

Digital Media, Power, and Democracy in Parties and Election Campaigns: Party Decline or Party Renewal?

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Abstract

The role of digital media practices in reshaping political parties and election campaigns is driven by a tension between control and interactivity, but the overall outcome for the party organizational form is highly uncertain. Recent evidence contradicts scholarship on the so-called “death” of parties and suggests instead that parties may be going through a long-term process of adaptation to postmaterial political culture. We sketch out a conceptual approach for understanding this process, which we argue is being shaped by interactions between the organizations, norms, and rules of electoral politics; postmaterial attitudes toward political engagement; and the affordances and uses of digital media. Digital media foster cultures of organizational experimentation and a party-as-movement mentality that enable many to reject norms of hierarchical discipline and habitual partisan loyalty. This context readily accommodates populist appeals and angry protest—on the right as well as the left. Substantial publics now see election campaigns as another opportunity for personalized and contentious political expression. As a result, we hypothesize that parties are being renewed from the outside in, as digitally enabled citizens breathe new life into an old form by partly remaking it in their own participatory image. Particularly on the left, the overall outcome might prove more positive for democratic engagement and the decentralization of political power than many have assumed.

Keywords

parties, campaigns, digital media, power, democracy

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The societal contexts and organizational practices of parties are undergoing remarkable change. Uses of digital media are of vital importance in this process. There is much at stake: Voting and persuading others to vote are arguably the most fundamental forms of political engagement. In different ways and in different contexts, parties have the potential to be organizational engines of mass democratic politics, yet they so often fall short.

Is the party form in terminal decline or is it being renewed? In 2014, when we invited scholars to the workshop that led to this special issue, nobody predicted that the British Labour Party was about to experience an insurgent, social media-fueled grassroots campaign for the party's leadership. Nobody predicted that in Spain, Podemos, a new political party founded in the spring of 2014 out of the ashes of the Indignados protest movements, would within a few years amass the country's second largest party membership and gain 21 percent of the popular vote in a general election, ending a long-established two-party system. Similarly, few in the United States saw billionaire populist Donald Trump and socialist senator of Vermont Bernie Sanders as serious contenders for the 2016 presidential election. Yet in January 2016, Sanders broke Democratic Party fundraising records, attracting \$20 million from an extraordinary 2.5 million individual donors (Yuhas 2016). Meanwhile, Trump's social media campaign, with its incendiary tweets and Instagram attack ads, set the agenda for professional media coverage of the Republican primary. The effectiveness of his strategy became evident on the eve of the Iowa caucuses when Trump chose to sit out a high-profile Fox News televised debate. Did this negatively affect his support? No, because he dominated dual-screener's social media conversation during the live televised event (Twitter Government and Elections Team 2016).

The Analytics Turn

Broadcast-era logics of top-down presentational professionalism and tight control of campaign messaging linger in important ways. At the same time, broadcast-era logics are being translated into new technological practices. Discipline and calibration are at the heart of the *analytics turn* in campaigning. By the analytics turn, we mean the increased use by campaign elites of experimental data science methods to interrogate large-scale aggregations of behavioral information from public voter records and digital media environments, with the aim of organizing and mobilizing key segments of the electorate to vote and to publicly and privately share their decision with others. Still in its early stages, the analytics turn is currently most advanced in the United States (Hersh 2015; Karpf forthcoming; Nielsen 2012). There, in 2008 and 2012, the Obama campaign pioneered mobilization techniques combining voter records and social media data and demonstrated their considerable advantage over the Republicans, in the latest installment of a process going back to the early 2000s (Kreiss 2012, 2016; Stromer-Galley 2014).

The analytics turn is now migrating. During the 2015 U.K. general election campaign, the Conservative Party hired two key political consultants: Obama's former campaign manager Jim Messina and Australian campaign veteran Lynton Crosby. The

Conservatives heavily outspent Labour, but it was *how* the money was spent that mattered. In 2015, Messina and Crosby directed an intensive series of private tracker polls in key swing constituencies. They also purchased geographical audience data from Facebook. These two data sources allowed them to identify and target—with phone calls and door knocks—undecided voters with specific concerns and behavioral traits (Ross 2015). In total, the Conservatives spent 30 percent of their budget on this type of work. Labour spent just 8 percent (UK Electoral Commission 2016). Given the Conservatives' unexpected electoral victory, the advantages are obvious.

