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A pandemic affair? Digital party conferences in Spain

Adrià Mompó[1] and Oscar Barberà[2]*

[1]Communication Networks and Social Change Research Group, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain, [2]Department of Constitutional Law, Political Science and Administration, Universitat de València, Valencia, Spain

The COVID-19 pandemic forced parties to face a critical dilemma between freezing their internal processes indefinitely or adapting themselves to sometimes unexplored online formats. Amongst the most affected activities were party congresses. This paper contributes to the scholar debate on critical junctures and party reform, examining how changes on the environment can drive parties to transform their organisational practices and innovate on their decision-making. Our aim is two-fold: first, to explore to what extent the Covid pandemic constituted a critical juncture facilitating the digital transformation of the Spanish party conferences; second, to assess the challenges and problems faced by the different parties that held digital party conferences by 2020. Conducting a comparative case study, we examine Spanish parties' strategies of adaptation to the lockdown and compare three online congresses celebrated in Spain during 2020. Our findings suggest that the Covid exerted an external stimulus that fostered digital innovation, although mostly among new parties. Further, internal crisis and change of leadership might have encouraged these conferences to pursue higher levels of inclusiveness and deliberation. However, parties seem to have abandoned these innovations after the pandemic, retreating to more established practices once the crisis was over.

KEYWORDS

party conferences, party digitalisation, democratic innovations, critical junctures, pandemic

Introduction

The digital transformation of political parties has undergone several periods of rapid development over the last decades. Already in the late 1990s, some parties started using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for campaigning and establishing linkage with the citizens (Gibson and Ward, 1999; Ward and Gibson, 2009; Lilleker et al., 2011). Nonetheless, the main surge of party digitalisation came along with the Great Recession, parallel to a rise on democratic reform demands and new forms of online participation. New parties emerged during this period, featuring an intensive use of digital tools for decision-making and members' engagement. Many innovations carried by several new parties consisted of promoting intra-party democracy through online participatory processes (e.g., primaries and online deliberation), aimed at enhancing members' inclusion (Lioy et al., 2018; Bennet et al., 2018; Vittori, 2020). New affiliation options were developed as well, removing entrance barriers such as fee payment and favouring less committed and time-consuming options of support (Scarrow, 2014; Gibson et al., 2018). Since the mid-2010s, party digitalisation has gradually spread from new parties to mainstream and established ones, enlarging its scope and meanings (Raniolo et al., 2021; Barberà et al., 2021). However, such transformation has not been a gradual, incremental process. On the contrary, party digitalisation has experienced several unexpected breakthroughs, sometimes followed by setbacks and intra-party democratic backsliding motivated by shifts in the competitive environment (e.g., Meloni and Lupato, 2022).

To better account for such changes, the scholarly research has paid increasing attention to the explanatory factors of party digital transformation. Its drivers have been analysed by a growing number of studies, evincing the impact of internal features such as the ideology, age or resources of the party (Sandri et al., 2024; González-Cacheda and Outeda, 2024). Further research has pointed out the effect of external and contagion effects to explain technological adaptation (Mompó et al., 2025; Gauja, 2016; Kurban, 2023; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2001). The literature on party change has also resorted to the concept of critical junctures, understood as sudden and radical alterations of the contextual conditions (Hogan, 2006). In that sense, external shocks and unexpected events have the capacity to interfere with parties' established practices, altering their organisational trajectories and accelerating their transformation (Harmel and Janda, 1994; Appleton and Ward, 1997).

The Coronavirus pandemic indeed constituted a critical juncture for party digitalisation around Europe (Oross and Gherghina, 2023; Ziegler et al., 2025). As membership organisations, most parties rely intensively on in-presence gatherings and social activities for strengthening ties, creating group identity and legitimise internal decision-making. That was clearly disrupted by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns, social distancing requirements and restrictions on public activity and physical mobility. In this context, most parties were forced to rapidly adopt new digital technologies. However, up to 2020, the extent and reach of the digital transformation varied heavily among different parties (e.g., Raniolo et al., 2021). To what extent political parties relied on digital technologies in such a critical juncture and what challenges faced as membership organisations?

The scant literature on this particular topic has tried to assess the adaptation strategies and problems faced by political parties during the pandemic, mostly focusing on the perceptions of the political elites and members (Oross and Gherghina, 2023; Vittori and Barberà, 2023; Ziegler et al., 2025). That said, the impact of the pandemic on the abrupt digitalisation of key activities connected with participation and engagement has not yet been fully researched. That is why the aim of this paper is two-fold: first, to explore to what extent the Covid pandemic constituted a critical juncture facilitating the digital transformation of the Spanish party conferences; second, to assess the challenges and problems faced by the different parties that held digital party conferences by 2020.

Party conferences are the main deliberative and decision-making arenas for every party and have always been celebrated as in-presence events open to party delegates and, eventually, to all party members (Duverger, 1954). The Covid lockdowns meant the cancelation of all sorts of in-presence events, so party conferences quickly became one of the most disrupted areas of party activity during the pandemic: the dilemma was either postponing or trying to organise the event through digital means. We argue that Spain constitutes a most likely case to explore the relevance of the Covid pandemic as critical juncture due to the number of party conferences that were expected to be held during the pandemic, the existence of highly digitalised new political parties and a the existence of multi-level territorial layers that might have favoured such digital transformation. Our results point out that party digital adaptation to the pandemics was shaped by preexisting conditions, in particular crisis and internal instability, suggesting the moderating effect of internal factors over the impact of environmental shocks.

