

Political Parties and the Use of Digitalization in Daily Politics: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

This special issue examines how digital tools influence the characteristics and functions of political parties by looking at three specific dimensions: intra-party communication, attitudes towards digitalization, and the use of digital tools in different institutional arenas. It advances our understanding of party digitalization in three significant ways. First, the collection of articles aims to shift the focus of party digitalization to everyday politics, complementing the traditional emphasis on the impact of digital technologies on party competition and election campaigns. Second, it covers the understudied impact of digital tools on political parties' parliamentary activities. Third, this special issue makes a distinctive contribution by examining the demand side of party digitalization with a focus on party members.

KEYWORDS

Elections, Party members, Political communication, Political parties, Technology

Zusammenfassung

Diese Sonderausgabe untersucht, wie sich digitale Werkzeuge auf Eigenschaften und Funktionen politischer Parteien auswirken. Insbesondere werden drei spezifische Dimensionen betrachtet: parteiinterne Kommunikation, Einstellungen zur Digitalisierung und die Nutzung digitaler Werkzeuge in verschiedenen institutionellen Arenen. Die Ausgabe trägt in dreierlei Hinsicht zu unserem Verständnis der Digitalisierung von Parteien bei. Erstens verlagert sie den Fokus auf den politischen Alltag und ergänzt somit den traditionellen Schwerpunkt auf die Auswirkungen digitaler Technologien auf

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Parteienwettbewerb und Wahlkampf. Zweitens behandelt sie die wenig untersuchten Auswirkungen digitaler Werkzeuge auf die parlamentarische Arbeit der politischen Parteien. Drittens leistet diese Sonderausgabe einen besonderen Beitrag, indem sie die Nachfrageseite der Parteidigitalisierung mit einem Fokus auf die Parteimitglieder untersucht.

Résumé

Ce numéro spécial examine la manière dont les outils numériques influencent les caractéristiques et les fonctions des partis politiques en se penchant sur trois dimensions spécifiques: la communication au sein des partis, les attitudes à l'égard de la numérisation et l'utilisation des outils numériques dans différentes arènes institutionnelles. Il fait progresser notre compréhension de la numérisation des partis de trois manières significatives. Premièrement, la collection d'articles vise à déplacer le centre d'intérêt vers la politique quotidienne, en complément de l'accent traditionnellement mis sur l'impact des technologies numériques sur la concurrence entre les partis et les campagnes électorales. Deuxièmement, il couvre l'impact peu étudié des outils numériques sur les activités parlementaires des partis politiques. Troisièmement, ce numéro spécial apporte une contribution originale en examinant la demande de numérisation des partis en mettant l'accent sur les membres des partis.

Riassunto

Questo numero tematico esamina il modo in cui gli strumenti digitali influenzano le caratteristiche e le funzioni dei partiti politici, esaminando tre dimensioni specifiche: la comunicazione all'interno dei partiti, gli atteggiamenti verso la digitalizzazione e l'uso degli strumenti digitali in diverse arene istituzionali. Il presente volume offre un triplice contributo innovativo all'analisi dei processi di digitalizzazione nei partiti politici. In primo luogo, la raccolta di articoli sposta l'attenzione della digitalizzazione dei partiti sulla politica quotidiana, integrando l'enfasi tradizionale riguardo l'impatto delle tecnologie digitali sulla competizione dei partiti e sulle campagne elettorali. Il secondo contributo innovativo risiede nell'analisi delle ripercussioni, ad oggi poco esplorate in ambito accademico, degli strumenti digitali sull'attività parlamentare dei partiti. In terzo luogo, questo numero tematico offre un contributo distintivo esaminando il lato della domanda della digitalizzazione dei partiti, con particolare attenzione ai membri dei partiti.

THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES BEYOND ELECTIONS

Political parties have quickly adapted to the increasing importance of the digital environment in people's lives. Over the last two decades, the literature on the main features and impacts of the digital transformation of political parties has flourished, evolving into well-developed debates. Most research on the digital transformation of political parties comes from a mix between political communication, sociology and political science studies focusing on party competition and campaigning. Previous research on the digital transformation of political parties has focused principally on the external functions performed by political parties, namely communication, campaigns' interaction with voters or party competition (Margetts, 2006; Norris, 2001; Vaccari, 2013).

