**REVIEW ESSAY**

# TWO VARIANTS OF THE DIGITAL PARTY
## The Platform Party and The Networked Party

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**ABSTRACT**: This article focuses on the impact of online participation platforms on the internal organization and democracy of a set of emerging political parties such as the Five Star Movement, Podemos, France Insoumise, the Pirate Parties and Barcelona en Comu. Taking cue from the recent publication of Paolo Gerbaudo's book *The Digital Party*, the article argues that digital parties can be divided in two ideal party types: the platform party and the networked party. Whereas the platform party is highly centralized, led by a charismatic leader, and strictly focused on the electoral competition, the networked party is a more decentralized ideal party type, which allows policy proposals and leadership positions emerge from the network itself. The article concludes by noting that while it would be easy to cast these two variants of the digital party as an alternative between political realism, both types of parties face symmetrical challenges such as how to move beyond plebiscitarian consultations and how to scale deliberation from the local level to the national level.

**KEYWORDS:** digital party, platform party, networked party, intra-party democracy, digital democracy

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past twenty years, a few political scientists and communication scholars have investigated the impact of digital media on the internal organization of political parties, identifying in some cases new party types such as the cyber-party (Margetts 2006) and the digital party (Gerbaudo 2019). The reason for which this strand of literature is significantly less developed than the political communication scholarship largely depends on the object of study: whereas most parties use digital media for campaigning and reaching out to constituents only a few parties make a thorough use of digital media for organizing and decision-making purposes. Over the past decade, however, emerging European parties such as the Pirate Parties of Sweden, Germany and Iceland, the Five Star Movement in Italy, the France Insoumise in France, and Podemos in Spain have leveraged the affordances of digital media to cut organizational costs and experiment with new forms of participation and intra-party democracy.

Taking note of this recent trend, Paolo Gerbaudo's monograph *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* (2019) argues that these emerging parties epitomize a new type of party organization, which would replace historical party models such as the mass party, the catch-all party, and the cartel party. According to Gerbaudo, digital parties such as Podemos, France Insoumise and Five Star Movement (from now on, 5SM) represent an antidote to the historical decline of party membership in mature democracies. They also ostensibly endow their members with more power than traditional parties, allowing them to participate in binding consultations, contribute to the drafting of the party program, and propose their own policy initiatives. Such innovations are possible because all digital parties share—and hence are defined by—one major organizational feature: the use of online participation platforms. Because the importance of these platforms cannot be overstated, throughout the book *digital party* is used interchangeably with *platform party*—an expression that titles an abridged Italian version of the book, *Il Partito Piattaforma* (2018).

Thus the focus on platforms allows Gerbaudo to distinguish between parties that generically use the Internet for political communication and the digital parties proper, which rely on their own participation platforms for internal decision-making and organization (2019: 68). Whereas digital platforms such as Rousseau (5SM), Participa (Podemos), NationBuilder (France Insoumise) and MyMomentum (Momentum – Labour Party) *promise* to empower the rank and file and improve on the quality of intra-party democracy (IPD) Gerbaudo argues that in actuality platform parties bring about a type of "reactive democracy," whereby ordinary members have no control over the party agenda and mostly respond to top-down consultations (2019: 17). However, he also

surmises that the gap between promise and reality could be filled with few correctives (190-192).

Striking a less optimistic tone, this article will argue that the platformization of parties goes hand in hand with two organizational processes that long precede the Internet: centralization and personalization. After highlighting several organizational continuities between the platform party and previous party models—such as the cartel party and the personalist parties of the television age—the article contrasts the centralized organization of the platform party to the decentralized organization of a different variant of digital party, the networked party. Under this definition, I group technocratic parties such as the Pirate Parties of Sweden, Germany and Iceland as well as movement parties such as Barcelona en Comú and the X Party in Spain. Similar to platform parties, networked parties adopt participation platforms for drafting program and policy proposals. But unlike platform parties, networked parties allow members to participate in various stages of the decision-making process, from setting the agenda to deliberation and voting. Further, as we will see, leadership positions in networked parties tend to emerge from a bottom-up division of labor, rather than top-down appointments of the party elite.

Thus, on an ideal party level, the networked party seems to offer a higher quality of IPD than the platform party.[1] Gerbaudo, however, tends to identify the digital party with the platform party. The aim of this article is to show that although all digital parties carry the promise of democratizing party politics (insofar as they ostensibly empower ordinary party members via digital platforms) only *some* digital parties, the networked parties, have actually tried to deliver on this promise. This difference will be explained with the different relationship networked parties entertain with digital technologies on the one hand and with social movements on the other hand. Before comparing the two variants of the digital party, I will review *The Digital Party*'s main theses, beginning from an analysis of the analogies and differences between social media platforms and the platforms managed by digital parties.

