



REVIEWS SYMPOSIUM

Are digital parties the future of party organization? A symposium on *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* by Paolo Gerbaudo

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Katharine Dommett: defining the digital party

The impact of digital technology on politics has been profound. In just a few decades, the institutions, procedures and practices of democratic politics have been radically transformed. The way in which organizations and individuals are adapting to digital, and the consequences of these shifts for politics, are the subject of a growing sub-discipline devoted to the study of technology and politics. Yet, to date, surprisingly limited attention has been paid to the consequences of digital technology for party politics. Whilst a flurry of initial commentary was offered by Helen Margetts' notion of the 'cyber party' (2006), and scholars such as Gibson *et al.* (2004), Greffet (2013) and Kefford (2019) have traced the organizational implications of digital technology for parties, analysis so far has tended to focus on the consequences of digital for established parties. Studies have therefore looked at parties' adoption of websites and social media, the growth of digital campaigning techniques, and the implications of digital for membership. Largely absent within this literature has been the analysis of new parties that are entirely reliant upon digital for their operation. Paulo Gerbaudo's *The Digital Party* adopts such a focus, and therefore marks an important new contribution to this field. Offering an outline of what he deems to be 'the new organisational template' (2019: 4) of digital parties, he uses comparative international analysis to explore, in detail, the emergence of parties imbued with digital techniques and tools. Apparent in the form of the Pirate Party, Podemos, the Five Star Movement, and evident to a lesser extent in France Insoumise and Momentum, Gerbaudo diagnoses a new form of digital organization that differs substantively from the 'mass party', 'catch-all' or 'cartel' parties of the past.

Gerbaudo's digital parties exist primarily online, using websites and online discussion forums to organize. Unlike established parties, they have been designed to capitalize on the benefits that digital provides. Whilst so far few in number, the examples surveyed in the book show the potential for digital parties to transform party competition, with new parties emerging and rapidly achieving electoral success. In grasping precisely what it is that distinguishes these new digital parties from established parties that are adopting digital tools, Gerbaudo offers a multi-faceted conception. Specifying numerous traits, he contends that digital parties are those that:

- '[P]romise to deliver a new politics supported by digital technology' that is 'more open to ordinary people, more immediate and direct, more authentic and transparent' (Ibid.: 4)

- '[H]ave heavily invested in the development of online decision-making tools' (Ibid.: 4) and seek to deliver 'a new grassroots democracy' (Ibid.: 5)
- Have 'promised to guarantee more transparency and to prevent political careerism and bureaucracy' (Ibid.: 4)
- Act as 'platform parties' that gather data, and exploit the devices, services and applications of social media (Ibid.: 4)
- '[B]ring digital transformation to their very core, to their internal structure of decision-making, rather than using digital communication simply as an outreach tool' (Ibid.: 13–14)
- Are 'outsider organisation[s]' that lack 'steady funding and...offices or similar infrastructure' (Ibid.: 14)
- Are 'disintermediating' organisations that do away with middlemen and bureaucrats (Ibid.: 15) and hence lack 'a number of structures and processes of traditional parties' (Ibid.: 5)
- Have a 'highly reactive "superbase"' who are allied with a charismatic leader (Ibid.: 17)
- Are funded by 'donations rather than...membership fees' (Ibid.: 17)
- Are 'start-up' parties that are 'flexible and cybernetic' (Ibid.: 93), and 'characterised by rapid growth and high scalability' (Ibid.: 80)
- Exhibit 'distributed centralism' where 'the party's bottom is accompanied by an increasing concentration of power in the hands of a charismatic party leader' or 'hyperleader' (Ibid.: 17). A dynamic that results in 'an evident mismatch between their idealistic discourse and their often deadpan practice, between the face-value of participatory democracy in which members are given all the power and the leaders are mere figureheads, and a plebiscitarian reality where the opposite seems to be the case' (Ibid.: 19)

These criteria provide a tight conception of digital parties, focusing attention not on the way in which all parties use digital, but rather how a specific form of party organization has emerged that uses digital. Initially obscured by the terminology, Gerbaudo's conception of the digital party therefore aims to update 'the party form to the technological and social conditions of our era' (Ibid.: 17). The digital party therefore reflects on the social agenda and support base of a particular type of party, as well as the significance of new technological affordances. This point becomes apparent in chapters 2 and 3, where Gerbaudo outlines how digital parties are 'concerned with transforming the economy, adapting it to the changing conditions of a digital society and redressing some of its more glaring imbalances' to create 'a more just and inclusive society' (Ibid.: 65). Whilst not exhibiting identical policy platforms – a point shown through discussion of his cases – he argues that digital parties are defined by a certain agenda. Moreover, chapter 2 shows how these parties draw appeal from a specific section of society, being supported by 'people who by and large identify themselves with the "digital revolution", who are "hyperconnected and hyper-exploited", who yearn for "a new politics", one based on digital rights, social provisions and new democratic institutions, which may solve this condition of political marginalisation and economic insecurity' (Ibid.: 44). It therefore appears that the digital party conceptualises a particular example of parties' relationship with digital, detailing how organizations in different countries have come to exhibit a similar organizational form.