The analytics turn is producing new and surprising sources of organizational power inside parties. New digital media elites have types of expertise and operating norms that differ from those prevalent among groups who worked in similar positions during the broadcast era. As evolutionary accounts of the role of digital media across multiple U.S. presidential campaigns have demonstrated, digital media, depending upon how they are assembled and organizationally enacted, are just as useful for backstage, data-intensive “computational management” (Kreiss 2012) and public-facing “controlled interactivity” (Stromer-Galley 2014) as they are for fostering openness and grassroots participation in directing a party or candidate's policies and goals.

The role of digital media will continue to be shaped by this tension between control and interactivity, but the overall outcome for the party form itself is still uncertain, for reasons we now discuss.

Parties as Movement-Like, Networked Organizations

Parties are often portrayed as monolithic, but in reality, their organizational boundaries are porous. Parties aggregate the networks of support provided by political formations in related fields—interest groups, social movements, more formally constituted social movement organizations, as well as inchoate popular—and populist—currents of opinion. The extent to which this matters has varied over time, between countries, and between party types.

Party-movement relationships are an important context for understanding how digital media are reshaping parties and campaigns. Some recent evidence of party renewal contradicts scholarship on the “death” of political parties (for declinist accounts, see, for example, Mair 2013; Whiteley 2011). Key here is the role of digital media in enabling personalized repertoires of citizen engagement that aggregate and scale to enable organizational experimentation. Hence, it is not at all clear that political parties are dying. In fact, given the interactive effects we see between digital media, changes in citizens' engagement repertoires, and parties' organizational practices, the reverse may be true. In some cases, parties are renewing themselves from the outside in. Citizens are breathing new life into the party form, remaking parties in their own changed participatory image, and doing so via digital means. The overall outcome might prove more positive for democratic engagement and the decentralization of political power than has often been assumed.

In common with most human organizations not based on coercion, parties are networks. They are built on relations of interdependence among individuals and groups

with different beliefs and expertise. These interdependent actors pool their resources in the pursuit of goals. Today, and contrary to the ghostly typologies of parties that still haunt political science textbooks, coherent ideological beliefs, low levels of internal competition among actors, hierarchical decision-making structures, and formal organizational membership are less important than they once were for binding these interdependent actors together. Parties in some countries, for example, the United States, have always been more *network-like* and *movement-like* than parties in other countries. But things are now changing elsewhere.

Postmaterial patterns of political engagement have spread among electorates, and digital media have played a role in this. The elective affinity between digital media and postmaterial engagement can be seen at work, with varying intensity and across varying levels of society and politics, in what Ulrich Beck termed *sub-politics*, Lance Bennett *lifestyle politics*, Henrik Bang and Eva Sørensen *everyday makers*, and Russell Dalton *engaged citizenship* (Bang and Sørensen 1999; Beck 1997; Bennett 1998; Dalton 2015). These shifts in individual attitudes and behavior involve a move away from older forms of habitual, loyalty-based party engagement and toward single-issue campaigns and protest. There is also a growing disconnection between formal bureaucratic modes of organizational maintenance and looser, more flexible, and less “dutiful” engagement repertoires (see, for example, Tormey 2015; Wells 2015).

But do these shifts necessarily lead to antipartyism? Perhaps not. It could be that the attitudinal and behavioral shifts of postmaterialism are now radiating beyond the protest and movement spheres where they had their initial impact. In other words, parties and campaigns might be undergoing a long-term process of adaptation to postmaterial political culture. The empirical and conceptual foundation for analyzing this shift needs to be established. It will require attention to the interactions between three bundles of variables: the organizations, norms, and rules of electoral politics; postmaterial attitudes toward political engagement; and the affordances and uses of digital media.

