit this special issue. This special issue brings together a collection of articles that illuminate the multifaceted ways in which digitalization is reshaping political parties and their practices across different contexts. The contributions offer timely insights into how political parties continue to navigate the complexities of the digital age and, more particularly, how they deal with the participation vs. centralisation dilemma. By highlighting both recent developments and persistent challenges, this issue also aims to advance our understanding of how the digital transformation of political parties is reshaping contemporary democratic systems.

The different contributions also go beyond the main topic of the Special Issue and explore the multifaceted ways in which parties leverage technology to engage with members and activists and respond to the evolving demands of digital communication. The papers address critical questions such as: What are the main dimensions connected to the emergence of new parties and what role plays digital tools in them? How do mainstream parties adapt their strategies in response to digital disruptions? To what extent mainstream political parties can use digital technologies to reshape the way they enroll and engage with party members and affiliates? To what extent the digitalization of participatory procedures leads to effective participation within mainstream parties? And, also, to what extent the introduction of intra-party democracy mechanisms might be strengthened (or not) by digital tools?

By examining these themes, the issue aims to highlight both the opportunities and the challenges of digital transformation, offering insights into how political parties can effectively operate as agents of democratic resilience in an increasingly digitized world. In the remaining part of this introduction, we shortly introduce the different authors and contributions:

**Jorge Bronet** and **Rosa Borge** offer a conceptual contribution by dissecting the notion of “new” parties, proposing the term *crisis parties* to characterize those emerging in response to societal upheavals. Their analysis, grounded in data from the Political Party Database (PPDB) round 2, provides a fresh perspective on the dynamics of party innovation in times of crisis.

In the Czech context, **Michal Malý** and **Tomáš Martínek** examine the Czech Pirate Party as a prototype of a digital party. Using the concept of the Network Party, they employ a mixed-methods approach to analyze the diverse digital tools utilized by the party, offering a comprehensive view of how digitalization can transform party organization and strategy.

Adding comparative breadth, **Adrià Mompó** uses Scarrow's (2015) multi-speed membership model to examine twelve Spanish regional parties, varying in age, experience,

and founding contexts. His study sheds light on how these parties adapt their party-member relationships in efforts to modernize and embrace digital tools.

**Alberto Díaz-Montiel** investigates the evolution of intra-party democracy within the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) between 2014 and 2023, focusing on the integration of digital tools in member consultations and primary elections. His findings highlight the experimental nature of digital adoption in decision-making processes over time.

**Gema Sánchez Medero** and **F. Ramón Villaplana** turn their attention to democratic innovations within conservative parties, offering a comparative perspective anchored in a detailed analysis of Spain's Partido Popular. Their study explores the tension between strong centralization around a leading figure and the introduction of digital tools to enhance intra-party democracy, providing critical insights into this underexplored area.

Together, these contributions demonstrate the potential diverse dimensions of party digitalization research. By combining theoretical advancements, comparative analyses, and in-depth case studies, this special issue underscores the complexity and significance of digital transformation in modern political parties. It invites scholars to further explore how digitalization continues to reshape party structures, strategies, and their role within democratic systems.

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