

ARTICLE

Theoretical debate on party digitalization: The case of the Czech Republic¹

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Abstract

Political parties have always been tied to the technological innovations of the time in which they existed. The gradual development of information technology, specifically the Internet and social media, has been accompanied by a gradual change in the functioning of political parties. The change includes the first websites, social media accounts, the electronification of internal communication, and most recently, the influence of artificial intelligence (AI) on parties and party life. The main subject of this study is to capture the theoretical debate regarding the digitalization of political parties and to analyse selected theoretical concepts. Specific attention is subsequently paid to analysing Czech political parties in the light of digitalization. The findings show that the range of approaches to the topic of digitalization is broad and that even political parties perceive its internal or external dimensions differently.

Keywords

Czech parties, digitalization, digital politics, political parties, new political parties, communication, party organization, theory

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1. Introduction

Modernization, the effects of the Internet, and a transition to the online environment are some of the phenomena traditional actors of the political process, political parties, cannot avoid. The sweeping rise of the Internet (with its advantages and disadvantages) has compelled political parties and their members to learn how to deal with these trends. The comprehensive concept of digitalization has been overused at times. How can we understand it for the purposes of the present paper?

Let us start with the fundamental distinction between digital and analogue encoding of information. Analogue technologies, for instance predigital photography, preserve information on surfaces such as canvasses, vinyl discs, or magnetic tapes. In contrast, digital technologies encode all data in the same numerical form, allowing us to process immense amounts of information and use algorithms to programme information. And the rather obvious outcomes of this technological revolution (Gerbaudo 2019: 46–47). have, naturally, also shaped political life, including the operation and organization of political parties.

Arguably, digitalization alone does not compel one to online processing of digital information. Yet during the gradual ascent of the Internet, political parties proved adept at taking up the technologies available, including digitalization and work in the online environment. The gradual development of the Internet, later social media and, last but not least, artificial intelligence has been associated with a number of options and opportunities for improving the precision and rationality of targeting voters, supporters, or citizens in general. In addition, it has opened up countless ways towards a more effective communication both within and between political parties.

This article seeks to provide a cross-sectional perspective on the theoretical debate surrounding party digitalization. Additionally, it strives to demonstrate empirically, on a limited space, the different forms this aspect of political parties' online work (among many others) may take and the lessons we can learn from such insight in concrete examples. The article provides answers to two research questions – RQ1: *What are the theoretical contexts in which party digitalization can be discussed?* and RQ2: *What are the differences between Czech political parties' strategies of external online presentation?*

The qualitatively and descriptively oriented interpretive study is divided into two main parts. The first part deals mainly with the theoretical and debate perspectives on digitalization issues that have been developing in scholarly literature; and the second part draws an empirical picture of selected Czech political parties and their online self-presentation focusing on websites and social media. The goal of the paper is to present a comprehensive view of the issues defined above.

2. The essentials of studying political parties in the digital age

Undoubtedly, the study of political parties and their digitalization is currently becoming an advanced subtopic of political science. It overlaps with several other research areas: party studies, of course, but also media and communication studies, political behaviour, cultural studies, etc. (Barberà et al. 2021: 9). The ascent and gradual professionalization of new media and a number of other online tools and, last but not least, the influence of AI have caused this area to be not only extremely complex but also highly dynamic.

With the expansion of the Internet since the 1990s, digital studies have progressed from description to integration. Expectations of new possibilities also came with the graphical user interface, which allowed online implementation of gaming, entertainment, and virtual environments. There were new tools and methods but also new ways of thinking and working that had to be adapted to the Internet world (Burdicková et al. 2019: 20). The Internet seemed a completely ideal tool for the needs of the business sector, among others, by mediating offers in unrestricted and mostly unregulated ways. The opportunity to obtain high amounts of information with minimum effort was confronted with growing debates about the boundaries of free expression. The organically growing number of users, then, was a separate chapter (Cohen-Almagor 2012; Hanych 2018: 73). This opened a kind of room for natural innovation, which developed in time and was closely associated with the development of the Internet – not only the technology as such but also its broadening user base.

In this context, Paolo Gerbaudo (2019: 45) adds:

“The rise of digital parties has to be understood as stemming from a new fracture in society, a new division within the electorate which opposes social groups that are differentially positioned vis-à-vis a central social dilemma. A concept that comes handy when trying to capture the social determinants of political processes is the notion of cleavage, a term that has been popularised in political science by Norwegian political scientist Stein Rokkan and his colleagues in the 1960s and 1970s, to make sense of the ways in which, at key moments in the course of history, new conflicts and corresponding social fractures emerged, producing lasting transformations in the party system.”

