

The rise of virtual activism means that Europe's political parties must embrace digital technologies as campaigning tools.

by Blog Admin

Historically, Europe's political parties have relied on an active membership to achieve and maintain influence. However, with the rise of professional communications management, political parties must increasingly seek influence and relevance through other means.

Florian Hartleb looks at the emergence of 'virtual politics' in Europe and finds that social media and online engagement offer new opportunities and challenges for political parties.



Democracy in Europe is now a multilevel governance system with a sometimes opaque interdependence of policies, institutions and actors, such as entrepreneurs, media and lobbyists. At the same time, society is changing, a result of the age of freedom, self-determination and globalisation. Votes for political parties increasingly fluctuate, providing less and less of a stable base because of the fragmentation of society. Representation itself is guided by changing popular moods, referred to in Germany as *Stimmungsdemokratie* ('mood democracy'). This has an impact on all political forces, especially mainstream parties.

In modern democracies, political parties tend to be professionalised, media- and communication orientated, and often have the following features:

- professional communication management;
- issues are quickly adopted based on the criteria of media logic, via Twitter;
- oriented more to single issues than to a coherent programme;
- perceived competences filtered through a strategic centre of power; and
- a reduced importance for active members.

New technologies bring with them the advantage of virtual activism and the possibility of grass roots movements in a democratic and global way. Such developments also contain some anti-democratic tendencies, however, including the creation of a more passive and drifting base of support, less ability to hold leaders accountable, and the emergence of a new, narrower digital elite that has displaced the older, more traditional activist base. Parties which can no longer rely on the notion of membership for their legitimising myth work instead on their digital presence; they find themselves suffering a loss of real members and general support, forcing them to turn to alternative resources to retain influence. The rise of newer, user-driven Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, social networking sites and video-sharing tools has raised



new opportunities for party activism and organisation. As well as offering new means for parties to organise their supporters and activists, these applications also stimulate the growth of unofficial groups and networks, which are loosely aligned with party politics but are not under their control.

Digital politics requires a new design of power; this new currency is represented not by traditional ownership, but rather by potential access. Access – online as well as offline, material as well as idea-based – opens up new options. Which party will be able to master the future by providing new access? Professional parties also suffer from a permanent communication stress, which has increased in digital democracy. Everything they do now is public, under real-time conditions. Party leadership, which now adheres to new participation formats, including attempts to activate non-party members, is placed under additional participation and performance pressure. There is also a danger that the requirements for a good politician might get slightly twisted. Is it becoming a necessity for a proficient candidate, for example, to have the good looks, good performance skills and aptitude to act as a media person instead of bringing deep content and strategies? In this environment, the party's name and symbols are merely branding, similar to corporate marketing devices for products. Like virtual corporations in the networked information technology, cyber parties network across traditional organisational boundaries, based on spin doctors, PR and policy sound-bites. But rebranding is needed for cases in which the substance in government (reform processes which need ongoing interaction with ministerial bureaucracies) is not enough. Professional media-communication parties, such as New Labour in Britain and the Social Democratic Party of Germany, failed under the conditions of realpolitik.

As parties lose members and stable voters, party organisations have to deal with the positive elements (concerning the possibilities of virtual activism) and negative (concerning activism with real membership and stable voting). One can observe two extreme positions or models: one is a strictly authoritarian form of leadership; another is consistent with the model of the Pirate Party and its 'liquid feedback', currently so successful in Germany, which involves more participation via the Internet and a new style of participation and organisation.

The structure of the established parties will not change at the core, at least not yet, even while new competitors pop up, focusing more on campaigning than on organisational life between legislative periods. Not all people can (or want to) use all the technological devices and opportunities available. So for the foreseeable future, possibly decades, parties will also have to deliver their messages in the traditional way. There will be more participation, as can be seen in the US-inspired primaries of the French Socialists and the use of membership surveys. There will be more participation and active involvement in leadership selection and in matters to be resolved by the leadership. Big hopes will be placed on Web 2.0 to facilitate more people participating in party activities, but that avenue will not produce miraculous results. Nevertheless, Facebook, Twitter and other social media can contribute to activating and mobilising members and (already politicised) non-members.

Of course, the classic membership parties on the national level are losing significance. In none of the long-established Western European democracies have raw memberships fallen less than 25 per cent. This also means that it will be possible to vote in elections for ad hoc movements in the absence of a vital party life. The example of Dutch populist Geert Wilders shows that even one member (Wilders himself), is enough to build up a successful political party. Besides these extremes, membership parties will prevail – on a low level in Western Europe and with weak civil society in Central and Eastern Europe. Also in the future, parties will claim a monopoly on linking citizens and political institutions, people's interests and political decision-making. With less penetration in society, the question is whether parties in this form still possess the necessary legitimacy. Traditional programmatic parties gradually give way to new, situational political players. In this brave new world of populist politics there is no need for coherent party platforms and stable loyalties. In an era of "populist zeitgeist", political parties are challenged to lose their deep-rooted functions in society and the way that they transform people's interests (inputs) into the decision-making process (outputs).

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and

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