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The role of digital platforms in the transformation of political parties

Abstract. The aim of the study was to identify the role of digital platforms in the transformation of political parties, particularly the structure, communication, and participation. The methodology was based on an interdisciplinary approach that combined case analysis, conceptual models from political science, digital sociology and organisation theory. As a result of the study, it was revealed that digital platforms radically changed the mechanisms of political communication, transforming these mechanisms into interactive forms of interaction. The introduction of digital participation caused the emergence of new formats of intra-party democracy, particularly through crowdsourcing and direct online voting. Structural changes in parties demonstrated the weakening of the traditional hierarchy and the growth of network forms of coordination. Case studies showed that digitalisation caused both democratic innovations and centralisation of control over platforms, i.e. digital platforms contributed to the hybridisation of party structures, combining hierarchical and network models, as in the cases of Rousseau (Italy) and LiquidFeedback (Germany); digital platforms expanded citizens' participation through e-voting and crowdsourcing (Podemos, Decidim), but also led to centralisation of data control and manipulation of algorithms (Trump's campaigns, criticism of Movimento 5 Stelle). The formation of hybrid party models was defined, which adapted digital tools within classical institutional structures. New practices such as microtargeting and personalisation changed the nature of leadership and legitimacy. It was established that the effectiveness of digital transformation depended on the national institutional context. In conclusion, digital platforms created both new opportunities and risks for party functioning, and the impact was ambiguous and contextually dependent. The most effective appeared to be hybrid organisational models, which combined the traditional with the innovative. The practical significance of the study lay in the formation of tools for the optimisation of party structures, the improvement of electoral technologies and the development of regulatory frameworks on digital democracy, which could be used by political parties, government bodies and civil society to increase the effectiveness of political governance

Keywords: deliberation; crowdsourcing; electronic voting; hybrid structure; microtargeting

Introduction

Throughout the 21st century, digital technologies radically changed the functioning of democratic institutions, and political parties faced the necessity of adapting to the new conditions of social communication, mobilisation, participation, and decision-making. Digital platforms, which were initially considered mainly as tools for information dissemination and pre-election campaigning, turned into system-forming elements of party activity, changing methods of organisation, hierarchy, leadership and internal democracy. The growing popularity of online participation mechanisms, the rapid spread of social media and crowdsourcing platforms, as well as the growing dependence of parties on algorithmically controlled communication created a new political ecosystem in which parties had to act in order to preserve political relevance and legitimacy. Digitalisation continued to be actively integrated into

state spheres, from the judicial system to political parties, creating new opportunities for increasing transparency, reducing corruption and supporting institutional reforms. At the same time, successful integration required proper regulation, consideration of ethical aspects and special training of specialists for the correct use of technologies (Dashkevych, 2024). Against this background, the study of the role of digital platforms in the transformation of political parties acquired exceptional relevance, since it concerned not only technological innovations but also fundamental shifts in political representation, organisational dynamics and democratic governance. The problem of this study lay in identifying the changes that digitalisation caused in the structure, functioning and internal democracy of political parties, as well as in understanding how digital platforms could simultaneously open new opportunities

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for citizens' participation and create risks of centralisation of control and manipulation. The literature review revealed significant research attention to different aspects of the digitalisation of political life. The study by A. Lioy *et al.* (2019) analysed organisational transformations of parties under the influence of digital platforms, showing that such changes generated not only innovations but also internal tension between the technological capacities of platforms and the institutional inertia of parties. The authors developed the concept of "platform politics", within which digital tools could both open new forms of participation and restrict such opportunities by means of centralised management. Similarly, the study by V.J. da Silva Neto & T. Chiarini (2021) drew attention to non-institutional digital initiatives that demonstrated high potential for democratic impact but remained vulnerable to political and economic barriers, as well as to technical dependence on global digital platforms. M. Lisi (2025) carried out a comparative analysis of party websites and concluded that less centralised, centre-left parties demonstrated greater activity in digital mobilisation but avoided genuine interactivity, limiting the activity to one-way communication.

Other researchers focused on the relationship between digital technologies, political leadership and style of communication. For example, S. Roy (2021), analysing the campaign of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India, indicated that the effectiveness of the digital strategy was based not so much on microtargeting as on the creation of powerful political narratives that mobilised collective identity. A similar thesis was developed by M. Iranzo-Cabrera & A. Casero-Ripollés (2023), who drew attention to new platforms (Twitch, YouTube Live), where politicians demonstrated authenticity and subjectivity, creating the effect of direct presence and informal citizen participation. This, in turn, transformed expectations of political leadership and changed the balance between rational and emotional components of political choice. A systematic framework for the analysis of digital transformation of parties was provided by O. Barberà *et al.* (2021), who proposed to assess changes across four dimensions: internal decision-making, financing, mobilisation and intra-party communication. The approach made it possible to move from isolated analysis of campaigns to a systemic vision of digital processes within party organisation. Similarly, S. Gherghina *et al.* (2025) in an interdisciplinary study of parliamentary parties showed that digitalisation affected not only strategic communication but also everyday party practice, particularly the interaction between leadership and ordinary members. The authors proved that digital tools could act both as catalysts of openness and as means of strengthening top-down control. A significant contribution to the understanding of parties' adaptation strategies was made by the work of R. Huerta McWhirter (2024), which emphasised the need for personalisation of digital communication for effective mobilisation. The author stressed the role of data analytics, social media and flexible organisational structures for achieving electoral success in the conditions of "audience democracy". In this context, digital platforms acted not only as channels of broadcasting, but as spaces for constructing political identities and carrying out political action. Despite the volume of academic publications, there