Digitally Enabled Activist Networks Are Remaking Parties in Their Own Image

Long regarded as comparatively diffuse and weakly institutionalized, since the early 2000s, U.S. parties have become even looser. They are now more riddled with internal competition among different elites, policy-seeking groups, and activists than at any time in the postwar era. Some of these entities are formally organized, such as the Democratic and Republican National Committees or the better-organized state committees. Some are less formal, such as groups of political consultants, pollsters, and (more or less) self-directed grassroots-netroots networks. Despite the centralizing force of digital analytics in the contemporary election campaign, American parties still have plenty of movement-like characteristics (Anstead and Chadwick 2009; Chadwick 2007; Heaney and Rojas 2015; Masket 2012; McKenna and Han 2014).

This organizational context constantly interacts with digital media use by individuals. Consider insurgent internet-fueled campaigns such as those by Democrat Howard

Dean (2003–04), Republican Ron Paul and the conservative Tea Party movement he inspired (2007–08 and ongoing), not to mention Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign, which he began as a rank outsider. The citizen movement MoveOn has been important as well. But as Michael Heaney and Fabio Rojas have shown, so, too, is the antiwar movement, which overlapped with Democratic Party activist networks. Individuals in these networks have what Heaney and Rojas (2015) term *dual identifications*: they are movement activists, but they are also party activists. Although their energy dissipated when the Democrats came to power in 2008, the patterns of engagement these groups adopted and their generally skeptical approach to political and professional media elites are likely to persist as they carry their habits into middle age.

When the 2016 U.S. election cycle began, no fewer than seventeen candidates stepped forward for the Republican candidacy. By the New Hampshire primary of January 2016, two Republican frontrunners—Ted Cruz, whose base is in the evangelical and Tea Party movements, and populist businessman Donald Trump—were squaring up against the only convincing party “establishment” figure: Florida Senator Marco Rubio. Cruz and Trump are manifestations of a loosening Republican party. The populist anti-elitism of their message and campaign ethos gels with the skepticism toward political authority among the web-enabled Tea Party grassroots. This energizes conservative supporters but causes intense managerial difficulty for the party’s organizational elite in the Republican National Committee (RNC). Research on Tea Party activists suggests that they value individual autonomy to an extent even the organizers of their online platforms cannot accommodate (Agarwal et al. 2014). And the situation is made even more difficult for the RNC because Tea Party policy goals in Congress often conflict with the interests of large sections of the movement’s middle class supporters (Skocpol and Williamson 2012).

Yet, despite the turmoil, wholesale party decline is unlikely to be an outcome of these shifts. Just as likely is that parties will adapt to the new reality of competing networks of supporters. The party-as-movement mentality often (although not always) eschews hierarchical discipline and blind partisan loyalty. Many individuals on both the right and the left now see election campaigns as yet another means for personalized political expression. Digitally enabled activist networks are reshaping parties. This party-as-movement mentality can easily accommodate populist appeals and angry protest—on both the right and the left.

The 2016 Democratic primary campaign of Bernie Sanders provides further evidence of this. Sanders’s main priority was social media outreach and small online donations to enact his rejection of special-interest influence via large campaign contributions. This was an ideological-organizational choice, another medium-is-the-message moment (Chadwick 2007). Before the primaries, Sanders spent more than all other candidates (both Democrat and Republican) on his online campaign. He brought in Revolution Messaging, a company founded by Obama 2008’s External Online Director Scott Goodstein. In an unusual and revealing move, Sanders made Revolution both his online division *and* his finance division. There was no need for a formal director of finance when the digital division would be doing the fundraising (Woodruff 2016). In the latest intensification of e-mail’s

fabled role in election campaigning, Revolution got to work perfecting *one dollar* donation requests. This contrasted with Hillary Clinton's focus on elite fundraising events designed to attract wealthier individuals to donate up to the legal limit of \$2,700 (Horowitz and Chozick 2016).

