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Party digitalization and members' empowerment: A comparison of four Italian parties

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ABSTRACT

The digitalization of political parties has often been approached from the perspective of political parties. Previous studies discuss the potential impact of technology on empowerment, but the users' attitudes to this are largely unknown. To address this gap in the literature, our article analyses how party members view the empowerment potential of digital tools in their party. We use data from semi-structured interviews conducted in November and December 2023 with members of four Italian political parties: Brothers of Italy, Democratic Party, Five Star Movement, and Forza Italia. Employing an inductive approach, the coding process was data-driven, and identified four forms of empowerment. The analysis revealed significant, and in some cases counter-intuitive, similarities and differences between the parties examined.

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KEYWORDS Political parties; members; technology; empowerment; representation

Introduction

Political parties started to deploy technology in their daily activities to reduce costs, engage members, and increase the efficiency of their functioning. Digital tools improve the quality and quantity of political participation (Morlino & Raniolo, 2017; Norris, 2001). Party digitalization includes a broad range of digital tools that can be used for external or internal communication and engagement. Initially, political parties used digital tools to fulfil limited administrative tasks such as communication with supporters, information sharing, and communication during electoral campaigns (Barberà, 2021; Dommert & Power, 2023). Next, political parties began to use digitalization in agenda-setting, candidate selection, deliberation, and other elements of intra-party decision making

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(Dommett et al., 2021; Gherghina, 2024; Scarrow et al., 2017). These developments on the digitalization front made political participation more attractive and accessible to party members (R. Gibson & Ward, 2009; Morlino & Raniolo, 2017) and ignited debates about digital party models or digital face of party organization (Deseriis, 2020b; Gerbaudo, 2019; Lisi, 2024).

In this context, an emerging literature covers the attitudes and behaviours of party members in relation to digitalization (Gherghina & Marian, 2024; Vittori, 2020). The creation of opportunities to engage in political processes via digital tools has been considered a proof of members' empowerment (Barberà, 2021; Borge & Santamarina, 2016). However, to date there has been little understanding of whether party members feel empowered by their party's use of digitalization. Empowerment provides individuals with the capacity to make decisions and influence dynamics within a context or organization. In the absence of empowerment, individuals cannot make their voices count in the decision-making process (Lee & Koh, 2001). Our article addresses this gap in the literature and explains how party members view the internal empowerment potential of digital tools. This focus on intra-party procedures is particularly relevant since party digitalization can modify intra-party organizational processes (Deseriis, 2020a; Gerbaudo, 2019).

We argue that it is crucial to examine the phenomenon of digitalization across a wider range of party types, which is why we conduct a comparison between four political parties. We integrate the literature about digital platforms as new avenues for party democracy with a fine-grained reconstruction of members' attitudes towards the empowerment potential of digitalization. We focus mainly on the digital tools or the dimension of party digitalization connected to internal activities. The limited literature about empowerment and political parties led us to use an inductive approach in which we identify four forms of empowerment from the answers received to 29 semi-structured interviews with members of four Italian political parties. Italy is a representative case study for established democracies in which many political parties have an appetite for digitalization, use primaries as tools to empower party members and sympathizers, and display a range of party organizational models.

The first section reviews the literature about party digitalization and empowerment. Next, we present the research design of this study with an explanation of the case selection, method of data collection, and method of data analysis. The third section provides an overview of the position each of the four parties has adopted towards empowerment, then the fourth section presents the evidence from interviews and inductively derives a typology of empowerment with an explanation of its characteristics. The conclusions summarize the main findings and explore their implications for the broader field of study.

Party digitalization and empowerment

Empowerment is described as a relationship between a source and a target. The first term refers to the authority that creates opportunities to engage in decision-making, and the second to the individuals who benefit from these opportunities (Lee & Koh, 2001; Voegtlin et al., 2015). Empowerment provides the individuals with higher levels of trust in the authority, and improves their self-confidence and motivation to be active in such practices since they believe that their voice matters in the decision-making process, thereby increasing the group's cohesion (Armache, 2013; Voegtlin et al., 2015). Political empowerment involves a transfer of power to citizens (external empowerment) or to party members (internal empowerment). Political power is understood in distributive terms, and through empowerment it ceases to be limited to a specific group in the top leadership of the party (Budryte, 2014; Miller, 1994).

Internal empowerment refers to the opportunities created for party members to engage in decision-making, and to determine their party's courses of action (Croissant & Chambers, 2010; Loxbo, 2013; van Biezen & Piccio, 2013). This can be considered a form of collective empowerment that is defined by political commitment (the members' loyalty to the party's views), political action (the activities through which members become empowered) and community involvement (the creation of a group that strives to optimize the party's performance) (Pirannejad & Janssen, 2017). Internal empowerment has started with intra-party democracy. The latter encapsulates procedures that allow party members to influence candidate or leadership selection, and how the political agenda is set (Cross & Katz, 2013; van Biezen & Piccio, 2013).

In the absence of studies exploring members' perceptions of the empowerment potential of technology within their parties, we use literature from related fields to build a theoretical basis of departure for the present analysis. This literature was important in identifying useful questions for the interviews, but it did not allow us to derive the different forms of empowerment. The following lines present the main theoretical lines of enquiry, while the forms of empowerment were derived from the answers given in the interviews using inductive thematic analysis.