was still a lack of comprehensive studies that integrated the organisational, communicative and democratic aspects of digital transformation of political parties into a single analytical field. Existing works mostly either focused on one element (for example, campaigns or technical infrastructure) or were limited to studying separate national cases without attempting to formulate broader conclusions about the typology or models of digital parties. Thus, there remained a need for deeper understanding of how exactly digital platforms changed the nature of party organisation and what consequences these changes had for the democratic quality of modern political systems. The aim of the study was to identify the influence of digital platforms on the transformations of political parties, particularly in the aspects of changes in the internal structure, communicative practices and mechanisms of participation. The research hypothesis lay in the assumption that digital technologies caused the gradual weakening of the classical hierarchy of political parties in favour of more horizontal communication structures, which transformed organisational architecture, decision-making models and intra-party democratic practices.

Materials and Methods

The research methodology was built using a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach that combined tools of political science, digital sociology and organisation theory. The main object of analysis was the transformational processes in political parties in the context of the digitalisation of the political process, in particular the changes in internal structure, forms of participation, mechanisms of mobilisation and communication with the electorate. For the theoretical comprehension of the subject of the research, several key analytical frameworks were used. The theory of network governance was used as a conceptual basis for the interpretation of political parties as flexible network structures. Within this framework, the concept of network logic was applied, which allowed political communication and decision-making to be analysed as the coordination of actions among non-hierarchical participants. The concept of crowdsourcing was considered as a mechanism of decentralised political decision-making, with an emphasis on the participation of individual citizens in shaping party programmes and organising digital interaction through platforms. The model of the hybrid party organisation was applied as an analytical construct that combined formal institutional mechanisms with new forms of digital participation. This approach made it possible to form classification criteria for further comparative analysis.

In the course of the research, a number of applied cases of political parties and digital initiatives were analysed, in particular the cases of using the digital platform Rousseau by the party Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy (Angelucci & Vittori, 2021; The Digital Democracy Initiative, n.d.) and the application of the LiquidFeedback platform in Piratenpartei Deutschland (Deseriis, 2022). The analysis also included the initiative MoveOn within the Democratic Party of the USA (MoveOn, n.d.), Your Priorities (n.d.) in Iceland, Decidim (n.d.), Now (ServiceNow, n.d.) and Loomio (n.d.) in Spain, which were chosen due to the representativeness in demonstrating different models of digital participation. The analysis of these platforms made it possible to

identify common mechanisms of deliberative participation, online consultations, intra-party voting and feedback, which were characteristic of digital democracy. In addition, the research used normative documents that established regulatory frameworks for digital communication in the political space. In particular, the provisions of the European Commission (2022) were applied, which served as an example of institutional regulation of the information responsibility of digital platforms within the political process. The Identity Documents Act (Riigikogu, 1999) was also considered, which became the legal basis for the introduction of digital voting in Estonia, in particular on the basis of the official source – the legislative register Riigi Teataja. The methodological basis of the research also included case analysis of political campaigns that used digital technologies for strategic communication and mobilisation. Such cases included the campaign of E. Macron in 2017 (Pruchnicka, 2023), the example of the use of Twitter in D. Trump's electoral strategy (Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018), examples of digital activism in Eastern Europe, in particular Poland, Hungary and Ukraine (Tóth *et al.*, 2022), as well as network movements such as Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation (n.d.). Special attention was paid to empirical platforms of digital participation, among which were LiquidFeedback (n.d.) and NationBuilder (n.d.). The study made it possible to describe the mechanisms of digital interaction at the level of party functioning.

Results

Theoretical and analytical foundations of the influence of digital platforms on political parties. Digital platforms radically changed the conditions of political communication, transforming not only the channels of information dissemination but also the very logic of political interaction. The traditional model of political communication, which was built on the one-way transmission of messages from the party leadership to the electorate, gradually lost its effectiveness against the backdrop of the spread of digital media. Social networks, online forums, platforms for collective decision-making, messengers, and specialised applications became not merely technical tools but new environments of political action, which influenced ideological mobilisation, strategic coordination, and the distribution of power within political organisations. Unlike traditional mass media, which implied centralised control and editorial content filtering, digital platforms functioned on the basis of network logic, encouraging horizontal communication and the formation of dynamic information flows. This created conditions for greater accessibility to party discourse for a wide range of participants: supporters, activists, and even casual consumers of content could interact with political messages in real time. Such blurring of boundaries between producers and consumers of information contributed to the emergence of new types of political participation that did not imply mandatory party membership but allowed involvement in mobilisation, campaigning, and decision-making through digital channels. A key aspect of changes in political communication was the transition from hierarchical dissemination of messages to an infrastructure of multidirectional interaction. Instead of the linear logic of “centre – periphery”, digital platforms enabled

the implementation of feedback strategies and active voter engagement. For example, the use of big data analytics allowed political parties to adapt messages to target audiences in microtargeting mode, which in election campaigns significantly increased the effectiveness of mobilisation efforts (Sheikh, 2024). In turn, tools of crowdsourcing and online consultations, such as Loomio, contributed to the decentralisation of the processes of party programme formation and the involvement of citizens in decision-making (Deseriis, 2021).