Research on party digitalization has traditionally been structured along two main themes that continue to shape scholarly debates in the field. The first is the divide between optimistic and pessimistic approaches regarding technology's potential impact on party organization and competition. The role of technology was disregarded for some time by the literature on the organization of political parties (Bolleyer, 2013; Scarrow et al., 2017). The second theme, partially connected to the previous, is the impact of digital transformation on party competition, which has traditionally been framed as the normalization vs. equalization divide. Since the turn of the millennium, both issues have consistently resurfaced on the academic agenda with the emergence of new technologies and practices such as the use of big data or data driven campaigning by political parties (Dommett et al., 2024; Gibson & McAllister, 2015; Norris, 2001).

The literature exploring the initial internal changes connected to the digital transformation of party organizations highlighted their use as management, recruitment, participation and mobilization tools (Gibson & Ward, 2009; Scarrow, 2015; Vaccari, 2013). Such effects were visible in the 2000s and early 2010s, but more recently, and especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, many new and established parties implemented organizational participatory platforms with different features and functionalities (Barberà et al., 2021; Oross & Gherghina, 2023; Oross & Tap, 2023). In this sense, the analysis of the affordances and system design facilitating or restricting internal participation and involvement in different party activities has been one fruitful research avenue (Biancalana & Vittori, 2021; Deseriis & Vittori, 2019). The empirical and comparative conclusions of this research strand have pointed out the limitations of digital technologies in enabling meaningful participation, achieving high turnout levels, or preventing participatory fatigue. Previous studies 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, 2021; Vittori, 2020).

Many political parties have introduced changes in the way they conceptualize party membership and other forms of affiliation. In this regard, political parties mimic Facebook and other social media platforms (Gerbaudo, 2019) and redefine the notion of membership substantially. Scarrow (2015) contributes to a better understanding and conceptualization through the emphasis on multi-speed membership. At the same time, the digital tools shape the ways in which party members engage in the lives of their parties and bring together members, activists and sympathizers (Gherghina & Stoiciu, 2020; Vodová & Voda, 2020).

Digitalization enhances and redefines new internal party functions. This has mostly affected new parties, but not exclusively. It is worth pointing out, for example, how intra party deliberation has been transformed through digital tools, some of them emulating social media (Borge & Santamarina, 2016; Gherghina, 2024; Vittori, 2020). The digital transformation of intra-party voting procedures also facilitates candidate and leadership selection processes, as well as internal consultations in several parties (Scarrow et al., 2022; von Nostitz & Sandri, 2021; Wuttke et al., 2019). These conclusions advance our understanding of how digitalization shapes party reforms, particularly regarding intra-party democracy and organizational innovation.

However, the predominance of single case studies or binary comparisons in empirical research constrains our ability to develop broader theoretical generalizations about these transformative processes.

There are also studies about the internal power consequences of introducing digital tools for organizational and participatory purposes. Some findings indicate how new forms of disintermediation emerge or are accelerated by digital transformation. This is mostly because many digital tools are designed to connect party members and affiliates individually and directly with the party leadership, which inevitably leads to an erosion of the power and relevance of intermediary party agencies and elites (Biancalana, 2022). This means that digitalization may strengthen leadership centralization, concentrating power in the hands of party elites while marginalizing rank-and-file members and traditional organizational structures (Gerbaudo, 2019). This trend has led scholars to identify the emergence of new types of party leadership such as ‘hyper’ or ‘platform’ leadership – a new form of digital-era party governance characterized by enhanced leader autonomy and direct communication channels with supporters, bypassing traditional party intermediaries (De Blasio & Viviani, 2020; Nunziata, 2024). At the same time, the extensive use of digital deliberation and inclusive member engagement in internal party decisions, which replace the traditional hierarchical structures, can lead to the collapse of the party (Gherghina & Stoiciu, 2020).

Another important arena where the organizational impacts of digital tools emerge is related to election campaigning. The internal power relations are reshaped by several contrasting campaigning dynamics connected to the use of digital tools (Roemmele & Gibson, 2020). The party central office is transformed and reinforced by the increasing use of data driven campaigning (Dommett et al., 2024) and the use of digital tools allows alternative (subversive) ways of campaigning by party members and followers (Dommett et al., 2021; Dommett & Power, 2023). Digital tools also influence candidates' campaigns and how party resources are used, accelerating the trend towards individualized campaigning (Karlsen et al., 2020). However, the degree of campaign personalization varies significantly across contexts, largely shaped by party nomination procedures and electoral system incentives.