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[1] The debate on IPD is too complex to be summarized in this article. Here it suffices to say that whereas political scientists have long considered oligarchic rule and internal party cohesion as necessary and even desirable conditions of representative democracy, a more recent orientation grounded in participatory and deliberative theories of democracy sees IPD as beneficial to state-level democracy. Gerbaudo's book (and this article) implicitly build on the latter insofar as all digital parties ostensibly afford ordinary members decision-making powers that traditional parties do not afford.

## 2. Platform Politics in Platform Parties

*The Digital Party* is divided into nine chapters, but the book advances seven key theses concerning the organization of the platform party, which can be summarized as follows: membership growth, delocalization, hyperleadership, superbase, plebiscitarianism, disintermediation, and distributed centralization. Thus the main merit of the book is to have introduced a new vocabulary, which grasps the emergence of important organizational innovations in political parties. At the same time, the emphasis on the new risks to cloud the many continuities that exist between the digital party and previous party models.

Such obfuscation occurs because Gerbaudo does not sufficiently explore the ambivalent nature of digital platforms, which lower on the one hand the costs of participation but increase on the other hand centralized control. In computational terms platforms are essentially defined by their programmability and APIs, which allow for the development of third-party applications (McKelvey 2011). Besides marking a shift from the Web 1.0 to the Web 2.0 (O'Reilly 2005), the programmability of social media platforms allows for the decentralization of data production and recentralization of data processing (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013). This dual logic of platformization is evident, for example, from the way Facebook uses its social plug-ins "for collecting and formatting external web data to fit the underlying logic of the platform" (Helmond 2015: 8). Most importantly, data collection and data extraction create significantly more value for platform owners than for platform users (Zuboff 2019).

To what extent is the double logic of platformization in line with the emerging organization of the digital party? Gerbaudo's answer to this question is unequivocal. Not only does the digital party make an intensive use of social media, but models its organization after social media platforms, from constantly eliciting feedback from members and sympathizers to adopting the

> free sign-up process of social media and apps, to lower as much as possible the barrier to entry and its definition of membership. . . . In other words, the digital party is the translation of the business model and organisational innovation of digital corporations to the political arena and their application to the idealistic project of the construction of a new democracy in digital times (2019: 5-6).

Whereas Gerbaudo's analogy is suggestive, it is also partly misleading. Certainly, similar to digital corporations, digital parties encourage member feedback and have an interest in growing their member-user base. But unlike digital corporations, digital par-

ties do not sustain such growth by extracting and selling users' data. This is because digital parties occupy the position of suppliers—*not that of intermediaries*—within the marketplace of political ideas. It follows that digital parties must first and foremost control the consistency of their message. This means, in turn, that they cannot open themselves up to uncontrolled third-party contributions neither semantically nor operationally. Second, because digital parties cannot systematically track their members without breaking the law, the analytic value of the data they collect via their participation platforms is infinitely lower than the value social media platforms extract from the habits and interests of millions of users (Karpf 2018).

These two elements—the non-neutrality of parties and the low analytic value of member data—suggest that the process of platformization of political parties is not a "translation of the business model and organizational innovation of digital corporations to the political arena" (Gerbaudo, 6), at least not a linear one. At the same time, the fact that political parties are not profit-oriented organizations does not mean that they cannot borrow some organizational principles from digital platforms—and the free subscription model is certainly one of them. Further by centralizing political processes that were previously managed by different branches and compartments of party organizations, participation platforms primarily empower those who control them—that is, the party elite—rather than the ordinary member-users. To be fair, the tension between what members gain from joining a digital party and what they give away surfaces at different turns of *The Digital Party*. But this bargain is not framed as an unequal exchange. Rather the seven organizational principles that undergird the digital party model suggest that the party elite and the party base are both empowered at the expense of intermediary cadres. As we will see, the empowerment of the base via digital platforms conceals in fact a redefinition of the base as an atomized collection of individuals, and thus the constitution of a new organizational layer, which replaces and disempowers the organized party on the ground. But before deepening this point, we shall first review the main arguments of the book.

## 3. *The Digital Party*'s Seven Theses

First, Gerbaudo argues that by adopting the free registration model of social media platforms digital parties such as the 5SM, Podemos and France Insoumise have quickly grown sizeable memberships, which stand in stark contrast and possibly counteract the historical decline of party membership in mature democracies (23). Second, participation platforms such as Rousseau (5SM), Participa (Podemos), NationBuilder (France In-

soumise) and MyMomentum (Momentum – Labour Party) allow parties to delocalize political decisions, which are no longer attached to local party branches or national party headquarters (92-104). Third, platform parties are conducive to the rise of charismatic "hyperleaders," whose name and image spread through digital networks in a variety of media formats including videos, hashtags, and memes (144-61). Fourth, the charisma of the hyperleader is counterbalanced by the party "superbase," a term Gerbaudo borrows from chemistry to refer to a "super-basic compound… that has high reactivity to protons" (162). Similarly, the digital base of party members and party supporters is reactive in that it responds to calls coming from the party leadership to participate in consultations and campaigns (162-76).