The paper is structured as follows: we first revisit the literature on party digitalisation, exploring critical junctures as an environmental driver of technological adaptation. We next move to the case selection. After discussing the relevance and main features of party conferences in Spain, the results section is divided in two main blocks: first, we survey the different party conferences scheduled for 2020, accounting for those that were celebrated and how; second, we analyse those congresses that were organised online. Finally, we discuss these results in a comparative way to highlight common trends and characteristics.

Critical junctures, party digital transformation and party conferences

The comparative literature on party digitalisation has highlighted relevant differences in the speed and approaches followed by political parties around Europe. New parties emerged during the Great Recession were more keen than mainstream parties on adopting new ICTs for either external and internal communication and organisational purposes. This trend also presented some geographical variation between countries, although the pandemic helped reducing this divergence both between countries and different party types (Raniolo et al., 2021; Sandri et al., 2024; Mompó et al., 2025; Sánchez-Medero, 2025). This research strand has also suggested that digital tools had generally been linked to aggregative forms of democracy such as primaries, consultations or referendums (Pérez-Moneo and Barrat, 2019; Deseriis and Vittori, 2019a; Villaplana et al., 2023), while online deliberation has remained underdeveloped. Pioneer digital parties such as the Pirates in several European countries, Podemos in Spain or the Five Star Movement in Italy, initially developed online platforms to conduct debates between party members, propose topics for the agenda, amend the leaders' decisions and decide collectively on the manifesto or the electoral program (Hartleb, 2013; Borge and Santamarina, 2016; Mikola, 2018; Deseriis, 2019).

Nevertheless, seminal studies on party digitalisation have shown scepticism or focused on the limitations of digital (deliberative and aggregative) experiences, remarking their incapacity to sustain members' engagement in the long run and its instrumentalization by party leaders (Mosca and Quaranta, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2019; Deseriis and Vittori, 2019b; Tronconi and Bailo, 2025). In a similar vein, Foucher (2014) reflected on how digital political participation has depersonalised activism and blurred members' identification with the party. Online participative processes, she argued, are embedded in individualised, low-cost conceptions of political engagement, where participation remains solely as a rational individual choice completely detached from its socialisation component and emotional incentives (civic duty, group identity, etc.). Eventually, this can lead to a greater isolation of the individual and thus disincentivise engagement, contributing to demobilise citizens even further.

Parties may be concerned about these risks and try to keep some of their internal processes in-presence, especially those that involve members' engagement. However, the exceptional situation imposed by the pandemic potentially overcame parties' normative or organisational concerns, forcing many of them to adapt to new forms of digital communication (e.g., group videocalls) and, eventually, to adopt ICTs for organisational purposes and internal participation. In this regard, the literature has stressed the impact that critical junctures can exert over political organisations.

A critical juncture consists of a sudden and radical change, triggered by an unexpected event that alters trajectories otherwise stable (Hogan, 2006). For a juncture to become critical and transformative, it needs to be bound on certain *permissive conditions* that facilitate this change and shape its outcome (Hogan, 2019). In the party politics literature, several scholars have suggested different concepts that refer, in a way or another, to critical junctures. Harmel and Janda (1994) differentiate between environmental trends and external shocks, the former being cumulative and incremental changes moving in a particular direction, and the later constituting key events that alter the institutional environment of parties. Alternatively, Appleton and Ward (1997) talk about *accidental stimuli*, which consists of an unexpected event that creates new opportunities for innovation.

The scant literature on the impact of the Covid19 pandemic over political parties and their digital adaptation, has pointed out the challenges and limitations connected to such sudden transformation. At an organisational level, the daily work and internal coordination of party officers had to quickly migrate to digital formats (e.g., online meetings, chat groups, etc.), in spite of possible cybersecurity gaps (Paulis et al., 2025; Barberà, 2020). From an elites' perspective, extant research has highlighted a poor confidence and low satisfaction with online deliberation (Vittori and Barberà, 2023). Finally, from a members' point of view, Ziegler and colleagues (2024) have examined the impact of organisational practices and rules acting as guiding principles of parties' adaptation to change. They find that parties previously used to online processes and highly digitalised structures, endured less challenges than less digitalised parties when acclimatising to Covid, sustaining a higher activity among their members during the pandemics.

To the best of our knowledge, there is no literature discussing the effects that the Covid pandemic might had on specific dimensions of the party digital transformation, such as party conferences. These events constitute the main deliberative and decision-making arena for Western political parties and, since the advent of mass parties, have always been celebrated as in-presence activities open to party delegates and, eventually, to all party members (Duverger, 1954). Arguably, the sanitary crisis provoked by COVID-19 acted as a trigger event that fostered parties' digital innovation, motivating the digitalisation of party congresses (see Table 1).

> *Expectation 1*: The pandemic constituted a critical juncture that favoured the celebration of digital party conferences.

The strong deliberative component of a conference implies long preparation periods and the participation of large numbers of people at different times in the process. This not only requires some technical

TABLE 1 Timing of sanitary restrictions throughout 2020–2021.

1st phase: March–June 2020	2nd phase: July–October 2020	3rd phase: November 2020–May 2021
• From total to partial lockdown. • First state of emergency.	• Limited reopening of public activities. • Suppression of mobility restrictions.	• Second state of emergency. • New mobility restrictions. • Nighttime curfew.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

infrastructure, but also some digital skills from the technical staff and from the party members and the party elites. If the organisational culture of the party was by early 2020 based on long-established practices with a preference for in-presence activities, the sudden digital transformation of such a key internal event might spark internal conflicts regarding the quality of debates and, particularly, the security and reliability of electronic vote (Barrat, 2019). On the contrary, new parties with shorter organisational legacies may have found less internal opposition, especially if they had previously utilised ICTs for decision-making. In this regard, the higher adaptability of these parties would have acted as a permissive condition for innovation. Overall, we should expect old and mainstream parties to have avoided digitalising their internal deliberative procedures during the pandemic. Reversely, new parties might have been more prone to it.

