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RECEIVED 20 February 2025

ACCEPTED 19 May 2025

PUBLISHED 05 June 2025

## CITATION

Sánchez Medero G (2025) Diagnosis of the digitalization of intraparty democracy in Southern European political parties.  
*Front. Polit. Sci.* 7:1580687.  
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2025.1580687

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# Diagnosis of the digitalization of intraparty democracy in Southern European political parties

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The purpose of this study is to diagnose levels of intraparty digital democracy on Southern European political parties' official websites and digital platforms. To this end, an intraparty digital democracy index has been developed to measure intraparty digital democracy beyond the scope of candidate selection and general participation, using the variables established by the Varieties of Democracy index as a reference. In this way, it is possible to determine whether the digitalization of parties is truly altering parties' behaviors towards, and interactions with, members, based on the premise that democratization involves different costs, trade-offs, and challenges. This has led us to ask which dimensions are undergoing the most digitalization, why this is and, whether the origin of the parties becomes a determining factor for greater democratization of these.

## KEYWORDS

political parties, intraparty democracy, digitalization, Southern Europe, digital

## 1 Introduction

The use of digital tools is transforming the internal organizational structures and strategies of political parties (Margetts, 2001, 2006; Hartleb, 2013; Klimowicz, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2019; Biancalana and Vittori, 2021, 2023), the forms of communication between party members and citizens (Faucher, 2015; Gibson et al., 2003; Jackson and Lilleker, 2009; Margetts, 2006; Gibson and McAllister, 2015; García Lupato et al., 2023), and even the ability of parties (and particularly of traditional party structures) to establish closer and more direct contact with citizens, thereby expanding and renewing democratic engagement (Scarow, 2005; Cross and Katz, 2013; Loxbo, 2013; Rahat and Shapira, 2017; Scarow et al., 2022; Sandri et al., 2024; Tronconi and Bailo, 2025). In recent years, this has led to the proliferation of studies on the digitalization of political parties. However, most studies focus on the transformation of party management, political communication, and electoral campaigns (Gibson and Ward, 2009; Ward and Gibson, 2009), so consequently there remains a lack of comparative analyses regarding the extent to which parties are implementing digital mechanisms to reconfigure intraparty democracy.

Studies of internal party democracy (IPD) have primarily focused on analyzing how parties have implemented new mechanisms and procedures to promote IPD. Specifically, they examine how party policies are decided (e.g., Gauja, 2009; Cross and Blais, 2009; Scarow, 2014; Sussman, 2007), how candidates and leaders are selected (e.g., Cross and Katz, 2013; Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Rahat, 2013; Sánchez Medero, 2024), or the nature of party innovations (García Lupato et al., 2023). This is problematic in that both the candidate selection and direct participation approach treat IPD as a matter of expressing and aggregating existing preferences, thereby overlooking the processes through which preferences themselves emerge (Wolkenstein, 2016: p. 300). Nevertheless, Scarow (2005: p. 3) defines internal democracy as "a broad range of methods aimed at involving party members in *deliberation* and decision-making within the political organization." Furthermore, as Cross & Katz (2013: p. 3) explain, there is no academic

consensus on what exactly interparty democracy means, nor how it should be institutionalized or measured. Although numerous studies have analyzed empirical indicators to measure IPD, they have focused on aspects such as participation, decision-making processes, organizational structure, elite behavior, etc. (Borz and Janda, 2020; Scarrow et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2022; Demker et al., 2020; Demker and Heidar, 2020). Although to a lesser extent, this includes official party websites (Lisi, 2025), or in party digitalization (Sandri et al., 2024).

For this reason, this article aims to develop knowledge on the digital transformation of political parties. In doing so, several theoretical and empirical innovations are introduced. First, the intraparty digital democracy indicators index was created by the Varieties of Democracy (Coppedge et al., 2019) and Fitzpatrick (2021) and is updated to develop a comprehensive analysis across various dimensions. Secondly, a diagnosis of intraparty digital democracy is conducted for Southern European parties, with parliamentary representation, a topic that has not yet been addressed in the existing literature. Thirdly, the article examines whether there is a potential link between the origin of political parties and their digitalization.

This study is empirically innovative because, to the best of our knowledge, it represents the most comprehensive and extensive set of comparative data on this phenomenon in Southern European countries. For this purpose, we assess the implementation of digital tools to promote internal democracy on the digital platforms and official websites of political parties, based on a proposed measurement model, across 22 parties in four countries (Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Greece). Furthermore, in an effort to go beyond case studies or descriptive comparisons, not only has the degree of intraparty digital democracy been measured, but existing deficiencies have also been identified. At the same time, following the framework established in Fitzpatrick's (2021) work, four of his five dimensions (electoral, liberal, participatory, and deliberative) have been used to conduct a diagnosis of intraparty digital democracy, to determine which dimensions are the most digitalized and explain why.

This article, therefore, poses two questions: What are the most digitalized dimensions of intraparty digital democracy, why, and which parties are more inclined towards intraparty digital democracy. The article first presents the analytical framework and hypotheses, followed by the methodology that leads to initial descriptive findings. Finally, the theoretical implications of our findings will be discussed, along with our contribution to the existing literature.

## 2 A proposal to measure intraparty digital democracy and the meso-level factors of its digitalization

The introduction of intraparty democracy initiatives is arguably the most transformative process many political parties have experienced over the past two decades. The crisis they appear to be undergoing has led them to integrate party members into internal decision-making processes, while also considering their needs and interests by making use of digital technology (e.g., online platforms, social media, mass media) in an attempt to reduce the distance between membership and decision making, increase members' trust in political parties, and counter political alienation (Schmidhuber et al., 2019). The democratization of party structures has thus become

necessary for citizens to regain interest in activism within a political organization (Bille, 2001; Scarrow, 2005; Norris, 2005). Parties are in part adopting these measures because they are obliged to implement them due to party leaders reacting to external factors, such as the decline in membership, and partly through conviction, as leaders respond to internal demands for more voice and participation in key decisions (Wauters et al., 2011). The former results from a set of actions undertaken by party leadership to try to halt the ongoing decline in membership. The latter reflects the complex interaction between leaders and grassroots members. However, this does not mean that intraparty democracy is limited to grassroots participation. It encompasses other aspects such as deliberation, competition, representation, receptivity, transparency, and dissemination (Rahat and Shapira, 2017; Ignazi, 2020). This is especially true considering many parties have opted to create online platforms, through which their members can participate in debates (Gerl et al., 2017), promote initiatives (Gerbaudo, 2019), make decisions on party strategy (Scarrow and Gezgor, 2010), vote in electronic consultations (Gerbaudo, 2019; Biancalana and Vittori, 2021, 2023), attend training sessions (Gerbaudo, 2021), coordinate party activities, and more. Additionally, official party websites have been transformed. They are now, not only used to provide information, but also to enhance transparency (Nixon and Johansson, 1999; Lisi, 2025), attract new members through online affiliation, mobilize, interact, or gather financial resources (Gibson et al., 2013; Scarrow, 2014; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2016), thus also fulfilling important functions for intraparty democracy.

The ability of party members to directly influence internal decisions has garnered the most attention in studies on intraparty democracy (e.g., Sussman, 2007; Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Cross and Katz, 2013; Scarrow, 2014). Moreover, political parties reduce this issue to mere aggregation, overlooking other essential aspects of intraparty democracy, such as delegation procedures. This is because aggregative processes typically reduce participation in decision-making to binary options (Sandri et al., 2015), ultimately enhancing the control of party leaders over decisions and diminishing the role of members in these processes, by preventing them from expressing themselves beyond the pre-established choices (Katz and Mair, 1995). Aggregative elements are, therefore, insufficient to strengthen intraparty democracy because the democratic functioning of parties is not only about allowing all members to ratify decisions, a question of quantity, but rather about fostering the best possible participation, an issue of quality (Presno Linera, 2000: p. 30). In this way, the impact of digital initiatives on intraparty democracy can be better understood, not only in terms of how democracy operates within parties, but also in terms of its possibly differential impact and consequences of its quality (García Lupato and Meloni, 2021).