Fifth, if it is true that the superbase is frequently consulted on key decisions, the timing and framing of consultations is controlled by the party leadership, which often uses them to legitimize its own position. This is what Gerbaudo calls "plebiscitarianism 2.0" (126-43). Sixth, similar to commercial platforms such as Amazon, Airbnb, and Uber, platform parties render many middlemen unnecessary, accelerating the decline or disappearance of the party middle-elite (69-73). Along with the abandonment of collegial decision-making bodies, the decline of intermediary cadres produces a party model wherein the relationship between the hyperleader and the superbase is direct and unmediated. However, "the discourse of disintermediation belies a reality of reintermediation in which doing away with previous forms of mediation is accompanied by the construction of higher-level mediations" (76). Such higher-level mediations are embedded in the software architecture of participation platforms, which inevitably shape the internal organization and democracy of digital parties (105-25). Far from being neutral, and this is the seventh thesis, the design of this architecture follows a principle of "distributed centralization," which Gerbaudo defines as "a process of organisational polarisation that empowers both the leadership and ordinary members at the expense of the cadres and the bureaucracy" (76).

Here Gerbaudo draws on the work of Becky Bond and Zack Exley (2016), two staffers at the 2016 Bernie Sanders' campaign for the US presidential primaries, to argue that while the digital party is open and flexible in mobilizing members and sympathizers, it also implements a centralized strategy, which is executed through the maintenance and querying of  centralized databases of members whereby a variety of skills and competences can be activated (Gerbaudo, 76). Bond and Exley also note that the efficiency of participation platforms enables a core staff of "super-volunteers" to coordinate remotely a high number of activities (Gerbaudo, 171-173). In contrast, according to Gerbaudo, the ordinary member is reduced to a "lurking supporter" whose sporadic

participation in party consultations and online campaigning reflects the low-level involvement of a large portion of the digital party membership (174-176).

Certainly, participation gaps in online communities are nothing new. Research on power-law distributions has demonstrated that the more a network grows in size the more the gap between a core group of hyper-active contributors and the vast majority of participants tends to increase (Barabási 2003; Shirky 2008). From an IPD perspective, however, such gap is problematic insofar as digital parties claim to empower the rank and file against oligarchic and vocational conceptions of party politics (Michels 1911; Weber 1946). In other words, as Gerbaudo admits, there exists a veritable gap between what digital parties *promise* to deliver and what they *actually* deliver at the level of IPD (186). Gerbaudo attributes this gap to utopian expectations about both the democratizing potential of the Internet and horizontal politics:

> By adopting the participationist utopia of leaderlessness and horizontalism, platform parties run the risk of following an all too well-known course from idealism to cynicism. What is required is thus more transparency about the power retained by the leadership, while clarifying the degree to which the membership can actually have a say (187).

At the root of this argument lies another argument about the centrality of charismatic leadership to the political success of all parties. According to Gerbaudo, charismatic leadership is "not necessarily anti-democratic" because "people need to identify themselves collectively, and they often do so by identifying with a leading individual" (185). Thus platform parties should grapple with this basic fact and set aside unrealistic expectations about the democratizing capacities of the Internet. Differently put, whereas leadership is a necessary condition of any (successful) party, digital participation is not, as demonstrated by the meteoric rise and fall of early digital parties such as the Pirate Parties of Sweden and Germany.

Whereas Gerbaudo recognizes a pioneering role to the Pirates, he also downplays their significance on the ground that they have not been successful in translating their techno-utopian vision into electoral results (9). The second wave of digital parties such as 5SM, Podemos and France Insoumise have forged instead a "hybrid party type," which combines "an agile directive structure and an active militant basis," (78) with the clear goal of winning the elections. The consequence of this theoretical move, however, is twofold. First, by identifying the digital party with the second wave of digital parties, Gerbaudo develops a party model that flattens the organizational differences that exist within digital parties. Second, this party model is much less innovative and

groundbreaking than it pretends to be. As we will see in the next section, the centralizing features of the platform party place it on a continuum with previous party models along several dimensions.

