

Essay

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No need for a coffee break? – party work in the digital age

The participatory digital party as an imperfect substitute

By Dr. Isabelle Borucki,¹ Dennis Michels² and Stine Ziegler ³

The Covid pandemic is changing perspectives on ourselves, on society and on politics in many ways. Things that were taken for granted are being questioned, failures and requirements are becoming visible, amplified as if by a magnifying glass. Questions of digitalization, or, more precisely, the opportunities offered by digital communication and collaboration over physical distances are playing a key role in this context. Apart from digital work and digital education, this also applies to the political process and to political parties as its key actors. In the past, parties were often criticized for completely failing to adapt to the digital transformation - or for wanting to ride it out.

Actually, the history of the digitalization of parties goes back to the 1990s and has gone through a number of ups and downs (Bieber 2014). If, on its cover, the daily "Tagesspiegel" describes the Greens' first digital party conference as a novelty in May 2020 (Eubel 2020) and the CSU celebrates its successful first online party conference in the same month (Clauß 2020), this is only the culmination of a longer development (Bieber 2002, 2001; Marschall 2001). Key moments in this process have certainly been the growing use of social media, starting with Facebook, as well as the increasing strength of the "Piratenpartei" (pirates party) since 2010 (Klecha/Hensel 2013), which already experimented with digital interaction in political decision-making processes. Especially the SPD (Hanel/Marschall 2012) and the Green Party (Gerl et al. 2016) have picked up these ideas and used them for their own digital experiments. At the international level, the "Five Star Movement" in Italy and the Podemos party in Spain were already much more digitalized parties even shortly before the pandemic (Gerbaudo 2019).. In the case of the Five Star Movement, however, the party showed a

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trend towards digitalized authoritarianism, because all positions and decisions that had been collaboratively developed by the members on the internet, were still subject to the approval of the party leader Beppe Grillo, who also had the power to exclude critical party members from the party platform that he owned personally (Diehl 2018). . Thus, it would be premature to present digital parties as paragons of modern internal party democracy.

The digital developments German parties are undergoing are therefore not completely new. Rather, they are processes that had already been triggered and for which the Covid pandemic had (has had) a catalytic effect. The tools and programs that are now being used increasingly have been sitting in the drawers at parties' headquarters for quite a while, which means they were already developed and tested internally (Burmester 2015, Machnig 2000). The pandemic as a driver of digitalization now coincides with the efforts parties are making to digitize their internal operations and decision-making modes.

The Greens certainly had the advantage that their young membership had urgently called for the use of more digital instruments in party work even before the pandemic. Combined with the party's grass-roots tradition, which classically strongly depends on interaction and exchange, this led to the implementation of various digital tools, such as platforms handling motions or collaborative platforms that were already operational at the beginning of the pandemic. In this sense, then, all that was needed was to upscale the existing structure in terms of hardware, in order to facilitate increased data traffic caused by a larger number of participants in video conferences, for example. It seems that the above-mentioned small-scale party conference was, therefore, technically manageable and served its function. However, there was little excitement or vibe at the event, the speakers talked into a camera, the response from the audience was non-existent, all of which was discussed and deplored by the delegates themselves.

Party work is a face-to-face business, after all. It thrives on a sense of community, a sense of belonging, informality and spontaneity. It has not been possible (so far) to translate all of this into software. Digital tools constrict interaction. The assumption that negotiating delicate political decisions that depend on the mutual trust of the actors involved only happens in an analogue mode, in physical meetings, still holds true.⁴ In addition, digital communication is usually persistent, which means that data can be collected and archived. It may be possible to retrieve the exact wording of statements and comments after a meeting, which, while creating transparency, virtually destroys spontaneity and relaxed social interaction (Neubaum/Krämer 2018). Also, a party conference is about more than just official debates and resolutions: for party members, bumping into people, striking confidential deals behind the scenes, meeting friends, sharing a drink after a long day and other sociable activities that can have an influence on the level of support for policy positions and decision-making are an integral part of the event.

⁴ An experimental study on this aspect proved that negotiating joint decisions in the digital space produced a change in social relations that did not lead to the same kind of confidence-building and consensus-seeking as face-to-face negotiations. In this case, however, the digital environments were purely text-based and did not include any interaction via digital video and audio transmission – which is currently growing so fast (Pritzlaff-Scheele/Nullmeier 2018).

This point was emphasized by Christian Lindner in the introductory remarks to his speech at the federal party conference of the FDP in September 2020:

„A federal party conference at last! We have learned a lot about digital communication during the pandemic. We have also developed new formats for our FDP. (...) But we have also learned this: Meeting and talking to people face-to-face cannot be digitized and that's why it was inevitable to have this federal party conference.“

This party conference was a first, too, because it was the first in-person party conference during the Covid crisis (Leitlein 2020). There was probably little relaxed social interaction due to hygiene protocols and the need to minimize contacts. Similar party conferences will follow: the party conference of the Linke ("the Left") in late October/early November, and that of the CDU in December (Otto 2020). What these parties have in common is that all of them are facing elections of their national executive committees, and therefore changes in their leadership, which makes in-person party conferences inevitable, because it would be difficult and legally shaky to implement a digital voting procedure that is secret and at the same time transparent. The option of casting digital votes to elect a new party leadership of the SPD, for example, gave rise to some criticism and concerns (Peteranderl 2019). The election had to be formally approved by the federal party conference that met just a few months before the beginning of the Covid crisis, so that the partially digitized members' vote, while politically binding, only had the character of a recommendation from a legal perspective.