Through collective empowerment, party members may consider themselves as more competent, impactful, and determined to engage in internal decision-making. Perhaps one of the most important psychological characteristics to emerge from this belief is the creation of a habit of continuing to engage in such practices. Initially, internal empowerment was achieved through implementing face-to-face practices such as internal deliberation (Croissant & Chambers, 2010; Loxbo, 2013). However, in recent decades technological developments have created

new opportunities for political actors to move face-to-face practices into the online sphere. The latter can empower party members because they meet the structural (online organization) and technical criteria to make this possible (Borge & Santamarina, 2016; Wolkenstein, 2018). A higher degree of intra-party digitalization creates more opportunities to engage in decision making (Oross & Gherghina, 2023; Oross & Tap, 2023). The use of digital tools empowers party members due to the major advantages (i.e., accessibility, territorial coverage, and lower financial costs) that digitalization has in comparison to physical participation methods. Through digitalization, engagement in political activities becomes easier, and every party member can take part in any political process organized online simply by accessing a digital platform (Barberà, 2021; Gerbaudo, 2019).

Through digital tools, party members can advance their policy proposals and make their voices heard regarding different political outcomes such as setting the agenda. This occurs when the party members engage in a valuable exchange of ideas – through discussions or voting proposals on specific platforms – in order to achieve a common goal (Barberà & Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020; Pedersen & Saglie, 2005; van Selm et al., 2002). They could be allowed to hold polls, and if the number of ‘voters’ is high enough then the top leadership may have to act on the matter that has gained the party members’ interest (Vodová & Voda, 2020). This form of empowerment is reflected in internal referendums conducted via digital platforms. For example, Podemos and the Five Star Movement organize online referendums of party members (Gerbaudo, 2021; Vittori, 2017). The online nature of these processes means that more party members engage in decision-making, which may confer a sense of being empowered on them since the parties invest resources to support their participation (Oross & Gherghina, 2023; Oross & Tap, 2023).

Party members support initiatives in the form of option polls, email voting lists, and video conferences that provide them with opportunities to explain their perspectives on how the political agenda should be shaped (Oross & Gherghina, 2023; Oross & Tap, 2023). This can be perceived as proof of members’ empowerment since the party’s leadership invests its resources into making these processes available to its members. Similarly, when the party members are provided with the ability to decide its political representatives and to follow/name the ‘colleagues’ that should be candidates for specific political positions, they could consider this as proof of empowerment. For instance, many parties have started to use digital platforms such as Agora Voting, OpenKratio, or even Facebook groups to organize discussions and voting sessions for candidates preparing for elections (Gad, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2021; Vittori, 2020).

These dynamics help party members to build their self-confidence and a feeling of unity because these decisions are taken together. The use of digital platforms reduces the distance between members and builds a sense of empowerment. Members feel more empowered when they engage in candidate selection through digital tools (Stoiciu & Gherghina, 2021). The accumulation of knowledge can also be a form of empowerment since participants can become more connected with policy decisions. The use of technology may empower individuals, especially when they cannot participate in-person at specific meetings. Technology can also increase party members' awareness of important issues and stimulate dialogue between members; both are relevant to consolidating the party community (Oross & Tap, 2023).

However, party digitalization can be a double-edged sword, depending on how it is used (or misused) by those implementing it. In addition to the positive empowerment outlined above, there are also instances in which digital tools have been used to control political processes and to deprive them of neutrality (Gerbaudo, 2019; Treré, 2016). Specifically, the influence of party members on the party agenda remains limited, as the leadership often reserves significant control (Deseriis & Vittori, 2019), resulting in a wider divide between the party elites and passive members (Gibson, 2015). Digital tools can shape individuals' political attitudes through information overload, the spread of misinformation, and/or the gathering of personal information without users' agreement (Maati et al., 2024; Treré, 2016). The use of digital tools inside parties could also mean privileged access of specific segments of the membership based on their digital skills, availability only for specific regions in the country (e.g., for technical reasons), or the instrumental use of technology to achieve personal goals (Gerbaudo, 2019). In summary, party members could view digitalization as enabling positive internal empowerment through offering additional opportunities to engage in decision-making, a higher flow of information and visibility, and lower costs, but also as disempowering because it can be used to enhance control, and introduce misinformation and bias. The analysis will reveal which of these perspectives prevails, and in what form.

Data and method

We use Italy as a revelatory case study, well-suited for theory building, because it includes a variety of party types, experiences of digitalization, and intra-party democracy. The case selection rests on three main criteria: the experience of digitalization of some Italian parties, the inclusive character of several of the country's political parties, and the different models of party organization (Barberà, 2021; Gerbaudo, 2019; Ignazi, 2023). We include four political parties in our analysis to ensure variation: Brothers of Italy

(Fratelli d'Italia, FdI), Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD), Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S), and Forza Italia (FI). This selection reflects the complexity of electoral dynamics at the Italian party level by examining mainstream versus challenger parties (Ignazi, 2023). While FdI and M5S are illustrative cases of challenger parties, FI and PD are generally considered mainstream parties. This selection of parties reflects a strategic decision in this study to focus on the distinction between new and old parties. The inclusion of other parliamentary parties such as Italia Viva or Lega Nord would have added unnecessary complexity to the data collection without providing useful insights for the analysis.

A caveat is necessary here: Forza Italia (FI) has been perceived as a challenger populist party for much of its existence (Tarchi, 2015), but in the past decade, it has gradually shifted its approach. Under the leadership of Antonio Tajani, who was elected secretary of Forza Italia after Silvio Berlusconi's death in June 2023, FI adopted more responsibility-focused discourses. Therefore, the inclusion of two challenger parties aims to identify a potential match between their rhetoric about popular sovereignty, disintermediation, and anti-elitism, and the perceptions of their members regarding the opportunities available within the organizational structures.