## 4. The Continuity Between the Digital Party and Previous Party Models

To begin with, Gerbaudo's claim that digital parties would epitomize a trend toward a re-birth or return of the party form seems overblown. This is due to the relatively small size of the digital parties' membership, which ranges between the 115.372 declared members of the 5SM (Blog delle Stelle 2019), 524.672 members of Podemos (Participa Podemos 2020) and the 540.000 supporters of France Insoumise (France 2 2017).[2] Because these numbers do not even approach the membership size of the mass parties of the mid-twentieth century, they cannot be taken as indicators of a structural reversal in the long-term decline of mass membership organization. Further, the free membership model raises questions on the actual commitment of members who are not required to pay annual dues and frequently abstain from participating in the consultations, as evidenced by research on the declining voter turnout in Rousseau and Participa Podemos (Mosca 2018; Deseriis and Vittori 2019). To be sure, Gerbaudo recognizes that "for the great majority of members, participation is very low and infrequent and mostly of a purely reactive kind" (176). However, he presents this type of reactive participation as a distinctive feature of the digital party rather than as the continuation of a trend that begun in the previous century, when television was still the centerpiece of the media system.

The shift from voting as an expression of collective belonging to a social group to voting as atomized expression of an "*audience* which responds to the terms that have been presented on the political stage" is well described by Bernard Manin in *The Principles of Representative Democracy* (1997: 223). Manin argues that while in the age of party democracy political parties transposed on the electoral arena salient and lasting social cleavages, the multiplication of cleavages in mature democracies afford politicians more freedom in choosing how to position themselves in the political arena. "In such a situation, the initiative of the terms of electoral choice belongs to the politician and not to the electorate, which explains why voting decisions appear primarily today

[2] Whereas the 5SM and Podemos require perspective members to upload a scanned copy of a valid ID, registration with France Insoumise only requires name and email address.

as reactive" (223). Further, in what Manin terms audience democracy, candidates take advantage of media exposure to "communicate directly with their constituents without the mediation of a party network" (220). Thus, as Katz and Dyan (1992) argued in their theory of media events, *disintermediation is a phenomenon that long precedes the Internet* insofar as political entrepreneurs who are skilled at playing the language-game of television can cut a whole range of intermediaries and shape the party organizations they are meant to represent in their own image rather than the other way around.

Brought to an extreme, this process of autonomization of the leader from the party leads to Forza Italia, a "television party," to borrow Gerbaudo's effective definition, that was modeled on and for Silvio Berlusconi's image. Within the framework of the television party, the audience is purely reactive in that its (political) opinion and orientations are monitored via TV ratings and telephone surveys, which function de facto as early cybernetic apparatuses. Indeed, in the same way as leaders of TV parties adjust their messaging on the basis of data collected and analyzed by pollsters and political consultants, so do party leaders in the digital age fine-tune their messages on the basis of data collected and analyzed by data analysts and digital strategists.

From this angle, one could observe that among the seven features of the digital party identified by Gerbaudo at least five of them make their appearance in the television age: the charismatic leader, the reactive party base, the dematerialization of the party infrastructure, the elimination of intermediary bodies, and the direct consultations of the membership are all processes that begun well before the rise of digital parties.

First, as noted, parties that prosper in the television age are led by highly mediatized and telegenic leaders. Gerbaudo borrows the term hyperleader from a debate between two of the co-founders of Podemos, Íñigo Errejón and German Cano, who "discussed the idea of hyperleadership as a strategy to create a new political identity" emanating from a group of intellectuals who "had very limited territorial penetration" (149). Mentioning the little-known anecdote that Pablo Iglesias's decision to become the talk-show host of the alternative TV program La Tuerka was inspired by the political success of Berlusconi, Gerbaudo notes that Podemos' choice to invest in the telegenic leadership of Iglesias was dictated by the need of creating a highly visible party in a short period of time (149-50). Thus, whereas the term hyperleader refers to the mode of *circulation* of the leader's image—which is Internet-based rather than TV-based—the *production* of the hyperleader presupposes the selection of an individual who possesses the same charismatic qualities and capacity to perform before an audience of the leaders of the television age.

Second, it is true that the hyperleader "navigates the nooks and crannies of a hybrid media system in which TV videos are shared and wildly commented on in social media"

(150). And it is also true that party members and supporters are often mobilized online precisely for this purpose. But as we have seen what characterizes digital parties is not online campaigning but the use of participation platforms for internal decision-making and organizing. And yet it is precisely on this level that the superbase seems to coalesce almost exclusively to respond to stimuli coming from above, mirroring at the intra-party level the reactive dimension of voting decisions in the age of audience democracy. Such observation is corroborated by data showing that participation in online consultations peaks when digital party members are called to express votes of confidence in the party leadership and bottoms when members express themselves on the party program (Deseriis and Vittori 2019). In this respect, the individualized relationship between the hyperleader and the atomized member of the superbase mirrors the charismatic relationship between the leader of the television party and the TV audience.