Thus, this study opted to create an index that is closer to those studies combining various elements of what have been considered democratic dimensions. Moreover, the decision not to use existing indices was taken because not all of the dimensions addressed in these indices, such as those of capacity or representation, align with the digital realm (Rahat and Shapira, 2017), or they are only applied to aggregative aspects (Hazan and Rahat, 2010). For example, while it is true that this index has the merit of going beyond candidate selection procedures as an indirect indicator of party democratization, it is still based on a formal (or procedural) conception of the DIP. On the other hand, von dem Berge and Poguntke's (2017) index evaluates the

impact of inclusiveness and the changing nature of party affiliation on two decision-making processes: assembly-based decision-making and plebiscite-based decision-making. However, democracy includes not only decision-making, but also the modality of decisions. This inevitably implies that democracy goes beyond inclusion, and that other elements such as internal pluralism, deliberation, diffusion, etc. must also be taken into consideration. Furthermore, if we add the fastpace of technological advances and the changes occurring within parties, it seems justified to attempt to develop a comprehensive and specific tool that covers both aggregative and delegative processes. To this end, we have taken as a reference the dimensions adopted in the Varieties of Democracy index (Coppedge et al., 2019) and Fitzpatrick (2021): electoral, participatory, deliberative, and liberal. We have used this index because it offers important tools and parameters applicable to intra-party democracy. In addition to this, alongside the dimensions used in Fitzpatrick's (2021) study, we obtain two further uses in our analysis: (1) we identify which dimensions of democracy are reinforced with the adoption of certain digital measures, and (2) determine the differential impact that digital technologies have on political parties' internal processes (Gerbaudo, 2019). However, it should be noted that we have discarded Fitzpatrick's egalitarian dimension because it did not offer as many possible items as in the other dimensions, and its application to the digital sphere is not as propitious, thereby potentially distorting the impact. Finally, we have proposed a series of items that combine aggregative and delegative processes for each dimension. These have been selected based on those used in other studies (in these cases, the authors appear alongside the items), but we have also added others *ex novo*. In any case, we chose those considered best suited to measuring all the dimensions of intraparty digital democracy.

First, the Electoral Dimension, assesses the effective capacity of party members to influence important party decisions, particularly the selection of electoral candidates, representatives in internal bodies and strategic decision-making through mechanisms such as consultations and referendums. Here, reference is made to digital voting to determine whether any participatory procedures have been established. Within this framework, the existence of digital voting is included as an indicator because it represents a relevant entry point for analyzing whether modern and accessible participatory mechanisms are being implemented. However, we recognize that simply voting does not guarantee substantive participation, which is

why other items have been selected to assess the inclusiveness and deliberativeness of internal processes. In this regard, indicators have been chosen that measure the degree of inclusion in these processes (see Table 1). For example, one indicator is the existence of candidate recruitment mechanisms, both for public elections and for internal bodies. This item is important because it allows us to examine whether candidate selection is open and accessible to a broad range of members, or whether it is limited to an elite. That is to say, this indicator helps identify the level of openness of the party's internal electoral process. We also considered it essential to observe whether members can present proposals or initiatives within the party. This item assesses whether there are institutionalized channels for members to influence the party's agenda, rather than validate decisions made by leaders. The ability to present initiatives implies a degree of empowerment beyond the relatively passive act of voting. Finally, the nature and impacts of internal consultations and referendums has been included. Rather than verifying their existence formally, what is truly important is to investigate how these mechanisms are implemented and what effects they have on the party's internal dynamics. To do so, we determine whether these procedures address general issues, coalition building, political strategies, or government decisions, or whether they are binding. In this sense, it is not simply a matter of counting how many times consultations or referendums are held, but rather of evaluating their content and scope, that is, whether they truly strengthen assembly-based and horizontal dynamics, in line with the proposals made by Cross and Blais (2009).

Second, the Liberal Dimension examines the degree to which party members possess effective mechanisms of control and accountability over their leaders. This is based on the premise that substantive party democracy is not limited to participation in decision-making, but also requires institutional conditions that guarantee transparency, accountability, and access to information for party members (Katz and Mair, 1995; Scarrow, 2005; Mikola, 2018). Based on this, indicators have been selected to assess the level of institutional publicity of the party, as well as members' ability to exercise informed oversight over leaders' actions. These include the publication of the party's core documents — the statutes, electoral program, and code of ethics. These texts constitute the organizations' normative and programmatic framework, and their public accessibility is essential for members to understand, interpret, and hold governing bodies accountable to established principles and standards.

TABLE 1 Electoral dimension indicators.

Variables	Items	References
Digital voting	Online elections to select electoral candidates	Hazan and Rahat (2010), Pilet and Cross (2014), von dem Berge and Poguntke (2017), and Biancalana and Vittori (2021)
	Online elections to select candidates for the party's governing bodies	
	Consultations	
Beyond digital voting in decision-making procedures	Any online mechanisms for recruiting candidates or internal party bodies	von dem Berge et al. (2013) and Coller et al. (2018)
	Capacity for online initiatives or proposals	
	Online consultations or referendums on general issues	Mikola (2018)
	Any online mechanisms for recruiting candidates or internal party bodies	
	Online consultations or referendums on political strategies and/or government decisions	
	The results of the consultations or referendums are binding	

Source: own creation.

We also consider whether publication of resolutions made by internal party bodies has been incorporated. This item accounts for whether relevant decisions are communicated openly and transparently, which is a necessary condition for any form of deliberative oversight by the party members. Similarly, it was deemed pertinent to include indicators related to internal communication, such as the existence of stable digital channels (such as email lists or internal platforms) that ensure the fluid flow of information between leaders and members, thus helping to reduce the communication asymmetries typical of hierarchical structures. Furthermore, items related to control over party finances are particularly relevant, as accountability in this area has been identified in the literature as one of the main shortcomings of contemporary parties (Van Biezen and Kopecky, 2014). The publication of the audit report and the submission of accounts to external or independent audits not only reinforce the principles of publicity and control but also act as preventive mechanisms against opaque or clientelist practices.

Finally, we consider the existence of specific mechanisms for demanding accountability through digital platforms. This indicator allows us to assess whether institutionalized spaces exist where members can actively challenge leaders and request explanations or justifications for their actions. In this sense, accountability is conceived not only as an act of passive transparency, but, beyond access to information, as an active and interactive practice in which the party base plays an oversight role. Ultimately, these items allow us to analyze the extent to which political parties offer institutional conditions that favor vertical accountability, understood as the ability of those represented to supervise and control those in positions of power within the party. This dimension is key to understanding the quality of internal democracy and the effects of digitalization on intra-organizational control processes.

Third, the Deliberative Dimension, aims to assess not only the existence of digital participation mechanisms within political parties, but also the quality of the deliberative interaction they enable among members. In this sense, we adopt a deliberative conception of internal democracy, emphasizing open dialogue, inclusion, and equality in argumentation (Habermas, 1996). Thus, the existence of digital platforms is not enough; it is essential to analyze the institutional, regulatory, and operational conditions that enable—or limit—authentic deliberative processes.

The first group of items refers to the existence of an online deliberative digital platform, as proposed by authors such as Scarrow (2005), Margetts (2006), and Cross and Katz (2013). This indicator is a fundamental starting point: without technological infrastructure that allows for the exchange of ideas and opinions among members, any analysis of digital deliberation would be meaningless. However, the existence of a tool does not guarantee deliberative effectiveness. Therefore, items are included that evaluate the platform's operating regulations, which are an essential feature for assessing whether the institutional design favors or restricts deliberation. Thus, we consider whether the rules have been unilaterally imposed by the party leadership or, on the contrary, whether they respond to clear, stable, and transparent principles. As warned by Poguntke et al. (2016), the way in which rules of participation are structured can radically influence the degree of openness and inclusiveness of internal debate. Furthermore, the transparency of procedures during online consultations is examined, in line with Gerbaudo (2021), who argues

for the importance of explicit mechanisms that regulate the deliberative process and guarantee its fairness.