Yet it was a number of diverse political parties, such as Pirate parties, Podemos in Spain, La France Insoumise, or the Labour Party in the UK, that took the initiative and offered “[t]o deliver a new politics supported by digital technology (...) to be more democratic, more open to ordinary people, more immediate and direct, more authentic and transparent.” (Dommett and Power 2021: 71; Gerbaudo 2019: 4).

The evolution of digital and online technologies was also accelerated by external shocks, first and foremost by the recent COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic that broke out

in the beginning of 2020. Citizens-voters were faced with a socially, economically, and politically challenging situation.³ In this complicated time period of manifold recurring restrictions, online technologies brought progress in bridging social gaps and physical separation (Šárovec 2022a; Musiał-Karg and Luengo 2021a: 1). At the same time, new light was shed on the valuable advantages of on-site encounters and the offline world that cannot, at least so far, be fully replaced by any technology.

A number of new research challenges have arisen in the field of political party digitalization. We need to understand how such parties come to exist, how they develop further, how they are organized internally, and how digital tools generally affect their functioning. From using simple websites and e-mail, the parties today have evolved towards highly sophisticated targeting of individual voter segments and towards creating content or other tools for disseminating individual messages (Dommett and Power 2021: 75). The different theoretical approaches elaborate these and other variants in more detail.

3. Reviewing the theoretical approaches and methods

The body of academic literature today contains a number of quality and inspiring studies that define theoretically what party digitalization is, how to understand it, and how to approach it methodologically (e.g. Margetts 2006; Gibson and Ward 2009; Musiał-Karg and Luengo 2021b), but also many empirical studies providing concrete evidence based on diverse types of data (e.g. Kalsnes 2016; Jacuński 2018; Sandri et al. 2024). Table 1 presents the diverse methods used in the study of digital parties as defined by Katharine Dommett and Sam Power (2021).

Table 1: Methods for studying digital parties

Method	Example sources
Surveys	Gibson et al. (2017), Hansen and Kosiara-Pedersen (2014)
Documentary analysis	Bimber (2014)
Interviews	Dommett et al. (2021), Penney (2017)
Content analyses	Gibson (2015), or Van Selm et al. (2008)
Mix of these methods	Jungherr (2016), Karlsen (2009)

Source: Dommett and Power (2021: 70).

Helen Margetts' definition of the term *cyber party* has been one of the key contributions to delimiting the subject of these analyses. Embedding the term in the classical theory of

³ Academic literature also talks about an accelerating technological revolution (cf. Musiał-Karg and Luengo 2021a: 1).

party development⁴, the author perceived it as an ideal type responding to existing trends in political participation (Margetts 2006: 530). Her definition follows:

“The key defining feature is that cyber parties use web-based technologies to strengthen the relationship between voters and party, rather than traditional notions of membership: such technologies are fuelling the trend towards lower levels of membership, rather than being used to ameliorate it.” (Margetts 2006: 531).

When viewing this ideal-typical definition through today’s lens, it is clear that many political parties would meet the condition of using web-based technologies to strengthen the relationship between voters and party without necessarily being perceived as highly digitalized. The definition shows us not only how extremely dynamic the trends in party development are but also how they have been naturally transforming under the increasing influence of online technologies.

Jasmin Fitzpatrick directly follows up on Margetts’ findings with her “five-pillar model of parties’ migration into the digital”. The five pillars include (1) membership, (2) leadership and candidates, (3) policy programme, (4) public image, and (5) resources. It should be noted that the model does not assume an ideal type (Fitzpatrick 2021: 25). According to Fitzpatrick (2021: 38), it can provide the basis for an index measuring the levels of party digitalization.

In a review article on changes to political parties’ organization and operation resulting from the rise of new digital information, Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward (2009: 87) defined three broad research areas, as succinctly summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Political parties in the digital age according to Gibson and Ward

Dimension	Coverage
Intra-party arena	<i>“how parties are connecting (or not) with their membership using new ICTs to wire up their internal communication mechanisms“</i>
Inter-party arena	<i>“examining and comparing parties’ online campaigning efforts and, in particular, the implications for minor party competitiveness and external relations with the electorate“</i>
Systemic arena	<i>“looking more broadly at how parties’ adaptation to new ICTs will affect their position in the democratic sphere and what new forms or model of party might emerge“</i>

Source: Gibson and Ward (2009: 87).