Third, Gerbaudo acutely observes that digital parties dispose of national headquarters because they are both costly to maintain and "symbolize [the] opacity and secrecy" of professionalized politics (96). This is certainly true but the dematerialization and delocalization of the party's infrastructure are by no means exclusive to the digital party. In fact, these processes also begun with the television party and, more in general, with the spectacularization and mediatization of politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999). Indeed, the multiplication of media channels in the last quarter of the twentieth century has had a double effect. First, it has increasingly shifted the setting of party elite's performances from party headquarters and party branches to TV studios. Second, it has progressively reduced the importance of parties' territorial organizations as evidenced by the generalized decline in European party membership since 1970 (Scarrow, 2000; van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke, 2012). From this angle, the dematerialization of the party infrastructure cannot be attributed entirely to digital party's ideological hostility toward bureaucracy (Gerbaudo, 96). Rather, it is an historical process that long predates the rise of digital parties.

Similarly, and this is the fourth point, the demise of intermediary bodies is also an historical process that goes hand in hand with the steady personalization of politics, which is conducive to centralized organizations with weak presence on the ground (Calise 2007; Cross, Katz, and Pruysers 2018). Further, beginning in the 1980s, parties rationalized organizational costs primarily for financial reasons, increasingly relying on state subventions to compensate for revenue losses from membership fees. The well-known cartel party thesis argues that the growing importance of state subsidies to party finances pushed parties to relax their ties with society (Katz and Mair 1995 and 2009). Further, cartelization tilts the power balance between the three faces of party

organizations in favor of the party in public office (PPO) vis-à-vis the party in central office (PCO) and the party on the ground (POG). In the early 1990s, Katz and Mair also speculated that in order to consolidate its autonomy from the POG and the PCO, the PPO may "build up its own independent resources and bureaucracy" (1993: 609). Data showing a significant expansion of the parliamentary staff in European parties between 1970 and 2010 have validated this hypothesis (Bardi, Calossi, and Pizzimenti 2017). But if that is the case, then the impact of platformization on party organizations should be assessed against the backdrop of the growing autonomization of the PPO on the one hand and the rise of personalist parties on the other hand. This means that "disintermediation" is not so much an effect of political parties' adoption of digital technologies. Rather, *disintermediation was already at work within parties whose thinning membership base and growing mediatization of the leadership reduced the need for political intermediation.*

From this point of view, and this is the fifth continuity, it is no accident that several European parties begun holding direct consultations of the general membership via postal ballots already in the 1980s (Katz and Mair 1994: 16-17). In noting the paradox of parties that ostensibly democratized internal decision-making "while at the same time affording more autonomy to the party in public office" Katz and Mair observed that the introduction of postal ballots for candidate selection extended

> the process of intra-party democratization. . . to the members as individuals rather than to what might be called the organized party on the ground. In other words, it is not the party congress or the middle-level elite, or the activists, who are being empowered, but rather the 'ordinary' members, who are at once more docile and more likely to endorse the policies (and candidates) proposed by the party leadership and by the party in public office. . . a process which is facilitated by the increasing use of centralized registers of party members (1994: 17).

Because electronic databases and the Internet have lowered the marginal costs of consulting members, platform parties can now consult members more frequently and on a broader set of issues than their counterparts of the 1980s. However, because participation platforms are strictly controlled by the PCO the outcome of the consultations is often plebiscitarian and tends to reinforce the position of the party leadership (Deseriis and Vittori 2019; Gerbaudo 2019). From this angle, not only does the introduction of participation platforms weakens the POG but it also provides the PCO with a critical resource tool to counterbalance the growing autonomization of the PPO. This is particularly evident in the 5SM, which requires elected MPs to pay a monthly allowance for

the funding of the Rousseau platform. (Podemos retains instead traditional ruling organisms of Leftist parties, which points to a more robust institutional role of the PCO).

In sum, these considerations on the continuity between the platform party and previous party models raise the question on whether the platform party really is a new type of party. The answer to this question should be in my view twofold. From a strictly procedural standpoint, there is no doubt that platform parties present several discontinuities with previous party models. Indeed, Podemos, 5SM, and France Insoumise have introduced in their statute direct democracy instruments that are virtually absent from the statutes of traditional parties. But if we take a substantive approach, overall these procedural innovations have had a modest impact on the quality of IPD, reinforcing instead a trend toward centralization that characterized the mediatized and personalist parties of the television age. From this point of view, Gerbaudo's digital party is a development in the history of party organizations whose degree of innovation is much less significant than it pretends to be.