Another major area focuses on effective participation in deliberative processes, considering both open access and the autonomy of the deliberative space. First, we analyze whether all members can participate freely in the deliberative platform, as per the principle of inclusivity defended by Kies (2010). Second, we assess whether the forums or debates have coordinators or moderators who can filter, channel, or influence the debate, since moderating intervention from power structures can limit the spontaneity and plurality of interventions. Finally, we analyze whether all comments are published without restriction, which allows us to verify the existence of a genuinely horizontal and uncontrolled deliberative space, in line with what Gerbaudo (2021) suggests.

These elements are grounded in theoretical literature on institutional design and deliberative quality. As Gastil and Levine (2005) point out, the way in which participatory spaces are structured can foster or inhibit deliberation, depending on factors such as centralization, regulatory transparency, and openness to a plurality of voices. Hence, special emphasis has been placed on two cross-cutting analytical dimensions: the centralization of control over deliberation (by partisan elites) and the quality of the deliberative process, understood as the capacity of the digital environment to foster free, equal, and meaningful discussion.

Finally, the participatory dimension is linked to analyzing the degree of inclusiveness of the party's internal processes. That is: the breadth of the spectrum of members who have real access to participate in decisions affecting the organization. From this perspective, participation is not limited solely to voting or consultations, but also includes the opportunity to influence, propose, communicate, and actively participate in the party's internal life (Scarrow, 2005).

The items selected to assess this dimension are designed to capture both the level of formal influence and the day-to-day interaction that members maintain with the party structure. First, the ability of members to participate in decision-making processes is considered essential. This item focuses not only on the existence of participatory procedures, but also on their actual effectiveness in channeling the will and demands of the party base. As Scarrow (2005) points out, a party may offer formal participation mechanisms that prove symbolic or sterile in practice. Therefore, this indicator seeks to measure not only institutional openness but also its effectiveness in terms of actual influence on strategic decisions.

Secondly, the capacity for direct communication between party members and officials is included, as well as the possibility for the former to present proposals or suggestions to the latter. This element is justified based on a horizontal conception of participation, which is not limited to large deliberative or electoral events but is also expressed in the daily contact between leaders and the rank and file. The existence of accessible, bidirectional, and effective channels for formulating proposals reinforces the participatory ideal by allowing a constant flow of initiatives from the bottom up.

A third element is the analysis of digital activism, understood as a form of participation that allows members to engage in party activities, overcoming geographical, temporal, or structural barriers. As Scarrow and Gezgor (2010) argue, digital tools can expand the universe of active members, allowing for more flexible, decentralized, and ongoing participation, especially for those who cannot engage in



person. This item, therefore, allows us to assess the extent to which the party is leveraging the potential of technologies to broaden its participatory base and democratize access to internal life.

We should note that the item relating to the election of candidates and party officials has been deliberately left out of this dimension, despite the importance highlighted by multiple authors (Hazan and Rahat, 2010; Urbinati, 2014; Ignazi, 2020). This decision is methodologically justified by the need to distinguish between general forms of participation and electoral forms. Since the election of internal representatives constitutes a specific expression of participation with its own organizational and regulatory implications, this item has been placed within the electoral dimension, where it can be analyzed more precisely.

To be sure, the implementation of intra-party digital democracy mechanisms entails a series of costs, trade-offs, and challenges that impact differently upon different dimensions of internal democracy (Fitzpatrick, 2021). This observation forces us to ask a central question: which are the most digitized dimensions within the functioning of political parties? Following the line of argument proposed by much of the specialized literature, we infer that dimensions linked to more structured, controllable, and normatively defined processes, such as the liberal dimension (including transparency and accountability) or even the participatory dimension (including access to information or the formulation of proposals), are more susceptible to digitization. In part, this is due to the fact that these dimensions are supported by external organizational pillars, more easily formalized on digital platforms and with a lower level of procedural indeterminacy. Furthermore, their digitalization does not necessarily imply a transfer of power by party elites. On the contrary, it can strengthen their capacity to supervise and manage their membership, thanks to the traceability and control of participation flows.

In contrast, those dimensions that imply a redistribution of internal power or that appeal to more open and horizontal forms of interaction—such as the deliberative dimension—tend to present greater resistance to digitalization. In this case, the difficulties are not exclusively technical, but fundamentally political and organizational, since enabling real, inclusive, and non-hierarchical deliberative spaces in digital environments implies challenging traditional vertical party structures. As Invernizzi-Acetti and Wolkenstein (2017: p. 104) point out, deliberative processes are, by their very nature, less structured and more open to dissent, and thus more difficult to institutionalize and translate into digital tools without losing their participatory essence. Thus, if we accept that most parties in Europe have focused their digitalization efforts on the more “external” or formal dimensions of intra-party democracy, then the true degree of development of digital democracy must be measured by its capacity to incorporate the more “internal” and substantive dimensions, such as deliberation. In this sense, the quality of intra-party digital democracy will not only depend on the number of tools implemented, but also on the type of dimension they address and the real impact they have on the redistribution of power within the party.

Thus, our first hypothesis assumes that the digitalization of intraparty democracy does not progress uniformly across all dimensions. The literature suggests that parties tend to prioritize the implementation of digital tools in areas where the political, organizational, and symbolic costs are lowest, and where their use does not significantly compromise internal power structures (Norris,

2005; Invernizzi-Acetti and Wolkenstein, 2017). This pragmatic approach implies that parties are likely to first choose to digitalize those functions that are most easily standardized, controllable, and operationally simple, and that pose fewer challenges to the organizational status quo. For this reason, digitalization tends to be most effective in aggregative processes, such as information management, accountability, or limited forms of consultative participation. It faces greater resistance in those dimensions that require a greater degree of openness, interaction, and horizontality, such as in deliberative processes or substantive inclusive mechanisms. This dynamic contradicts the approach of cyber-optimists (Margetts, 2001; Heidar and Saglie, 2003), who have argued that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) open up new opportunities to democratize the internal structure of parties and foster greater grassroots participation.

In contrast to this view, our hypothesis suggests that digitalization does not necessarily democratize. Rather, it can even reinforce existing power asymmetries, depending on the dimension in which it is applied. In this sense, we argue that the liberal (linked to transparency and accountability) and participatory (related to access and the formulation of proposals) dimensions will have the greatest impact in terms of digitalization, not because they express a profound desire for democratization, but because they are more compatible with the logic of centralized control of party leadership.

*H1: The liberal and participatory dimensions will demonstrate greatest degree of digital development within parties, as they are the most easily digitizable and compatible with leadership control.*

In addition to analyzing the dimensions, comparative literature pays increasing attention to the organizational and historical factors that influence the adoption of digital technologies by political parties. Among these, one of the most relevant is the origin or age of the party, understood as a possible determinant of the degree and type of digitalization adopted (Norris, 2005; Pettitt, 2012; Raniolo et al., 2021). Within this framework, our second hypothesis proposes that new or “digital native” parties show a greater propensity to implement digital tools compared to traditional parties. This approach finds support in the empirical experience of parties such as Podemos in Spain or the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) in Italy, whose trajectory has been marked by an intensive use of digital platforms for internal decision-making, collaborative program writing, and participation in binding referendums. In this sense, Gerbaudo (2019) argues that these emerging parties constitute a new type of party organization, where digital tools are not only for communication purposes, but rather become a structural component of internal organization, reconfiguring the relationships between militants, leaders, and citizens. According to Bennett et al. (2018), this transformation also responds to a more horizontal and participatory logic that redefines the organizational and democratic functions of the party.

Thus, *a priori*, new parties tend to adopt digital innovations more intensely and radically, developing a model of organizational change that Raniolo and Tarditi (2020) define as “disruptive innovation.” In contrast, due to their consolidated bureaucratic structure, established ruling elite, and institutionalized communication channels, traditional parties tend to introduce change more gradually, configuring a model of “sustainable innovation.” This difference is largely due to the fact that emerging parties lack organizational legacies that hinder the

introduction of new practices, which facilitates both internal reorganization as well as insertion into a more dynamic and demanding political environment (Barberà et al., 2021).