> *Expectation 2a:* Mainstream and old parties tried to avoid digital party conferences during the pandemic.
>
> *Expectation 2b:* Digital conferences were mostly organised by new parties.

We shall also expect differences in the democratic qualities and inclusivity of the digital party conferences that were celebrated. The specific tools and platforms utilised might have differed from a relatively simple process (vote without deliberation) to a more complex, multi-level distribution of deliberative forums with several phases and different inclusive thresholds. Variation can also be found in terms of inclusivity, according to the scope of participation, whether it was constrained to party delegates, open to all members or even to the wider citizenry. Other differences may refer to the congress agenda, depending on the range of topics decided: if it only focused on renewing the leadership or it also included further deliberation on the strategy and the party program. Previous research has examined the effect that legitimacy crisis and internal conflict can exert over parties' willingness to enhance members' engagement and inclusion in deliberative processes (Mompó et al., 2025). In this regard, the context in which the digital party conference was called may have also characterised its development, inclusivity and agenda. Crisis, loss of leadership or internal renewal may have encouraged a more open, participative conference regardless of existing party regulations.

> *Expectation 3*: Parties under internal crisis or transformation aimed to organise more deliberative conferences.

Case selection and methods

Spain constitutes a most likely case (Eckstein, 1992) to explore the relevance of the Covid pandemic as a critical juncture for party digitalisation, and to better understand the problems and challenges faced by different parties due to several reasons: first, because general and regional elections were held during 2019 and many party conferences were meant to be organised at different governance layers by 2020; second, for the co-existence of highly digitalised new parties as well as mainstream ones; third, due to the territorial diversity of the political system, with several territorial layers that allow for the

co-existence of Statewide Parties (SWP) and Non-Statewide Parties (NSWP), which indeed provides a higher ground for variation within the same political system.

The units of analysis are the nine Spanish political parties with representation in the national lower chamber that had scheduled conferences within this period. While this selection does not cover mainstream political parties such as the PSOE, by then in government, or the PP, the main opposition party, it does include all the new SWPs such as Podemos, Ciudadanos and Vox and most of the relevant NSWPs.

The period of analysis covers 14 months, from March 2020 to May 2021. This time selection embraces the period of exceptional measures to contain the spread of Covid, including two states of emergency (from March to June 2020, and again from October 2020 to May 2021) and restrictions to social gatherings and public activity (see Table 1). Death tolls reached their peaks in the spring and autumn months, although the exceptional measures continued throughout the first half of 2021. After a brief summer break, only the beginning of the vaccination campaign allowed for a gradual de-escalation that eventually normalised public activities (Table 1).

We have relied on press coverage to gather information on the development of each conference and the context in which it happened, accounting for conflicts involved, candidates, dates, norms and use of technology. Using the press repository Factiva, we have browsed a selection of the main national newspapers (El País, El Mundo, Eldiario.es; Elconfidencial.es) and some regional newspapers (Ara, Levante, La Voz de Galicia, El Correo), as well as the most important Spanish news agencies (EFE, Europa Press, ACN) during the timeframe of our research. Complementary information on the timing, process regulations and organisational characteristics, was consulted in party documents available on their websites and specialised literature.

The analysis follows a descriptive comparative case study approach (Barlett and Vavrus, 2017) based on two-steps. We first compare the possible strategic choices regarding the organisation of party conferences during the pandemic: to postpone it and to hold it in-presence without sanitary restrictions, to celebrate it with some sanitary restrictions (when possible), or to call it as soon as possible by digital means. We focus afterwards on those parties that held digital party conferences to explore their main features and challenges. The

descriptive comparison between the digital conferences is structured according to several specific dimensions:

1. Congress digitalisation: to what extent the event was conducted through digital means and how was the process structured.
2. Agenda: which issues were discussed.
3. Deliberation: whether the party enabled online deliberative forums or not, and how did they work.
4. Participants: who participated, particularly if the conference was open to all citizens, members or just delegates.
5. Competitiveness: to what extent the conference allowed dissent and opposition to manifest and what were the results achieved by alternative candidates.
6. Continuity: whether these innovations have had continuity over time or were exceptional.

The pandemic as a critical juncture for the digitalisation of Spanish party conferences?

Party conferences in Spanish politics

The party congress or general conference is the main deliberative arena for a political party. In Spain, it occurs normally every 3 or 4 years and (unlike British party conferences), its attendants decide not only on the long-term strategy of the party but also regularly select its ruling bodies and the party leader. Very often, the leader becomes the candidate to the main executive office as well, highlighting the importance that congresses have over party life. Given that congress delegates are simultaneously the selectorate of the party leader, attendance is also more restricted than platform conferences (Rodríguez-Teruel et al., 2010). This is the reason why they are often considered the middle-level elites of political parties (Baras et al., 2015). Even though conferences are normally representative (restricted to delegates), they tend to be relatively massive, gathering hundreds or thousands of members amongst the biggest parties (Rodríguez-Teruel et al., 2010).

Party conferences and selection procedures have nonetheless evolved over time (Ramiro and Morales, 2004). On the one hand, some grassroots parties have emerged with a higher recurrence to assembly-based decision-making, such as the *People's Unity*

TABLE 2 Expected party conferences by 2020, changes during the pandemic.