At the same time, these transformations questioned the sustainability of the traditional party model, which for a long time was based on centralised hierarchy, closed procedures, and bureaucratic discipline. The traditional party structure was characterised by a vertical organisation of power, where decision-making took place at the top (at the level of the leader or governing body) and execution was delegated downwards, to the lower levels of the party apparatus (Nunes, 2021). Such an approach made it possible to ensure unity of positions, control over political actions, and discipline among the membership, but at the same time made it impossible to respond flexibly to rapid social changes. Decision-making mechanisms in traditional parties were based on fixed regulated procedures – congresses, plenums, internal votes, which had hierarchical legitimacy. Such mechanisms were often inaccessible to ordinary party members, let alone sympathisers or potential voters. At the same time, in the conditions of the digital age, these mechanisms began to give way to new forms of intra-party democracy, which more actively engaged the audience through interactive formats. For example, in the case of the “Movimento 5 Stelle” movement in Italy, intra-party decisions were made through the digital platform Rousseau, which allowed all registered users to participate in voting on candidates, programme documents, or key decisions (Angelucci & Vittori, 2021). Digital platforms thus undermined the institutional monopoly of the party centre on strategy development and implementation. Through social networks, blogs, or interactive applications, political communication could unfold without direct control from the party leadership, which led to a rethinking of the role of the party apparatus and political leadership. For example, in the USA, the Democratic Party at the federal level increasingly resorted to cooperation with digital activist networks such as MoveOn (n.d.), which, although not part of the official party structure, played a critical role in mobilisation, fundraising, and shaping the political agenda.

In modern political science, theoretical approaches increasingly spread that made it possible to conceptualise the decentralisation of political structures as a systemic response to the challenges of the digital age. One of the central concepts in this context was the notion of the network model of organisation, which displaced classical vertical management structures. The theory of network interaction assumed the delegation of powers to a wide range of participants in the decision-making process, who shaped the political environment on the basis of horizontal links, situational coalitions, and joint knowledge production (Riley *et al.*, 2022). The political party in conditions of network logic appeared not as a clearly defined hierarchical structure but as a flexible configuration of digitally connected actors – activists, subscribers,

sympathisers, informal opinion leaders. The central feature of such a model was its dynamism and low institutional fixation, which ensured a rapid response to changes in the external environment. These networks were formed mainly around certain topics or values rather than stable organisational forms, and had the ability to self-organise without centralised management. As an example, one could cite the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation (n.d.) in the USA or the digital platform Now in Spain (ServiceNow, n.d.), which, although not political parties in the classical sense, significantly influenced the political programmes of centre-left forces thanks to horizontal mobilisation of numerous participants. Another critical theoretical vector was crowdsourcing as a mechanism of political decision-making. This approach implied the involvement of many individuals in the development of strategic documents, programmes, decisions, or even bills (Martí, 2022). In the context of party transformation, crowdsourcing allowed overcoming the limitations of elite decision-making and ensuring a more inclusive model of participation. Well-known examples of the implementation of crowdsourcing practices in party politics included the use of online platforms such as Rousseau in Italy (n.d.), Your Priorities (n.d.) in Iceland, which enabled not only voting but also the proposal and discussion of meaningful political initiatives. The third analytical focus, digital democracy, was connected with the broader process of democratisation of political institutions with the help of digital technologies. Theoretical models of digital democracy emphasised the potential of ICT (information and communication technologies) to strengthen citizen participation, increase transparency, and ensure accountability of political decisions. Within the party structure, digital democracy was embodied in the forms of online consultations, electronic votes for candidates, open discussion of budgets and campaign priorities. For example, “Piratenpartei Deutschland” for a long time used the platform LiquidFeedback, which allowed each participant to delegate or accept votes on various issues, thus providing a dynamic form of digital representation within the party (Deseriis, 2021). Despite the popularisation of models of digital democracy, the effectiveness remained the subject of intense scholarly debate. There were studies that revealed a significant positive impact of democratic innovations (such as “mini-publics”) on knowledge, political attitudes, and participants’ skills (Theuwis *et al.*, 2025). These results indicated that digital methods indeed could strengthen institutional participation and legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. At the same time, real limitations were noticeable. For example, experimental studies in the field of online debates revealed that more detailed substantiation of opinions stimulated a sense of knowledge but at the same time could restrain participation due to social comparison – that is, even a “qualitative” discussion could discourage potential participants (Schäfer *et al.*, 2024). As for specific party contexts, the digital platforms demonstrated both potential and risks. For example, P. Gerbaudo’s (2019) study analysed the experience of Podemos and “Movimento 5 Stelle”, showing that the online platforms combined “plebiscitary”, “deliberative”, and representative mechanisms, but at the same time the balance between openness and control remained unstable.