However, this difference is not necessarily static. The literature has also pointed to the existence of convergent dynamics between the two kinds of parties. On the one hand, a contagion effect has been observed whereby traditional parties, pressured by electoral competition and the need to adapt to the digital environment, adopt certain innovations promoted by emerging parties (Gibson, 2013). On the other hand, as they become institutionalized or achieve positions of power, tend to adopt more conventional organizational behaviors, new parties demonstrate a progressively limited propensity for radical change (Harmel and Svasand, 1993; Levitsky, 1998; Randall and Svasand, 2002). This evolution reinforces the idea that a party's life cycle directly impacts its capacity for digital innovation (Mosca and Quaranta, 2017).

Consequently, we propose that a party's age and degree of institutionalization constitute relevant explanatory variables for understanding commitments to intra-party digital democracy. It is also true that other factors such as size, ideology, or party financing could contribute to this explanation, but these are not the subject of this study.

*H2: New parties show a greater degree of commitment to intra-party digital democracy, characterized by a higher level of innovation compared to traditional parties.*

## 3 Data and methods

### 3.1 Case selection

To test the hypotheses, we have chosen to analyze the websites and digital platforms of 22 national parties with representation in the national parliaments of Southern European countries. Specifically, there are 4 parties in Spain (PP, Vox, PSOE, Unidas Podemos)<sup>1</sup>, 8 in Portugal (CH, PSD, IL, PS, PC, BE, PAN, L)<sup>2</sup>, 5 in Italy (LSP, FdI, FI, PD y M5S)<sup>3</sup>, and 5 in Greece (EL, ND, KIN, AFI, y KKE)<sup>4</sup>. It is worth noting that Sumar in Spain has been excluded from this analysis, due to it being a recently formed coalition, which prevents an assessment of its digital activity. The selection of parties with national parliamentary representation is considered relevant in Sartori's terms. Moreover, by making this selection, we can compare political parties of different types, thus moving away from more restricted case studies, small-scale comparisons, or an exclusive focus on a single party family.

The selection of these four countries is based on the fact that, to date, a significant portion of the existing literature indicates that the most innovative and extensive use of digital participation by political

parties has developed in Southern Europe, examples being Podemos and the Five Star Movement (Gerbaudo, 2019). Peña and Gold (2023) suggest that they created the networked party, a new mode of party organization. Furthermore, most studies on ICTs in Southern European parties, focus on analyzing specific aspects of internal democracy (Astudillo and Detterbeck, 2018; Gastil, 2021; etc.) or on case studies, primarily of Podemos and the Five Star Movement (Mikola, 2017; Deseriis and Vittori, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2021; Raniolo and Tarditi, 2020; García Lupato and Meloni, 2021; etc.).

In addition, Eurobarometer data shows a very low level of trust in political parties in these four countries. They also have similar scores in the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), developed by the European Commission in 2014. Thus, the selection of these countries ensures a comparable context in terms of progress in digital competitiveness, covering areas such as human capital, broadband connectivity, business integration of digital technologies, and digital public services. In 2022, Portugal scored 50.8 (15/27 in the ranking), Italy 49.3 (18/27 in the ranking), Greece 37.3 (21/27 in the ranking), and Spain 60.8 (7/27 in the ranking).

### 3.2 Data collection

We have created a database on intraparty digital democracy in Southern Europe, which can be accessed on the "zenodo" platform<sup>5</sup>, that collects information on 32 indicators used to identify the advancements made in this area within political parties represented in the lower house of Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece. A total of 22 political parties' official websites and digital platforms were analyzed during 2022–2023, to determine which indicators have been implemented in these parties, and to create a diagnosis of the digitalization of intraparty democracy (Appendix). Additionally, in order to determine their age, we referred to the founding documents of each political organization.

To carry out our diagnosis of intraparty digital democracy in Southern European political parties, we designed a measurement index drawing from the Varieties of Democracy index and the work of Fitzpatrick (2021). Unlike other indices, we decided not to give greater weight to any of the dimensions or indicators, allowing for a fair assessment of all the dimensions we analyze. In this sense, each indicator is classified using a three-point scale: not present (0), partially present (0.5)<sup>6</sup>, and present (1). This approach has two objectives. First, to identify which indicators are used by each party; and second, to diagnose the degree of implementation of intraparty digital democracy, in order to determine which dimensions are most widely adopted. Thus, the dataset collected focuses exclusively on the digital processes and tools used during the analysis period (2022–2023), assessing only the presence of digital practices at that point in time.

<sup>1</sup> Acronyms for: Partido Popular, Vox, Partido Socialista Obrero Español, and Unidas Podemos.

<sup>2</sup> Acronyms for: Chenga, Partido Social Democrata, Partido Socialista, Partido Comunista, Bloco de Esquerda, Pessoas-Anímaís-Natureza.

<sup>3</sup> Acronyms for: Lega por Salvini Premier, Fratelli d'Italia, Forza Italia, Partito Democratico, y Movimento 5 Stelle.

<sup>4</sup> Acronyms for: Elliniki Lisi, Néa Dimokratia, PASOK, SYRIZA Y Kommunistikó Kómma Elládas.

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://zenodo.org/records/15338175>.

<sup>6</sup> 0.5 represents the "partially present" category and is used when an intraparty digital practice is incompletely implemented or used sparingly. For example, if a party allows members to vote electronically on certain issues, but not on all key decisions, or if some key documents are digitally accessible, but not all those required for full participation.

The main sources of data for this analysis are the official websites and digital platforms of the parties under study. It is important to note that, due to the dynamic nature of digital platforms, we adopted an approach that considers potential discrepancies arising from the frequency of updates and temporary digital initiatives. We recognize that party platforms are constantly evolving, with frequent changes in the tools used, which can lead to variations in the indicators evaluated. To address this challenge, we structured the analysis in three data collection phases, distributed throughout the 2022–2023 period. This strategy allowed us to capture updates and modifications made to the parties’ official websites and digital platforms at different times, increasing the reliability of the results. Furthermore, to ensure more comprehensive coverage, we employed a two-pronged strategy. First, we temporarily joined the parties when possible; and second, in those cases where we could not directly access, we requested information from party members. Additionally, we supplemented our data with journalistic sources, allowing us to obtain a more complete and accurate view of the state of intraparty digital democracy in the parties analyzed.

The analysis period covers 2022–2023 and includes three different sampling phases. In the first phase, we reviewed existing academic research as well as relevant press articles, and we analyzed the statutes and specific documents related to the functioning of certain processes (e.g., primary elections) within our cases. Statutes are considered a “useful indicator of changes in attitudes regarding the relationship between party leaders, members, and the party” (Kittilson and Scarrow, 2003: p. 65). It should also be noted that the use of party and journalistic sources, contributed to determining whether a specific procedure had been digitized or not. Next, we analyzed the official websites and digital platforms of the parties to score each of the selected indicators based on the value scale, as explained in the following section. This process was repeated twice to ensure that no errors had occurred in the analysis and coding of the data. Additionally, the results were sent to country-specific experts in the field to verify whether any errors had been made in the data coding. This means that people with expertise in the fields of digital democracy, political parties, or comparative politics reviewed the information obtained to verify its quality and validity.

Experts were selected based on their experience and knowledge relevant to intraparty digital democracy. Experts were local academics who have worked in areas related to digital democracy in parties, and in some cases, professionals in the political field, such as political party members, consultants, or those responsible for digital processes in parties. The strategy for identifying experts was twofold: (1) using a prior database compiled by consultants in each country and authors who have written academic papers on intraparty digital democracy in the countries under study, and (2) recommendations made by colleagues or other researchers. We contacted them via email to explain the project and invite them to participate. If they accepted the invitation, we held virtual meetings to specify the methodology and data we would provide, as well as the database obtained. Country experts reviewed the data in its entirety, and subsequent online meetings were held with them to comment and provide feedback on the indicators and the parties’ scores in relation to the digital democracy indicators. The corrections and adjustments indicate that a detailed review of the experts’ comments was carried out. In the event of any discrepancies in the data, an additional review was carried out. If it was concluded that the indicator had been misclassified, the score for that indicator was corrected.

### 3.3 The dependent and independent variables

Taking note of Fitzpatrick’s (2021) work, and based on the database developed, we proceeded to construct the four dimensions that allow us to understand the degree of development of intra-party digital democracy: the electoral dimension, the liberal dimension, the deliberative dimension, and the participatory dimension. Each of these dimensions is composed of a set of items or indicators which enables a more precise assessment of the elements that constitute digitalization within parties (see Tables 1–4).