In terms of organization and experience with digitalization, M5S is widely regarded as a crucial case in the literature on digital parties (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2019). There is a discrepancy between the official discourse, with an emphasis on the horizontal decision-making within the party, and the actual practice that reflects a top-down organization in which members have had little influence on internal decision-making processes (Biancalana & Vittori, 2021). Recent developments indicate the transformation of M5S into a more traditional party, dominated by the party in public office and struggling with both organizational renewal and a break-up with the Rousseau Association which provided its eponymous digital platform (Crulli, 2023). PD has partially abandoned the mass party model that has characterized its legacies, but its organizational strength and entrenchment at the local and regional levels remain significant in the Italian party system (Pasquino & Valbruzzi, 2017). The party has also inherited specific cultural and ideological traits that make it particularly open to processes of intra-party democracy (Florida, 2019).

FI has traditionally been associated with a minimal organizational structure that aligned closely with the central role of its founding leader in party politics (Calise, 2015). The party underwent a transformation during its merger with the post-fascist National Alliance into the People of Freedom, losing some of its original, personalized characteristics (McDonnell, 2013). The central offices fostered preferential connections with local politicians, which facilitated Forza Italia's extensive reach, especially in Southern Italy, but its hierarchical command structure and public messaging remained tightly

linked to the figure of Berlusconi himself (Calise, 2015). There is limited evidence on the use of technology in intra-party decision-making, although there has been substantial investment in digital communication in recent years. In essence, while there is extensive knowledge of how Berlusconi controlled Forza Italia in the 1990s and early 2000s, there is relatively little understanding of the party's internal dynamics in recent years.

Fdl achieved significant electoral success by becoming the largest party in parliament following the Italian general election in September 2022. Described as a 'rooted-newcomer' (Baldini et al., 2022), Fdl leveraged the organizational legacy of the Movimento Sociale Italiano and the National Alliance (Ignazi, 2023). While both its predecessors relied openly on mass organization, Fdl retains some elements of this model: a hierarchical structure, an emphasis on membership recruitment (especially in electoral periods), and a focus on socializing its members into the party values (Vampa, 2023). However, the importance of digitalization remains largely unexplored.

We conducted 29 semi-structured interviews with party members, from a sample with diversity of age, gender, education, and region of residence (see Table 1). To maintain anonymity, regions rather than specific localities were recorded. The interviewees were members of one of the four parties that have three distinct organizational units: the party on the ground, the party in central office, and the party in public office. Interviewees from the party on the ground were members with no hierarchical role in the party but who regularly participate in party activities. There was some overlap between the respondents belonging to the central and public office: several members were part of both the national/subnational executive party committees and its elected representatives at national/sub-national level. In such cases, interviewees were asked to identify their prevalent role. The recruitment procedure involved a combination of snowball sampling and direct outreach. Saturation point was achieved after conducting 6–7 interviews per political party. To ensure quality assurance, one additional interview was conducted for each party, confirming that no new information emerged. In theory, the small number of interviewees for each party unit, their high levels of education, and the gender bias could raise concerns regarding the generalizability of the findings. In practice, however, the convergence of answers was very high and there were no visible differences in the opinions of members across the units or with different socio-demographic characteristics.

The interviews were conducted in November and December 2023, both in-person and online, and no relevant differences were observed in the content of responses between these two formats. The interview guide was designed to explore multiple facets of party digitalization mainly connected with internal activities (see Appendix 1). Each interview, conducted in Italian, began with a broad opening theme addressing the interviewee's personal political involvement and party membership. It then moved to questions

Table 1. Overview of the semi-structured interviews included in the research.

Interviewees	Party	Membership	Gender	Region	Age	Education	Length (min.)	Type of interview
11	PD	on the ground	Male	South	50–55	University	37	In person
12	M55	central office	Male	South	60–65	University	54	Online
13	PD	central office	Female	South	50–55	University	125	Online
14	PD	central office	Male	South	50–55	University	42	In person
15	PD	on the ground	Female	Centre	25–30	University	30	In person
16	PD	central office	Male	Centre	30–35	University	23	Online
17	M55	central office	Female	South	25–30	University	46	Online
18	FDI	central office	Male	Centre	30–35	University	46	Online
19	FI	on the ground	Female	Centre	50–55	Highschool	33	Online
110	FDI	on the ground	Male	South	30–35	University	28	In person
111	FDI	central office	Male	Centre	20–25	University	49	In person
112	PD	public office	Female	North	50–55	University	16	Online
113	FDI	on the ground	Male	Centre	30–35	University	20	Online
114	M55	central office	Male	Centre	25–30	University	38	Online
115	FDI	central office	Male	Centre	25–30	University	40	Online
116	M55	on the ground	Male	North	20–25	High School	40	Online
117	FI	central office	Male	South	50–55	University	36	Online
118	M55	central office	Male	North	25–30	University	44	Online
119	FI	central office	Female	Centre	20–25	University	45	Online
120	FI	public office	Female	South	45–50	High School	31	Online
121	M55	central office	Male	North	20–25	University	21	Online
122	FI	public office	Male	North	25–30	University	20	Online
123	FI	public office	Male	North	20–25	University	41	Online
124	PD	central office	Male	South	40–45	High School	30	Online
125	FI	on the ground	Male	North	20–25	High School	33	Online
126	M55	public office	Female	South	40–45	University	52	Online
127	PD	on the ground	Female	South	30–35	University	12	Online
128	FDI	public office	Female	Centre	25–30	University	55	Online
129	FDI	on the ground	Male	South	40–45	University	53	In person

directly related to the research question: decision-making and intra-party democracy, the use and impact of digital technology, and comparative use and future directions. We adopted a flexible approach to the content and order of the questions to encourage a free narrative and in order to obtain deeper and spontaneous insights into the participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations. There was natural variation in the duration of the interviews and in the details provided by each interviewee. The subsequent phase involved transcribing the interviews and conducting inductive coding. The coding was done independently by the authors based on a meticulous review of the data, keywords identification, and openness to the patterns of meanings and ideas emerging from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2021, Naeem et al., 2023).