Party	Territorial scope	Expected conference date	New date (after 1st lockdown)	Format
Bloc	Valencia	June 2020	Postponed (June 2021)	(In-presence)
BNG	Galicia	2020 (unsettled)	Postponed (November 2021)	(In-presence)
CC	Canary Islands	May 2020	November 2020	In-presence
Ciudadanos	Spain	March 2020	April 2020	Online
Junts	Catalonia	July 2020	Unchanged	Online
Más Madrid	Madrid	May 2020	Unchanged	Online
PNV	Basque Country	July 2020	December 2020	In-presence
Podemos	Spain	April 2020	May 2020	Online
UPN	Navarre	March 2020	June 2020	In-presence
Vox	Spain	March 2020	(pre-lockdown)	In-presence

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Candidacies (CUP in Catalan) (Culla, 2017). On the other hand, new and established parties as well have reformed their decision-making favouring more direct democracy procedures, to the point that there was a considerably high use of digital tools to this end before the pandemics. Apart from the digitally native parties, such as Podemos, other new parties emerged during the 2010s featured by their utilisation of ICTs, while established and mainstream parties also embraced digitalisation to remain competitive. Digital Democratic Innovations had mostly focused on vote-based procedures (primaries, plebiscites) and new membership options (Raniolo and Tarditti, 2020; Raniolo et al., 2021). To a lesser extent, some parties had conducted deliberative processes through their OPPs (e.g., *Plaza Podemos* or *miPSOE*) to elaborate electoral programs or decide on the party agenda (Borge and Santamarina, 2016; Barberà and Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020). Nevertheless, online conferences were mostly unheard of in Spanish politics, and only Podemos conducted hybrid assemblies in 2014 and 2017.

Party conferences and the pandemic

2020 was meant to be an important moment for many Spanish political parties, both in organisational and political terms. Several elections were held in Spain during the preceding year: national elections in April; local, regional and European ballots in May; and a snap national election in December after the Parliament failed to invest a Prime Minister. This last election led to the first coalition government since the Transition to democracy, composed by the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the far-left Podemos, and externally supported by a variety of NSWPs. In addition, further regional elections were scheduled for 2020 in the Basque Country and Galicia, and the unstable situation in Catalonia was likely to lead to a snap election there as well. Many ordinary party conferences were expected to be called after the electoral cycle. Other parties were experiencing important organisational transformations due to electoral setbacks (such as Ciudadanos), or because they accessed government for the first time (that was the case of Podemos).

The third column at Table 2 illustrates the expected conference calendar of Spanish parties represented in the national parliament within the period of analysis: from the beginning of the emergency on the 14th of March 2020, to the end of the exceptionality measures on the 9th of May 2021. Nine parties announced their general congress or assembly at some point during this timelapse. Five parties were meant to celebrate ordinary party conferences: the far-right Vox, the Valencian Nationalist Bloc (shortly, the Bloc in Catalan), the Navarre's People Union (UPN, in Spanish), the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV in Spanish), Canarian Coalition (CC, in Spanish), and the Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG, in Galician). After the elections, two state wide parties called for extraordinary congresses that were not initially scheduled: on the one hand, Podemos decided to celebrate its Third Citizens' Assembly earlier than expected; on the other hand,

Ciudadanos (C's) called for a refoundation process after a remarkable electoral decline and the resignment of its party leader. Finally, two other parties emerged during that period, More Madrid (MM, in Spanish) and Together for Catalonia (Junts, in Catalan) leading to their correspondent foundational congresses.

All this schedule unexpectedly changed once the government's measures against Covid were implemented in Spain by mid-March 2020. The policies against Covid were particularly tough in Spain, ordering a general lockdown of the population between March and May 2020, with further restrictions in-force throughout the second half of the year and the first half of 2021. During this period, elections and other massive in-presence political gatherings such as party conferences became unfeasible and had to be rescheduled. Of all parties, Vox was the only one that celebrated its party conference under normal conditions, just 1 week before the emergency was declared. All the other party conferences had to be postponed or adapted to the new health situation (see Table 3).

Spanish political parties faced the extraordinary situation introduced by the Covid pandemic through three alternative strategies. The first choice was to postpone the celebration of their Congress indefinitely, until the conditions allowed for an in-presence, ordinary event. The second option was to celebrate the conference after a substantial temporary delay (months), sticking to an on-site, traditional format. The parties that followed this path had to wait for a convenient window of opportunity to be able to meet in-presence, avoiding the height of the successive contagion waves. When they did so, it had to be by delegation and in small meetings, given the limitations to public gatherings and mobility. The third possibility was to carry on with the (re)scheduled conference, but adapting it to fully digital formats.

The Bloc and the BNG were among the first group of parties which decided to postpone their conferences indefinitely. This does not mean the two parties did not have important issues at stake. The Bloc was undergoing crucial internal processes and it had just reedited the regional coalition government with the PSOE in Valencia the previous year, though after a slight decline and a general perception of stagnation. The congress was, thus, called to be a relaunching one, defining a new organisational identity and even changing its name. In the meantime, the BNG was facing an important electoral year in Galicia. However, while the BNG enjoyed a strong leadership and had good prospects about the upcoming elections, the Bloc was still in government and its potential crisis had not sparked yet. Both parties finally held in-presence party conferences once the Pandemic crisis was over.

In the second group we find UPN, PNV and CC. Both hold in-presence assemblies during the second half of the year. UPN suspended its General Assembly programmed for late March. After the relative relaxation of restrictions following the beginning of summer, it finally launched an in-presence assembly of party delegates

TABLE 3 General assessment of the main dimensions of three Spanish online party conferences (2020).

