



Digital parties and their organisational challenges

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abstract

Digital parties such as the 5 Star Movement, Podemos, and the Pirate Parties have introduced important organisational innovations to tap into the new affordances of digital platforms. However, their project of a digital democracy allowing for more disintermediation in the relationship between citizens and the political process has also raised important dilemmas. In this note, I summarise my research on digital parties and focus on some of the key organisational challenges they are facing.

Amidst this era of political chaos, marked by the convergence of multiple economic, political, health and ecological crisis, the question of political organisation has come back as a matter of great urgency. The sheer scale of the challenges we face makes the basic logic of all forms of organisation - namely uniting the force of individuals in pursuit of a collective cause - key to the major mobilisation efforts that are required to address contemporary social problems. In recent years we have in fact witnessed a revival of discussions on organisation, as new movements using digital media in their organising practices have arisen, raising questions about issues such as leadership and participation, horizontality and hierarchy. Vociferous debates have emerged around this and connected questions, and the discussion is as much alive among scholars as it is among activists, as seen in the debate on

horizontality and verticality (Nunes, 2021). Discussions about organisational transformation were initially focused on the transformation of protest movements, in response to the wave of protest movements experienced during the 2010s, from Occupy Wall Street to the Gilets Jaunes. Yet, in recent years the discussion has turned towards political parties, amidst a rapid transformation of electoral politics, and the emergence of new political organisations, some of which are strongly intertwined with the 2010s protest movements, to the point of being sometimes seen as their electoral projections.

One of the most significant political trends in recent years has been the emergence of new political parties sometimes described as ‘digital parties’, because of their enthusiastic adoption of digital technology as a means of political organisation. From the Pirate Parties in Northern Europe, to the Five Star Movement in Italy and Podemos in Spain, a new generation of political parties has emerged which adopt the logic and organisational structure of digital platforms. Meanwhile, also some mainstream political parties including the UK Labour Party, the Spanish PSOE, and the German SPD have been adopting. This return of the party is not merely a return of old organisational structures inherited from the industrial era. Rather it entails a process of profound organisational innovation, a renewal of the party-form that reflects the rapid technological change we have witnessed in recent years as a result of the so-called ‘digital revolution’, namely the pervasive diffusion of digital apps, platforms and devices. While political parties have a reputation as old-fashioned construction, out-of-sync with contemporary reality, historically the political party has been a very malleable organisational form. From the parties of notables of the 18th and 19th century to the mass party of the Fordist era, and the television parties of the neoliberal era, different configurations of organisation, leadership, participation and mobilisation responding to the dominant technological and social trends of the times. Something similar is currently afoot with parties re-organising after the image of the ‘digital revolution’. Social media and their structure of discussion of interaction, and new participation and decision-making platforms, described as ‘participatory platforms’ or ‘participation portals’, such as Rousseau in the 5 Star Movement, and Participa in the case of

Podemos have progressively become the key organisational structure of these movements, in their striving for a more direct participation of the citizenry (Deseriis, 2017; Mikola, 2017; Deseriis and Vittori, 2019). But is this transformation actually bringing about more democracy to organisations? And what does it tell us about contemporary organisational trends and challenges?

In recent years, scholars have addressed different aspects of the organisational transformation of political parties. They have explored their forms of deliberation (Deseriis, 2020, Florida and Vignati, 2017), their voting practices (Mosca, 2020), the functioning of online primaries (Mikola, 2017) and the relationship between digital and physical spaces (Husted and Plesner, 2017). In my own research about emerging political parties (Gerbaudo, 2019a; 2019b), I have highlighted some fundamental trends that cut across different formations and how they illuminate more general structural conditions of contemporary politics. My notion of digital party, also rendered alternatively as 'platform party' (Gerbaudo, 2019c) to indicate the centrality of the platform logic to their functioning, expresses a number of connected trends: 1) the way political organisations are absorbing innovations coming from the field of business management of digital companies; 2) the mimicking of digital platforms disintermediation dynamics and their nature as forms of re-intermediation; 3) the transformation of forms of membership this turn carries, with the shift towards more open and light notions of membership; 4) the dubiousness of claims according to which participatory platforms are ushering in a better and more involved democracy. My analysis of the digital party, and the debate (Husted, 2019; Dommett et al., 2020; Deseriis, 2020) it has sparked, carries important implications for contemporary debate on organization. In this research note I develop a series of general propositions about these different trends drawing on my own research and on relevant scholarship in the field.

