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Testing the Toolbox: European Political Parties Embrace Digital Transformation in Election Campaigning[1]

Isabelle R Borucki, Philipp University Marburg

In today's world of rapid technological advancements, European political parties are increasingly utilizing digital tools and platforms to shape and support their election campaigns (Borucki & Kettemann, 2024; Bossetta, 2018; Dommett, 2020; Gibson, 2020). In a high-choice online environment, the hybrid meshing of campaign strategies and tools from several sources for different target groups will be crucial in the upcoming 2024 European parliamentarian elections—despite the fact that it is not so new in the US context (Chadwick, 2013; Wells et al., 2016).

This essay aims to explore the various aspects of digital campaigning, focusing on the integration of digital tools and especially hybrid meshed forms of campaign interactions in the sense of exploring political parties' toolboxes. It uses recent evidence from research on parties and their digital transformation in Germany as a case study. Moreover, potential benefits and drawbacks are discussed.

Digital Campaigning: Exploiting Opportunities with Precision Tools?

Digital campaigning heralds an era of unparalleled connectivity and engagement, empowering political parties to exponentially transcend geographical constraints and amplify their reach. Employing social media platforms and digital communication channels, parties can disseminate their messages swiftly and efficiently, fostering real-time interaction with voters—

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if those voters do find the parties' informational offers. However, this comes at a cost, mostly in the forms of spending for ads and the need for specialized personnel (Votta et al., 2024). The transformative potential of micro-targeting and artificial intelligence-fueled campaigns extends further by enabling parties to tailor their messaging to distinct demographics and precise constituencies. Through data analytics and micro-targeting techniques, parties can identify key issues and concerns among different voter groups and customize their messaging to resonate with diverse audiences (Bennett, 2016; König, 2020; Matthes et al., 2022). This personalized and individualized approach to canvassing promises to enhance the effectiveness of campaign efforts with tailored messages and thus increase the likelihood of voter engagement and support. The main avenue to achieve this is by political ads, especially on Facebook since most relevant demographics to parties are still active there (Schmidt et al., 2024). However, transparency in concerns of who gets targeted and—in the end—votes for a party because of its ad is still somewhat of a black box for political communication research (Dommett, 2020).

Furthermore, digital platforms enable parties to mobilize supporters and volunteers to actively participate in campaigns more effectively, facilitating grassroots organizing and activism (Bischof & Kurer, n.d., 2023). From crowdfunding initiatives to virtual rallies and online petitions, parties can utilize digital tools to mobilize resources and rally support for their cause. The party-internal democratization of campaigning through digital channels promises to empower grassroots activists and also amplify the voices of marginalized communities, fostering a more inclusive political process. However, the other side of the coin is that not all party members get involved or want to take part in such digital activities. This is due to the fact that the same parties also drift to the pole of centralized organization, meaning that they focus and concentrate their leadership on the top instead of the base (Blanke & Pybus, 2020). To delve deeper into this topic, the following showcases some insights from a recent study.

This essay is based on the "DIPART" member survey dataset (DigiPM) (Ziegler, 2023),[2] which is an original panel survey conducted among four political parties represented in the German Bundestag: CDU (Christian Democratic Union), SPD (Social Democratic Party), Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Alliance 90/The Greens) and Die Linke (The Left).[3] The study includes four panel waves spanning 13 months from late October 2020 to November 2021. The third wave, which was conducted after the German general election in 2021, is the primary source of data for this study.

Evidence from the panel survey shows that people who are already active in their parties, also partake digitally. So-called social-media members or digital members are rare, but active,

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[2] The dataset is available upon request. The work of the junior research group was supported by the Digital Society research program funded by the Ministerium für Kultur und Wissenschaft des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen under the grant number 005-17090003.

[3] AfD and the Liberals refused to support our research. The survey questionnaire was distributed by the party headquarters and sent as paper version upon request.

reinforcing the existing gaps and divides in society regarding age, gender, and resources (money, time, location, education). Regarding alternative forms of campaigning, the digital form is only employed by around 10 percent of our respondents.

About 60 to 70 percent of members are actively involved in campaigning efforts. Interestingly, half of these participants are also engaged in social media campaigning, highlighting a significant overlap between traditional and digital campaign methods – such as email-lists, online events or digital townhall meetings, mainly summarizing video conferences as a substitute to real meetings. Despite some members reporting decreased activity, their participation rates do not deviate from the overall percentages, indicating a consistent level of engagement across the board. This suggests that even those who have scaled back their involvement remain committed to the campaign's objectives at a rate comparable to the general member base. However, those who campaigned online for their parties did so via a broad range of tools, mostly on social media for campaigns or via Zoom, to maintain internal party activity and organization of activities linked to the campaign.