An important component of digital decentralisation was the role of social networks in shaping the party agenda and strategies of interaction with voters. In this context, social networks appeared not only as channels of message transmission but as independent political arenas in which the struggle for legitimacy, recognition, and mobilisation took place. The algorithms of platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, or TikTok determined which messages the audience would see and therefore directly influenced the information environment in which the party formed its strategy. Political parties used data analytics from social networks to adjust the rhetoric, target messages, and identify potential electoral groups. For example, E. Macron’s 2017 campaign actively used social networks to test audience reactions to key political theses, which made it possible to adapt programme positions to the expectations of target groups (Pruchnicka, 2023). At the same time, social networks acted as an instrument for the formation of so-called real-time agenda setting, when the agenda was shaped not in the usual terms of institutional politics but under the influence of media-viral events, hashtags, flash mobs, and reactive political behaviour (Carazo-Barrantes, 2021). The analysis of the interaction of political strategies with digital platforms revealed a significant transformation of communication approaches. As N. Srnicek’s (2017) research showed, in the digital age political action increasingly depended on the logic of digital platforms, which structurally encouraged short, emotionally charged messages, personalisation of messages, and rapid feedback. This transformed the communicative strategies of parties: instead of detailed programmes and political discussions, priority was given to visualised content, clickable theses, and influential images of the leader. For example, D. Trump’s campaign became a classic case of using Twitter as the main communication channel, which made it possible to bypass traditional media and create the illusion of direct dialogue with voters (Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018). Social networks also created conditions for new forms of party activism that did not require formal membership or participation in official structures. For example, digital activism through Telegram channels, TikTok campaigns, or YouTube streams allowed mobilisation of young people, who traditionally had a low level of involvement in institutional politics. In Eastern European countries, particularly in Poland, Hungary, and Ukraine, social networks increasingly acted as a space for the formation of an alternative political agenda not represented in traditional mass media (Tóth *et al.*, 2022).

In this context, the concept of the hybrid party organisation in political science was important, which appeared as a response to the deep structural changes caused by the digitalisation of the political process (Schäfer, 2021). It described the form of organisation of political parties, which combined elements of traditional hierarchy and digital network flexibility, while preserving stability and institutional continuity and ensuring adaptation to new models of political participation. In such a hybrid format, classical institutional mechanisms – congresses, statutory bodies, governing councils, intra-party discipline – were supplemented by tools of digital interaction: platforms for electronic voting, online consultations, mobile applications for communication with the electorate, crowdsourcing initiatives. This

created organisational duality: one level preserved the formalised structure, the other functioned on the principles of digital dynamics and horizontal participation. The peculiarity of the hybrid party model was the pragmatic combination of old and new approaches, which made it possible to optimise party activity. For example, strategic decisions (formation of ideological lines, election of leaders) could be taken within classical procedures, whereas mobilisation, communication, and consultations were carried out

through digital channels. This approach was especially widespread in next-generation parties, in particular in E. Macron's "La République En Marche!" as well as in Scandinavian social-democratic movements, where platforms such as NationBuilder or Loomio became an integrated part of internal coordination. For the systematic analysis of the hybrid party structure, it was advisable to consider Table 1, which demonstrated the key differences between classical, digitally oriented, and hybrid party models.

Таблица 1. Comparison of party structures

Criterion	Classic party structure	Digitally-oriented structure	Hybrid structure (synthesis)
Organisational logic	Hierarchical, centralised	Horizontal, decentralised	Combined: strategic hierarchy + digital horizontality
Decision-making mechanisms	Through congresses, bureaus, internal statutes	Through online voting, surveys, crowdsourcing	Partially formalised solutions + online consultations
Communication with voters	Through the media, press conferences, party bodies	Through social networks, messengers, video streams	Mass media + social platforms; targeting through big data
Type of membership	Formal, institutionally formalised	Informal, flexible, sometimes anonymous	Dual: formal members + digital supporter base
Type of mobilisation	Through branch structures, local offices	Through digital calls to action, online campaigns	Campaigns both offline and online simultaneously
The role of leadership	Central, personalised	Collective, decentralised	Depends on the stage of the process: personalisation + network leadership
Form of legitimisation	Through history, tradition, institutional authority	Through openness, transparency, feedback	Balance of institutional authority and digital support

Source: compiled by the author based on F. Raniolo *et al.* (2021), S. Wolinetz (2023)

The synthesis of classical and digital elements enables political parties to optimise the organisational resources in conditions of rapid change in public demand and the information environment. Classical elements provide predictability, stability, legal legitimacy, and long-term organisational memory. At the same time, digital flexibility ensures rapid response to public challenges, large-scale mobilisation of the electorate, operational testing of ideas, and adaptation to behavioural changes among voters. This hybridity is particularly important in the context of the crisis of trust in traditional political institutions. Hybrid structures, capable of demonstrating transparency, openness to participation, interactivity, and at the same time institutional reliability and managerial efficiency, are able to move beyond the polarisation between "old" and "new" parties. Such structures also make it possible to avoid the trap of populism or unprofessional digital emotionality, while preserving elements of expertise and strategic control. The hybrid model, therefore, is not a compromise, but rather a new type of organisational adaptation that corresponds to the logic of "second modernisation" in the political process, where tradition and innovation function not as opposites but as complementary principles. Such a flexible combination provides parties with the ability to survive and renew in a political environment where speed, accessibility, networked character, and personalisation become defining features of effective political action.

Digital transformations of the internal organisation and public strategy of parties. In the context of the digital transformation of political parties, the rethinking of the concepts of membership, participation, and intra-party democracy is of particular relevance. Digitalisation has caused a shift from the classical understanding