These actions resulted in the development of codebooks categorizing the interview answers into distinct forms of empowerment based on party digitalization. These forms gather together the different attributes identified by the interviewees in their narratives about the impact of digitalization to provide rich contextual information regarding the predominant values and interpretations of digitalization within party politics. The forms refer to empowerment as defined in the theoretical section and help to organize the subjective narratives of our interviewees, illustrating how they view the digital tools. The four forms of empowerment highlight the degrees of similarity across the narratives, capturing how different individuals attribute specific outcomes to the use of digital tools within party structures.

The separate codebooks – developed by each author – were compared, and we selected four themes that all codebooks have in common. The overall agreement between coders was higher than 90 per cent. The identified forms of empowerment are: 1) *representational*, in which the interviewees connect the digital devices to opportunities to advocate for their needs and aggregate interests; 2) *cognitive*, in which technology is linked to opportunities for information and acquiring competences and skills; 3) *operational*, connected to the ability to perform tasks more effectively, with consequences for recruitment, career development, and enhancing individual visibility, which have often perceived as unidirectional and elitist in nature; and 4) *relational*, reflecting the reduction of participation costs and the nurturing of a collective identity.

Digital tools of Italian parties: A comparative overview

This section provides an overview of the use of digital tools across the political parties based on the evidence drawn from the semi-structured interviews. It covers both the reasons for the use and the mode of use. There was consensus among the interviewees that the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst, pushing parties to find ways to sustain their organizational

structures within the online realm. These observations are in line with findings from other political settings (Gherghina & Stoiciu, 2020; Cross & Tap, 2023). The interviews revealed a spontaneous and collaborative interplay between top-down and bottom-up initiatives, exemplified by instances such as Members of Parliament (MPs) facilitating access for their constituents and local organizations to video conferencing solutions provided by the parliament. Party leaders occasionally assumed a more direct role online to compensate for the perceived lack of empathy. Notably, many members of Forza Italia from the Northern macro-area recalled a Zoom meeting organized by Silvio Berlusconi in November 2020, in which he engaged with party representatives to discuss their needs and views on electoral strategies (I23, 23, 25). While there was unanimous agreement among the interviewees regarding the heightened intensity of online party activities during the pandemic, there was also shared recognition of a diversification in these activities.

The pandemic temporarily produced a reconceptualization of party politics, characterized by an augmented receptivity to spaces for consultation, planning, and decision-making. However, this manifestation of digital engagement changed after 2022. The interviewees delineated a process characterized by changing online participation: while opportunities diversify and increase for the party in public office (at local, regional, and national levels) and in central office, they concurrently diminish for ordinary party members, sympathizers, and voters. In the case of the M5S, this trajectory is a consequence of its ongoing territorial organizational process:

The individual member obviously counts less and less, not because he or she is deprived of power, but because it has been realised over the past years that there is an opportunity cost, obviously the more democratic and representative the decision-making process, the less effective and efficient it is. Often in the past, the M5S's historically sluggish bureaucratic machinery in endorsing political choices and strategies has led to, let's say, lost opportunities (...), so now the party is becoming increasingly hierarchical. (I14)

The interviewees outlined a series of advantages of digitalization in their parties. In the case of FdI, the predominant rationale centres on the imperative to uphold order and discipline within the party organization. On this, I28 observed that: 'We are all involved in the party activities. Then, unavoidably, the decisions are taken by those on the top level'. This acknowledgement was accompanied by recognition of the inherent complexity arising from divergent ideas among party members. Within the context of Forza Italia (FI), the hierarchical dimension assumes a political-functional justification, as expressed by one participant who suggested a return to the original paradigm of a party made of mayors. The identity of FI, according to this perspective, is deeply rooted in the essence of local administrators who are all

naturally answerable to their constituency. Interviewees affiliated with the central office of the PD proffered a rationale deeply rooted in a discerning conceptualization of the noteworthy online opportunities aimed at the 'dismantling of the pyramid' (I3).

The use of social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok) is common across the four parties, especially for communication and visibility purposes. While communication at the national, regional, or provincial levels demonstrates a higher degree of professionalization, management at the local level tends to be more informal. This narrative was particularly expressed by the local elected representative (I28) who closely monitors social network comments to discern citizens' needs and identify shortcomings in the party's policy agenda in the city in which she is politically active. Across the parties, there is a general acknowledgement of a major limitation in social media-based empowerment; for example, 'The online makes the relations cold; politics requires human relations. People want to meet you, and they feel used if you do not find the time to meet them in person' (I20).

Some parties integrate social network communication with opportunities for face-to-face interactions. An initiative implemented in Southern Italy allows voters, party sympathizers, and ordinary members to participate by meeting with the Provincial Secretary. Through social media profiles or designated telephone numbers, they can book one of the three weekly slots available to express their needs, concerns, or suggestions face-to-face (I29). This hybrid communication allows opportunities for the central party office to establish connections with diverse groups of potential voters. Social media platforms can also serve as dissemination channels for coordinated national-level imagery which is explicitly designed to strengthen identity linkages. University groups provide the opportunity to heighten awareness among their student constituency but also to foster online relationships with students who are apprehensive about potential repercussions in academic and private spheres should their political identity be disclosed (I11).