Recognizing the scope of this book is critical to understanding the reach and significance of this text. Gerbaudo offers a fascinating insight into what he describes as 'a specific type of party that can be most clearly seen across a number of formations described as "internet parties"' (Ibid.: 14). This exposes both the ambitions and challenges of this organisational form, offering useful new ideas such as the notion of 'distributed centralism' and the 'superbase'. Yet, the book also claims that the notion of the digital party highlights 'a trend of general transformation of the party system in the present era'. Whilst bringing a number of fascinating trends in party organization to the fore, the relationship between these specific examples and the practices of other types of party that have adopted digital is unclear. It is therefore often not obvious whether the observations made about Gerbaudo's digital parties are illustrative of the practices of

established parties or other ‘new’ parties whose agenda and approach to the Internet comes in a different form. In essence, questions remain about the way in which the party system as a whole is adapting to digital, and the degree to which the practices of Gerbaudo’s digital parties echo the activities of parties adopting digital in other ways (or for other ends).

In order to fully tease out the significance of digital for the party system, it therefore appears that further analysis is required that considers other digital party forms. Such inquiry appears particularly pertinent because in recent years there have been many examples of established parties adopting digital technologies in ways that mirror (if not entirely replicate) ‘digital parties’ behaviours. Within the UK, for example, the Labour Party showed considerable interest in the potential of digital technology for engaging membership – creating a ‘Digital Transformation Team’ designed to lead change in party organization (Dommett, 2018). Elsewhere, parties such as the Scottish National Party in Scotland have experimented with online engagement mechanisms, and parties across the UK’s political spectrum have sought to engage supporters online without the necessity of party membership or even formal affiliation. Such examples suggest that established parties are beginning to exhibit some of the practices associated with Gerbaudo’s digital parties. Yet it is not clear how and why these bodies differ, or what these changes mean for our understanding of the party system as a whole. Whilst this book therefore presents one important part of the puzzle, questions remain about the relationship between digital technology and parties more generally.

One other particularly interesting question to consider relates to the future of Gerbaudo’s digital party. Reflecting on the organizational challenges the party faces, Gerbaudo notes that there is a ‘risk that in the long term the lean organisational format used by the party may prove ineffective, as periods of latency follow in the trail of waves of enthusiasm’ (2019: 187). As such he argues that there is a need for organizational adaptation, with digital parties needing to ‘find a way to give solidity to its energy, by either routinizing the charisma of the hyperleader or giving weight to its organisational structure’ (Ibid.: 188). This raises interesting prospects for the future of digital parties and suggests that they will continue to evolve and change. But, in turn, this poses questions about the definitional criteria outlined by Gerbaudo. In predicting change in the future, it becomes unclear whether digital parties will always be expected to be ‘start-up’, outsider organizations that exhibit loose organizational forms. As many digital parties become more mainstream and adopt less fluid institutional infrastructures, their status is therefore in doubt. Recognizing this, questions emerge about the way in which digital parties can be identified. Whilst the checklist of attributes outlined above appears to help classify digital parties as they appear now, it is unclear whether they will remain pertinent in the future or will need to change to reflect different organizational trends. It could be that parties that currently qualify as digital parties no longer fit the definition Gerbaudo outlines in the future, and hence are seen to take on a new organizational form. Thinking about the Five Star Movement, for example, it may be that if this party becomes increasingly mainstream and less participatory, it would be classified in a different way (potentially more akin to established parties that are adapting to digital). These points raise questions about the rigidity of Gerbaudo’s definition of digital parties, and suggest that it will be important to devote more attention to the significance of time for how parties’ relations with digital are understood (Karpf, 2020).

In reviewing the significance of *The Digital Party*, it therefore appears that this book opens up an important new debate around the relationship between parties and digital technology. The book undoubtedly fulfils its aim of overcoming ‘the twin evils of uncritical celebration and pre-conceived criticism that have so far dominated public commentary on the digital party’ (Ibid.: 6). Indeed, Gerbaudo offers careful analysis, outlining digital parties’ ideals whilst also highlighting the gulf that can exist between these ideals and the actual practices parties display. Yet, whilst spotlighting an important aspect of the party landscape, questions remain about the wider significance of digital for parties with different social agendas, support bases and more established organizational forms. Given the increasing importance of digital technology and its growing

significance for the everyday practices of partisan politics, further analysis of parties' interactions with digital is therefore not only urgent but will need to be wide-ranging. Scholars should therefore consider, as Gerbaudo does, the stated objectives and actual form of parties' application of digital, but they should also examine the ways in which different types of party are interacting with digital, considering the significance of party type, political context and time. In the opening debate on many of these issues, Gerbaudo therefore points the way for further analysis, offering a foundation on which scholars of party politics and digital technology can build to understand the dynamics of politics today.

Jasmin Fitzpatrick: the digital party as another piece in the puzzle of the party change debate

Paolo Gerbaudo presents with *The Digital Party* a well-researched and entertainingly written book, which challenges the reader to connect the well-known classics of political science with the exciting changes in the political sphere. His observations provide a comprehensive description of parties, which he calls digital parties. Yet, more importantly, he opens room for the debate of party and party system research.