Several studies conceptualize and assess the dimensions connected with the party digital transformation (Fitzpatrick, 2021; Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020). These frameworks were applied in several contexts to reveal the causes and functioning of party digitalization (González-Cacheda et al., 2022; González-Cacheda & Cancela Outeda, 2024; Raniolo et al., 2021; Sandri et al., 2024). The literature on the digital transformation of party politics has been speaking about the potential emergence of alternative party models such as the cyber-party for roughly two decades (Margetts, 2006; Norris, 2001). What seemed like political science fiction in the early 2000s became reality by the late 2000s and early 2010s. Emerging and challenger parties started leveraging digital tools not just for external communication and campaigning, but to fundamentally reshape their organizational structures. These parties pioneered the use of digital platforms to enable more horizontal forms of participation and decision-making, facilitating what Bennett and Segerberg (2014) termed as ‘connective action’.

Moving beyond traditional hierarchical party structures, digital technologies could enable more fluid, networked forms of political organization and membership engagement (Bennett et al., 2018; Hartleb, 2013; Klimowicz, 2018). The most elaborated and somewhat controversial theorization of the digital party was developed by Gerbaudo (2019). This party model is characterized by distinctive organizational features that challenge traditional structures: open membership without fees, volunteer-based political labor, extensive digital data collection through integrated platforms, and the abandonment of physical infrastructure such as party offices and local branches. These structural innovations are underpinned by a radical democratic ideology (participationism) that emphasizes direct participation and collective decision-making. While Gerbaudo's model only corresponded with the formation period of a group of parties such as Podemos or Five Star Movement, his contribution has indeed sparked

an ongoing debate on the relevance of digital technologies in party politics, and more specifically on the need to identify new digitally shaped party types and sub-types (Deseriis, 2020; Liroy et al., 2019).

KEY CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

All these results indicate how digital technologies have transformed the ways in which political parties operate, communicate, and engage with citizens and institutions in their day-to-day activities. This special issue examines how digital tools influence the characteristics and functions of political parties by looking at three specific dimensions: intra-party communication, attitudes towards digitalization, and the use of digital tools in different institutional arenas.

Building on a rich body of scholarship examining political parties' adoption of digital technologies, this special issue advances our understanding of party digitalization in three significant ways. First, the featured collection aims to shift the focus of party digitalization to everyday politics, i.e. the period between elections, overcoming the emphasis traditionally attributed to the impact of digital technologies on party competition and election campaigns. The focus on everyday party politics – from membership engagement and internal communication to daily organizational routines – provides unique insights into how digitalization affects parties' continuous democratic functions, rather than just their periodic electoral mobilization. Moreover, most studies on the impact of digitalization have considered the vertical relationship between party officials and members, or between representatives and citizens. Nonetheless, party digitalization fundamentally reshapes the traditional boundaries between vertical and horizontal relationships, as citizens gain unprecedented access to elected officials, enabling them to influence policy decisions and participate in everyday political discourse. The contributions in this special issue extend beyond temporal shifts to examine how digital transformation affects the core functions of political participation. The analyses move past conventional focuses on representative selection and accountability to explore how digitalization transforms decision-making processes and democratic deliberation.

The article by Tronconi and Bailo (2025) investigates the impact of the digital tool Lex Eletti used by the Italian Five Star Movement between 2013 and 2021 to enhance citizens' online participation in law-making. The study focuses on the effects on participatory democracy in lawmaking using text analysis and sentences to compare draft bills and their parliamentary counterparts. The main findings show a minimal impact of the platform on law-making activity: few MPs engage with it, there is decreasing user attention for bills on the platform, and limited interaction between platform users and MPs. These results nuance the existing knowledge about the impact of digitalization in parties' functioning and temper the optimism outlined by several studies about the use of digitalization, including some focusing on the Five Star Movement. Along similar lines, the article by Buta and Farcas (2025) explains why the Roma political parties in Romania fail to use digital technology although they face a continuously decreasing level of support from their voters. The findings, based on interviews with local Roma party leaders, show that the lack of digitalization is heavily influenced by electoral clientelism, which affects the Roma electorate because of their socioeconomic situation. Moreover, the poor organization of Roma parties and the limited trust people have in them disincentivize these parties from adopting digitalization.