Mobile messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram are crucial for the coordination and organization of events between party members at different levels (I1, I2, I6, I8, I9, I14, I28), the facilitation and dissemination of customized messages from central offices to local levels (I29), and for real-time updates on the party's stance on technical issues (I28). Telegram, which was exclusively mentioned by M5S members, particularly within the youth network, is characterized as a more informal communication channel renowned for its security features, including privacy guarantees (I14, I16). It is used due to its unlimited group and channel participation (I14, I16, I21) and superior video diffusion capabilities (I26). However, the simultaneous use of WhatsApp and Telegram raises challenges such as information overlaps and dispersion risks. For instance, in the M5S, three Telegram groups are used by MPs in the lower

chamber, each serving distinct purposes, alongside three WhatsApp groups catering to specific functions, such as the leadership group, Parliamentary Commission referents, and press releases (I26). While these apps are extensively used for internal communication and organizational purposes (I2, I12 and I26), they can also serve as communication tools with external audiences.

Political parties use video-conferencing solutions such as Meet, Webex, and Zoom for extensive assemblies, training sessions, and career coaching. These virtual meeting platforms exclusively cater to party members and are implemented on a broad geographic scale. The pragmatic considerations of time and cost management are prevalent across various parties, as highlighted by I14, I20, I24, and I29. The central office, whether national or regional, assumes the primary role of organizing these events. While praised for their technical attributes, including high-quality video and audio, and their compatibility with private life, a critical perspective was articulated by I3, who contended that online conferences cannot replace in-person meetings:

The other side of the coin is that online conferences cannot become a substitute for the live meeting. You can't get excited very often in online conference. When you come out of a meeting in person with 70–80 people, you bring home some feelings that the online conference cannot give you. The feelings of participating, the fact that people came, they sacrificed time which is already a huge commitment to an idea that brought all of you together and made you part of the same community. (I3)

Additionally, improvised digital innovations often coexist with more sophisticated tools. I3 spoke about an improvised debate platform crafted by a local councillor in the southern city where she resides. This platform, resembling a virtual classroom, facilitates reflective discussion forums, along with the storage and exchange of documents. I26 detailed a more sophisticated app developed by the M55 in parliament, which is designed to map bills, amendments, and various stages in the legislative process. This experimental app, to be tested at the parliamentary level, aims to enhance communication within the M55 parliamentary group. Its anticipated future extensions involve broadening access to activists, local representatives, and individuals dealing with specific issues, ensuring comprehensive awareness of the M55's position on various legislative matters.

Forms of empowerment through digitalization

The evidence from the semi-structured interviews allows the identification of four forms of empowerment through digitalization: representational, cognitive, operational, and relational (see [Table 2](#)). We labelled these forms to reflect their functions and characteristics. The interviewees focused almost exclusively on how digital tools enable them to feel effective, competent, and

Table 2. Forms of empowerment through party digitalization.

Form	Functions	Characteristics
Representational	Bring members' needs onto the agenda Aggregate and articulate interests	Bi-directional Inclusive
Cognitive	Disseminate information Acquisition of competences and skills	Unidirectional Self-selection
Operational	Recruitment and career development Increase individual visibility	Unidirectional Elitist
Relational	Reduce participation costs Contribute to collective identity	Bi-directional Inclusive

authorized to perform tasks within the party organization. There were some isolated narratives about the negative by-products of digitalization, but they were insufficient to form the basis of an articulated view.

The representational empowerment is summarized by I3 in the sense that digital tools 'provide the possibility for citizens to feel themselves represented and become protagonists'. Ideally, this empowerment is envisioned as a bidirectional and inclusive process involving both party members and the wider citizenry. It engenders a scenario where diverse digital tools provide opportunities for representation, by bringing the party members' opinions and needs – and occasionally those of citizens – onto the parties' agendas. Illustratively, the email-based distribution of surveys employed by the central office of a party to discern intra-party preferences is a component of this representational empowerment process. When examined from the perspectives of various Fdl-affiliated interviewees, these are means of supporting the traditional function of aggregating interests and opinions. However, the process remains incomplete, as it is exclusively driven by the central office of the party (i.e., the Fdl in Rome), and lacks further interactions with the grassroots (e.g., the absence of feedback on the survey results).

Empowerment becomes notably conspicuous within the realm of social media. According to the reconstructions offered by our interviewees, party representatives primarily utilize social networks to establish a direct communicative rapport with the general citizenry. Our interviewees collectively indicated that party representatives employ their profiles not only to disseminate information on their political activities, but also to solicit feedback through gathering comments. Representational empowerment emerges as an implicit byproduct of the specific opportunities afforded by social networks for various user categories, including party members, sympathizers, and voters, who can articulate their perspectives. Numerous interviewees keenly focused on these feedback mechanisms as indicators of their party's efficacy in policy implementation. Even in this context, the empowerment process is potentially incomplete. The collection of feedback appears to be more of an individual undertaking rather than a standardized obligation. The failure to respond to feedback undermines the empowerment process, while

engagement through responses establishes a connection. For example, I29 contended:

If you fail to answer the feedback, there is no empowerment. If you answer, you create a connection. 'He/she answers me!' But an elected representative lacking a connection with a constituency (especially those running in so-called secure constituencies) often perceives this engagement as a time-consuming endeavour. Instead, they prefer to invest their time in disseminating information tailored by the central office in Rome.