The *Digital Party* describes an emerging form of the political party as a reaction to societal changes such as digitalization and the demand for more participation. Therefore, the digital party is another piece in the puzzle of the party change debate. Archetypical examples of this form of party are the Pirate Parties, Podemos and the Five Star Movement (Gerbaudo, 2019: 7, 12). Along with France Insoumise, these are the cases that provide the empirical ground for Gerbaudo's analysis.

The digital party is a party of the Internet age (ibid.: 13). Central aspects characterizing the digital party are the enthusiastic use of digital technology for political participation and decision-making (Ibid.: 7) and the highlighting of broad participation in their decision-making processes (participationism, chpt. 4). The platform-character with a lean organizational body mimics the structure of Internet companies (Ibid.: 14, 18), where a central charismatic leader (Hyperleader, chpt. 8) collimates attention from inside and outside the party. Gerbaudo classifies this leader as a benevolent dictator (Ibid.: 19, 159), which leads to the digital party being 'autocratic and anti-pluralist' in practice (Ibid.: 19). The counterpart of the hyperleader is the superbase (chpt. 9) – as indicated by these terms, participation is based on numbers not on real engagement turning party affiliates rather into *Stimmvieh* (German voting livestock, pejorative). This definition wipes away the naiveté of mobilization-driven digital enthusiasts and points to evident flaws in idealized new forms of party organization. Throughout the book, Gerbaudo goes into more detail on each of these digital party ingredients.

The *Digital Party* provides an analysis of political organization out of a critical party research perspective. Because of their origin and their framing, these parties seek to portray themselves as movements and therefore often attracted movement researchers before party researchers. Gerbaudo connects Podemos and the Five Star Movement to the classic literature of party change – starting with the Jacobins (Ibid.: 22). He sketches the evolution of parties in close connection to the society they represent. While well-known to all scholars of political party research, the chapter 'The Party Strikes Back' provides a useful summary of party definitions and developments to novices drawing on many influential authors. In the centre of his elaboration is the role of bureaucracy and its consequences for democracy.

Following these general remarks on the emergence of parties as organizations, Gerbaudo builds on the classic work of Lipset and Rokkan (1967) suggesting that the Great Recession of 2008 and the digital revolution caused a new societal cleavage. Comparing the industrial revolution with the digital revolution, Gerbaudo explains in clear terms the key aspects of digitalization (Gerbaudo, 2019: 45–51) and weighs positive aspects adequately with negative consequences for people's lives. While a critical look is most certainly necessary, Gerbaudo tends to sensationalize.

He connects the financial crisis of 2008 to the emergence of the iPhone as ‘the killer device of the social media era’ (Ibid.: 48) or refers to the large Internet giants as FAANGs (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google) which steers the readers’ minds to think of the fangs of a predator. His initial point of suggesting a new cleavage needs further debate. Instead of arguing for a new cleavage, Gerbaudo’s quite detailed description opens another possibility as well: Do we really experience a new cleavage or is this the capitalists/worker cleavage 2.0? The new cleavage proposed by Gerbaudo concerns three aspects: digital freedom, democracy and economic security. Gerbaudo himself suggests that we inherited the second conflict (democracy) from the industrial era. The economic conflict appears inherited as well. The observation that ‘[o]ne of the key measures advocated by many digital parties in Universal Basic Income (UBI)’ (Ibid.: 63) connects digital parties to the left parties and, therefore, places them on the same side of the capitalist/worker cleavage. Yet, there are other forms of capital besides the economic capital, which are also and maybe even rather effective, that is, cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in the manifestation of information and knowledge. The digital freedom conflict actually calls for a digital equivalent of human and civil rights: the right to property of one’s own information, rule of law, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of association (as partly stated by Gerbaudo, 2019: 55). To what extent we actually experience a new cleavage or the capitalists/worker cleavage 2.0 is a relevant discussion. Either way, the observations presented regarding the composition of digital parties remain unquestioned. These parties attract individuals who do not find their spot in the established party spectrum – the outsiders (Ibid.: 51). They are Internet-savvy and hopeful when it comes to technology. Gerbaudo describes that these individuals respond to the large offers of participation promised by digital party designers like Davide Casaleggio who dooms representative forms of democracy (Ibid.: 61).

Gerbaudo poses the notion that digital parties imitate the structures of large online companies (Ibid.: 66). He argues that it is obviously the case for parties’ communication, however, and maybe more interestingly this poses consequences for intra party structures. He chooses the analogy of a cloud (Ibid.: 67) where a party is present everywhere and nowhere at the same time and, in this position, provides information and interaction. The consequence is that individuals and elites become directly connected, the former intermediate bodies become dispensable – they are replaced by protocols or algorithms. Taking a critical, Marxist perspective in his observations, Gerbaudo describes the path of organizations from a Fordist to a platform model. He refers to other authors who perceive individuals’ data sharing through these platforms as a form of free labour or even slave labour, leaving a few platform capitalists wealthy. He states (Ibid.: 72): ‘The platform is never neutral’. While quite well-familiar to many platform users, the fact that algorithms prefer certain forms of content over others poses a democratic problem questioning the very core of our democratic ideal: the equal competition of opinions. ‘Emphasis moves away from content and towards process’ (Ibid.: 77). Other dangers are posed by the degradation of members in favour of loosely affiliated supporters who potentially inflate the party without an ideological belonging or bearing responsibility for a political outcome.