The operationalization of the variables refers to the process by which the abstract concepts of each dimension are transformed into measurable indicators. For this study 32 indicators were used, and were coded on a three-point scale: (0) absent, (0.5) partially present, and (1) present. This approach allows for a precise assessment of the degree of implementation of each digital practice within political parties. A total or cumulative score was subsequently calculated for each dimension.

Building on Fitzpatrick’s (2021) work, and based on the database we created, we proceeded to construct the four dimensions allowing us to assess the level of development of intra-party digital democracy: the Electoral dimension, the Liberal dimension, the Deliberative dimension, and the Participatory dimension. Each of these dimensions is further composed of a set of items or indicators, which enables a more precise evaluation of the elements that constitute digitalization within the parties (see Tables 1–4).

The operationalization of the variables is based on a set of 32 indicators, coded as follows: (0) practice not present, (0.5) practice partially present, and (1) practice present. A total or cumulative score was calculated for each dimension. The score for each party’s Electoral dimension was calculated by summing the scores obtained for nine

TABLE 2 Liberal dimension indicators.

Variable	Items	References
Online transparency	Statutes, regulations, and organizational chart	von dem Berge et al. (2013) and Rahat and Shapira (2017)
	Resolutions adopted by party bodies	
	Biographical information about party officials	
	Information on asset or financial declarations of party officials	
	Management reports	
	Ethical Code	
	Budgets	
	Internal audit reports	
Accountability	Internal communication tools and email list of party officials	Margetts (2006) and Gibson et al. (2003)
	Mechanisms or spaces where members can demand accountability from party leaders and bodies online	

Source: own creation.

TABLE 3 Deliberative dimension indicators.

Variables	Items	References
Digital platform	Existence of an online deliberative platform	Scarrow (2005), Margetts (2006), Cross and Katz (2013), and Rahat and Shapira (2017)
Platform regulations	The operating or participation rules are established by the party's regulations	Poguntke et al. (2016)
	The principles and procedures are transparent in online consultations	Gerbaudo (2021)
Participation on deliberative processes	Platforms are open to all members	Kies (2010)
	No coordinator and/or moderator of the forums	
	All comments are published without restriction	Gerbaudo (2021)

Source: own creation.

TABLE 4 Participatory dimension indicators.

Variables	Items	References
Online decision-making process	A mechanism or space for interaction with political leaders	Bennett et al. (2018) and Fitzpatrick (2021)
	A mechanism or space for submitting suggestions on political issues	Bickerton and Accetti (2018), Gerbaudo (2019), and Fitzpatrick (2021)
	Participation in organizational decision-making	von dem Berge and Poguntke (2017), Bickerton and Accetti (2018), and Gerbaudo (2019)
		Scarrow and Gezgor (2010), von dem Berge and Poguntke (2017), and Bickerton and Accetti (2018)
Digital activism	Online membership	von dem Berge et al. (2013), Scarrow (2014), Faucher (2015), and von dem Berge and Poguntke (2017)
	Establishment and coordination of activities	Gibson et al. (2013) and Scarrow (2013)
	Microcredits	González-Cacheda (2018) and González-Cacheda and Cancela Outeda (2024)
	Microdonations	

Source: own creation.

items constitutive of this dimension: online elections to select electoral candidates; online elections to select candidates for party bodies; consultations; existence of any online candidate or internal body recruitment mechanism; capacity for online initiatives or proposals; online consultations or referenda on general issues; online consultations or referenda on coalition formation; online consultations or referenda on political strategies or government decisions; the results of consultations or referenda which are binding. The score for this dimension ranges from 0 to 9. The set of items scored high reliability (Cronbach's alpha of 0.930).

The scores for the Liberal dimension were calculated by summing the scores obtained for ten items: statutes, regulations, and organizational chart; resolutions adopted in the party's governing bodies; biographical information about party officials; information on asset or financial declarations of party officials; management reports; Code of Ethics; budgets; internal audit; internal communication tools and email list of officials; online mechanisms or spaces where members can demand accountability from party leaders and bodies. The score for this dimension ranges from 0 to 10. The set of items scored moderate reliability (Cronbach's alpha of 0.572).

The score for the Deliberative dimension was calculated by summing the scores obtained for six items: existence of an online deliberative platform; operational or participation rules set by the party's regulations; transparency of principles and procedures in online consultations; openness of platforms to members; no coordinator and/or moderator in forums; all comments are published

without restriction. The score for this dimension ranges from 0 to 6. The set of items scored high reliability (Cronbach's alpha of 0.859).

The score for the Participatory dimension was calculated by summing the scores obtained for seven items: a mechanism or space for interaction with political leaders; a mechanism or space for submitting suggestions on politically relevant issues; participation in the organization's decision-making; online membership; establishment and coordination of activities or online endorsements; microdonations; microcredits. The score for this dimension ranges from 0 to 7. The set of items scored high reliability (Cronbach's alpha of 0.810).

The sum of the scores obtained in the four aforementioned dimensions was then calculated, producing overall intraparty digital democracy score. The reliability of the 32 items was high (Cronbach's alpha of 0.945), reinforcing the consistency and precision of the measurements.

To simplify the visualization and presentation of the data, the general intraparty digital democracy score was recoded into an ordinal variable composed of three categories: parties scoring between 0 and 10 are classified as having a low level of digital democracy, parties scoring between 11 and 21 are classified as having a medium level of digital democracy, and parties scoring above 21 are classified as having a high level of digital democracy.

This ordinal categorization is a useful tool for facilitating comparative analysis across parties, although it must be both empirically and theoretically justified. The classification can be derived from the empirical distribution of scores across parties, which would



allow for the identification of categories based on how digitalization levels are distributed. Alternatively, the thresholds could be based on previous standards established in the literature on digital democracy and expectations of digitalization within parties. In any case, it is critical that these thresholds are not arbitrary but are aligned with the structure of the data and conceptual definitions of digital democracy.

Finally, a dependent variable was defined and selected for both the descriptive analysis and the statistical model. This variable is derived from the expectations and hypotheses of our theoretical framework. In this regard, it should be noted that data on the founding year of the party were extracted from the Party Facts database (Döring and Regel, 2019), whenever possible. For simplicity, party age is measured as a categorical variable that distinguishes between traditional parties (established on or before 2009) and new parties (established on or after 2010). The rationale for selecting this time threshold is due to the shift in the global political landscape around 2009 and 2010, which marked the end of an era of stability in traditional party systems and the beginning of new dynamics of party formation and consolidation. Thus, using the 2009/2010 threshold allows for a clear and manageable distinction between two groups of parties: traditional parties, which have maintained a more stable hierarchical structure, and new parties, most of which emerged from a radically different political, social, and economic environment, with a greater emphasis on digitalization, direct participation, and organizational flexibility.

### 3.4 Data analysis

Descriptive statistical data were obtained for the scores of the Electoral, Liberal, Deliberative, and Participatory dimensions as well as for the overall score of intraparty digital democracy. To facilitate the comparison between the different obtained scores, these were calculated in percentages, where 100% represents the maximum score for any of the analyzed dimensions.

Subsequently, bivariate analyses were performed: contingency tables and descriptive tables of means, using the overall score of intraparty digital democracy as the dependent variable, and the party's founding year as the independent variable. To supplement the aforementioned information, inferential analyses and tests of statistical significance were conducted. In the case of contingency tables, the chi-square statistic, its associated *p*-value, and the adjusted standardized residuals were employed. For the analysis of mean differences, a *t*-test was used when comparing two groups, along with its corresponding *p*-value; for comparisons involving more than two groups, an ANOVA was conducted and its *p*-value reported. Subsequently, pairwise comparisons were performed using the Scheffé procedure, with reference to the *p*-values obtained. Statistical

significance tests were also incorporated to reinforce the robustness of the findings derived from the bivariate analysis. Specifically, *t* tests were used to compare means between groups and chi-square tests for contingency tables, as appropriate. *p* values and 95% confidence intervals were also reported, which will allow for assessing the robustness of the observed differences and facilitate a more rigorous interpretation of the results.