First, digital parties adopt organisational features originating from the digital economy, and the 'lean management' philosophy of start-ups and large digital platform companies. This trend reflects a more general tendency: in every era political parties are adapting to the technological structure of their times, and following Lenin's famous suggestion, attempting to adopt state-of-the-art

technologies and organisational practices. While in the industrial era, the party styled itself after the Fordist factory, in these times of social media and apps it has come to adopt the quality of Facebook and other digital companies known under the collective acronym of FAANGs (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google). Looking at the doings of 'digital parties' such as the Pirate Parties, the Five Star Movement and Podemos, it soon becomes apparent that what these organisations ultimately are putting forward is a political translation of the operational model of Silicon Valley firms: the platform capitalism model that brought to success figures such as Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg and Amazon's Jeff Bezos (Srnicsek, 2017). This organisational change has to do with these new parties' attempt to make up for their outsider status and their lack of funds and personnel by reaping economies of scale available on social media and mobilise thousands of people in online discussions and actions that would be impossible for them to reach otherwise.

Second, digital parties are informed by their own ideology that I describe as participationism, which centers on the goal of a better democracy than the one that is on offer in the contemporary representative system. Digital parties argue that by using digital technologies they will usher in a more direct and authentic democracy that is going to make political decisions far more responsive to the wishes of ordinary citizens (Frederiksson Almqvist, 2016; Ringel, 2019). Key in this view is the idea of disintermediation. Disintermediation has become a popular keyword to express what platforms are about (Pasquale, 2015). The by-passing of previous intermediaries structures achieved by digital companies in several areas of information, culture, knowledge, commerce, entertainment, is translated by digital parties into the promise of a more direct democracy doing away barriers between voters and representatives. However, the result of this process of disintermediation are highly contradictory. It is true that by means of platformisation political parties are doing away with some forms of organisational intermediation, and in particular, the party's bureaucracy that Antonio Gramsci (1971: 133-135) in his discussion of the 'modern prince', described as the 'third element' articulating the base of the party with its apex. In the same way in which social media and apps promise to do away with middle-men in the public sphere and distribution systems, from mainstream

media, to retail malls, cab companies and restaurants so the digital party promises to use digital media to facilitate the direct participation of the citizenry in all the important decisions that concern ordinary citizens. Yet, this disintermediation is in fact a re-intermediation, the creation of new forms of higher-order intermediation in place of pre-existing one. Rather than becoming truly 'leaderless' these formations are overshadowed by charismatic leaders, or 'hyperleaders', who play a pivotal role in shaping the party's public image and its direction, and therefore end up acting as symbolic intermediaries.

Third, digital parties radically transform the nature of party membership. Traditionally political parties operated with a highly formalized definition of member, in which members were expected to abide by a series of rules, as well as contribute financially and with their own political labour to the life of the party. The case is radically different with digital parties. These formations have adopted a free registration model in which membership is disconnected from financial contribution. For example, in the case of France Insoumise, it is sufficient to write one's name and email address, and hit the button 'je soutiens' (I support) to become a member. Beppe Grillo has often celebrated the fact that becoming a member of the Five Star Movement is costless as a democratic measure. But the fact of allowing anybody to register for free also reflects digital parties' ambition of rapid growth. In so doing, digital parties are imitating the model traced since the late 1990s by digital advocacy organisations such as MoveOn, Change.org or Avaaz, which enlist internet users as 'members' simply for agreeing to be on their mailing list and for having participated in any activity at any time – for example by having signed a petition (Karpf, 2012)