Along with these changes in party structure, Gerbaudo suggests a more comprehensive change of society which he terms participationalism (Ibid.: chpt. 4). This mode can be characterized by suspicion towards representatives and the demand for inclusiveness, openness and spontaneity (Ibid.: 81). This trend goes along with a redefinition of the term participation: while usually conceptualized as a civic right, Gerbaudo emphasizes its evolution to a civic duty within digital parties. While Gerbaudo presents accurate observations illustrating this development, the reader longs for a more systematic link to the classic democratic theories (e.g., Mill, Rousseau, Schumpeter) and rather contemporary ideas. Inclusiveness of all adults, power over the agenda, enlightened understanding (Dahl, 1998: 37–38) are ideals of democracy posed before the web 2.0 era. Elite criticism and consequences of perfect inclusion have been extremes of the participation spectrum far before the dawn of the Internet or the World Wide Web. The pitfalls of participation (Gerbaudo, 2019: 90–91) briefly point to the problems of such an idealization of

participation, yet, this leaves the reader wondering about the perspectives classical reads provide to this phenomenon. The overall impression is that participation as provided by digital parties is not real participation but rather a form of modern-day *'panem et circenses'* to please the crowd.

Gerbaudo documents the digital parties' avoidance of the term party and the self-perception as movements (Ibid.: 86–88). Consequences of this demeanour are the *'terror loci'* (Ibid.: 93), the fear of an identifiable location or even headquarters. This may be seen as part of the innovative character of digital parties denying bureaucracy by not having a bureau, yet, it also provides a form of anonymity ('phantom office', Ibid.: 97). Here it is important to stress that this gives leeway for non-transparent, obscure transactions and secrecy – the opposite of what is promised by digital parties. Declaring official head-quarters also means that an organization (party or not) can be addressed, can be held accountable. Gerbaudo describes the culture of dodging official offices by operating out of offices-in-disguise (Ibid.: 96–97). It is common sense that running an organization with legal responsibilities requires an offline location. By trying to create an image that this is not necessary, digital parties are covering their tracks rather than providing transparency and openness.

This behaviour is transferred to the digital sphere. While creating the image of comprehensive participation and addressing the democratic deficit, software-based decision-making poses challenges. Gerbaudo refers to different models of democracy, before describing the key features of different decision-making/decision-formation platforms, linking these platforms to these different types (Ibid.: chpt.6). Gerbaudo states that all of the platforms include functions from different democratic models, however, the deliberative character is mostly emphasized – probably for image reasons (Ibid.: 123). Gerbaudo presents a more realistic interpretation: Online-decision-making rather provides a model of 'reactive democracy' where members still have limited options for participation (Ibid.: 127). In the 7th chapter, Gerbaudo evaluates the bottom-up or top-down quality of intra-party democracy in digital parties. His evidence shows 'an unmistakable top-down bias' (Ibid.: 141) – balloting over debating is the pre-dominant modus operandi in both digital parties (M5S and Podemos). Dismissing the ideal of leaderlessness, Gerbaudo sharpens the contrast of the leading and the led by coining the terms Hyperleader vs. their Superbase. He attests leaders a pivotal position in parties pointing to the vast body of literature including Max Weber and Robert Michels, before characterizing hyperleaders. One key feature is the celebrity-like demeanour, a social media-compatible likability, but they also have to be down-to-earth and appear honest. Gerbaudo chooses the picture of the Hyperleader as a 'gas balloon' floating above the party (Ibid.: 149) or uses the term 'Caesarist figure' (Ibid.: 150). Other than one might think, digital party strategists were well aware of the necessity of a leading figure with the capability to inspire the masses and fill TV screens, as Gerbaudo outlines. Hyperleaders are charismatic in a Weberian fashion (Ibid.: 151). He explains the necessity of leadership referring to Gramsci, who was convinced that in 'periods of re-organization of the political arena', for example, after a crisis, leaders fulfil an important function. The leaders introduced by Gerbaudo qualify as charismatic and authoritarian. They derive their support from a superbase. This heterogeneous supporter base is equally necessary for political organizations as the digital party (Ibid.: 162). Although the membership concept is blurred and softened in digital parties, members differ in the degree of their activity just like in any other party (Ibid.: 163). Yet, the membership numbers presented may spark the idea of the return of mass participation (Ibid.: 168). This thought might be misleading: Gerbaudo points to the changed concept of membership. Still another point should be considered especially for parties like the digital party: Gerbaudo frequently draws links to the giant Internet companies. For these companies, follower numbers are crucial in order to prove their power and attract even more users. Similarly, the digital party has no reason to be interested in accurate membership numbers: membership is for free, so there is no financial motif; however, keeping the numbers up is essential regardless, whether individuals still want to count as members. Barely any scientific contribution sheds light on resting members. In this case, they might just artificially magnify the perceived support of the

digital party. These are not identical with what Gerbaudo calls ‘lurker supporters’ (Ibid.: 174) because they are less than passive. Finding out more about the development of this share of the declared member base has to be part of the future research agenda in order to learn more about the real impact behind the digital party.