## 5. The Second Variant of the Digital Party: The Networked Party

And yet in recent years we have also witnessed the emergence of a truly innovative model of party organization, which I would term the *networked party*. Although networked parties such as the X Party and Barcelona en Comú in Spain, and the Pirate Parties of Sweden, Germany, Iceland and Czechia (to mention the most successful European chapters of the Pirate Parties International) have not achieved the same electoral success as platform parties, they have introduced significant organizational innovations, which leverage the decentralized and cost-abating logic of the Internet to implement an ideal party type characterized by a low degree of institutionalization (Panebianco 1982) and a strong anti-oligarchic tendency. Mirroring Gerbaudo's seven theses, I will argue that the emerging organization of the networked party can be divided into seven organizational principles: non-exclusive membership, decentralization, leadership function, bottom-up division of labor, collective agenda setting, hybrid participation, and scalable deliberation (table 1).

Not unlike platform parties, networked parties make an intensive use of participation platforms such as LiquidFeedback (Piratenpartei), Decidim (Barcelona en Comú) and X.Piratar (Icelandic Pirate Party) for internal decision making as well as collaborative software such as etherpads and wikis (X Party). As compared to those used by platform parties, these platforms embed deliberative features such as the possibility for members to discuss and revise proposals, gather endorsements, and delegate their

vote to other users. Further these platforms are often used in conjunction with and as an extension of offline meetings and assemblies. In this respect, networked parties emerge from the convergence and collaboration of two distinct social groups: information technology activists, hackers and geeks on the one hand; and social movement activists on the other hand.

**Table 1. Comparison between the seven features of networked parties and platform parties.**

| Platform Party | Networked Party |
|---|---|
| Membership growth | Non-exclusive membership |
| Delocalization | Decentralization |
| Hyperleadership | Leadership function |
| Superbase | Bottom-up division of labor |
| Plebiscitarianism | Collective agenda setting |
| Disintermediation | Hybrid participation |
| Distributed centralization | Scalable deliberation |

The former group has played a prominent role in shaping the internal organization of networked parties such as the Swedish Piratepartiet and the German Piratenpartei, which were were initially focused on digital rights such as privacy protection, copyright reform, and an uncensored Internet. The latter group has played a key role in the foundation of Barcelona en Comú (from now on, BeC) and the X Party, two parties with strong ties to the indignados movement. It important to underscore, however, that these two groups frequently overlap. For example, the Swedish and the German Pirate Parties grew their membership base by spearheading two social movement campaigns for copyright reform and against government censorship, respectively (Bukart 2014; Deseriis 2019). Conversely, not only has the X Party built its internal organization upon ethical and operating principles of geek culture such as meritocracy and collaboration, but it also has provided digital know-how to the networked organization of BeC (Calleja-Lopez 2017).

Further, one of the main distinguishing features of networked parties such as the Piratenpartei, X Party and BeC is that they seem to entertain a non-hegemonic relationship with social movements, as evidenced by the first two organizational principles of networked parties: *non-exclusive membership* and *decentralization*. Because membership in networked parties is not incompatible with membership in other parties and civil society organizations, networked parties often function as coordinating hubs for initiatives and campaigns that emerge from the civil society. Thus the Piratenpartei significantly expanded its membership base after playing a key role in coordinating the

2009 #zensursula campaign against Internet filtering (Deseriis 2019); the X Party was founded by 15M activists who had previously designed and coordinated #MPRato, a citizen campaign to bring to court former CEO of Bankia Rodrigo Rato (Postill 2018); and BeC was founded and led by Ada Colau, charismatic leader of the PAH, a grassroots solidarity initiative for people affected by foreclosures (Russo Spena and Forti 2016).[3]

To be sure, double affiliations and networked collaboration do not automatically translate in horizontal and egalitarian relationships. On the contrary, as noted, research on power-law distributions has demonstrated that networks may harbor strong inequalities. However, because networked parties tend to be meritocratic and thus to reward voluntary work (Calleja-Lopez, 2017: 246-48) leadership selection in networked parties works quite differently from leadership selection in platform parties. This is the third point of contrast between the two variants of the digital party. Whereas the platform party is a leader-centered or "leaderist" party, the networked party is, on an ideal party level, a leaderless organization (Deseriis 2017). More precisely, the networked party is a polycentric organization wherein individuals can easily assume a leading role—or a *leadership function*—on the basis of the work they contribute in their area of interest or expertise. To be sure, all parties functionally differentiate tasks, putting in a position of responsibility those who are more adept to fulfill certain roles. But while in traditional parties the party elite exerts political control over the internal division of labor, distributing incentives and rewards as part of the career system (Michels 1911; Panebianco 1982), the networked party reduces the level of professionalization to a minimum, allowing leaders to emerge on the basis of their own contributions rather than of their affiliation to a power clique.