Within the realm of social media, there is discernible evidence of a negative manifestation of representational empowerment, as was particularly documented by female politicians (I26, 28). This phenomenon is characterized by the proliferation of hate messages. I26 explicitly explained that:

Since I have been elected, I have observed that the higher one's institutional role, the more one becomes the target of hate (...) The absurd thing is that I sometimes receive nasty comments not from bogus profiles but from visible profiles (...) And this happened not when I was a local councillor and people knew me; my public were the people of my city. I had, of course, criticisms, but never hate comments. Since I became an MP, everything changed.

In line with previous studies (Brison, 1998), many citizens seem to resort to hate speech as a means of expressing their views by vilifying 'party representatives' based on their political affiliations. Consequently, these individuals are negatively empowered through the creation of a hostile and even intimidating online environment in which they feel represented.

The second mode is that of cognitive empowerment, in which digital tools are associated with an increased opportunity to disseminate information on both general and situational aspects of interest on the political agenda, as well as insights into the functioning of politics. These opportunities are predominantly content-related and encompass training activities primarily organized through party websites, or utilizing video-conferencing solutions such as Meet, Webex, and Zoom. The interviewees consistently portrayed these activities as avenues for knowledge-sharing exclusively intended for party members. For instance, the M5S interviewees highlighted a recently conducted thematic workshop focused on Artificial Intelligence, featuring experts spanning various application domains and addressing its potential adverse effects.

The interviewees confirmed that party websites remain valuable tools for the dissemination of information. The websites provide avenues for cognitive empowerment through training and coaching initiatives which are explicitly designed to enhance the political competences and skills of party members (I24). They raise targeted opportunities for recently elected representatives to learn about the technical requirements inherent in their administrative/political roles (I19), and enable central offices to solicit feedback on specific topics

from their members (I21). The utility of party websites extends to facilitating online recruitment, as exemplified by the PD, FI, and M5S interviewees. In the instance of the PD, online recruitment is construed as a mechanism for overseeing, and in some instances removing, the traditional gatekeeping role of local sections (I1 and I3). This transformation is posited to empower genuine party membership *vis-à-vis* personal interests (I1) and factionalism (I3, I4). These insights are in line with recent research about the connection between digitalization and websites (Lisi, 2024).

Within the PD, the interviewees recounted experiences of thematic training sessions centred on the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). In the context of Fdi, recent discussions have focused on the topic of public transportation in a specific region. In the case of Fi, a notable recent initiative has been the political school for the youth movement organized in Gaeta in September 2023. I19 shared her firsthand experience, stating:

We had a councillor from city X who spoke about his experience as a councillor, elucidating how the institutional role is performed to shape a ruling class or a future ruling class. When I first entered the city council, I lacked basic knowledge, not knowing the procedures for handling an agenda or crafting a motion (. . .) But now, with this training school, it proves highly valuable as it imparts a foundational understanding, enabling one to navigate, so to speak, and conduct oneself within municipal councils. I believe that, particularly in internal party affairs, this significantly fosters cohesion among us.

Some of the interviewees pointed out the relevant role of podcasts and YouTube channels related to representatives (I26). Even from a more passive perspective, owing to the lack of interaction and a top-down direction, they can contribute to disseminating information on the activities of the parliament, the majority, and the opposition among militants and activists, thereby fostering the development of vertical accountability. Thus, beyond the immediate subject matter, such experiences are intricately linked to the acquisition of competencies and/or skills that enhance the technical prowess of party members in specific policy domains. Digital tools contribute to this process by reducing the costs associated with participation and diversifying the content of training opportunities. This manifests as a tangible investment in cognitive empowerment which fosters complex thinking about the policy agenda, and encourages intellectual openness to tackling potentially divisive issues.

However, other interviewees advocated for additional, latent forms of cognitive empowerment. Participation in video-conferencing solutions is linked not only to opportunities for party members to engage in discussions about party politics and ensure that their voices are heard by their peers, but also to foster civil and argumentative reasoning. While these online meetings may fall short of a deliberative ideal, as noted by interviewee I19:

During the pandemic, we frequently convened in online meetings, discussing issues such as abortion (...) Vigorous debates emerged, and these discussions persisted on the regional chat platform with prominent figures, involving more than 100 participants (...) It was constructive, we gained intellectual enrichment.

Although mobile messaging apps offer some opportunities for debate and discussion (I29), the lack of efficient administrative control led some interviewees to express concerns about the poor quality of argumentation and the absence of shared ethical norms in the digital arena.

The third form is operational empowerment, which specifically addresses the recruitment and development of political careers. As was previously elucidated, the process of online recruitment diminishes the gatekeeping function traditionally held by local sections, fostering the perception that digitalization has a levelling effect within the party hierarchy. One interviewee (I3) reflected on this shift: 'Before, there was the local level that decided. I invited at least 100 people, they signed up for me, but I don't ask who they vote for in the primaries (...) I don't have my members; people signed up online. This is how I can contribute to the change of the party hierarchy'. In connection with this, the interviews revealed that digital tools can be employed to enhance the visibility of individual political entrepreneurs. This phenomenon extends beyond interactive social media profiles to encompass the intricate realm of parties' mobile messaging apps. WhatsApp groups including representatives from different levels of government ensure a permanent arena where it is possible to show their abilities in front of those from higher party levels. An interviewee (I8) explicitly argued that:

If you speak for two minutes at the General Assembly of the Party in Rome, almost no one listens to you, but if you are in a WhatsApp group, where perhaps there is a minister, a parliamentarian, a member of the national party office, and you write intelligent things, maybe he reads it, he remembers you, and he understands that you are a member to be valued.