The overview of the three dimensions covered by empirical studies of the adaptation process tells us that there are clear variants of how political parties may conceive of digitalization – or in which directions their efforts may be oriented. All in all, these authors came up with questions that can be viewed as persistently relevant; internally, political

⁴ Caucus party – mass party – catch-all party – cartel party – cyber party (Margetts 2001: 9).

parties themselves should keep inquiring about the extent to which new technologies and digitalization in general help them work with their membership, how these contexts affect mutual interactions and electoral campaigns, and last but not least, how these trends impact on parties as actors of the democratic process. These questions are still relevant in contexts such as the ongoing digitalization process or the ascent of AI.

The inter-party arena will be the main focus of the empirical section of the paper. We will demonstrate how selected Czech political parties present themselves through their online activities in general and through their social media activities in particular.

4. Czech political parties in the light of external digitalization⁵

As of that date, there were 212 active political parties and movements in the Czech Republic (Mvcr.cz 2024). Each of these entities, including ones limited to the regional or local levels, rely on some level of digitalization, both internally and externally. However, our empirical comparison will only focus on successful parties, i.e. ones represented in the lower chamber of the Czech parliament in the current term of office, 2021–2024: the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People’s Party (KDU–ČSL), the TOP 09, the Czech Pirate Party (Pirates), the Mayors and Independents (STAN), the ANO 2011 (ANO), and the Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD). These can be divided into two opposing blocs – PM Fiala’s government coalition comprised of two electoral alliances (the SPOLU alliance and the PirSTAN alliance) and a total of five parties versus two movements that remained in the opposition (Šárovec 2022b).⁶

As shown in Table 3, all the political entities of interest are clearly compelled to integrate the Internet into their standard operations, or else risk being losers in the competitive struggle. However, the entities do differ somewhat in the strategies adopted or, in other words, in the tools considered a must-have versus ones viewed as less fundamental (or treated less uniformly). The traditional platforms that are indispensable to the parties’ online activities include websites,⁷ Facebook pages, and YouTube channels. Although this finding may appear trivial through the lens of 2024, it should be noted that for many years, political parties’ online presentations relied exclusively on websites,⁸ and

⁵ All the data in this section were obtained and verified as of 19 September 2024.

⁶ Before the general election of 2021, the ODS, the KDU–ČSL, and the TOP 09 formed the SPOLU alliance, and the STAN and Pirates the PirSTAN alliance.

⁷ Here we refer to traditional website presentations of a given entity, rather than microsites or other single-purpose election websites.

⁸ From today’s perspective, they were often difficult to navigate and functioned poorly.

it was only the gradual development of individual social media platforms that caused them to diversify their communication channels towards individual voter segments.⁹

Table 3: An overview of political parties' online activities in 2024 (Y = yes, N = no)

Party	Website	Facebook	X (Twitter)	Instagram	TikTok	YouTube
ODS	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
KDU-ČSL	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
TOP 09	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Pirates	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
STAN	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
ANO 2011	Y	Y	N ¹⁰	Y	N	Y
SPD	Y	Y	N ¹¹	N	N	Y

Source: Own elaboration.

In contrast, the parties as collective entities took a uniform stance on the TikTok platform. They may have been discouraged from starting their party accounts by the highly personified nature of the platform's content. Thus, instead of a TikTok account of ANO, there were ones dedicated to the movement's founder, leader and chairman, Andrej Babiš, or his party colleagues Alena Schillerová and Jana Vildumetzová. Similarly, the Freedom and Direct Democracy did not have a party account but its chairman, Tomio Okamura, had an official account in his name. The parties were aware of the long-term mobilization potential provided specifically by the platform, with party leaders and candidates tapping this communication channel to appeal to young and first-time voters, above all (cf. Zykmondová 2024).¹²

Specifically, the ANO and the SPD, then, pursued a different communication strategy on the X platform, where they did not have their official accounts but primarily relied on the impact of their founders and leaders. We infer from this that the entities were fully aware of the absence of their key target groups among the spectrum of X users. Instead they relied on a near-identitarian association of the collective entities with their respective chairmen. Observably, SPD pursued a similar strategy on Instagram as well.

⁹ We assume that different population groups use different social media platforms. This can be illustrated on the extremely clear differences between the typical users of TikTok and Facebook.