This is particularly evident in LiquidFeedback (LQFB), the participation platform adopted by the German Pirates in 2010 to introduce, discuss and approve policy initiatives. Because LQFB allows participants to transfer delegations to other users for a specific initiative, topic area or any issue, it supports an internal division of labor that is more granular and less formalized than the division of labor based on top-down appointments. Further, this *bottom-up division of labor*—the fourth defining feature of the networked party—dovetails with the leadership function in that it can relieve highly visible party figures from the burden of having to shape the party strategy and policy proposals. As we will see in the next section, in the same way as the concept of hyper-

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[3] Even though charismatic leadership runs counter the decentralized structure of the networked party BeC combines a mediatized front end centered around the figure of Barcelona's mayor with a decentralized back end which retains many organizational features of the 15-M movement (Aragón et al. 2017; Toret 2015).

leadership in platform parties can be traced to the charismatic leadership of the television age, the origins of the leadership function can be traced to the attempts made by the German Greens in the 1980s to decouple leadership from individual personalities and manage it in a collective fashion.


## 6. From Basisdemokratie to Networked Self-Government

In a prescient book published over a decade ago, Clay Shirky (2008) argues that in reducing the costs of publishing and of coordinating group activity the social web disrupts the media industries and related professional institutions. According to Shirky, the collapsing costs of publishing and coordination of the workforce have given non-professionals a growing capacity to produce and distribute content and services whose quality is sufficiently high to compete with the content and services produced by professional institutions. This "mass amateurization" of formerly professionalized activities can also be extended to politics. From this angle, digital parties express the capacity of ordinary citizens to self-organize and challenge traditional parties' hold onto "the monopoly of representation" (Bourdieu 1991).

At the same time, the de-professionalization or amateurization of politics cannot be entirely attributed to the social web. In the 1980s, the German Greens tried to democratize institutional representation by introducing into party politics a set of organizational principles known as *Basisdemokratie,* which they borrowed from environmental and grassroots social movements. Such principles included collective leadership, strict separation of office and mandate, limited terms and rotation, effective control of all office and mandate holders by the rank-and-file, member access to meetings on all levels, and full political autonomy of the local organizations from the party executive (Poguntke 1993: 137-143). Although in the 1990s the structural constraints of the parliamentary system induced the Greens to "sacrifice some of their participatory ideals to the creation of a more efficient organizational structure," *Basisdemokratie* remained a point of reference for the movement parties of the following decades (Kitschelt 2006; Della Porta et al. 2017).

Thus, when it was founded in 2006, the Piratenpartei adopted some of these principles allowing for example all members to attend party conventions with voting power. Whereas this model was viable in the first three years, in 2009 the party saw a tenfold increase in its membership base as a result of a successful campaign for Internet freedom (Deseriis 2019). This unexpected growth, however, raised the problem of how to manage party conventions with thousands of participants all of whom had equal power

to make policy proposals, amend them, and vote them on. With meetings dragging for days and failing to come to a conclusion (Postill 2018: 148), the Pirates searched for an effective decision-making tool that could scale participation without incurring in the democratic deficits typical of large-scale assemblies on the one hand and of oligarchic party cliques on the other hand. Released in late 2009, LQFB was initially designed to meet both needs. As we have seen, the transitive delegation feature of LQFB allows participants to receive proxy votes and transfer them in turn to other participants based on their expertise. This reversible (or liquid) system of delegations has two major consequences. First, as noted, it puts the internal division of labor into the hands of ordinary members, weakening the capacity of the party elite to distribute incentives and rewards. Second, because proposals have to pass an initial quorum, it allows the rank-and-file—in particular those members who hold many delegations—to exert control over the party agenda.

To be sure, with the exception of the Berlin branch, the Piratenpartei did not make a binding use of LQFB and conflicts erupted between the Berlin branch and the Bavarian branch of the party over the contentious proposal to transform LQFB into the equivalent of a permanent party convention (Deseriis 2019). Notwithstanding this particular case, however, it is clear that on an ideal party level networked parties allow their members to engage in *collective agenda-setting*, a feature which also stands in striking contrast with the centralized agenda-setting of platform parties. Here it is important to underscore that the party-network's capacity to set the agenda from below is a process that does not exclusively occur online. This is clear in the case of BeC, whose 2014 "electoral program was drawn up by over 5000 people, with contributions made in open assemblies and online" (Shea Baird 2015). And it is also clear in the case of the Berlin Pirate Party, which made use of LQFB to assemble, amend and approve policy proposals that had been previously drafted offline by working groups and individuals.