Gerbaudo presents an impressive stocktaking of the empirical examples of the digital party that we find in an increasing number of European countries. His suggestion of coining this type of digital party is intriguing. Some questions remain unanswered: Are the terms digital party and platform party really interchangeable? There is no reference to what Margetts (2006) termed the cyber party: Is there a systematic difference? Should these terms co-exist? In addition, next steps for the research agenda of the party research community can be derived. Some appear may be more obvious than others: do we see a convergence of digital parties and traditional parties? Do digital parties form an own party family? Do we see a change in hyperleader generations and what does this mean for the digital party? How do digital parties perform in government?

Lorenzo Mosca: the future of digital parties

Gerbaudo’s book has the unquestionable merit of approaching the topic of digital parties from a comparative perspective, which is an approach that is generally lacking in this kind of study. His work is centred around some interesting concepts which take into consideration structure, agency and action, such as the growing salience of the populist cleavage, the platformization of party politics, the rise of a new party ideology which he calls ‘participationism’, organizational changes in the three faces of parties translating into the surfacing of a ‘hyperleadership’, a ‘superbase’ of members and marginalization of intermediate organisms. The general argument is well-designed and supported by empirical evidence collected on the German Piraten Partei, the Italian Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) and the Spanish Podemos. In what follows, I focus on two relevant interrelated topics that have not been thoroughly addressed in his book: (a) the institutionalization of digital parties, and (b) the relations between digital parties and the traditional media as an indicator of the democratic nature of these parties.

What can we say about how institutionalization affects digital parties over time? How do they change once their attention tends to gradually shift towards parliamentary and government politics? Do digital platforms help them to resist the pressure exerted by institutional politics on their particular identities, liquid organizational structures and unconventional forms of action? To start answering these questions, we should consider that while digital platforms represent a distinguishing feature of digital parties, these parties share many characteristics with other party families. Podemos and the M5S can be included in the broader category of ‘movement parties’, which are hybrid organizations operating with one foot in and one foot outside institutions, moving across the protest arena and the representative arena. Throughout history, movement parties have emerged from different social movement families: socialist parties from labour movements, regionalist parties from ethnic movements, confessional parties from religious movements and the Greens from environmental ones. Although to different degrees, both the M5S and Podemos share a common origin in the anti-austerity protest wave that followed the financial crisis of 2008 (Della Porta *et al.*, 2017).

It is worth stressing that the literature on movement parties tends to highlight their volatile and temporary nature and to see them as evanescent phenomena (Kitschelt, 2006). This concept ‘shed[s] light on such complex and *contingent dynamics* developed when the field of party politics meets with protest politics with unexpected outcomes during critical junctures [...] “Movement party”, thus, refers to a *transitional process* embedded in time that may not last for long’ (Della Porta *et al.*, 2017: 24, emphasis added).

The story of the Greens – which share many characteristics with the Spanish and Italian digital parties discussed below – can illuminate our discussion on institutionalization. The Green parties were in fact initially radical, with the rejection of bureaucratic power structures as an

organizational principle and inspired by *Basisdemokratie* or grassroots democracy implemented through collective leadership, rotation rules, separation of office and mandate, and gender parity rules (March and Mudde, 2005). Studies on the Greens have indeed empirically noted a progressive moderation of their claims, a generalization of their programmatic profile and bureaucratization of their organizational forms (Poguntke, 2002; Rihoux, 2016).

There is, however, a notable difference between the history of the Green parties and that of digital parties. The former emerged in media systems that had at their core the traditional media and broadcast communication. The latter act in a more complex and interdependent media environment where concurrent logics can emerge which disrupt the dominant media logic previously established (Chadwick, 2013). Can digital parties resist environmental pressure towards adaptation to the codes of the mainstream media and the rules of representative institutions? May digital platforms operate as shields against institutionalization? Is the possibility of continually stimulating members' participation through digital media an antidote against this process?

Observing the M5S, I have highlighted elsewhere that although the party has 'offered its supporters innovative online spaces for decision-making, such innovations have been combined with forms of control and management of consensus typical of organised parties (those strongly opposed by the M5S) [which are] particularly effective in strengthening the leaders rather than effectively transferring power to the grassroots' (Mosca, 2018: 17). Hierarchical governing mechanisms channelling participation and driving it from the top have often been hidden behind the smart shining shells of digital platforms.

Recent personal referenda called by Podemos and the M5S leaders seem to confirm these findings. One episode that is quoted in Gerbaudo's book is the vote of confidence that Podemos' leader and his partner (the party's parliamentary spokeswoman at the time) decided to call on the party's online platform Participa once the press spread the news of their purchase of a €600,000 villa on the outskirts of Madrid. A referendum was called in May 2018 to re-legitimize the leadership against virulent criticism from the media, the opposition and internal party factions. In the end, 68% of the voters confirmed their support for Iglesias and Montero.

Another revealing episode happened 4 days after the disappointing results of the May 2019 European elections, when the M5S gained 17.07%, almost halving its vote compared to the 32.68% gained in the national election of the previous year. The then party leader, Luigi Di Maio, called a referendum on the party platform Rousseau with the following words: 'I have the right to know what you think of my work. I want to hear the voice of the citizens who elected me to be a political leader a few years ago. So I give you the word. I ask for my role as political leader to be put to the vote of the members of Rousseau, because it is fair for you to express yourselves – the only ones I have to account to for my work'. Expectedly, he was confirmed with 80% of the votes.