of membership as a formal, long-term, and institutionally formalised link between the citizen and the political party, towards more flexible, often temporary and dynamic forms of interaction. This process is accompanied by changes in the internal structure of parties, mechanisms of legitimisation, and organisation of collective decision-making. One of the leading new formats of participation is online activism, which allows citizens to engage in party activities without formal membership or with minimal organisational barriers. This phenomenon encompasses a wide spectrum of practices – from likes, reposts, and comments on social networks to active participation in street protests organised through digital channels. Such actions have the potential for large-scale mobilisation due to focusing not on organisational loyalty but on support for specific values, issues, or leaders. Online activism becomes a platform for demonstrating emotional involvement rather than institutional discipline, shifting the accents in party strategy-building. At the same time, the importance of digital platforms for public engagement is growing, allowing two-way communication between parties and voters in an interactive format. Platforms such as Decidim (n.d.) in Barcelona, Your Priorities in Iceland, or Rousseau (n.d.) in Italy act as instruments of "platform democracy", ensuring discussions, submission of proposals, ranked voting, and even initiation of programme changes. Such platforms not only reduce the cost of participation in the political process but also transform the party apparatus into a "virtual interface", where the voter can interact with the party organisation in real time. This fundamentally changes the understanding of membership, as permanent participation is replaced by situational engagement, and formal membership is replaced by transactional connection through

participation in specific decisions. Digital platforms increasingly influence the strategies of political parties, particularly in the organisation of campaigns, voter mobilisation, and reputation management. One example of institutional regulation is the Code of Practice on Disinformation, adopted by the European Union, which establishes regulatory responsibilities for platforms and mechanisms of the cooperation with political structures. This document outlines the obligations of digital services regarding advertising transparency, verification of information sources, and prevention of manipulation during electoral campaigns (European Commission, 2022). A separate case deserving attention is Estonia – the first country in Europe to introduce digital voting (i-voting) at the legislative level (Górny, 2021). The legal basis for this process was the Identity Documents Act (Riigikogu, 1999), published in the official Estonian legislative register Riigi Teataja.

With the increasing functionality of digital platforms, the practice of electronic voting as a form of intra-party deliberation and decision-making is also emerging. Such systems may be used to select candidates, approve programme documents, elect leaders, or adopt intra-party resolutions. In this context, electronic voting performs not only a technical function but also acts as a mechanism for expanding political participation, especially among categories of citizens traditionally less involved in formal politics – youth, migrants, representatives of regions. For example, the “Piratenpartei Deutschland” for a long time used the LiquidFeedback (n.d.) platform, which allowed not only voting but also delegation of votes, creating a dynamic model of representation. These new formats of membership directly affect intra-party democracy, which under digitalisation acquires new features and mechanisms of implementation. Firstly, digital tools increase transparency of decision-making processes, as most procedures and documents become publicly accessible. Voting protocols, programme drafts, candidate lists, or campaign budgets can be published online in a format convenient for verification and commentary. This creates conditions for public monitoring of the internal activity of the party, significantly reducing the risk of corruption, behind-the-scenes agreements, or authoritarian decision-making. Another important aspect is the strengthening of competition within the party through digital tools. In classical party structures, for example, the Labour parties of Great Britain or the social-democratic parties of Scandinavia in the 20th century, where the nomination of candidates

for elections required approval of regional committees and the central apparatus, access to internal competition was usually limited by “narrow gates” – recommendations of leadership, electoral hierarchy, or personal networks. In contrast, in digitally-oriented or hybrid parties, open primaries, crowdsourcing of programmes, and electronic ranking of candidates provide opportunities for many participants to compete on equal terms. For example, in the Canadian Liberal Party, ranking systems are used to determine campaign priorities, which any registered supporter can join, not just a formal party member (Endersby & Towle, 2025). This increases the legitimacy of decisions and contributes to a sense of involvement among grassroots participants. An important component of digital intra-party democracy is deliberation – the process of collective discussion, clarification, and formulation of decisions (Caluwaerts *et al.*, 2023). Digital tools create infrastructure for extended debates, arguments, voting, and revision of positions. For instance, on the Decidim (n.d.) platform, it is possible not only to submit a proposal but also to justify it, review comments of other participants, gain support, after which the proposal moves to the next level of discussion. This promotes inclusivity of the political process, strengthens the logic of collective intelligence, and limits the influence of elite factions.

At the same time, excessive digitalisation of intra-party democracy generates new risks. In particular, issues of cybersecurity, vote fraud, disinformation, or manipulation by algorithms remain pressing challenges. For example, the Italian Rousseau platform in 2017 suffered a large-scale breach: the user database was stolen, which led to an investigation and a fine from the Italian regulator for violation of GDPR standards, including the absence of voting anonymity and risk of result manipulation (Giacomini, 2022). In 2023, it became known that the UK Electoral Commission suffered a major cyberattack by hackers linked to China, who gained access to the voter register with over 40 million records, raising serious doubts about the security of electoral institutions even in consolidated democracies (Mason & Farah, 2023). These cases demonstrate that digital tools do not guarantee the democratic nature of the process if not accompanied by regulatory frameworks, ethical principles, and technical reliability. All cases in Table 2 demonstrate different levels and approaches to digital modernisation of party infrastructure, which allows for comparative analysis across several parameters.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of digital tools in party structures of different countries

Country	Party/Initiative	Type of digital platform	Main functions	Key effects
Italy	Movement “Movimento 5 Stelle”	Rousseau (proprietary platform developed by Casaleggio Associati)	Electronic voting; development of legislative initiatives; policy discussions; training modules for activists	Democratisation of the party process; centralisation of data control; conflicts over management transparency
Spain	Podemos	Plaza Podemos (forum based on Reddit-like design); internal CRM systems	Open discussion of party policy; leadership elections; online consultations with members	Youth mobilisation; high interactivity; gradual transition towards more centralised management
USA	Democratic Digital	Complex of digital services (including Mobilize, NGP VAN, ActionKit)	Campaign organisation; voter data analysis; targeting; email marketing	Increased field campaign efficiency; personalisation of messages; fundraising through microtransactions

Table 2. Continued

Country	Party/Initiative	Type of digital platform	Main functions	Key effects
Canada	Liberal Party Digital Toolkit	Central party platform based on NationBuilder + proprietary applications	CRM system for contact management; internal analytics; control over party discipline	Institutionalisation of digital culture; strengthening of vertical coordination; decline in participation of local branches

Note: NGP VAN – National Gateway Platform & Voter Activation Network

Source: compiled by the author based on D. Angelucci & D. Vittori (2021), K. Dommert *et al.* (2024), The Digital Democracy Initiative (n.d.), International Downtown Association (n.d.), Podemos (n.d.)