The Political Parties Act of 1967, understandably, did not anticipate the technological developments happening in our information society. It provides for parties to organize gatherings that are physically attended. This concept is linked to the democratic ideal that assumes the physical presence of individuals. Changing the law would require a major effort. Even an amended law could not guarantee a successful clarification of the currently uncertain legal status of online elections.

The ideal of physical presence is also reflected in the territorial principle governing party structures that is laid down in party law. The organizational set-up of parties reflects the federal administrative structure of the German state. For some time there has been a discussion on departing from this principle to enable the creation of digital party units that are not tied to any location. In the context of a planned amendment of the Political Parties Act, parties are trying to find solutions for the geographical definition of their organizational structures which only parts of their membership still favor. These solutions are supposed to take into account the preferences and needs of people who are increasingly hyper-mobile, supra-territorial and cosmopolitan. To this end, the SPD adopted the option to introduce so-called "online issue forums" at its last party conference (Michels/Borucki 2020). These new digital bodies have the right to submit motions at federal party conferences and can be represented by so-called advisory delegates who have the right to speak but not to vote at the conference. The really new feature of these forums is their statutory status, i.e. they are laid down in the party constitution, which makes them the first fully digital, full-fledged party body, and the issue-centered digital connection of its members, which is supposed to be nationwide, not tied to any geographical location. The idea is to provide a more appealing opportunity

mainly to new young party members to get digitally involved in party work and in the internal policy debates, based on the internet, beyond the boundaries of their local community or neighborhood.

Apart from the problem of changes in social relations and confidence-building due to inadequate digital responsiveness as well as the legal barriers regarding votes and organizational structures, the major obstacles hampering the increasing digitalization of parties are cultural challenges (i.e. party culture, its structure, the structure of its members). As far as the opportunities and limits of digital party work are concerned, it seems that there are no technological limits, but actually doing everything that is possible is not always wanted. After all, the use of digital tools requires users who are skilled and well-informed enough to use them reliably, which raises the issue of data literacy. Parties need to offer online training programs, but they also have to be prepared to use digital organizational and voting tools. So far, research has shown that there is little inclination for this among party members, which is mainly due to a certain resistance of the medium-level leadership to such tools. They regard a digital blurring of boundaries in decision-making as a potential threat to their power base which is rooted in their function as a filter between the rank and file and the party leadership (Chiru et al. 2015).

The socioeconomic and sociocultural structure of party members also creates friction in intra-party digitalization processes. Elderly and female party members still tend to have less affinity to digital tools than younger male members. Another factor, known since the "Pirate Party's" experiments, is the time individual members can dedicate to their party's online activities. If discussions no longer have a time limit (as you would have in face-to-face meetings), but are conducted as a permanent forum, chat, stream and the like, information overload and a fragmentation of the debate quickly follow. This, in turn, gives those party members wider influence who have "more online time to spare" (Klecha/Hensel 2013, S. 65-74). Also, lessons learned from using commercial social media like Facebook and Twitter need to be applied to intra-party digital instruments: on these platforms, statements by users are often unrelated to any other comment made by others and the number of positions and opinions multiplies extremely, which ends up producing mostly noise and dissonance (Klinger 2020).

At the same time, the way parties have confronted the inadvertent digitalization boost during the pandemic has shown that they are more innovative and more prepared to try new approaches than is usually believed. Is it that the right trigger had simply been missing? Perhaps. Parties are well-advised, however, to keep pursuing this course. Because the Fridays-For-Future movement is only the latest example that shows young people's willingness to speak up for the issues that they feel strongly about. Parties, however, are not relevant platforms for them (Albert et al. 2019, S. 19). It is not that they are disillusioned with politics, they are disillusioned with parties. Those who have grown up in a connected world, who experience digital interaction in all spheres of life are also those who call for digital ways of getting politically involved. The focus here is not only on digitalization but also on the way collaboration is defined. Some essential demands are: hierarchical structures should be replaced by a networking logic and it should be possible to do party work anywhere and anytime, thereby reflecting the increasing mobility and flexibility of their members. Digital

tools offer opportunities that can help meet these demands. Meetings of local party chapters, discussing politics over a beer, party conferences and festivals will not automatically lose their relevance, but can even become more important, because they invite people to be completely open to and make the best use of face-to-face contact, while the policy debate was already prepared or even concluded online.

In early September, the Greens announced that, due to the current Covid situation, their federal delegates' conference will also be organized as a virtual meeting (RND 2020). So the experiment will continue in May. Surely, the party will have learned its lessons from the first digital party conference and will change a few things. Perhaps there will be some excitement or vibe after all – on the web.

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