The article by Lisi (2025) in this special issue connects digitalization to party websites and identifies the determinants of website functionalities across a broad spectrum of political parties. The results show that most parties use their websites for mobilizing human and financial resources, while interactive features remain less prevalent. Those parties with less centralized leadership and with left-wing ideology have websites with more functions. Newer parties also have more complex websites although this effect is mitigated by their electoral strength. The

article by Bon, Gibson, Darius, Greffet and Römmele (2025) looks at the use of digitalization during campaigns and explains the adoption of data-driven campaigning by German and French parties in recent national elections. The findings indicate limited use of data-driven campaigning, which is explained by a combination of the regulatory environment and parties' prior campaign practices. Smaller and newer parties use this type of campaigning more than the large and the more established parties.

This special issue's second contribution examines the understudied impact of digital tools on political parties' parliamentary activities. The legislative arena represents a core institutional function of political parties, where digital technologies are reshaping everything from policy research and bill drafting to constituent communications and inter-party negotiations. Indeed, the transformation of legislative work through digital tools may be just as profound as the changes observed in parties' grassroots operations or central office administration. While legislative studies have already acknowledged the impact of digital tools on the systemic functions performed by parliaments (Serra-Silva, 2022), we know little about how parties in public office use digital tools. The empirical analysis of party digitalization in the legislative arena helps to identify relevant phenomena of this ongoing process that have remained understudied hitherto.

The article by Poljak (2025) argues that political parties strategically choose to initiate issues in parliamentary debates rather than on social media to establish dominance through real-time discussions. It seeks to understand to what extent political parties use digital platforms to reinforce them on the political agenda. It covers parliamentary speeches and Facebook posts by parties in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, and the UK between 2010 and 2022 to illustrate that issues discussed in parliamentary debates do not initially emerge on social media but attract online attention after being introduced in parliament. These results are crucial to understanding the interplay between parties' strategic decisions, their rhetoric and agenda-setting.

Third, this special issue makes a distinctive contribution by examining the demand side of party digitalization, addressing a critical gap in current research. While previous studies examined how individuals perceive and interact with digital technology in their daily lives (Lusoli & Ward, 2004; Ziegler et al., 2024), we miss a systematic understanding of how party members view the digitalization of their organizations. This knowledge gap is relevant given that members' acceptance and engagement with digital tools ultimately shapes the success of parties' digital transformation efforts. By focusing on members' attitudes and behaviors, this issue advances our understanding of how grassroots participants perceive, adopt, and potentially resist digital innovations within party structures.

The article by Gherghina and Marian (2025) in this special issue addresses the issue of party members' support for digitalization directly. The study uses individual-level data from a survey conducted with party members to test the extent to which technology winners and the reinforcement hypothesis could explain the support for digitalization. The results show that those party members who are active and informed about party activities support party digitalization. These are strong explanations irrespective of how technology savvy the members are.

Overall, the special issue acknowledges the crucial importance of the supply side in understanding party digitalization comprehensively. Several contributions expand existing research by analyzing novel datasets on parties' digital websites and platforms. These studies test innovative hypotheses about how parties design, implement, and adapt their digital strategies to meet organizational goals and respond to their members' needs (Bon et al., 2025; Lisi, 2025). In particular, the article by Bankov (2025) studies how party digitalization influences political processes. More precisely, it investigates the contribution of party digitalization to policy narratives on e-voting in Bulgaria on the restoration of a dual voting method that combines paper ballots and machine voting. The results show that party digitalization is a contextual and indirect explanation for parties' positions towards the dual voting method. The novelty

of these findings is that digitalization appears to serve ideological purposes under specific circumstances.

This dual focus on both supply and demand enables a nuanced understanding of the dynamic interplay between parties' digital initiatives and their members' responses, providing insights into the conditions that facilitate or hinder successful digital transformation in political organizations. Furthermore, the collection of articles included in this volume extends the focus beyond advanced Western democracies to explore understudied cases in Eastern Europe and other non-Western regions. By expanding both the geographical scope of inquiry and attention to routine party operations, these studies reveal both universal patterns and context-specific variations in how digitalization affects parties' functions in contemporary democracies.

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