Significant differences are observed between countries in the choice of type of digital platforms. In the case of Italy and Spain, preference is given to creating proprietary or semi-autonomous systems with an open element of participation. The “Movimento 5 Stelle” was designed as an alternative to traditional party institutions, aimed at reducing hierarchy (Rousseau, n.d.). In turn, Plaza Podemos also emerged as a horizontal initiative, but gradually lost its initial openness (Podemos, n.d.). In the USA and Canada, the integration of external services into party infrastructure dominates: the American the Digital Democracy Initiative (n.d.) is an ecosystem of complementary services, while the Canadian Liberal Toolkit (International Downtown Association, n.d.) combines a centralised platform with ready-made software solutions. The tools used in all four cases demonstrate a wide range of functional capabilities – from electronic voting (Rousseau) to the full cycle of digital campaign management (NGP VAN, NationBuilder). The shift in emphasis from open participation (Italy, Spain) to efficiency and manageability (USA, Canada) indicates the evolution of the understanding of digital democracy – from a utopian vision of direct participation to more pragmatic management of electoral processes. Despite the common goal – the modernisation of party structures – the results differ significantly. In the “Movimento 5 Stelle”, digitalisation triggered ideological conflicts related to the lack of transparency in managing the Rousseau platform (n.d.). The Podemos party encountered difficulties in maintaining horizontality as party centralisation increased (Podemos, n.d.). In the USA, digital tools became part of electoral campaigns, contributing to microtargeting and mobilisation based on big data. An example is B. Obama’s 2012 campaign and the subsequent use of similar technologies in D. Trump’s 2016 campaign, where algorithmic analysis of social networks made it possible to generate personalised messages for different groups of voters. The Canadian example demonstrates the successful institutionalisation of digital politics, albeit at the expense of reducing the autonomy of local party structures. The Liberal Party of Canada developed the Liberalist Digital Toolkit, which centrally coordinates the collection and use of data, ensures party discipline, and creates a unified strategy for interaction with citizens. However, such a model reduces the ability of regional organisations to influence the political agenda, creating dependence on national leadership and its digital solutions. Despite cultural and political differences, all cases illustrate a common trend – the transformation of parties into organisations with digital operational logic. However, the trajectory of transformation significantly depends on the initial political culture: in the context of Italian anti-political rhetoric,

the Rousseau platform (n.d.) became a tool of paradoxical power concentration, while in North America digital tools were integrated into already existing institutional frameworks. In the era of digital transformation, political campaigns have undergone radical changes, caused not only by the widespread adoption of digital technologies but also by the change in the nature of interaction between political actors and the public. Digital campaigns have become the dominant form of political communication, based on constant presence in virtual space, immediacy of reactions, high personalisation of messages, and dynamic management of reputational risks. The modern strategy of digital presence of political actors involves not only generating content aimed at electoral mobilisation but also building an integrated system of monitoring, prevention, and neutralisation of information threats capable of affecting reputation and political stability.

Reputational risks in the digital environment are multidimensional. Such risks encompass both external threats, associated with the spread of fake news, cyber-provocations, leaks of personal data, and internal challenges linked to uncoordinated actions of team members, unethical statements by candidates, or errors in communication strategies. In this context, it is critically important to develop a digital reputation security strategy, which includes multi-level risk analysis, modelling of crisis scenarios, involvement of digital security experts, lawyers, and crisis communicators. At the same time, effective management of online conflicts requires rapid responses to escalations on social networks, the use of counter-narrative tools, targeted advertising to shift focus, as well as active involvement of influencers to neutralise negative discourse. Online crises – including “cancellation” campaigns, information attacks by bot networks, or coordinated discreditation campaigns – change the landscape of political competition. In Ukraine, an example of high-risk online communication is the 2019 presidential election, during which V. Zelenskyi’s team conducted a hybrid digital campaign that included Telegram, YouTube, and Instagram. In the corresponding fragment analysing the “strategy of presence”, an example should be given of using entertainment content as a form of political mobilisation. However, excessive personalisation of the brand created risks for institutional stability, as evidenced by the perception of the “Servant of the People” party as merely a media project. The management of such crises is impossible without prior development of information response protocols, a system of digital ethics of the party or candidate, as well as constant analysis of digital traces. The exit strategy from a reputational crisis should rely on rapid apology (in the case of confirmed misconduct), rephrasing