Sanders's campaign capitalized on social media enthusiasm and sharing to drive individuals to his website. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and the mobile picture and video messaging service Snapchat are now the staples of this approach in U.S. elections. But a surprisingly powerful force in Sanders's campaign was Reddit, the long-established user-generated news and discussion forum. By February 2016, the "Sanders for President" Reddit contained 197,000 subscribers. "Subreddits" were set up for each U.S. state and a wiki maintained to inform newcomers to the campaign about the candidate's policy stances. Reddit became an important node in the self-titled Grassroots for Sanders movement that overlaps with, but is not entirely subsumed by, the official Sanders campaign. This important piece of campaign infrastructure started out as a discussion thread founded by two Reddit users, Aidan King and David Frederick (Guadiano 2015). People for Bernie, a similar grassroots-netroots movement, was founded by two former Occupy organizers Winnie Wong and Charles Lenchner (Hilder 2016).

Two important caveats are due here. First, as we finalized this essay in March 2016, Sanders was highly unlikely to secure the Democratic nomination. Second, we are not suggesting that small dollar fundraising is the only important dynamic in U.S. campaigns—far from it. The other 2016 candidates benefited to varying extents from wealthy individual donors who funneled their contributions indirectly through the so-called super-PACs (Political Action Committees) that were stimulated by the Supreme Court's further move to deregulate campaign contributions in 2010. Big money is more important than ever in U.S. politics.

Then again, so is small money. Sanders's campaign is a reassertion of the power of the grassroots-netroots. It puts a dent in the top-down, analytics-driven, inauthentic, and disempowering side of contemporary election campaigns. Despite convergence around the importance of e-mail testing, targeted social media advertising, centrally directed ground campaigns, and mainstream media-focused, sensationalist social media interventions, there is still no one-size-fits-all approach—not even in the U.S. context where Obama's success has imposed strong behavioral norms on campaign professionals. There still appears to be room for the kind of campaign that Howard Dean and his staff pioneered in 2003.

Similar shifts are underway elsewhere. In Britain, just as parties were being consigned to the dustbin of history, the 2015 Labour Party leadership election revealed more complex forces are at work. In 2014, the Labour Party quietly but radically changed how it selects its leader and deputy leader. In an effort to reengage the public, Labour broke the mold of British party politics by creating an entirely new category of member: the "registered supporter." Upon paying a token fee of £3 and registering support for Labour's values on the party's website, any individual could vote in Labour's leadership and deputy leadership elections. This turned the 2015 leadership campaign into a primary—of sorts.

Like Sanders, Corbyn was an outsider candidate. Corbyn qualified to run in the campaign by only the smallest of margins, securing the support of only thirty-five Labour members of parliament (MP). Yet, he went on to win the leadership with a 59.5 percent landslide, gaining large majorities among trade union affiliate members, constituency party members, and the new “registered supporters.”

The roots of this victory are complex but there is little doubt that digital media were an important ingredient. With its blend of Facebook, Twitter, and e-mail, the Corbyn campaign organized more than a hundred rallies across Britain and in some towns attracted crowds not seen since the 1960s and 1970s. More than 422,000 voted in the leadership election, 105,000 of whom were the new registered supporters. But just as significant was the effect Corbyn had on local constituency parties. In 2014, their membership stood at 194,000. Within three months of Corbyn’s victory, they had doubled to 388,000, reversing a decline that began in 1998 (Syal 2016). And then there is Momentum, a new grassroots movement of Corbyn supporters.

Labour’s membership reforms have their origins in a period of reflection inspired by Obama’s 2008 victory (Anstead and Straw 2008). And, as Susan Scarrow’s (2015) recent comparative analysis has shown, diversifying the channels through which individuals can engage with parties is not exclusive to Britain but is part of a broader trend across western democracies. We are now in a new era of “multi-speed” party membership along the lines predicted by Helen Margetts’s “cyber party” model (Margetts 2006). It has taken a while for the organizational response to emerge, but over the last five years, many European parties have introduced mechanisms that blur the boundaries between formal dues paying and looser modes of affiliation. These include primaries; one-off donations rather than regular subscriptions; online consultations, online voting; online petitioning; and simply encouraging individuals to become the party’s “news audience” for online newsletters and social media feeds. In a similar vein, Rachel Gibson has recently identified the emergence of online “citizen-initiated campaigning” based on “community building, getting out the vote, generating resources and message production” (Gibson 2015: 187). While the intensity of change will always differ across parties and across countries, these accounts capture how postmaterial attitudes and digital media use might be renewing parties.