## 4 Diagnosis of intraparty digital democracy in Southern European political parties

The 22 parties in the dataset show significant variation in their degree of digital democracy, both in general terms and, with regard to the four dimensions considered. Table 5 presents the internal structure (number of observations, minimum and maximum values, mean, etc.) of the four dimensions analyzed, as well as the overall score for intraparty digital democracy.

The data reveals variable levels of digital democracy across the different dimensions analyzed. In line with our expectations (H1), the Liberal and Participatory dimensions exhibit the highest levels of digitalization, with scores of 41 and 46%, respectively. In contrast, there is less evidence supporting digitalization in the other two dimensions. The electoral dimension, with an average score of 25%, and the deliberative dimension, with 26%, demonstrate a relatively underdeveloped level of digitalization. Moreover, the overall average for intraparty digital democracy is 34.87%, indicating that it remains underdeveloped despite the progress made in this regard.

This is corroborated by Figure 1, where both the Liberal and Participatory dimensions show the highest levels of digitalization. This demonstrates that parties do not face significant challenges in publicizing their statutes, regulations, or organizational structures. These are formal pieces of information that govern the life of each organization and are always made public after their approval at party congresses. However, this is not the case with more sensitive information, which may be of greater interest to the membership in terms of exercising greater control over the party's leadership, such as resolutions adopted by party organs, management reports, ethical codes, or asset declarations, among others. Furthermore, the parties do not seem hesitant to encourage member participation in digital activism, which is viewed as a benefit to the organization rather than a threat. In contrast, the other two dimensions (Deliberative and Electoral) provide fewer indications of significant progress in digitalization.

The Electoral dimension, for instance, scores a medium level of digitalization, at 2.27 points, indicating limited development.

TABLE 5 Descriptive statistic.

Dimensions	N	Min.	Max.	Stocking	D. T.	Average (%)	SD (%)
Electoral dimension of the party	22	0	9	2.27	2.90	25.25	32.30
Liberal dimension of the party	22	0	10	4.11	1.75	<b>41.14</b>	17.52
Deliberative dimension of the party	22	0	6	1.55	1.61	25.76	26.84
Participatory dimension of the party	22	0	7	3.23	1.79	<b>46.10</b>	25.29
Intra-party digital democracy	22	0	31	11.16	7.41	34.87	23.17

The numbers in bold indicate the best results.

Source: own elaboration.

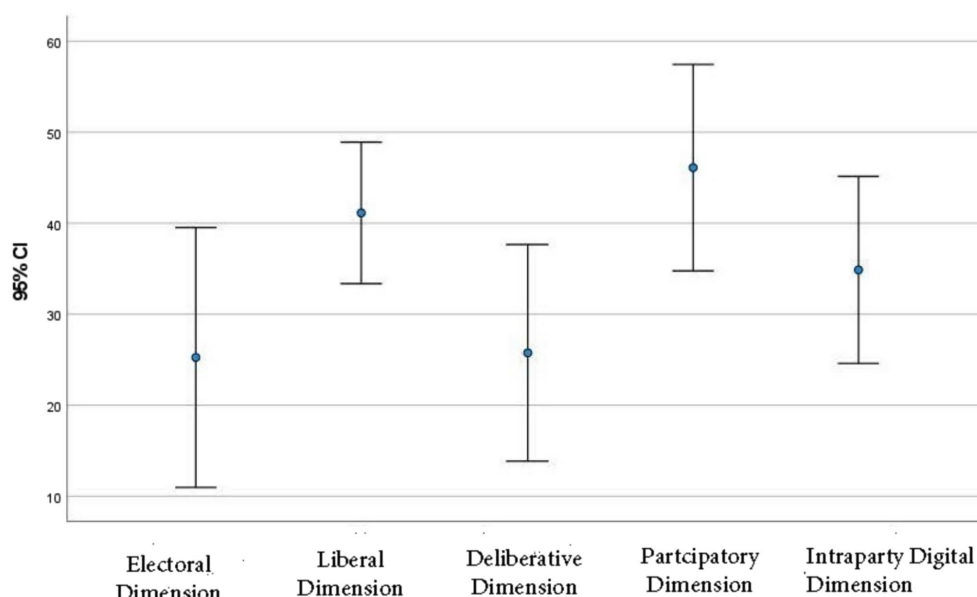


FIGURE 1  
Dimensions of digitalization. Source: own elaboration.

Although a significant number of the parties under study have implemented some digital procedure for selecting their leaders or candidates, they have not invested in establishing tools beyond digital voting in internal decision-making processes. While these procedures are certainly an innovation, they have become mere plebiscitary instruments where members ratify decisions made by the leadership (Faucher, 2015; Gauja, 2015). For instance, in Podemos, in November 2014, members were called to elect various party bodies, and 80.71% of the 112,000 registered members voted in favor of the organizational document proposed by the Secretary-General, Pablo Iglesias. Furthermore, 88.6% (95,311 people) supported his candidacy for party leadership. Thus, on the one hand, the adoption of online internal election tools highlights that representative mechanisms are far from disappearing and continue to play an important role. On the other hand, however, these processes tend to acquire plebiscitary characteristics. A similar situation occurs with consultative or referendum processes, as they are usually controlled by the party leadership. For example, these consultation processes are often initiated by the leaders to gather the opinions of members and gain legitimacy. Additionally, the questions and content of these processes are typically determined by the leadership, meaning that members can only “react” to proposals that have already been formulated by the leadership. For example, the consultations in Podemos are binding, but they are always initiated by the leadership. Similarly, the only two parties under study that have implemented online mechanisms for recruiting election candidates or members of internal bodies are Podemos and M5S. In principle, this could suggest that both parties have a high degree of inclusivity, since they allow members to run for public and internal positions. However, this inclusion is in practice, negated by a high degree of centralization, as clearly seen in the case of Podemos and M5S’s closed-list systems (Gerbaudo, 2021). In contrast, in most other parties, members are not even allowed to participate in candidate selection, or appointments to internal party organs. Moreover, in the majority of parties (with

the exception of M5S and, partially, PD) no online mechanisms have been established to recall the leadership. Furthermore, members do not have the ability to propose initiatives or consultations beyond general topics. Consultation on coalition formation or political strategy is solely the responsibility of the leadership, with the exception of M5S, PD, and UP. When such a possibility does arise, there are high barriers to overcome for the approval of proposals. For instance, in Podemos, initiatives only become binding if 0.2% of party members approve their inclusion on the main page of the participation portal.<sup>7</sup> After this, an email is sent to all affiliates announcing that the proposal is being debated, at which point the proposal has 3 months to gain the support of 10% of affiliates or 20% of local circles. If this threshold is met, the proposal enters a one-month development phase, led by a working group, and the initiative is then submitted to a referendum by all members. If it passes, it becomes binding for the party; however, no such initiative has ever been approved.

The Deliberative dimension scores an average of 1.55 points, reflecting very little progress. This is because the implementation of digital platforms does not necessarily mean that genuine deliberative processes are established. Moreover, we should underline that not all digital platforms are the same, as they present different access models. For instance, in FdI and FI, membership fees must be paid; in M5S, one only needs to register on the website, without any required fee; in PD, any member or voter registered in the party’s electoral registry can participate; in UP, members are divided into two groups: registered members (who can participate in national and regional citizen assemblies, as well as in the most important political consultations) and full members (who can participate in all open participatory processes); and in SYRIZA, any citizen interested in participating can

<sup>7</sup> [participa.podemos.info](https://participa.podemos.info)

do so, without having to be a member or be up to date with membership fees. Furthermore, some parties have consultative platforms (e.g., FdI, FI, PS, PSOE, PP, ETC), while others have panels with capacity for decision making (e.g., PD, M5S, Podemos). However, the actual decision-making power in these platforms may be limited, as in M5S, where documents approved at the Assembly are presented by the President and must be approved by one-third of the registered members, or where legislative initiatives from members must go through several procedural obstacles and political filters, significantly reducing both their quantity and their political prospects (Deseriis and Vittori, 2019).

Regarding the overall intra-party digital democracy score, an average of 34.87% (SD = 23.17) is observed, indicating a moderately low level in general terms, accompanied by a high dispersion between parties.