of the political message, increased transparency of actions, and demonstration of value consistency. Digitalisation of political communication has far-reaching consequences for the very nature of political legitimacy, trust, and participation. Unlike traditional forms of communication, where parties functioned as institutionalised intermediaries between citizens and the authorities, the digital environment fosters fragmentation of the information space, a decrease in the role of ideological identity, and an increase in the importance of individual charisma. This process transforms the paradigm of political participation – from structured involvement in elections and party activities to new forms of micro-activism, digital mobilisation through social networks, online petitions, crowdfunding campaigns, and virtual rallies. Trust in parties in the digital age is no longer based solely on programme principles or historical capital. It is formed in real time, in conditions of informational saturation, where public opinion is highly sensitive to visual signals, media behaviour, and responses to socially significant events. Party structures are forced to adapt to new expectations of citizens by introducing policies of openness, digital accountability, and regular communication with the audience through streams, blogs, and chatbots. The role of the leader is also changing – from a bearer of a political programme to an active participant in a constant digital dialogue with citizens. The issue of legitimacy is also transformed in the new political context. While in the traditional sense it relied on formal election procedures, institutional continuity, and legality of actions, in the digital era legitimacy increasingly takes the form of “emotional coherence” – the ability of a political actor to represent public moods, values, and expectations in the online space. The absence of digital activity or irrelevant presence can be perceived as a loss of social connection, undermining trust in a party or institution. Thus, digitalisation not only expanded the tools of political communication but also posed new challenges for party structures, requiring a profound revision of participation strategies, methods of reputation management, and legitimacy formation. Actually, the success of digital campaigns depends not so much on the quantity of content as on its relevance, adaptability, and ability to create sustainable symbolic links with the audience. In this context, political trust becomes not a given, but the result of a constant digital dialogue, where strategic management of conflicts, vulnerabilities, and value identity in the digital environment plays a decisive role.

Discussion

The digitalisation of politics as part of broader processes of technological transformation of society became the subject of active interdisciplinary attention during the 2020s of the 21st century. The rapid development of social media, digital platforms, algorithmised interaction tools, and big data changed both external political communication and the internal structure of political organisations. Political parties – institutional intermediaries between citizens and the state – emerged at the centre of these changes. Traditional models of hierarchical governance, centralised control over decision-making, and clear organisational structures came under pressure from horizontal, decentralised, networked logics. The application of network governance theory, the

concept of crowdsourcing, hybrid party organisation, and comparative analysis of digital practices made it possible to reveal the complex nature of these changes. A comparison of the research results with the work of A. Min (2023) revealed a shared emphasis on the role of strategic communication in the context of digital politics. While A. Min emphasised the use of social media, data analytics, and targeted messaging to gain competitive advantage in political campaigns, the conducted research highlighted not only communicative but also structural transformations of parties. Both approaches pointed to the personalisation and emotionalisation of political leadership as key features of the new digital era. However, while A. Min viewed these changes mainly in terms of the effectiveness of electoral strategy, the research focused on the impact on the internal organisation of parties and the nature of legitimacy. These conclusions were consistent with the analytical framework of A. Larrondo-Ureta & K. Meso-Ayerdi (2021), which emphasised the emotionalisation of political content, transmediality, and the use of big data. Both works stressed the importance of adaptation to new technologies; however, while A. Larrondo-Ureta & K. Meso-Ayerdi focused primarily on the potential of AI and big data, the conducted research revealed the impact on organisational structures and legitimacy.

The results of the research indicated the formation of complex hybrid party structures, in which traditional hierarchical models of governance gradually combined with modern horizontal digital tools, based on the principles of networked organisation and digital interaction. This integration of classical elements of hierarchy – centralised control, formal leadership units, procedural rules – with dynamic, open, often decentralised platforms of digital participation created unique organisational configurations characterised by flexibility, adaptability, and the ability to respond rapidly to changes in the political environment. Such conclusions corresponded to the conceptual framework proposed by I. Borucki (2022), who, in the work, emphasised a comprehensive analysis of digital parties through the combination of technical and political aspects of transformation. I. Borucki proposed an integrative approach covering not only the technological impact of digital platforms on party activities but also the influence on decision-making procedures, internal communications, and mechanisms of political legitimisation. The model stressed the importance of procedural adaptation, i.e., the reorganisation of internal party processes in line with new digital opportunities, as a key precondition for effective transformation. Thus, the findings of this research confirmed I. Borucki’s key ideas about the formation of hybrid structures that combine traditional hierarchical principles with networked organisational mechanisms. However, unlike the relatively uniform approach of I. Borucki, the research results demonstrated a much broader variability of adaptation models, determined by the influence of national political cultures, historical traditions, the level of digital infrastructure development, and legislative frameworks. It was revealed that the nature and depth of digital transformation differed significantly even among countries with similar levels of digitalisation, which emphasised the need to take local context into account in the study of hybrid party models. This showed that universal

models of transformation could not always fully reflect the complexity and dynamics of digitalisation in different political systems. Similar ideas about the hybridity of organisational forms were confirmed in the works of A. Peña & T. Gold (2023), who proposed the concept of the “party-in-network” and developed a taxonomy of digital roles within party structures. This approach considered the party not only as a hierarchical institution but also as a complex network of interactions, including formal institutions and informal digital groups of influence. The empirical analysis detailed the role of digital activists, digital platform managers, and online initiative coordinators as new centres of power that significantly influenced the distribution of intra-party authority. It was particularly emphasised that the effectiveness of such hybrid models depended on the institutional and regulatory context, which could both facilitate and restrain the decentralisation of power. Therefore, the obtained results not only confirmed the feasibility of considering political parties as networked organisations but also highlighted the need for a clear distinction between formal (institutional) channels of digital influence and informal networks of digital activists operating outside traditional structures of authority. This division was critical for understanding how intra-party democracy was formed and transformed in the digital age.