In this respect, and this is the sixth feature, the networked party balances out the dematerialization of the party infrastructure with a *hybrid participation* process that combines offline deliberation with online decision-making. These two layers fulfill two essential and complementary aspects of any democratic process: trust and political equality. Offline meetings lay in fact the foundations for participants to trust each other and work together, a process epitomized by the neighborhood assemblies of BeC (Zelinka 2018). At the same time, the online process allows participants to acquire a holistic view of the proposals coming from different quarters of the party and exercise their voting rights at the decisive stage of the decision-making process (Dahl 1989). For example, BeC developed its program as a three-stage process: the proposals that emerged from the neighborhood assemblies were first amended via the Participa por-

tal and then subjected to a final vote online (Russo Spena and Forti 2016: 92). In this way, hybrid participation combines offline deliberation with online preference aggregation to produce a multimodal process whose overall quality is certainly higher than the plebiscitarian consultations of platform parties. To be sure, platform party activists also meet offline. But such meetings usually do not have an impact beyond the local level, and thus do not affect the national agenda, which remains firmly in the hands of the party elite. This is evident from the fact that the 5SM activist groups cannot undertake regional or national initiatives via the Rousseau platform and that no member-sponsored initiatives in Participa Podemos have ever reached a quorum to be turned into binding referendums (Deseriis and Vittori 2019).

Certainly the question of how to scale deliberation from the local to the national level also concerns networked parties. Both the Piratenpartei and the X Party faced in fact various challenges when they tried to scale collaboration and deliberation beyond Berlin and Barcelona, respectively (Deseriis 2019; Calleja-Lopez 2017). Indeed software such as LQFB and Decidim have been designed precisely to scale deliberation beyond overcrowded party conventions and neighborhood assemblies, respectively. But a veritable gap persists between what deliberative software can afford and what networked parties are actually capable of implementing. Of course, not unlike platform parties, networked parties remain partisan organizations that compete in the electoral arena and have to maintain a recognizable political line. In this sense, the assessment of the scope, quality and impact of networked deliberation on a digital party's political line cannot overlook the systemic constraints of inter-party politics and of the hegemonic nature of electoral politics. At the same time, on an ideal-party level, *scalable deliberation* remains a defining, if experimental, feature of networked parties insofar as it aims at overcoming the limitations of small-scale deliberation in local meetings of activists on the one hand and of party elites on the other hand.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that although all digital parties share certain ideological features such as the emphasis on participation of the rank and file and the use of participation platforms for internal decision making, these two variants of the digital party present significant differences in organizational terms. The platform party presents in fact a high degree of centralization, which is epitomized by four distinctive features identified by Gerbaudo: hyperleadership, reactive superbase, decline of intermediary cadres and plebiscitarian character of the consultations. In Gerbaudo's analysis these

centralizing features mitigate the risk that the lowering costs of participation—epitomized by the free membership model—may yield a weak party identity and an incoherent political line. On an organizational level, however, the platform party ends up presenting several continuities with previous party models such as the cartel party and the personalist parties of the television age, which had already cultivated passive and reactive modes of participation.

In contrast, by combining social movement practices with deliberative and collaborative software, networked parties advance a model of digital party that leverages the decentralized affordances of the Internet to make the party line (and the relative division of labor) emerge from the network itself. This does not mean that leaders are absent from networked parties. Rather, the networked party selects its leaders more for their capacity to execute specific tasks within the party, than for their charisma or capacity to win internal power struggles. The coexistence of several leadership-functions (organizational, symbolic, policy-oriented, and so on), however, leaves unattended the question of how the networked party is to shape its identity. Perhaps herein lies the main contradiction of networked parties: whereas the network form is by its very nature flexible, open ended, and receptive to the inputs that come from the social body, the party form is hierarchical, structured, *partisan*, and thus less permeable to the heterogeneity of the social. Whereas platform parties have solved this tension by delegating to their leaders the task of symbolizing the unity of the party, networked parties have bet on the capacity of networks to display emergent and self-organizing properties.

But as we have seen, a key feature of the networked party—the scalability of deliberation—remains at this stage experimental. In this sense, the networked party is an *ideal* party form, which is far less structured and defined than the platform party. At the same time, we should resist the temptation of casting these two variants of the digital party as an alternative between political realism and political idealism. The recent electoral setbacks of the 5SM, France Insoumise, Podemos and Labour Party—the four cases analyzed by Gerbaudo—suggest in fact that platform parties may have exhausted their capacity to capitalize on the participatory demands emerging from the social movements of the past decade. On the other hand, networked parties can become a viable party model only if they are capable to reconcile democratic participation with a model of (collective) leadership that can hold together the many nodes and functions of the party network. For this reason, the networked party and the digital party are best understood as two different but related outcomes of the crisis of the party form on the one hand and of the new opportunities offered by the lowering costs of digital participation on the other hand.

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