Party	Agenda	Deliberation	Participants	Competitiveness	Continuity
Ciudadanos	Leadership selection + manifesto approval	Yes	Delegates	No	No
Junts	Leadership selection + manifesto approval	Yes	Citizens	No	No
Podemos	Leadership selection	No	Members	No	Yes

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

by late June. To avoid displacements to the central headquarters, the party habilitated several in-presence voting centres across the region, but it did not conduct any online process, nor it allowed for online vote. Canarian Coalition postponed its National Congress, scheduled in May, until November, after the summer holidays brought a new height in the contagion and restrictions. Accordingly, the party decided to divide the process in a series of small assemblies distributed across the archipelago, instead of gathering all delegates in a main conference room. Therefore, there were several island-level assemblies, or even local assemblies for the biggest islands. The party enabled streaming channels in YouTube and the official website to coordinate the different simultaneous assemblies and to allow the assistance of international delegates and the press. However, decisions were taken entirely offline and just retransmitted online. As for the PNV, it decided not to organise its National Assembly, the most important party body in charge of choosing the party executive and approve the manifestos, which normally gathers around 600 delegates. Instead, it called for an in-presence General Assembly in December, a lesser party body of just 100 members to elect the chairman and executive council, while leaving the ideological debates for a better time.

Finally, the third group comprehended four parties that decided to conduct fully online conferences during the pandemic: Podemos, Ciudadanos, Junts and Más Madrid (see Table 3). We did not find enough evidence from MM, a regional split from Podemos mostly constrained to the capital city, that launched an internal process to define its organisation and structures after their electoral breakthrough in 2019 (Díaz Montiel and Tíscar, 2023). As for Podemos, Ciudadanos and Junts, their conferences are analysed in greater detail in the following section.

Overall, the shocking event of the pandemic did not affect equally every party, and only those in the last group adapted their internal processes significantly. These are all new parties (born after the Great Recession) and most of them characterised by previous intense usage of digital technologies. Unlike the other parties in the sample, they did not have to overcome rooted legacy practices. But apart from their higher adaptability, the particular circumstances defining their internal situation may have influenced the way they projected their conferences. In the next section, we explore the possible factors that shaped the digital adaptation of party conferences, its design and outcomes.

The digital transformation of Spanish party conferences during the pandemic

This section is devoted to analyse the online conferences of Podemos, Ciudadanos and Junts that were held in Spain throughout the pandemic. We first describe the characteristics and basic context of each party, to then examine the main features and development of the party congress, and finally analyse its main challenges and outcomes.

Podemos' third citizens' assembly

Podemos is a new left party born in 2014 as a result of the reconfiguration of the Spanish party system following the Great Recession. Given its intensive use of digital tools and blurred membership, it has been considered a native digital party (Bennet et al., 2018). When first launched in its First Citizens' Assembly (the

party's general conference), it managed to attract remarkable levels of engagement through an innovative use of ICTs, particularly its online deliberative platform *Plaza Podemos*. This forum articulated collective discussions over the party manifestos and policy proposals, where any citizen could intervene by simply registering on the website (Borge and Santamarina, 2016). However, over time it has reoriented many of its early structures and deleted some democratic innovations, introducing formal fee-paying membership and more on-site procedures (Meloni and Lupato, 2022). It is particularly characterised by a centralised structure and plebiscitary decision-making, seeking a direct interaction between the bases and the leader. This absence of intermedial party bodies has been categorised as a disintermediation process, that reinforces internal hierarchies and hyperleadership (Gerbaudo, 2019). Podemos' short trajectory has been marked by several major splits and mass desertions, first in 2017 after the II Citizens' Assembly, and shortly before the 2020 conference. After a gradual electoral decline following its foundation, the party managed to form a coalition government with the PSOE in 2019. These circumstances motivated the Secretary General to call for an early conference initially scheduled for March. It was already meant to be a mostly online process (like every party conference), although there was going to be a final in-presence event to present the elected leaders. The goal was to ratify the party's bodies and their strategy to face the new stage as a government party, with no serious opposition expected. Nonetheless, the lockdown declared earlier that month forced the postponement of the assembly when the process was already started. Finally, the party decided to celebrate the conference fully online from the 15th to the 21st of May.

Podemos does not use delegation and every registered member who pays a fee can participate in the conferences. Hence, the process necessarily happens online, initially utilising an online platform for deliberation. However, and unlike the foundational assembly, Podemos' general conferences no longer include significant ideological debates. The candidate for Secretary General proposes four manifestos, Political, Organisational, Ethic and Feminist, that are voted altogether with him. He also proposes the 89 candidates for the main executive body, the Citizens Council, voted in closed and blocked lists. Once the Citizens' Council is elected, its members choose a more reduced executive committee (the Coordination Council) proposed by the Secretary General. Two additional bodies are elected as well: the Guarantees' Council, entrusted with ensuring compliance to the Party Statute and apply disciplinary measures, and a representative for each *Círculo*, the local branches of the party. For instance, the conference does not differ much from primaries to vote the party leader, without any chance to deliberate on the party strategy and manifestos: whether they are ratified or rejected along with the Secretary General and his team as a whole. The closed and blocked lists do not allow, either, to vote for some outsider candidates without withdrawing support to the party leader. This generally creates oversized majorities in his favour (Raniolo and Tarditti, 2020).

Before the suspension, the period to present candidacies with their respective endorsements and political documents have already met the deadline, on the 17th of February. Once the conference was called again, the party only gave 2 days for the incumbents to modify, if necessary, the proposed manifestos, from 10th to 12th of May. There was not a chance to present new candidacies or amend the documents. A day later, the party opened the online primaries to select the different bodies, using its internal voting platform (*DesBorda*). On the

one hand, the representatives of the territorial branches were voted between the 13th to the 18th of May. On the other hand, the election of the national party bodies remained open from the 15th to the 21st of May. As expected, the incumbent candidate and leader of the party, Pablo Iglesias, was elected with an overwhelming majority, as well as his 89 candidates to the central committee, although participation only reached 11% of the census.

