Digital technology is changing party politics, the interesting question is how

By Democratic Audit UK   20 March 2018

*It is evident from the 2017 general election, writes **Kate Dommett**, that digital technology has been fully embraced by political parties and incorporated into campaigning strategies. It is also creating opportunities for satellite campaigns to mobilise citizens. Longer term, digital innovations have the potential to reshape the nature of engagement between citizens and parties, though these more fundamental changes are not yet being implemented.*

Social media logos. Picture: European Parliament, via (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

It is often claimed that digital technology is changing politics. In the wake of the 2017 general election, this claim seemed to have more power than ever. With Jeremy Corbyn and Momentum reaching out to thousands of voters on social media, it seems that online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat have revolutionised how politics is done. But to know whether things really have changed, we need to ask two questions: first, how are political parties using digital technology? And, second, are these tools changing the way parties connect with people? The answers show that digital is now the norm, but, as yet, parties are failing to realise a hitherto unrecognised interest in using digital tools to facilitate interaction.

The above two questions have underpinned my recent research and are asked in two recent publications. The first, part of *Britain Votes 2017*, looks at how political parties used digital technology at the recent general election. Luke Temple and I argue that digital tools have indeed been embraced and that new practices are emerging. Websites,

email lists, voter contact databases and social media presence have become the new bread and butter of party campaigns, but there are also innovations in how digital is being used to campaign.

These innovations come in two forms. First, 2017 saw the indubitable rise of Facebook. Following the Conservatives' use of the platform in 2015, Labour is seen to have outperformed their rivals, successfully targeting messages at key constituencies and voters, and creating a wave of social media content and support. Attempts from central office to integrate data gathered from voters on the doorstep with online content and campaigns (through the tool Promote) has facilitated and encouraged grassroots campaigning. In essence, online and offline tools have been fruitfully combined, expanding existing capacity by offering central party staff *and* grassroots activists the means by which to target voters and mobilise support. Given the perceived success of Labour's Facebook campaign, this kind of digital tool is likely to become a mainstay of future election campaigns. The interesting question is whether voters will tolerate, embrace or reject this change, as greater use of data may prompt public concern.

In addition, a second novel use of digital emerged. Typified by Momentum, but evident in a wealth of other campaigning platforms such as Campaign Together, More United, CrowdPac and others, 2017 witnessed the growing importance of, what we call, satellite campaigns. Formally distinct from political parties (yet often connected), a new infrastructure for campaigning has emerged that relies and builds on the potential of digital, bringing people together online to donate, campaign or mobilise. These democratic intermediaries are more open and easily accessible than parties. By allowing people to engage without signing up to a programme of party ideals, satellite campaigns access and mobilise a wealth of new activists, and in the process bolster traditional party campaigns. In 2017, these organisations were found mainly on the Left, but there is growing recognition that the Right recognise the importance (and problems) of these campaigns, not least in regards to raising funds.

Digital therefore changed the nature of the 2017 election campaign, and is being widely used by parties (and proclaimed as a driver of success). Yet, what remains unclear is whether these tools and approaches are changing how parties connect to citizens.

The second question is analysed in another recently published piece in *Party Politics*. This article looks at *how* political parties intend to use these digital tools, and whether there is any interest in creating different kinds of connection with the people. The idea of interactivity, or the capacity for digital to give people more power or a greater stake in politics is well established. To date, however, most scholars have found little evidence that parties are using digital tools to enable interaction. In the place of greater citizen control or more interactive modes of engagement, parties appear to have used digital to exercise top-down control. Whilst offering excellent analyses, existing studies have not asked whether parties themselves are *interested* in the interactive capacities of these tools.

Conducting interviews within Labour and the Greens, I found evidence that whilst parties remain committed to the top-down use of digital tools for campaigning (focusing on digital as a means of mobilising top-down action, educating activists and gathering data), when it comes to party management, there were signs that both parties were willing to use digital tools to facilitate interaction. Whether discussing policy formation, party management or other internal functions, elites in both parties were interested in creating different connections with members using digital tools. Labour's Digital Transformation Team and the leadership of the Greens are therefore open and enthusiastic about the new capacities of digital tools, suggesting the potential for different kinds of connection between citizens and parties. And yet, in practice, progress has not been readily made. Whilst the Green's have been held back by a lack of resource, elites in Labour have been constrained by internal division and capacity barriers. Whilst the rhetoric is therefore positive, the reality turns out to be somewhat less developed.

It therefore appears that digital technology is changing party politics. Parties have embraced digital as a tool for management and campaigns. Digital has become the new normal. In 2017, we saw the continued evaluation and expansion of these tools, unlocking new capacities and practices that will doubtless become a feature of future campaigns. Yet, perhaps more excitingly, there is also interest in using digital to connect with people in different ways. Whilst barriers exist, parties are interested in connecting with citizens in more interactive, collaborative manners, specifically when it comes to internal party democracy and organisation. As parties continue to evolve the question therefore becomes not whether digital is important for those seeking to understand parties, but whether those within parties are able to realise an interest in interaction. Attempts to understand and overcome the barriers elites currently face will therefore be vital for those seeking to witness and advance this form of change.

This article represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It draws on research by the author and Luke Temple published in Britain Votes 2017*, by* Parliamentary Affairs*, which is being launched in London on* 20 March*; and on* *'Roadblocks to interactive digital adoption? Elite perspectives of party practices in the United Kingdom'*, published in* Party Politics*.*

About the author

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