On the other hand, most parties with a digital platform do not clarify the functioning and procedures within these platforms, nor the role that members can play in them. This contributes to the control of the digital platform by the party apparatus. For instance, in all parties except UP, a party official co-ordinates the deliberative process, or there would be a high degree of arbitrariness in the publication of comments. In this regard, after the 2018 Italian elections, it was revealed in the M5S party program, whose main policies had been voted and approved online, that there had been significant editing in order to soften the more radical positions (Il Foglio, 2018). A further complicating factor is the number of topics up for debate. Especially in parties that have adopted deliberative platforms, where information overload prevents members from reviewing all proposals (Stockman and Scalia, 2019: p. 8). For example, in 2018, the UP platform had 8,021 proposals, but only 20 of these obtained more than 100 comments, with the vast majority of debate threads consisting of the opinions of one or two members. Thus, participation takes place within “plebiscitary or aggregative” forms, where the leadership has significant control over preference formation mechanisms (Wolkenstein, 2016; von dem Berge and Poguntke, 2017).

At this point one might ask whether new parties are the most committed to digital democracy. This question is particularly relevant in view of the fact that a significant portion of literature argues that emerging parties embody a new type of party organization, where members have notably more power than those in traditional parties (Gibson and Ward, 2009; Gibson and McAllister, 2015; Bennett et al., 2018; Gerbaudo, 2019).

If we look at the data in Table 6, it can be said that, overall, there is no clear trend to support the claim that new parties are more committed to digital democracy (H1):  $X^2(2, 22) = 0.244$ ,  $p = 0.83$ . However, it is observed that, *a priori*, newer parties—those founded from 2010 onwards—exhibit a slightly higher average level of digitalization. Moreover, the three parties with the highest level of intraparty digital democracy are new political formations: the Five Star Movement, Unidas Podemos, and the Democratic Party. Nonetheless, a more detailed descriptive analysis, as addressed in Figure 2, shows that the founding date of a party can make certain differences in specific intervals of digital democracy scores. For example, within those associated with particularly low digital democracy (<4.50) 33% are traditional parties, and 20% are new parties. Conversely, the opposite is the case for intervals linked to higher digital democracy (from 13 to 26.5) where there is a higher percentage of new parties: 40% compared to 33% traditional parties.

TABLE 6 Degree of intraparty digital democracy by party foundation date (%).

Variables	Traditional (until 2009)	New (from 2010)	Total
Low digitization	50.0%	50.0%	50.0%
Medium digitalization	33.3%	40.0%	36.4%
High digitalization	16.7%	10.0%	13.6%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: own elaboration.

Indeed, if we shift from macro data to a more detailed micro-level analysis, it could be concluded that parties with particularly low digital democracy scores (<4.50) are traditional formations such as Elliniki Lisi, Kommunistikó Kómma Elládas, or the Communist Party in Greece, or Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal. In contrast, those with higher digital democracy scores (ranging from 13 to 26.5) are more predominantly the new parties, such as Movimento 5 Stelle, Unidas Podemos, Syriza, and others.

The greater commitment of the so-called “new parties” to intraparty digital democracy is further evidenced by the data provided in Table 7. From this, it can be seen that new parties have a slightly higher percentage in the two dimensions which are generally considered more difficult to digitize. Therefore, in the Deliberative and Electoral dimensions, new parties score 26 and 27%, respectively – 1 and 2 points higher than traditional parties’ scores. This demonstrates that these parties have implemented more inclusive and transparent mechanisms fostering greater member participation in decision-making. However, while the figures between the two types of parties are close, they also indicate a significant regression in the evolution of their internal digital democracy processes from their foundation to the present (Meloni and Lupato, 2022), as seen in Podemos or Movimento 5 Stelle. This also explains why traditional parties have a slight advantage over new parties in the Liberal dimension, with scores of 44% versus 39%. It is important to note that the information in the Liberal dimension is more formal and regulatory. It might be expected for that traditional parties to have a higher compliance rate in this area, because when they adopt new technologies, the first thing they tend to do is incorporate this type of documentation onto their website, which, in principle, has less direct implications or consequences for challenging the power of the leadership.

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

This article has aimed to provide a diagnosis of intraparty digital democracy, mainly because much literature suggests that the implementation of these reforms enhances internal democracy by improving the participation and deliberation among party members (Cross and Katz, 2013; Gauja, 2013; etc.). Moreover, both theorists of democracy and digital technology have tried to envision a harmonious union between the two concepts (Barber, 1984; Becker and Slaton, 2000; etc.). However, our analysis indicates, firstly, that the digitalization experienced by political parties does not represent a homogeneous process of convergence towards a new mode of party management (Barberà et al., 2021). Secondly, there are substantial differences between external operations (e.g., the publication of

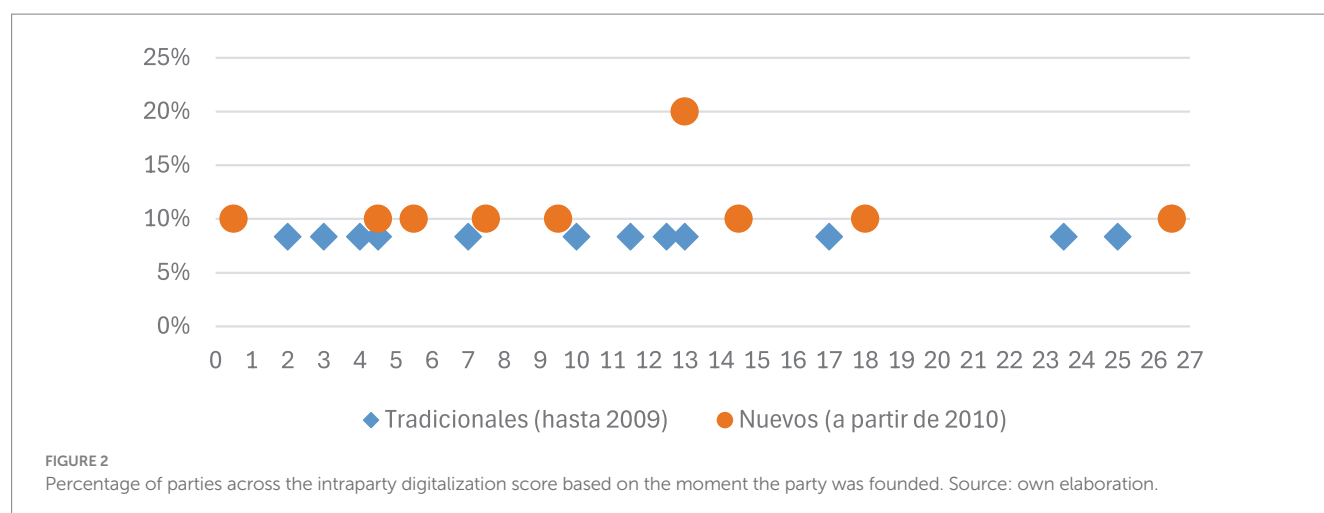


TABLE 7 Dimension scores (%) by party foundation date.

Variables	Electoral dimension (%)	Liberal dimension (%)	Deliberative dimension (%)	Participatory dimension (%)	Intrapartidist digital democracy (%)
Traditional (up to 2009)	25%	43%	25%	44%	34.25%
New (since 2010)	26%	39%	27%	49%	35.25%

Source: own elaboration.

regulations, communication, and resources) and internal ones (e.g., internal democracy). Therefore, as demonstrated by [Borucki and Fitzpatrick \(2021\)](#), organizational digitalization processes do not always improve democracy or transparency within political parties, nor have the parties shown themselves to be particularly receptive to supporters and members within the digital sphere.

If this were the case, the results of this study would be different, leading to a balance between the four dimensions under analysis. However, there is a significant difference between the degree of implementation of the Liberal and Participatory dimensions, and the Electoral and Deliberative dimensions (H1). This is partly because the former are the easiest to digitalize, but above all, because doing so poses a lower risk to the leadership. Thus, it is important to note that most of the indicators in the Liberal dimension refer to the top-down publication of formal documents, which does not pose any risk to the leadership. When this is not the case most parties do not provide information, such as with management reports, resolutions of the party organs, or budget control. The same occurs with the Participatory dimension, which concerns formal issues, where—one only needs to analyze the topics that have been opened for participation, and the degree of binding authority of the decisions made. Therefore, these instruments are relatively superficial in developing flexible ties with their members ([Chadwick, 2006](#)). Moreover, such innovations only serve to reinforce the conventional model of vertical linkage.