A particularly significant comparison was made with the work of J.H. Lipschultz (2022), which analysed in detail the transformations of political legitimacy in the digital space, including the role of propaganda, the diffusion of innovations, and manipulative strategies. J.H. Lipschultz stressed that social networks had become not only channels of communication but also active participants in the processes of forming political discourse, significantly influencing the perception of the legitimacy of political actors. The results of the research complemented this approach, demonstrating that social media not only possessed manipulative potential but also performed a structuring function in the organisation of party activities – social media facilitated the emergence of new forms of political leadership and participation mechanisms, particularly through platforms of direct democracy and crowdsourcing tools. Similar conclusions were found in the work of P. Gerbaudo (2019), who examined intra-party democracy in digital parties such as Italy’s “Movimento 5 Stelle” and Spain’s Podemos in the context of plebiscitary logic. P. Gerbaudo criticised officially declared mechanisms of participation as superficial and instrumental, favouring centralised control and populist strategies. The research not only confirmed these critical observations but also revealed additional structural aspects that extended beyond purely intra-democratic processes. In particular, it was found that alternative centres of influence were being formed on the basis of digital platforms, concentrating power and resources in the hands of a limited number of people. Of particular importance was the identification of the paradox of concentration of control over digital tools, which created new challenges for democratic transparency and accountability.

The comparison with J.L. Bayless (2022) and G. Sánchez Medero (2024) confirmed a shared concern about destabilisation risks. While J.L. Bayless analysed the USA, the research extended these concerns to a broader

range of democracies, showing that the centralisation of technical control (e.g. admin access to platforms, algorithmic control) was a global trend that created asymmetries in access to political influence. However, unlike the mainly normative approach of J.L. Bayless, this research detailed intra-party mechanisms of centralisation: from restricting access to back-end systems to the moderation of digital discussions, effectively controlled by a few individuals. A significant contribution to the study was made by the work of M. Malý (2024), which examined the “Česká pirátská strana” as an example of an Eastern European digital experiment. Compared with this, the research results covered a broader range of cases but confirmed general trends associated with decentralisation, changes in decision-making mechanisms, and the strengthening of the role of digital participation. A particularly relevant observation was the shared recognition of how digital parties sought to balance new forms of horizontal governance with the need to preserve organisational integrity. The discussion of the research results in the context of contemporary literature demonstrated that the digital transformation of political parties was a multidimensional process, encompassing communicative, organisational, and legitimising changes. The academic debate to which this research contributed was gradually shifting from the analysis of individual tools to an understanding of the structural consequences of digitalisation. Unlike some earlier studies, which focused mainly on the effectiveness of digital strategies or normative risks, this research demonstrated that the key determinants of change were the interaction between digital technologies and the organisational environment. The identified hybrid models, network logics, and new channels of legitimation showed that political parties were not merely adapting to technologies – the parties were shaping new types of institutionality, where the boundaries between formal and informal, centralised and decentralised, transparent and closed were becoming increasingly blurred.

Conclusions

The research revealed a significant transformation of political parties under the influence of digitalisation, which manifested itself at several interconnected levels. Firstly, it was established that digital platforms radically changed the nature of political communication, transforming it from a one-way process of message transmission into a multidimensional space of interactive engagement. This change led to the emergence of new forms of political participation, particularly through mechanisms of direct digital democracy, as confirmed by the analysis of the LiquidFeedback platform in Germany’s “Piratenpartei Deutschland” and crowdsourcing tools implemented in systems such as Decidim in Barcelona. The research showed that digitalisation significantly influenced the internal organisation of parties, challenging the effectiveness of traditional hierarchical structures. The analysis of the cases of Italy’s “Movimento 5 Stelle” and Spain’s Podemos demonstrated that digital platforms created alternative centres of influence, leading to the decentralisation of decision-making processes. However, as revealed in the case of the Rousseau platform, this decentralisation was often accompanied by the paradoxical effect of concentration of control over data in the hands of a limited

circle of individuals. An important academic finding was the identification of the formation of hybrid party structures that combined elements of traditional hierarchy with networked organisational principles. Such structures, analysed in the case of the Liberal Party of Canada and a German party, demonstrated adaptability in the digital age while maintaining institutional stability. However, the research revealed significant differences in the implementation of hybrid models, determined by national political cultures and institutional contexts.

At the level of political strategies, it was established that digitalisation led to the emergence of new communicative practices, particularly microtargeting and real-time agenda setting. The analysis of the election campaigns of E. Macron and D. Trump showed that social networks transformed the nature of political leadership, placing emphasis on personalisation and emotional intensity of content. The research also revealed significant changes in the nature of political legitimacy in the digital age. As the analysis demonstrated, traditional sources of legitimacy associated with institutional continuity and formal procedures were giving way to new forms based on constant digital dialogue and emotional alignment with the audience. The obtained results indicated that digital transformations had an ambiguous impact on political

parties. On the one hand, such transformations opened new opportunities for democratisation and inclusiveness; on the other hand, the digital transformations generated new challenges related to cybersecurity, algorithmic manipulation, and the loss of control over party processes. Thus, it was established that the process of digital transformation of parties had a non-linear character and depended significantly on the national institutional context. The analysis showed that hybrid organisational models combining traditional elements with digital innovations demonstrated the greatest viability under contemporary conditions. Future research could focus on a comparative analysis of the adaptation of hybrid party models in countries with different levels of digitalisation, as well as on the impact of artificial intelligence and social media algorithms on the mechanisms of intra-party democracy.

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Conflict of Interest

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