As Gerbaudo rightly notes 'rather than the participatory and deliberative democracy that is promised on paper, digital parties correspond far more to the beleaguered model of "plebiscitarian democracy", in which a demagogic leader periodically verifies his mandate by calling a referendum [...] We seem to leave the iron law of oligarchy only to crash against the "silicon law" of "benevolent dictatorship"' (2019: 181 and 185). According to this account, the voice of the grassroots, which could have helped the two digital parties to resist institutionalization, was not really taken into consideration.

The history of the M5S is a very clear case of institutionalization. In a recent contribution, Bordignon and Ceccarini (2019) highlight how 5 years in parliament (2013–2018) resulted in the violation of five of the Movement's taboos: (a) the taboo of representation; (b) the taboo of the media; (c) the taboo of justice; (d) the taboo of leadership; (e) the taboo of alliances. During 5 years in opposition, the M5S reduced its emphasis on the ideal of direct democracy by coming to terms with *representative politics* and accepting important institutional responsibilities (i.e., the vice-presidency of the lower chamber). Regarding the *traditional media*, the ban on

party members accepting interviews with journalists from print media and TV (which had been seen as enemies belonging to a corrupt establishment) was soon lifted. Concerning *justice*, after multiple judicial charges touched elected representatives in cities governed by the Movement, in January 2017 the party significantly altered its inflexible position by adopting a new code of conduct according to which decisions are to be taken on a case-by-case basis by the Guarantor (Grillo). Regarding *leadership*, despite presenting itself as horizontal and leaderless, in 2017, it elected Di Maio as a political leader and adopted a new statute formalizing directive roles. As for *political alliances*, the M5S, which had always refused continuing cooperation with other parties, entered a national government coalition, first with the far-right League of Matteo Salvini and then with the centre-left Democrats of Nicola Zingaretti. Last but not least, in 2019, the party started to revise the limit of two terms in office for elected representatives at the local level – a measure intended to resist professionalization.

A contribution by Kitschelt (2006) on movement parties and their evolution seems particularly useful in our reflection on the institutionalization of digital parties. In fact, when discussing their changes over time, he states that ‘The worst situation for a movement party undoubtedly occurs when it achieves procedural concessions, such as cabinet participation, but gains little in terms of substantive concession’ (2006: 284). Expectations on the evolution of this type of parties are then related to their capacity to orient public policies towards progressive or regressive goals by maintaining or cutting off their relations with social movements and society more broadly, and to stick to their promises of widening participatory opportunities for all citizens.

The situation described by Kitschelt seems to apply to the M5S, as its participation in a coalition government with a right-wing party like the League watered down most of its progressive claims and definitely detached it from movement constituencies (Mosca, 2020). The coalition choices of movement parties in parliamentary systems are certainly of essential importance in shaping their trajectories and their relations with movements. Would things have been different if the M5S had entered a coalition with the Democratic party? The recent formation of a ‘yellow-red’ government in Italy will provide answers to this question. However, the Spanish case may already offer some hints on how an alliance between a movement party and a socialist party may push domestic policies to the left, whereas ‘law and order’ legislation represented the core of the government coalition between the M5S and the League.

Another important topic that Gerbaudo’s book does not explicitly tackle concerns the relationship between digital parties and the traditional media. This fragile bond presents similarities and differences among the two digital parties that deserve further discussion. This issue is relevant because it seems to provide indications on the democratic nature of these parties.

Two massive public events called ‘V-days’, organized through the Internet and mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people, were important demonstrations anticipating the creation of the M5S. These demonstrations generated attention and media coverage legitimizing this new political actor. Such events were intended to define the enemies of the Movement: the first one addressed the ‘caste of politicians’ and the second one targeted the ‘caste of journalists’ (Mosca, 2014). Despite gradually changing its approach towards the traditional media (Mosca and Vaccari, 2017), the M5S has always virulently attacked journalists and legacy media. Anti-establishment and anti-systemic claims represent a constitutive trait of its identity that tends to resurface cyclically.

In March 2019, Podemos launched the hashtag #LaBancaManda (The Bank commands) to denounce the financial links between banks and media companies which – according to the party – ‘kidnap the right to information’ (El Mundo, 27/03/2019). Media companies were accused of violating Article 20 of the Spanish constitution on freedom of information. Although the purple party has attacked traditional media outlets every now and then, Podemos does not consider the media system as a whole to be one of its enemies as the M5S does. As a matter of fact, before the foundation of the party, Iglesias was strategically present in the traditional media in order to acquire symbolic capital and public recognition, and to give visibility to his counter-hegemonic project (Iglesias, 2015).

One may wonder whether this difference could also be related to the two parties' kinds of populism. As discussed in the literature, while Podemos presents an 'inclusive' type of populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), the M5S displays an 'eclectic' variant of it (Mosca and Tronconi, 2019). Hanspeter Kriesi considers that a fundamental defining feature of populism is illiberalism, noting that 'populist democracy is illiberal, because it takes "government by the people" literally and rejects all checks and balances on the popular will. Constitutive elements of liberal, "Madisonian" democracy – the rule of law, the division of power or respect for the rights of minorities – are rejected because they confine the people's sovereignty' (2014: 363). Does Kriesi's claim hold across different populist actors? Is illiberalism a common denominator of inclusive, exclusive and eclectic populist parties? Or does it only apply to specific variants of populism?