In this meshed environment between online and offline, reported creative campaigning techniques entail uncommon ways of enabling contact with voters, supporters, and sympathizers. These forms primarily took place offline, where the tangible interaction with communities creates a strong foundation for engagement, i.e., having bike tours, organizing BBQs or hiking tours to interact. Despite this focus, online formats are also crucial, offering tools for reaching wider audiences and fostering digital engagement that complements physical efforts. Campaign activities are thus diverse and deeply rooted in local contexts, reflecting the unique cultures, needs, and dynamics of the areas they serve. Thus, the federal structure of the German party system is somewhat mirrored in campaign organization.

The pandemic has profoundly impacted the party members' activity, often resulting in decreased engagement due to health concerns and restrictions. However, the crisis has also been a significant catalyst for digital campaigning, pushing political parties to innovate and adopt new technologies. This shift has been supported by the narrative of a future-oriented digital party, which resonates across party lines, appealing to a broad spectrum of members. Furthermore, hybrid campaigning and participation have emerged as crucial elements in a party's successful transition to digital platforms, blending traditional and online methods to maintain and enhance member involvement and outreach.

These insights from the German case might serve as a blueprint and idea-giver to possible avenues of the ongoing electoral campaigns of European parties. With the caveat that the European elections are a special case, as are the party groups and families, which, in turn, has an impact on their campaigns and strategies (Bene et al., 2022; Carter & Poguntke, 2010).

The increasing commodification of personal data and the opacity of algorithmic decision-making processes have led to growing concerns regarding privacy infringement, consent

violations, and algorithmic biases. These issues have become particularly salient in the context of data utilization in political campaigns, where the ethical ramifications of such practices necessitate vigilant oversight and regulatory scrutiny. Such practices and their proliferation were also discussed within the panel survey. And interestingly, most members refrain from too much data-driven campaigning but rather want to inform and interact with their audiences through social media. Transparency and accountability thus are needed to asses more responsivity in the process around elections and beyond. By doing so, we can help to ensure that the use of personal data and algorithmic decision-making processes is consistent with ethical principles and promotes the well-being of society as a whole (Bietti, 2021; Daskal et al., 2020).

Therefore, political parties must follow strict principles of transparency, accountability, and democratic governance when dealing with the ethical dilemma of data-driven campaigning. Regulatory frameworks, such as the recent European Acts (Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act, and Digital Governance Act) should be strengthened to protect the integrity of voter data, with strong safeguards against exploitation and manipulation by political actors within the EU. Moreover, concerted efforts to improve algorithmic transparency and accountability are crucial, creating an environment of public trust and confidence in the fairness of electoral processes (Bormida, 2021; Dommett, 2019).

Conclusion

This essay has analyzed how digital campaigning affects European political parties by illustrating evidence from a German perspective, both positively and negatively. Evidence from the "DIPART" member survey dataset shows active digital participation among party members, though only a small percentage rely solely on digital forms of campaigning. The overlap between traditional and digital methods is significant. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital campaigning by German parties, pushing parties to innovate and adopt new technologies while balancing health concerns and engagement with their grassroots. While digital tools allow unprecedented levels of connectivity and engagement, they also bring ethical and democratic challenges that demand careful consideration in political strategic management: Combining digital strategies with traditional campaign methods offers a multifaceted approach to voter engagement, using precision targeting with grassroots mobilization, as the German case showed. As European political parties continue to navigate the digital landscape and find themselves in different ecosystems, their ability to balance innovation with ethical responsibility will be critical in shaping a resilient and inclusive electoral environment.

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Dr Isabelle Roth Borucki is a professor of political science methods and democracy in digital transformation at Philipp University Marburg, Germany. She holds an MA in political science, sociology and philosophy from Julius Maximilian University Würzburg, a doctorate from the University Trier, and obtained her habilitation from the University of Duisburg-Essen. Before joining the Institute for Political Science in Marburg, she served as an interim professor at the University of Siegen and led DIPART, digital party research, a junior research group at the University of Duisburg-Essen. She also is an executive committee member of the Marburg Center for Digital Culture and Infrastructure (MDCDI) and its master program "Cultural Data Studies".