The proliferation of formal groups coexists with the array of informal groups that unite individuals sharing common interests or opinions occasionally diverging from the broader political party. Similar to traditional political factions, these informal WhatsApp groups have an online organizational capacity that can influence intra-party candidate selection. The personal and political dimensions intertwine in these groups, contributing to coordinating the activities not only of internal party currents but also of individual groups linked to specific representatives or precise political visions. As one interviewee (I13) noted, 'There are groups that become groups of friends, groups of factions but in an improper sense, groups of people who think in a somewhat similar way, with whom there is a very close vision, very close goals, and where we discuss and organise'.

Moreover, the presence of informal groups with a particularly high number of people can influence candidate selection, especially in local contexts. Individuals who are active in these groups are linked to greater visibility, and therefore, a potentially greater consensus, a factor that can be crucial in deciding a candidacy. A local member (I9) explained that:

There are people who have created, just for pleasure, WhatsApp groups of sympathisers and friends, and they are politically weighed for the following they have [in these groups] (...). And in the definition of candidacies, this is considered by the party leaders because it's a way to contact people, and so they pay attention to it.

This intricate interplay within digital spaces adds a layer of complexity to the dynamics of political entrepreneurship and career development within the party structure.

Relational empowerment is a crucial dimension within the digital sphere. Our qualitative analysis underscores that digital tools play a pivotal role in reducing distances, mitigating the time and resource costs associated with travel, and fostering networking. Although party politics is traditionally perceived as a proximity space rooted in face-to-face interactions, various digital tools are able to amplify party identity beyond these conventional boundaries. Representatives are not only spared the effort of envisioning themselves as part of the same party, but they also recognize the practical advantages of operating within a digital network. One illustrative example was provided by I3, who highlighted the efficacy of an online meeting involving 40 regional representatives discussing the *Decreto Sud* (the law establishing a single special economic zone). The meeting facilitated the exchange of valuable information, and I3 expressed amazement at hearing their own words echoed by Elly Schlein in the parliamentary discussion on the topic. This collaborative approach resonated positively among the participants, exemplifying the multiplying effects of digital networking.

Moreover, mobile messaging apps serve as platforms for chat groups among representatives at provincial and regional levels, functioning as spaces for sharing ideas and experiences. This support system is deemed particularly indispensable by young elected representatives. The involvement of national elected representatives further enhances this network by enabling the showcasing of achievements: 'what has been done from the territory to Rome and from Rome to the territory' (I28). This multifaceted network, facilitated by digital tools, serves as a vital resource for mutual support, ideas exchange, and strategic coordination, contributing significantly to relational empowerment within the party structure.

Table 3. The attitudes of party members towards empowerment through digitalization.

	Fdl	FI	M5S	PD
Representational empowerment	-	++	+	++
Cognitive empowerment	++	++	++	++
Operational empowerment	+	+	+	++
Relational empowerment	+	+	++	+

Stands for none, + the empowerment was mentioned by several respondents, ++ the empowerment was mentioned by most of the respondents.

A comparative discussion

The members of the four parties covered by our analysis cluster differently across the four modes of empowerment (see Table 3). For example, the PD interviewees perceived the highest level of empowerment, while the Fdl case saw the lowest. This alignment corresponds to the parties' inherent organizational practices: the PD case involves a more member-oriented utilization of digital tools, whereas the Fdl interviewees described a use of digital tools strongly directed by top party circles, affording lower levels the option of cognitive empowerment only.

The interviewees constructed diverse configurations for the four modes of empowerment. Except for cognitive empowerment, which was uniformly perceived among our interviewees, the other empowerment modes varied. Specifically, there was no evidence of representational empowerment in the case of Fdl, possibly because the aggregation of interests was filtered by uniformly perceived party authorities, who were deemed to be the most legitimate locus of decision making. Similarly, in FI, operational empowerment was observed primarily among young party members, while relational empowerment has become increasingly relevant, with newly-elected representatives viewing online tools as particularly crucial in enhancing the quality of their office. A challenging insight thus emerges for FI, which is that the narrative reconstruction places representational empowerment at the forefront, in line with the image of a party composed of local representatives primarily addressing the needs of their constituency. Operational empowerment is visible, particularly among young interviewees who perceive the online milieu to give them the opportunity to expedite their political careers. The relational dimension is present, primarily as a support for representational empowerment.

The M5S interviewees highlighted a party in reconstruction, modelling itself after the dense organizational pattern of the PD. However, in the interviewees' narrative, the empowerment model only partially aligns with the PD. During the reconstruction phase, representational empowerment has been put on hold, while the relational dimension has taken precedence. The operational empowerment originally associated with M5S remains

undervalued. In the case of the PD, representational empowerment was strongly emphasized, aligning with opportunities for facilitated bottom-up interest aggregation. Aligned with the PD's experience of inclusive procedures in internal processes, particularly by open primaries, the PD interviewees identified a positive role for digital tools in recruitment opportunities and more broadly in fostering an open configuration of political careers. Relational empowerment was seen as equally pertinent, albeit with a hierarchical emphasis.

Conclusions

This article has aimed to understand how the members of four political parties in Italy view the empowerment potential of digital tools within their party's activities. The findings illustrate that the party members referred to the positive dimension of digital empowerment, often overlooking the negative traits. They identified four modes of empowerment with different roles in the functioning of the party organization and in members' engagement with the organization. Two main results stand out. On the one hand, all party members considered digitalization as having cognitive empowerment potential. This adds nuance to the literature discussing the use of digitalization by political parties to enhance members' engagement (Barberà, 2021; Dommett et al., 2021; Oross & Tap, 2023). It shows that digitalization provides information to members, contributes to transparency, and makes them feel more confident about the recent developments in the party.