¹⁰ There is no X account dedicated to the movement as such but one named *Better Government* and subtitled *The shadow cabinet of ANO*. We could also identify an outdated account named *ANO 2011*, with the most recent posts from January 2013.

¹¹ We could only identify an outdated account named *The SPD Movement*, with the most recent posts from February 2019.

¹² Interestingly, there is no official TikTok account of TOP 09 but one named *volimtop09* [I vote for TOP 09] with approximately 1,600 followers. However, the party did not embrace it as its official communication channel.

Another, rather creative, question is the wording of the URL¹³ of a party's main website – something parties can choose freely as long as the address is still available. A comparison in Table 4 shows that an overwhelming majority of the parties did not use surprising, difficult-to-remember, or otherwise complicated URLs for their websites. There was rather a tendency to shorten party names or acronyms – e.g. KDU or *Piráti* [The Pirates]. The only outlier, ANO, used one of its long-term slogans for its URL, namely the claim *ANO, bude líp!* [Yes, things will get better!] (the party's name is synonymous with the word yes in Czech). Here, ANO not only showed creativity and an attempt to differentiate oneself but also openly bet on a slogan used as one of the key elements of its communication irrespective of election type – to the extent of featuring it in its internet address.

Table 4: Websites of Czech political parties in 2024

Party name according to the Ministry of Interior	URL of the main website
Civic Democratic Party	https://www.ods.cz/
Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party	https://www.kdu.cz/
TOP 09	https://www.top09.cz/
Czech Pirate Party	https://www.pirati.cz/
Mayors and Independents	https://www.starostove-nezavisli.cz/
ANO 2011	https://www.anobudelip.cz/
Freedom and Direct Democracy	https://www.spd.cz/

Source: Own elaboration based on the parties' websites.

Unsurprisingly, the index pages of the websites of all political parties contained more-or-less visible links to their social media accounts. The goal of this standard practice among political parties and beyond is to strengthen the association between subject, website, and social media. Yet some parties accentuated different platforms than others.

Based on available data, YouTube and Facebook were the leaders among social media and similar platforms in the Czech Republic. According to the 2023 AMI Digital Index, they were attended by 87 and 89 per cent of the country's Internet users, respectively. Instagram recently exhibited a substantial growth, as more than 61 per cent of individuals operating in the virtual world had some experience with the platform (AMI Digital Index 2023). According to the Czech Statistical Office, more than 5.2 million users aged 16+ used social media (like Facebook, Instagram or X) in 2023 (CZSO 2024). This only confirms the fact that substantial clusters of citizens or voters were targeted by political parties' online activities in general, and social media activities in particular (see Šaradín et al. 2021).

¹³ Uniform Resource Locator.

A comparison of the data shown in Tables 5, 6, and 7 below provides several findings. A universal fact is that all the political parties of interest used Facebook for their self-promotion, thus underlining the role of this traditional social media platform. It should be noted that the number of Facebook page likes is not the only metric of effective communication on this platform. Facebook users are allowed to follow a page without liking it – a function added over time. A detailed examination of the structure and impact of each post would, of course, provide a more precise metric (which is also the case of other platforms), yet that has not been the goal of the present comparison.

It was as early as in 2010 that Czech political parties discovered Facebook’s potential. For example, the TOP 09 was then able to effectively use other available tools such as Facebook events. The ODS stood out for its virtual critique of the ČSSD (its main opponent, now SOCDEM), an image-making app, or an election-themed game. Many posts also contained direct links to YouTube videos (Klapal 2016: 81). As of 2024, the simple ranking by page likes was led by three parties with more than 100 thousand likes: the Pirates, the TOP 09, and the ANO.¹⁴ In contrast, KDU–ČSL fare worst on this metric.

Using the same metrics, the party accounts can now be compared with those of their leaders or chairmen. Although ANO had slightly over 100 thousand likes, its chairman Andrej Babiš achieved more than 2.5 times more – 269,083 likes. Tomio Okamura trumped him with 290,602 likes – an even large gap between leader and collective entity. This only underlines both movements’ mostly successful personified bet on their leaders, who are both their driving forces and the main public faces of not only their campaigns but also their permanent communication.

Table 5: Number of Facebook likes, September 2024

Party name	Number of page likes
Czech Pirate Party	156,641
TOP 09	120,866
ANO 2011	100,187
Civic Democratic Party	68,957
Mayors and Independents	39,899
Freedom and Direct Democracy	31,708
Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People’s Party	27,157

Source: Own elaboration based on the parties’ accounts.