Fourth, digital parties' internal democracy contradicts the promise of a participatory democracy marked by radical egalitarianism. Far from the edifying picture of a digital 'basis democracy' (*Basisdemokratie*) to adopt the term utilised by early green parties, digital parties often correspond more to a model of plebiscitarian democracy, strongly top-down in its orientation. While these formations emphasise those practices that have a strong deliberative and participatory element, such as collaborative policy-development, the practices that have the strongest impact are internal

strategic referenda. These referenda, such as those carried out frequently by the 5 Star Movement to expel members accused of not having followed party guidelines, have often been approved with overwhelming majorities for the option preferred by the leadership. Episodes of rank-and-file rebellion against the leadership's position and proposals have been very rare. This highlights that digital democracy applications can be geared towards rather different purposes from the ones officially stated by party leaders. The use of participatory platforms introduces new forms of power and control, with the party staff able to influence the results of digital ballots through their timing, the formulation of questions submitted to the base, and the creation of an atmosphere within the party conducive to the adoption of a certain line. Thus, the longstanding dream of a digital democracy appears to have foundered in its practical application. Digital democracy is often a codeword for online forms of plebiscitarian democracy in which the actual intervention of members is very limited (Gerbaudo, 2019b). Rather than delivering a participatory democracy these parties have delivered a 'reactive democracy', in which citizens' intervention merely consists in responding to the stimuli coming from the leadership, more often in the form of approval or acclamation than disapproval.

This analysis of the shortcomings of digital parties could lead to two different responses or solutions. First, the supporters of direct democracy through the use of digital media, may want to argue is that these failings have to do with an insufficiency of practice, merely digital parties have just betrayed their founding principles, and it is from this betrayal that their failures stem. According to this view, if anything digital parties have not been ambitious enough in pursuing the digital democracy agenda. However, this type of response seems to neglect that some of these parties ultimately found themselves compelled to introduce representative and plebiscitary mechanisms, as a matter of necessity rather than preference. The participation of these parties in electoral processes and mass democracies made these mechanisms essential to guarantee a semblance of internal democracy in the choice of representatives and in the adoption of certain political directions in front of dilemma issues. The 5 Star Movement and its transformation since becoming a party with parliamentary representation is

a clear case in point, given the profound contradictions that emerged between the movement's claim to leaderlessness and its creation of internal and public leadership structures, in order to cope with its incipient institutionalisation.

Second, a more sound response should start from the premise that if the project of a digital direct democracy has failed it is first and foremost because it was conceptually flawed. Leadership and hierarchy within organisations may be made more accountable, more responsive, more democratic; but they cannot ever be completely eliminated. Max Weber had already clearly highlighted that there is not such a thing as a party without the existence of a leadership, be it personal or collective, which members collectively accept (Weber, 1978: 244). Furthermore, before digital parties many other political parties, and in particular the green parties of the 1970s and early 1980s, which tried to eliminate organisational hierarchies, such as by setting term limits, and double spokespersons, only to soon be forced to do away with these measures (Poguntke, 1994). Rather than continuing with failed attempts at doing away with organisational power structures, what is necessary is establishing mechanisms in which participation and representation may be reconciled, along the lines of what in my book on digital parties I describe as 'participatory representation'. What I mean by this is a system in which representation by leaders and parties is intertwined with participation by members and the opportunity for ordinary citizens to periodically discuss and assess the status of political leadership and its policies. Only by reconciling participation and representation we may be able to overcome present organisational dilemmas, and reconcile democratic legitimacy and organisational efficacy.

In coming years, the debate on political parties in the digital era is likely to continue to occupy much of our attention. Particularly important is the question of whether what we are seeing is simply an embryonic inkling of a coming party-form or an already full-fledged organisational template. Due partly also to the failure of their organisational structures many of these parties have faced serious political and identity crises, as most glaringly seen in the case of Movimento 5 Stelle which is currently discussing internal organisational reforms to address these issues. Ultimately, unless the digital party manages to find a way to give solidity to its action, either by routinising

the charisma of the hyperleader or giving weight to its organisational structure, it risks experiencing the same mortality rate of start-ups or, worse, could end up becoming a party just like the others it so vehemently criticises. The digital party may profit much from its being cloud-like, which is what allows it to be capable of wondrous growth, similar to the one experience by successful start-up companies. However, by the same token it can also be as inconsistent as clouds. It can condense great waves of popular anger and hope, and flash thunderbolts of rage, but just like a cloud it can also rapidly disperse into blue skies and thin air in response to the ever-changing winds of public opinion. The key question going forward is how these organisational weaknesses may be addressed, and a more democratic system may be constructed by intertwining representation and participation rather than pitting them against one another. It is on this question that much of the future and ultimate legacy of digital parties is staked.

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