In sum, the development of the conference was highly mediated by the leader and scarcely deliberative. Its main aim was to strengthen the elites' control over the party right after an important political event, as it was to access a government coalition. In this regard, contestation to the incumbent leader, Pablo Iglesias, was infimal. After the conference the only opposition candidate sued the party amidst accusations of fraud and asked for the repetition of the primaries, but these claims have not been proved (Coarasa, 2021). Overall, it did not present innovative uses of digital technology beyond the party's standards, and its online format responded more to organisational preferences rather than to the new needs arising from the pandemics. Indeed, Podemos organised online conferences before and has continued to do so afterwards, as part of its organisational culture.

Ciudadanos' fifth general assembly

Ciudadanos was born in Catalonia in 2006 as a non-statewide centre-left party opposed to Catalan nationalism. In 2015 it jumped to the national arena and gained increasing influence, accessing several regional governments in coalitions with the conservative People's Party (PP). Through time, it gradually moved to the right-wing of the spectrum and reached its best electoral results in April 2019. Originally, Ciudadanos introduced some democratic innovations and used digital tools for its internal processes, although mostly focused on the selection of leaders and candidates while leaving decision-making aside (Raniolo and Tarditti, 2020). Similarly to Podemos, it is a highly centralised party with weak intermedial levels, where the leader has usually enjoyed a wide margin of action. This has led to multiple conflicts, including accusations of electoral fraud in regional primaries. In some case, these complains have been proved and even led to the judiciary suspension of the results (Moraga, 2020).

After the April 2019 election, the party leader, Albert Rivera, rejected to form a government coalition with the PSOE, leading to a snap election in December that resulted in an important setback and his resignment. As a response to the internal crisis that this generated, the party called for a relaunching process to renew the leadership and its public image. The internal discontent marked the development of the Fifth General Assembly and influenced some decisions related to its design. The conference was initially scheduled for March, and later on postponed to the end of April due to the lockdown. Nevertheless, the party decided not to wait for a hypothetical improvement of the situation and carried on with the congress in a fully online format. Ciudadanos' conferences were usually partially online and the use of ICTs throughout the process was not entirely new. In particular, online voting was a normalised practice in the party, since the leader is elected in open primaries prior to the congress. However, the assembly, more oriented to strategic deliberation and to elect the remaining party bodies, was never carried online before. Due to previous accusations of fraud during online primaries, the organisers finally accepted coming back to a hybrid model, both with electronic and in-presence vote.

The process consisted of three main phases: first, the congress delegates were elected in online primaries on the 23rd of February (before the postponement of the congress). Each province had at least one delegate assigned plus an additional one for every hundred members. In total, 355 delegates were elected, to which we need to add the different members of the party bodies with attendance right: the transitional management committee created after the resignment of the former leader, the incumbent Executive Committee and the General Council, 506 in total. Second, new primaries were held to choose the new President and Secretary General, voted together. The rest of the executive committee would be later appointed by the President, who did not have to publicly state who they would be. The voting took place in early March, first online on the 7th and later in-presence on the 8th, only for those provinces that officially requested it. To enable in-presence voting in a territory, at least 5 % of the members in the province had to ask for it and only if more than 25 petitions were registered. The party traditionally relied on its own intranet to organise primaries (Raniolo and Tarditti, 2020), but given the mistrust generated, an external company was hired to create and *ad hoc* voting system.

Finally, the conference as such happened in 4 days, between the 30th of April and the 3rd of May, and was entirely conducted through the conference app Zoom. The first day mostly consisted of presenting and voting the management reports of the different executive areas. The second day was dedicated to debate the amendments to the party's organisational and political manifestos. Previously, the local branches were given a period to read and debate the documents, and to propose amendments through the website. These amendments were accepted or rejected by the General Council according to their fitness to the party's statutes and basic values. During the conference, the attendants were assigned by chance to different working groups (organised in Zoom meeting rooms) to discuss the amendments and elaborate a final draft. Their interventions were made through the chat, and each amendment was defended by a representative through a video shared online. The definitive manifestos were voted on the third day in a plenary meeting, and the remaining party bodies were elected on the fourth day. These were the General Council and the Guarantees' Commission, voted in open lists.

Overall, Ciudadanos' online conference was considerably innovative for the party standards, although it has not had continuity in the subsequent assemblies. The deliberative meeting rooms were supposed to encourage debate, given the lesser number of participants and the absence of time limitations for written interventions, in comparison to speeches. However, concerns were raised about the quality of the debates held on chats, complaining that most interventions remained unanswered. In spite of this, the organisers considered the online conference considerably more participative than a traditional in-presence assembly. The fact is that the incumbent leaders faced little opposition, and the composition of the delegates was highly favourable to them. The outsider candidate defeated in March only gathered 21 delegates of the 355, with most of their demands being rejected. In addition, some opponents questioned the assignment of delegates to working groups, considering it favoured the isolation of outsiders and their ban from the key forums (Casillas, 2020). The main outcome of the Fifth Assembly was to ratify the new leader Inés Arrimadas (seen as a natural successor to Rivera) and legitimise a party affected by accusations of poor internal democracy and political mismanagement.

Junts' foundational congress

Junts per Catalunya was originally born as a coalition of sovereigntist parties and independents in 2017 (Barrio et al., 2019). Its main organisational structure was given by the centre-right Catalan Democratic Party (PDeCat). However, the leaders of the PDeCat and Junts, the former Catalan Prime Minister Cales Puigdemont, were gradually distanced over fundamental disagreements on the strategy and opposite organisational interests. They reached a breaking point in 2020, when the entourage of Puigdemont decided to launch Junts as a new party with its own organisational structures. By the time the lockdown was declared, the results of this quest were still uncertain and, hence, no congressional process was initially scheduled. It is not possible to establish comparisons with previous processes either, so the creation of Junts took place in unprecedented conditions and without past references but for its preceding party (the PDeCat). Rather than postponing or reshaping the format of the conference, Junts had to improvise its foundational congress in the middle of the Pandemics.