Once again, KDU–ČSL had the fewest followers on X. The Pirates, the ODS, and TOP 09 each had over 50 thousand followers. As of the date of observation, ANO and SPD did not have X accounts in their name, yet both relied on the accounts of their respective founders

¹⁴ Of course, there are sock puppet or inactive accounts on every social media platform. Given the large numbers of likes, we found these difficult to filter out and hence included them in the metric.

and chairmen (Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura). ANO's presentation was complemented with the account named *Better Government* and subtitled *The shadow cabinet of ANO*. While the account did not bear the very name of the movement, ANO, it effectively served as its official communication channel on X.¹⁵

Table 6: Number of X followers, September 2024

Party name	Number of followers
Czech Pirate Party	76,973
Civic Democratic Party	63,995
TOP 09	59,601
Mayors and Independents	37,026
Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party	24,727
ANO 2011	n/a
Freedom and Direct Democracy	n/a

Source: Own elaboration based on the parties' accounts.

The Instagram, as a specific platform focusing primarily on visual rather than textual communication, shows a completely different picture, with the Czech Pirate Party being the only one to surpass the threshold of 50 thousand followers. The other entities oscillated around approx. 15 thousand, the KDU–ČSL had around 5 thousand followers, and the ANO had fewer than 1,500 followers. And while Pirate chairman Ivan Bartoš was followed by almost 51 thousand Instagram users, Andrej Babiš had as many as 144 thousand followers. Finally, although the SPD did not have any Instagram account in its name, Tomio Okamura reached over 38 thousand followers.

Table 7: Number of Instagram followers, September 2024

Party name	Number of followers
Czech Pirate Party	50,037
TOP 09	16,738
Civic Democratic Party	15,857
Mayors and Independents	13,525
Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party	5,059
ANO 2011	1,392
Freedom and Direct Democracy	n/a

Source: Own elaboration based on the parties' accounts.

¹⁵ This account was followed by 1,947 people. In contrast, the account of Mr. Babiš, subtitled *A citizen of the Czech Republic*, was followed by 515,250 people.

Using on the above overviews, we should be able to determine which parties pursued more successful social media activities than others. But the picture would not be complete. The empirical comparison revealed how important it is to thoroughly analyse personified promotion, which tends to be centred on a party's leader or chairman. It was especially in the cases of ANO and SPD that such a trademark persona proved much more fundamental for their inter-party external communication than the trademark of the collective entity. However, the numbers shown cannot be taken at face value. They often reflect not only the parties' often highly divergent communication strategies but also any ongoing election campaign (see Maškarinec and Novotný 2020), the people comprising the party leadership, and their concrete ideas of how and where their party should be communicating.

5. Conclusion and future challenges

Over time, party digitalization at different levels became a highly relevant research area for political science and related disciplines. And in the somewhat overtechnologized times we now face, its importance will continue to grow. This will be accompanied not only by the standard efforts at retesting theories and the validity of existing concepts but also by the emergence of new concepts.

The data above showed that over time, all the political parties studied were able to successfully adapt to, and anchor themselves in, what is now an omnipresent phenomenon – the different social media platforms. They have been using the platforms for ongoing communication with voters, or citizens, to achieve reach both organic and paid. This was far from clearly anticipated back at the time when digitalization was only slowly coming to the foreground and parties were making their first steps in the online world via simple web presentations. A few years later, parties are facing new challenges posed by advanced AI-based tools.

The present article first provided a key building block by outlining the essentials of the study of political parties in the digital age. Then it presented cross-sectional information about several important theoretical concepts, emphasizing both party–voter and inter-party relations. The empirical section sought to provide a basic, comparative, and up-to-date insight in the online communication channels used by political parties, including traditional websites and social media. The comparison supports the fact that in this domain, too, some parties are more successful than others. The ranking of social media accounts in the name of the collective entity should not be taken at face value because their long-term leaders often play a more important role.

Nowadays, parties are using the Internet and the online technologies available voluntarily, in their own interest, but also mostly as a matter-of-course. While day-to-day relations between parties and voters are pursued exclusively online, it should be noted that parties and their leaders have not abandoned whistle-stop tours and on-site

encounters with their constituents. And striking a balance between these two worlds is not only a task for parties but also another research challenge in political science and beyond.

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