To conclude, Gerbaudo posits in his book that the digital party is a new organizational template that can be considered the functional equivalent of the mass party in the industrial era. Since the publication of the book, we have seen the quick surfacing and success of Farage's new party in the 2019 European elections. The Brexit party was openly inspired by the M5S. However, while the M5S and Podemos seem to have acquired important roles in their national party systems, other digital parties appear somewhat marginal in national politics. In fact, the empirical reality suggests that digital parties still represent a minority in European party systems and, additionally, few of them are really relevant. Should we then be more cautious and conclude that platformization of parties is not a destiny?

Paolo Gerbaudo: a rejoinder from the author

A book should not be the final word on a topic, but rather the beginning of a conversation. That is particularly the case when it comes to emerging political phenomena, as the digital parties that I discuss in my book *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy*, to which the Italian Review of Political Science has kindly decided to dedicate a symposium. The book reviews by Katharine Dommett, Lorenzo Mosca and Jasmin Fitzpatrick have given me the opportunity to think about some of the key theses at the heart of my book, how some of them may need to be reconsidered and redeveloped, and what are their more general implications of my research and conceptualization for an understanding of the party system and of politics in the present term. In what follows, I wish to address some of the points they raised and develop some remarks on the relevance of the notion of digital party for future research.

Using the term 'digital party', my aim was first and foremost to provide a common label for new political parties that have emerged in recent years, from Pirate Parties, Podemos, the Five Star Movement, France Insoumise and Momentum. I argue that this is a new generation of political organizations that adapts the platform logic of social media and apps to the political domain, with the aim of constructing a more direct form of political participation. However, as I detail in the volume, this democratic promise is only partly fulfilled. Rather than a participatory democracy in which members truly have a possibility to intervene in shaping parties' political programme what we are served is more of a plebiscitarian reactive democracy, in which users' intervention amounts more to a reaction to the initiative of leaders. The volume develops this line of theorizing by introducing a number of concepts, such as the terms hyperleader and superbase, to describe the alliance between leadership and members of the party at the expense of the party intermediate apparatus, and connected outsiders to describe the contradictory nature of the main support sector of these movements. As I was writing the volume, I was aware that some of these terms and my attempt to find common categories would fall under criticism, especially given the necessary contradictions that the generalizations that I make raise. This symposium gives me the opportunity to clarify some of these points.

Starting with the positives, all the reviewers seem to appreciate the contribution that is made by the book in terms of its theoretical effort, comparative analysis and systematization. Thus, for

example, Mosca highlights that ‘Gerbaudo’s book has the unquestionable merit of approaching the topic of digital parties from a comparative perspective, which is an approach that is generally lacking in this kind of study’. This is indeed a very important element of the book’s design, which attempts to move beyond case study-specific analysis, to sketch out a general theory of a new party type, which covers rather different actual parties. However, this comparative generalization necessarily leads into some definitional problems that are particularly identified in Katharine Dommett’s piece that raises the question of what fits in the category and what does not (I will get back to that in a bit). The other aspect that is appreciated in my intervention is its conceptual innovation, and the way in which the manifold concepts used in the book ‘hyperleader’, ‘superbase’, ‘distributed centralisation’, ‘reactive democracy’ and the term ‘digital party’ itself, allow for some ‘stock-taking’, to use the term adopted by Jasmin Fitzpatrick in her own review. I particularly appreciate this point, as the attempt to introduce new concepts has been an ongoing attempt also in my previous work on social movements (2012, 2017). I think that in current political science, there is often a dearth of good conceptualization, and often excellent empirical work lacks this element of theoretical development, also due to empiricism that is affecting the discipline. Theoretical development is ultimately essential for the analytical systematization and interpretation of issues, so as to identify general tendencies that are traversing society, and are not reducible to any specific empirical entity, while being manifested across different concrete phenomena.

Coming to the critical points, there are several issues that are raised in the book reviews that require to be addressed. Specifically, I will focus on three: the ambiguity of my conceptualization of digital parties; what is the future of digital parties and whether we are likely to see a more general transformation of the party system along the lines of the organizational change seen in the context of digital parties.

The first point on the ambiguity of the definition of digital party is raised at different points by reviewers. Thus, Katharine Dommett, for example, suggests that the conception I propose can appear rather narrow and that there is a certain ‘rigidity’ in my definition. She questions whether what I am describing is fundamentally a transitional stage, after which these parties will evolve in more structured forms, or a stable party type. Similar definitional questions are raised by Jasmin Fitzpatrick, by questioning whether digital party and platform party are really interchangeable and what is the difference *vis-à-vis* pre-existing definitions such as Helen Margetts’ ‘cyber party’ (2001).