The conference was finally called for July and would last until early October. It was fully online, although the settings included a physical scenario with a limited number of in-presence attendants who led the process from the headquarters and streamed it in YouTube. Participation was open to every citizen who wished to inscribe on the website, becoming "associates" who would constitute the base for the future membership. The members of the PDeCat were also invited to join the process and were given full rights, in an attempt to force the integration of the former. By the end of the congress, the party had gathered more than 4.000 participants. The process was divided in three main phases:

The first part consisted of the inaugural meeting, on the 25th of July. The associates chose the congress chairpersons and two commissions, each one in charge of elaborating one of the manifestos: political and organisational. The protocols to discuss and approve the documents, and the future structure of the party bodies that would be elected later, were also voted. The elaboration of the manifestos was paralleled by online deliberative processes. From the 26th of July to the 15th of August, there was a first round to launch proposals and discuss the drafting, organised in 10 online thematic forums open to the associates. The first definitive proposals emerging from these debates were made public after the 20th of August, and debated again in a second round for amendments that would conclude in the general assembly of October.

The second step was the election of the party bodies between the 7th and the 9th of August. Candidacies were allowed to be formalised until the 1st of August. Firstly, the President and the four vice presidents of the party were voted by a majority system. Secondly, the General Secretariat, consisting of the Secretary General itself, and the organisation and finance secretaries, were elected through a closed and unblocked list. Thirdly, the 18 remaining members of the National Executive Council were voted by open lists.

The final stage of the conference took place on the 3rd of October, to vote the finals drafts of the party manifestos. At this point, more than 4.000 people had enrolled in the party, although the turnout only reached 27%.

There were two peculiarities of Junts' conference. On the one hand, it must be noted that the process was fully online even though the health conditions of summer allowed, in principle, for limited gatherings of people. Such was the case of UPN or CC, parties that used delegation systems. On the contrary, Junts preferred a one person-one vote system, which under the current circumstances could only happen digitally. As we have seen, the only attendants to join in-person where the organisers and leaders of the future party, while participation was conducted in digital formats. Probably, the promotors of the project wanted to enhance inclusivity and transparency to strengthen the image of the new party. On the other hand, the timing and development of the congress was not settled from the beginning and was mostly improvised. The organisers justified this decision on the need to adapt to the evolving pandemics and keep the possibility to celebrate some of the events in-presence. However, the agenda and the calendar were to a great extent related to the development of the negotiations with the PDeCat, and the possibility of a snap election in Catalonia. Under such conditions, the organisers preferred to maintain a flexible schedule to avoid unnecessary time constrains. Moreover, the party promotors (Puigdemont and his entourage) held an undisputed control over the process, with infimal contestation. While Puigdemont did not face opposition in his quest for the presidency, there was an alternative list for the General Secretariat which finally agreed to withdraw. Still, the fact that Junts was born as a union of different parties and ideological sensibilities, encouraged some extent of consensus when elaborating the lists (Quitian, 2020). Overall, Junts' conference was considerably more participative than those of Podemos or Ciudadanos, which does not necessarily mean less mediated by the leadership. The 2020 experience has not been repeated, and the party has preferred to conduct its following congresses in-presence.

Discussion

Online conferences are unusual in most political parties, partly because they lack the socialisation component inherent to a gathering of party members, partly because they entail substantial technological and organisational challenges. Hence, the most expectable decision during the pandemic would have been to postpone the congress and celebrate it in-presence when the circumstances allowed it. Still, of seven parties that celebrated assemblies in 2020, four did it digitally. The other three conferences organised in 2020, took place in-presence when the toughest restrictions were over, and did not gather more than a small delegation of representatives. Digital congresses were not limited to native digital parties, but also parties without previous experience with online deliberation. Even so, they were all organised by newer parties, while older ones opted for postponing. These findings support our first expectation and second expectations.

However, the effect of the pandemic was not unanimous and must be placed in context, as our analysis evinces the influence of a series of conditions shaping parties' adaptation to Covid. The literature has defined these factors as the permissive conditions that allow a critical juncture to trigger enduring changes (Hogan, 2019). Hence, the characteristics of each party conference were influenced both by the political context that each party was facing, and its own organisational practices.

Firstly, the internal circumstances in which the conference was called seemed to be relevant. Those parties under important organisational or foundational processes, as well as those discredited by electoral failures, organised more open and participative congresses.

We explain this decision as an attempt to legitimise the project for a new phase, although the pattern is not unanimous and shall be put in connection with additional factors such as the electoral performance or holding office: while the Bloc was facing some internal criticism over poor electoral results, it was still in government, so the party leadership decided to delay its internal renovation until the circumstances allowed for a traditional conference, avoiding risky experimentation. The same can be said about the BNG, whose uncontested leader was able to suspend the renewal of the party bodies without forcing a crisis. Very differently, Ciudadanos suffered an electoral collapse that forced a change of leadership and organisational renovation, the earlier the better. Having lost its long-standing president and after suffering an important defeat, the party not only needed to elect a new leader; it also had to involve its members in the process to confront an increasing internal criticism over poor internal democracy and mistaken political decisions. As for Junts, the foundation of the party was not decided in the beginning of the pandemics, but the increasing instability of the original coalition and the expected regional elections, pushed the celebration of a congress to define its organisation and leadership.