These accounts stress adaptation by traditional parties, but there are also new party forms. These have innovated organizationally before turning their attention to the mainstream. Since 2009, Italy has seen the rise of the Five Star Movement (M5S), a hybrid fusion of political party, celebrity culture, populism, online mobilization, and street protest. Then there is Spain’s great experiment in fusing movement networks with more traditional party forms: Podemos (“We Can”). Podemos and similar organizations such as Partido X and Guanyem Barcelona grew out of the protests, occupations, self-organizing local assemblies, and open source online deliberation platforms of the Indignados. Podemos, however, quickly moved from the streets and digital networks to more formal leadership structures, stronger organizational discipline, and a broadcast media focus. This has involved hybridizing the decentralized, quasi-anarchist organizational forms of 2011 with a broadcast-era personal leadership strategy. Central to this has been the integration of digital media, television, and local activism.

Podemos crowdfunds using digital media. It runs its own primary elections online. It organizes local discussions through its *circulos* (circles). It established its own La Tuerka online video discussion show organized around party leader Pablo Iglesias. However, it also colonized the Público online news site, turning it into a party organ as Iglesias himself set about successfully breaking into the popular televised political discussion show circuit on Spain's Intereconomía, Cuatro, and la Sexta television channels (Postill 2015).

These are parties, but not as we have known them.

About This Special Issue

The articles in this special issue were first delivered as presentations to a workshop we organized on "Digital Media, Power, and Democracy in Election Campaigns," held July 1–3, 2015, at Washington, D.C.'s Omni Shoreham Hotel and at Greenberg House, Syracuse University's base in the U.S. capital. The papers included here reflect the range of conversations we had about the state of political parties, the ways digital media are being used in the tug and pull of political power between elites and ordinary citizens, and the role of traditional and professional media in those processes.

The six papers that comprise this special issue highlight the transformation occurring in electoral politics. All of the papers underscore the idea that political parties are not undergoing a simple process of decline; they are instead changing in remarkable ways by reaching new potential supporters. Cristian Vaccari and Augusto Valeriani use survey data to identify to what degree party membership is related to party-related engagement in three countries: Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. They find that social media serves as an important bridging platform between parties and the public; those who are not party members are more likely to engage in party-related activities on social media. Similarly, Benjamin Lee and Vincent Campbell find that the new genre of the online political poster (OPP) provides compelling visual persuasion that reaches beyond party members. The OPPs also put politics into spaces such as Facebook that are not intentionally political.

Although political parties may have found new ways to reach the public, the style of messaging is also shifting. Take, for example, the case of Norway. Rune Karlsen and Bernard Enjolras examine individualized campaigning on Twitter. While they find that candidates who adopt a more individualized style tweet more, they also note some important disparities in terms of who has influence. Candidates with already large Twitter follower levels are more likely to be more influential. In the Norwegian case, eight candidates received 66 percent of all of the Twitter @mentions.

The articles here also highlight the complex communication interactions that occur between political parties, traditional news media, and the public. Andreas Jungherr's article suggests that campaigns increasingly use digital tools to influence the professional news media agenda and often to bypass it altogether to speak directly to the public. In the case of Podemos in Spain, Andreu Casero-Ripollés, Ramón Feenstra, and Simon Tormey provide a detailed examination of the strategic ways political parties use digital and traditional media to advance their cause. They explain the ways that

the party grew its visibility by using social media while also using traditional media outlets for strategic purposes.

Finally, if political parties are being remade in the West, can the same be said for developing nations whose parties and the electorate are moving online only recently? The research by Tabarez Ahmed Neyazi, Anup Kumar, and Holli Semetko on the 2014 Indian national elections suggest that political parties are still profoundly important and are strategically engaging new and old media to maximize their reach. Their article reveals that face-to-face contact from parties, a traditional form of campaigning, is still of primary influence. Yet, as more Indians go online, sharing information digitally is now also of significant importance for political involvement.

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