Beginning with the purpose of coining a new term, my wish in introducing the concept of digital party was to find a compromise between a descriptive term that is used and recognized by many activists already, alongside other cognate terms such as ‘Internet parties’, and developing a more abstract concept that could define the nature of the existing organizational template. The digital party in this latter sense is a typical Weberian ideal-type. It is not meant to be fully reflected in any concrete example, and it is by its nature abstract and idealized, it is therefore bound to be met by a number of exceptions. In this sense, it can be said that some parties (such as those analysed), at some point in their trajectory, may acquire some of the characters of the digital party: platformization, free subscription, superbase/hyperleader alliance, etc. In a way, this is the same reasoning behind time-honoured party-type concepts introduced in political science literature in the past such as mass party, catch-all party, cartel party, etc. It can be said that no party has ever completely fulfilled the abstract criteria of any of these types, but has rather positioned itself on a spectrum across them.

The difference *vis-à-vis* Margetts’ concept of cyber party (2001) is (a) that this concept stemmed from an era in which social media and digital platforms had not yet become as powerful as they are known and consequently there was not such a clear consequence for political party organization; (b) that Margetts’ concept concerned party’s external communication, not their internal organization. As I made clear in the introduction instead, what qualifies a political party as a digital party is the fact that digital transformation reaches within the internal structure of the party, redefining power mechanisms and democratic practices.

Finally, in terms of the use of the concept to indicate a more general trend in the party system rather than just something that is unique to an emerging ‘party family’, precisely because of the ideal-type nature of the concept, the idea of digital party is not meant to be applicable only to a small group of party, in which these tendencies are most clearly seen. It is also meant to highlight a general tendency of the party system in Western democracies, seen for example, in the way traditional Left parties such as PSOE in Spain, Labour in the UK and SPD in Germany are experimenting with digital democracy. This take again is similar to the one implicit in other party-type concepts in the past, that while focusing on some concrete example of parties that seemed to typify the tendencies they identified most clearly also had the ambition of pointing to more general trends, investing the party system as a whole. In this regard, in response to Lorenzo Mosca’s question on whether platformization really is an inescapable destiny, my sense is that this is likely, though obviously not a certain direction of travel. This is due to the fact that platformization offers parties ways to address some of their most glaring problems, and in particular the need to attract and motivate a membership at times marked by political polarization and a social media ecosystem that favours movements that have some diffuse support, due to the influence of ‘likers’ and ‘sharers’, as sort of new micro-opinion leaders, in the processes of public opinion formation.

Regarding the question of institutionalization and more generally the future of digital parties, I agree with reviewers that this is an area where the book raises more questions than it provides answers. Partly, this is a reflection of the newness of the topic and of the parties analysed, and of the fact that there has not yet been sufficient time to see them evolve, and see how they transform once in power. Now with the 5 Star Movement in government in Italy and Podemos in Spain, we will have an opportunity to do just that. As Lorenzo Mosca highlights in regards to the 5 Star Movement, this party has already abandoned some of its most symbolic positions and appears to have normalized. Perhaps we shall see similar things taking place with Podemos.

Similarly, also the relationship of these parties with mainstream media has become more nuanced. They appear to have progressively acquiesced to the still important role of TV and other mainstream media. This, however, should not lead to questioning whether they are still digital parties or not. Really existing parties are always hybrid phenomena and it is obvious that especially once in power they will undergo significant transformations. Furthermore, it is clear that if they become established, they will tend to abandon some of the elements that are typical of their ‘genetic phase’, to use Panebianco’s (1988) term, and in this case the start-up character that is characteristic of them. A question that remains open and on which I am still quite unsure is whether formations like Podemos and 5 Star Movement will have a long shelf life, or whether at some point they will fade away and be substituted by newer formations. Partly the rapid change and unpredictability of the digital society seem to militate in this direction, leading to a rapid emergence and waning of formations.

On a final note, there are many other issues raised by reviewers that I could not fully develop in the book, and that hopefully will become the object of future works. For example, Jasmin Fitzpatrick highlights that it would have been good to see a more systematic link to classic democratic theories, when discussing various models of democracy, and that it would have been good to elaborate more on the notion of participation and what exactly is proposed in these movements. This is certainly something that I would like to do in future work, as it deserves its own specific attention. I do not think that participation in these movements is purely fictitious, a sort of ‘*panem et circenses*’ as Fitzpatrick puts it, neither it is obviously the idealized form of participation which these movements have promised to achieve and have not delivered. Rather, as implied by the notion of ‘superbase’, it is a participation that revolves around a moment of subordination, in which plebiscitarian leadership and grassroots involvement are working in tandem, rather than being mutually exclusive.

My hope is that the debate about the digital party will continue in the future, allowing us to address more clearly some of the issues that book reviewers have raised, and to follow the

evolution of the party system in coming years. What is reassuring is to see the wealth of high-quality research that is developing in this area, including the work of book reviewers themselves, and some of the work they have cited in the article. See for example, the work of Deseriis (2017), Vittori (2017), Caruso (2017) and Mosca (2014, 2018) and of Casero-Ripollés *et al.* (2016) on Podemos as the examples of a growing field of investigation and debate, that is likely to grow and develop further in coming years. This is the best evidence that something significant is happening to the party system, something that is bound to redefine the way in which organizations operate, and the role of political parties in Western democracies. This is a phenomenon, whose developments, we should all follow with care, given the central role of parties, as a bridge between society and institutions; a bridge that seemed to be faltering, but that appears to be taking once again centre-stage in our debates.

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