On the other hand, there is relevant variation in the attitudes about the potential for the other three modes of empowerment across the political parties. These differences are not always in line with the results of previous research. For example, although M5S has been a frontrunner in digitalization (Biancalana & Vittori, 2021; Deseriis, 2020a; Gerbaudo, 2019), its members perceive only a low potential of representational or operational empowerment. In comparison, members of political parties like PD, which did not use technology until recently, see great empowerment potential. One possible explanation for this difference may be the enthusiasm often evident in the early stages of digitalization. In contrast, the M5S members are accustomed to digital tools so may have understood their limitations relative to some other modes of empowerment. There is a pervasive acknowledgement of operational empowerment, with all interviewees associating the online dimension with positive opportunities for recruitment and political careers. Relational empowerment is also recognized as significant, particularly as a support for the reorganization process initiated by the M5S in the post-2021 period.

Although this analysis is based on a limited number of parties and interviews, which may raise questions about its generalizability, its findings have

broader implications for the study of digitalization and political parties. At the theoretical level, we contribute to the literature by identifying four forms of empowerment that can be tested for other political parties. This analytical framework is not context-sensitive, i.e., it is not limited to the Italian political environment, and could be used in comparisons across space and time. The framework advances understanding of party membership in the digital era by outlining how members from all party units identify the multi-faceted potential of digitalization. This approach aligns with previous studies on the reorganization of party politics that see digitalization as revitalizing traditional party functions of interest aggregation and articulation. Cognitive empowerment, in particular, signals a rediscovery of parties' socialization function, enabling members to feel capable of performing tasks thanks to an increased access to information and knowledge.

We empirically illustrate the positive and multi-faceted empowerment in the minds of party members. Most of our interviewees identified more than one mode of empowerment. The prominence of cognitive empowerment has normative implications because it indicates the benefits that it can bring for party membership. Representational empowerment is not confined to political parties with strong organizations (PD), or those that originated online (M5S). In the post-Berlusconi era, FI focuses on representational empowerment at the local level, strategically perceived as a protective measure implemented for the party's long-term survival. This highlights parties' adaptability in leveraging digital tools to address internal challenges and reframe their engagement strategies. The narratives of our interviewees reveal that digitalization is part of a broader process of re-intermediation which reduces participation costs while strengthening collective identity. By shifting from a purely socio-structural understanding of digitalization to a more psychological perspective focused on individual perceptions of empowerment, our study offers new insights into how digital tools shape the lived experiences of party members. These findings suggest that digitalization can foster a sense of belonging, efficacy, and visibility within political parties, thus contributing to their adaptability and long-term survival.

A key area that demands further exploration is developing a more nuanced understanding of how both the formal and informal use of digital tools can influence perceptions of empowerment. One emerging aspect during the interviews which deserves deeper investigation is the potential impact of technology, and specifically social networks, on female representatives. This raises important questions about the specific experiences and challenges faced by women in the political sphere in the context of digital engagement. Moreover, future analysis could explore the ambivalent character of digitalization for empowerment purposes. While our study has revealed a dominant

positive outlook regarding digitalization, it is important to understand the possible circumstances in which party members may feel that the use of technology by political parties can also produce disempowering consequences.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

- (1) Political Engagement and Motivation
 - When did you first become involved in politics?
 - What motivated your initial involvement?
 - Why did you decide to join the party?
 - (2) Party Membership and Rights:
 - What does being a party member mean to you?
 - What rights do you believe party members should have?
 - What responsibilities do you think party members should uphold?
 - (3) Decision-Making and Intra-Party Democracy:
 - How would you describe the decision-making process within your party?
 - Are there elements of intra-party democracy present?
 - How are ordinary members involved in decision-making?
 - (4) Use of Digital Technology:
 - What digital technologies does your party use and for what purposes?
 - Since when has your party been using these technologies?
 - Who initiated the adoption of these technologies within the party?
 - Were there any challenges or resistance encountered during their implementation?
 - How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence the frequency and goals of technology use?
 - (5) Perceived Benefits of Digital Technologies:
 - What benefits do digital technologies provide to your party?
 - Is there a correlation between technology use and increased member involvement in decision-making?
 - How do these technologies impact voters outside the party?
 - (6) Perceived Empowerment through Digital Technologies:
 - In your opinion, do digital technologies empower you as a party member?
 - How do they enhance your influence within the party?
 - How do they facilitate your engagement in broader political activities?
 - (7) Challenges and Obstacles:
 - What are the primary obstacles hindering the effective use of digital technology within your party?
-
- (1) Personal Use and Engagement:
 - How frequently do you use digital technologies for party activities?
 - Can you provide specific examples of how you use these technologies?
 - How much time do you typically spend using digital tools each week?
 - Are other local branch members actively engaged with digital tools?
 - (2) Trust and Political Activity:
 - Has the use of digital tools influenced your trust in the party? If so, how?
 - How has technology use affected your willingness to participate actively in political activities?
 - (3) Comparison with Other Parties:
 - How do other political parties in the country utilize digital technology?

- Do these parties achieve better outcomes with digital tools? If yes, in what ways?
- (4) Future Directions and Challenges:
- What changes would you like to see in your party regarding digital technology usage?
 - What do you perceive as the biggest challenges facing your party in the coming years?

Note: There were several ad-hoc follow-up questions for respondents, which were triggered by their answers.