External conditions interacted with the internal situation of each party. The characteristics of the party's territory and the health regulations in-force appear to be influential in terms of mobility restrictions, specially while limitations applied to displacements between different territories. This fact might have eased the celebration of in-presence events for small, regional parties based on a single province, while making it more complicated for bigger parties comprehending wider territories. If the party normally use a delegation system, in most cases it was feasible to organise an ordinary assembly with a limited number of participants after the total lockdown of the spring months ended. Such was the case of UPN or CC, which conducted ordinary conferences by simply establishing several voting places or dividing the main assembly in several headquarters. On the contrary, Ciudadanos celebrated its General Assembly online in the early pandemics, which made it impossible to gather nationwide delegates in person. In different terms, a small party like Más Madrid, based on a compact territory, opted for online formats given its native use of ICTs.

These contextual factors seemingly interacted with the internal functioning of the party, encompassing its organisational culture and practices. In particular, new parties seemed to be more adaptative, especially digital native parties (Podemos and Más Madrid). In the case of Podemos, the circumstances were in principle more favourable to this party, that had just entered the government. Consequently, its leaders had a wider margin of manoeuvre and could have easily postponed the assembly. Still, digital formats are inherent to the party's internal functioning. Launching an online congress open to all its members does not pose the challenges that traditional parties may face. In this regard, organisations with a relatively low use of ICTs, such as UPN, CC or the PNV, may be more reticent to innovate and alter their legacy practices.

On the other hand, parties that never before experimented with online deliberation were not less innovative (Ciudadanos and Junts). Ciudadanos had to overcome internal doubts and scepticism, but it was a new party relatively experienced with digital technologies. Regarding Junts, its leaders did not have any reference of previous congresses on which to relay. Under the sanitary conditions of the summer months, this conference could have been partially in-presence

if the party decided to use a delegation system. However, it preferred to launch a fully online process open to the citizenry, in an attempt to enhance the democratic qualities of the new party and legitimise its leaders. Further, the party was probably seeking for a recruitment strategy, profiting the congress to attract members into the future party.

The structure of these three online conferences varied in innovation and inclusivity, from the relatively traditional and compact format of Ciudadanos' assembly to the extended 3-month congress of Junts. In these two cases, the conference included primaries to elect the party cadres and deliberative processes to elaborate the party manifesto. Their approaches held some similarities, specifically regarding the creation of thematic forums to conduct the debates. The difference refers to the inclusivity and horizontality of these deliberative processes. While Ciudadanos restricted participation to delegates and assigned them by chance to each one of the working groups, Junts left them open to every member according to his personal interests. Meanwhile, Podemos merged both procedures in a single election, leaving little margin to debate and involve members in the definition of the party strategy.

Another aspect refers to the multi-level subdivision of the congress. Ciudadanos organised a first stage of local-level assemblies in charge of discussing and amending the manifestos. The selection of delegates also involved the different provincial branches through the celebration of territorial primaries. Differently, Podemos' assembly was entirely conducted from the centre, since the manifestos were not subjected to any kind of deliberation or amendment process. Junts did not have any territorial subdivision at the time, as the party was just being created. Nevertheless, it somewhat counterbalanced this by dividing the conference in several phases. Participants in Junts' congress had a higher level of involvement in every stage than those of any other party, as they were also called to vote on the structure of the process and the party bodies that had to be elected.

These findings suggest that critical internal conditions and leadership instability enhanced inclusivity, as ventured in our third expectation. That is why Ciudadanos or Junts, even though being right parties, celebrated considerably more inclusive congresses that Podemos. However, we should not overestimate the deliberative quality of these conferences. All the processes analysed were conducted top-down and worked out as a ratification of the leadership. The main differences we find are, thus, not in terms of outcome but design: parties facing an internal crisis or important organisational moments conducted more deliberative assemblies. Any of the incumbent leaders faced a strong opposition, even though Junts was the only one to achieve a considerable degree of consensus, instead of dispelling contenders. This does not seem to be related to the inclusivity and development of the conference, but to the elites' efforts to reach a compromise and strengthen party unity. In comparison, both Ciudadanos and Podemos were later accused of irregularities and their conferences neglected as elite-driven.

Conclusion

Our study of pandemic conferences explores COVID-19 as a critical juncture that fostered parties' digital transformation, contributing to a research strand previously focused on internal factors as the main enablers of party digitalisation (González-Cacheda and Outeda, 2024; Sandri et al., 2024). Conducting a descriptive

comparative case study of nine Spanish parties, we first examine the digital adaptation of party conferences to the pandemic, to then compare the three online congresses celebrated during the lockdown. We find that parties reacted differently to the pandemic depending on their organisational characteristics and contextual conditions: while new parties launched digital conferences, more established parties opted for postponing their scheduled events. The inclusivity and deliberative reach of the different congresses was seemingly enhanced by internal instability, such as organisational crisis and changes of leadership. All in all, these findings suggest that environmental conditions can overcome organisational limitations and established practices, creating new paths that would have otherwise remained unexplored.

Finally, it is worth assessing the continuity of this pandemic adaptation. Only Podemos has reedited online assemblies after the pandemics. On the contrary, Ciudadanos came back to in-presence formats in the following assembly, and Junts has also opted for in-person congresses by delegation afterwards, amidst an increasing institutionalisation. Considering the limited scope of our sample, further research should assess the endurance of those democratic innovations that are induced by external shocks, instead of being the result of strategic choices. While our study illustrates parties' adaptative capacity when facing changing environments, it remains uncertain to what extent these transformations can survive crisis periods or institutionalisation processes. Probably, the surge of digital deliberative experiences occurred through 2020–2021 was not more than a pandemic affair without prospects of continuity.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

AM: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, Investigation. OB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

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

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2025.1599250/full#supplementary-material

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Appendix 1. Party documents

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