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Editorial: Digital policies, rules and practice on political organisations and their digital ecosystem

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Digital policies, rules and practice on political organisations and their digital ecosystem](#)

With the surge in the use of the internet and social media, political organizations like political parties, trade unions, Civil Society Organizations and governmental entities are increasingly digitalizing their decision-making procedures and interacting online (e.g., Barberà et al., 2021; Gilardi, 2022). They now leverage social media to inform about public policy decisions, conduct campaigns, engage with supporters, and manage their operations. The expectation is that these digital tools will enable these intermediaries to connect with both existing and new supporters at a lower cost, deliver tailored messages, and lower the hurdles for political participation, especially within parties (Jungheer et al., 2020).

Despite the increasing reliance of political parties on online platforms and tools, there is a lack of research on the existing and appropriate regulation of their online activities. Scandals like the Cambridge Analytica data breach or the M5S internal party platform's privacy and democratic issues highlight the urgent need for regulations (Heawood, 2018). Political parties should aim to use online tools to enhance democracy and empower people to engage and participate with politics, not to erode trust and membership in these intermediary organizations.

Along four papers, this Research Topic aims to provide the state of the art on the influence of digital policies, regulations, and practices on political organizations and their digital ecosystem. This endeavor encompasses exploring informal practices governing these organizations, both internally and externally, and how these are determined by and might determine public policy and administration. This multifaceted approach enables the incorporation of perspectives on rules and practices at the juncture of formal and informal policymaking, generating valuable insights surpassing academia to inform political parties and public policymakers alike.

The first paper by Villaplana et al. entitled "From open government to open parties in Europe. A framework for analysis" transfers the concept of Open government (OG) to political parties. They argue parties are crucial players in determining whether OG measures aimed at transforming public administration succeed or fail, both from a grassroots and a top-down viewpoint. One key aspect is that through their involvement in such policies, parties might transform themselves into more open organizations. These "open parties" according to Villaplana et al. feature high standards in transparency, participation, collaboration and degrees of organizational digitalization. The application

of their innovative framework led to find out that, although most parties exhibit a solid organizational strength at the local level, they still need to advance in various areas, especially in promoting the engagement of members and activists in their decision-making. Key obstacles seem to be elitism, clientelism, and populist rhetoric.

The paper by [Fitzpatrick and Thuermer](#) shifts from discussing the effective use of technology in transforming political parties to the role of financial resources. By conducting interviews with stakeholders of the German and Austrian Green Parties about their utilization of online participation platforms, they analyse what aspects and security concerns are discussed when parties purchase new ICTs. Their findings point out differences, even among these most similar cases, in their approach to securing ICTs: “some see security as a long-term issue and invest in in-house solutions, while others see security as a necessary expense and opt for external service providers” ([Fitzpatrick and Thuermer](#), p. 1). Thus, as their title suggests, political parties might have quite different philosophies and spending policies when it comes to security concerns.

The next two papers move from how ICTs reshape party internal organizations and their link to members and supporters. Instead, they focus on emerging interactions between ICTs, existing rules and informal practices during political campaigns and beyond. Here, the paper by [Barclay et al.](#) studies “*The regulatory ecosystem of data driven campaigning in the UK.*” The diverse nature of data-driven campaigning (DDC) and the involvement of multiple regulatory bodies raise concern about the adequacy of existing regulatory frameworks to address the potential harms arising from its expansion. This paper attempts to address this issue by examining the emergent regulatory ecosystem for DDC in the specific case of the UK. Based on interview data from a range of regulators, they reveal that while privacy violations associated with DDC are largely addressed by current law, other potential harms have received less attention or are entirely overlooked. These shortcomings are attributed to regulators’ insufficient authority or motivation to take action.

The last paper by [Hegelich et al.](#) steps from regulations to practice. Their study investigates the employment of Twitter as a tool for political acclamation by candidates during elections. Their mixed-method study encompasses a theoretical examination of acclamation and its interplay with constituent elements of social media. The paper is followed by a comparative analysis of the acclamation strategies employed by US-Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden on Twitter. Their results establish acclamation as a fundamental aspect of political communication, albeit with distinct nuances for each president. These variations stem, in part, from differential effects of Twitter’s algorithms on the communication of the three presidents. These findings expand the notion of social media as an acclamation platform and reaffirm its relevance in contemporary political discourse.

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Overall, these four articles shed much needed light on the digital policies, regulations and practices of political organizations and their digital ecosystem. They highlight both how ICTs change party internal organization and campaign practices. At the same time, they show the need to adopt appropriate regulation to achieve a successful digital transformation of political organizations, especially parties, to increase the benefits of ICTs and limit its potential harm. This Research Topic proved a useful foundation to study new and upcoming digital regulations and policies on the national and European levels, such as the EU Digital Services Act. By gaining a better understand how these rules impact political parties’ online activities, future research should assess the effectiveness and enforceability of these regulations to ensure that they can contribute to safeguarding or even enhancing democracy.

Author contributions

FN: Conceptualization, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. IB: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. OB: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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