We should note that a crucial difficulty lies in the creation of spaces and processes that are inclusive, coherent and where power is shared. Parties are reluctant to foster other elements that are also essential for intraparty digital democracy, such as designing platforms and processes with strong deliberative standards or truly competitive electoral processes. Indeed, even the so-called “connective” ([Margetts et al., 2015](#)) parties have limited themselves to offering participation within predefined alternatives or specific areas, with little connection to executive decisions. This is mainly because true inclusion in the central

organizational processes becomes a persistent source of tension. If authentic spaces for discussion and debate were created, intraparty democracy would increase significantly by empowering members ([Wolkenstein, 2016](#)). This undoubtedly complicates the possibility for parties to genuinely embrace non-mediated or non-filtered processes, without undermining the power of the party’s leadership.

Therefore, intraparty digital democracy can only exist if the principles of participation, competition, representation, accountability, and transparency are guaranteed ([Rahat and Shapira, 2017](#); p. 88). Thus, what is truly important in this instance is that party members can influence decision-making, that internal debate is possible, and that procedures are inclusive ([Meijers and Zaslove, 2021](#); [Rahat and Shapira, 2017](#); [Scarow, 2014](#)). So far, however, it does not seem possible to implement all of the above. Our results do suggest that some promising innovations have been introduced in terms of the development of collaborative policies, such as primary systems or referendums, but their scope remains limited. The principle of voting predominates over any other aspect, and aggregative procedures outweigh disruptive ones. Moreover, leadership control over agenda setting (the issues to be voted on, the candidates to be selected, the online proposals to be deliberated, the content and questions for consultations, the schedules, etc.) means that participatory platforms are contributing to a strong centralization of decision-making. Additionally, there is a lack of clear principles and transparent procedures to manage online consultations; or, as evidenced by the results in this study, there is a high degree of arbitrariness on behalf of party staff when selecting and editing comments on existing proposals. This has led to new forms of control and dominance by elites, which [Stromer-Galley \(2014\)](#) has called “controlled interactivity,” or what [Pateman \(1970\)](#) referred to as “pseudo-participation.”

In short, a sense of participation and openness has been created to recover lost legitimacy, but decision-making power remains in the hands of the party leaders. Innovations in intraparty digital democracy have undoubtedly led to greater participation from party members



and supporters, and even to greater satisfaction among them (Lioy et al., 2019; Deserii, 2020). However, as Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016) and Gerbaudo (2019) have argued, they have not led to a “renewal of the party” that entails a radical transformation of its organizational forms to deepen internal democracy. Their importance cannot be denied. ICTs have led to new forms of political participation (i.e., connective action) and altered political repertoires, including, to some extent, to how political actors organize, mobilize, compete, and collaborate (Bimber et al., 2012; Bennet and Segerberg, 2013; Margetts et al., 2015; Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016; Dommett and Temple, 2018). This effect is, however, less pronounced than initially expected, because it is clear that the will is still not predominantly developed from the “bottom-up,” and power continues to centralise.

Ultimately, digitalization has generated a sense of participation and openness as an attempt to regain lost legitimacy. However, decision-making power remains concentrated in the hands of a ruling elite. This is largely due to the fact that political parties continue to operate within a traditional hierarchical model that resists the decentralization of power, even in digital environments. So much so that digital platforms often fail to facilitate in-depth deliberation, but are limited to aggregative voting systems, where decisions are reduced to a simple vote count, with no room for genuine debate or joint policymaking (Chadwick, 2006). These platforms do not therefore foster constructive dialogue, but rather superficial participation, where decisions are already predetermined and debates are limited to minor issues. Thus, greater digitalization does not necessarily lead to more inclusive decision-making or a more equitable distribution of power within parties. However, it is also true that innovations in intra-party digital democracy have indisputably driven greater participation among party members and supporters, which has led to greater satisfaction (Lioy et al., 2019; Deserii, 2020). Digitalization has opened up new forms of political participation (such as connective action) and has, to some extent, transformed the organization, mobilization and cooperation of political actors (Bimber et al., 2012; Bennet and Segerberg, 2013; Margetts et al., 2015; Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016; Dommett and Temple, 2018). However, this has been to a lesser extent than initially assumed, confirming what was stated in the studies by Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016) and Gerbaudo (2019), that digitalization does not produce a “renewal of the party” or a radical transformation of its organizational structures.

The expansion of digitalization has led to significant differences among political forces in respect of the degree and pattern of ICT implementation in intraparty functioning. It is true that new parties initially created participatory platforms and embraced the digital realm to compensate for their organizational and structural deficiencies, thereby enabling them to compete on more equal terms with traditional parties (Margetts, 2006: p. 530). In other words, these political forces have integrated, supported, or even replaced classical structural architectures, giving way to lighter forms of organization (Gerbaudo, 2019), and opening new channels for the inclusion of members in decision-making processes. This differentiates them from traditional parties (Hacker and Van Dijk, 2000). However, the data obtained in this study corroborates, on the one hand, the theoretical assumptions defended by other authors, such as Ward and Gibson (2009) or Raniolo and Tarditi (2020), who associate innovation and digitalization with party age, and on the other hand, those proposed by Ward and Gibson (2009) or Mosca and Quaranta (2017), who identify a greater propensity of organizations with fewer resources, to use digital tools to mobilize resources and connect with the social base.

Thus, new movement-parties have been initially more committed to intraparty digital democracy than traditional parties (H2), but to a lesser extent than one might have thought. However, as these movements have become institutionalized, they have diminished their initial push for digitalization. The measures used in this study suggest that levels of intra party digital democratization in new parties are only slightly higher than in traditional parties. This finding is also present in the works of Harmel and Svasand (1993), Levitsky (1998), or Randall and Svasand (2002). Additionally, traditional parties have been adapting to the new technological environment to avoid falling behind, to continue to compete electorally or attempt to regain lost legitimacy. Such results are also supported by the work of Jungherr et al. (2019, 2020), which indicates the existence of an external pressure factor (or contagion effect) on traditional parties in response to the rise of external competitors. Therefore, the link between the origins of the party and the degree of digitalization can be better explained by the theory of normalization, rather than that of equalization (Ward and Gibson, 2009).

## Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found in the article/supplementary material.

## Author contributions

GS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research and/or publication of this article.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Generative AI statement

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## Appendix

Country	Political party	Acronym	Founding year	Party type
Spain	Partido Popular	PP	1989	Traditional (until 2009)
	VOX	VOX	2013	New (from 2010)
	Partido Socialista Obrero Español	PSOE	1878	Traditional (until 2009)
	Unidas Podemos	UP	2016	New (from 2010)
Greece	Elliniki Lisi	EL	2016	New (from 2010)
	Néa Dimokratía	ND	1974	Traditional (until 2009)
	PASOK	KIN	1974	Traditional (until 2009)
	SYRIZA	AFI	2012	New (from 2010)
	Kommunistikó Kómma Elládas	KKE	1918	Traditional (until 2009)
Italy	Lega por Salvini Premier	LSP	2017	New (from 2010)
	Fratelli d'Italia	FdL	2012	New (from 2010)
	Forza Italia	Fi	2013	New (from 2010)
	Partido democrático	PD	2007	Traditional (until 2009)
	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S	2009	Traditional (until 2009)
Portugal	Chega	CH	2019	New (from 2010)
	Partido Social Demócrata	PSD	1974	Traditional (until 2009)
	Iniciativa Liberal	IL	2017	New (from 2010)
	Partido Socialista	PS	1973	Traditional (until 2009)
	Partido Comunista	PC	1921	Traditional (until 2009)
	Bloco de Esquerda	BE	1999	Traditional (until 2009)
	Pessoas-Animais-Natureza	PAN	2009	Traditional (until 2009)
	Livre	L	2014	New (from 2010)