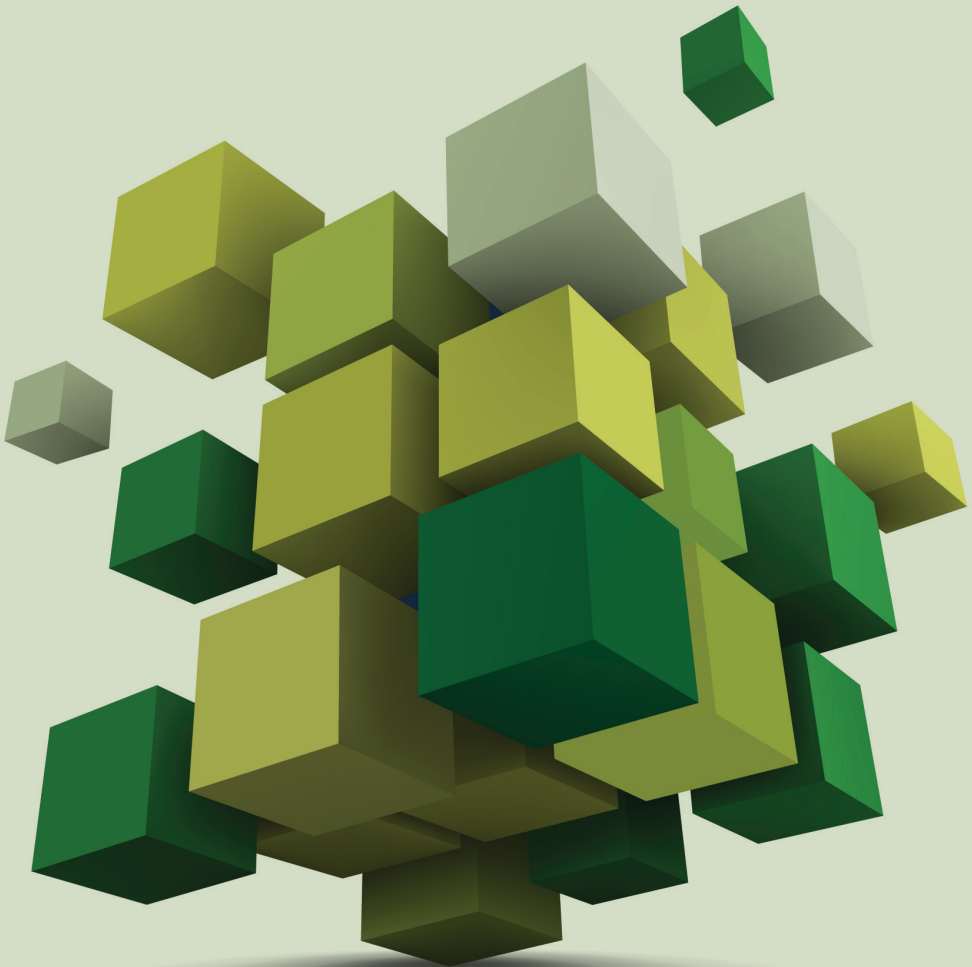




# Adapting to the New Normal

Political Parties During Lockdown and Social Distancing

Political Party Innovation Primer 6





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# 1. Introduction

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Since its establishment in 1995, International IDEA has witnessed drastic impacts on the institutions and processes of political participation and representation, including political parties. The level of change brought about in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been unprecedented. Governments across the world have been compelled to adopt and enforce periodic lockdowns and efforts at social distancing. Such measures render the physical proximity and social interaction on which political parties usually rely in order to engage with citizens almost impossible. What strategies can or should political parties adopt to survive and function during the ‘new normal’ way of conducting public life and various forms of political activity? With lockdowns and social distancing likely to be features of life for some time to come, will political parties be forced to operate or even exist increasingly online?

Political parties are social entities that function as the *transmission belt* between citizens and those in power. This naturally requires them to maintain close engagement and interaction with, as well as physical proximity to, their members and supporters, and citizens more generally. Such interaction is normally conducted through rallies and social events, door-to-door canvassing to seek support and hand out literature—or on billboards in public spaces to disseminate information targeted at different social groups. Through all these exchanges, political parties shape their policies, recruit new members and convey the party’s ideology and programmatic intentions. At least for the foreseeable future, social interaction and physical closeness will not be possible in the ways in which and to the extent that political parties have been accustomed.

In several countries, political parties are stepping up their digital presence in the online world. This creates opportunities for political parties to tap into and reach a wider potential audience or membership base, particularly among the youth. From highly digitalized political parties in states such as Taiwan to

contexts of low Internet penetration in various parts of the world, parties are turning to the digital sphere to carry out many of their activities. Digitalization has been an ongoing process in political parties across the globe, and the current pandemic is likely to accelerate this process. Young people tend to have a preference for online tools and platforms, perceiving them as more user-friendly options for engaging in politics in comparison with established or traditional ways of doing things. While digitalization might be considered the natural option for political parties and politicians to sustain engagement with their constituents during the reality of social distancing, for various reasons, such as poor communication infrastructure, or slow and unreliable Internet connections, not all states have the capacity to adopt such measures.

This Primer highlights some of the non-digital mechanisms that are being widely used and can be adopted by political parties to allow them to continue to function or operate in times of social distancing and other contexts where restrictions on social gatherings are being enforced. It also presents practical options for digitalization and developing an online presence that parties in different contexts can adapt and optimize to respond to such restrictions, and ideas to support the transformation efforts that parties are undertaking.

## 2. Non-digital campaigning strategies

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Sustainable Internet penetration at a high level and the use of related technology are not yet feasible in many states around the world. Nor can Internet activity replace all the political activities that parties undertake when no social distancing rules are in place. It is worth highlighting that the global average level of Internet penetration (proportion of Internet users) is just 53.6 per cent (ITU 2020). However, disparities exist between regions, for instance, Europe has the highest Internet usage rates (85.2 per cent), while Africa has the lowest Internet usage rates (28.2 per cent). Even where access to the Internet is well established, however, conducting all political party activity online does not seem to be the preferred choice of political parties. The significant disparities between regions and states only increase the challenge of being entirely reliant on Internet-based tools and platforms to conduct political activities and campaigning.

### 2.1. Traditional campaigning

In-person campaigning by political parties is the traditional and most widely used way for political parties to engage with their voters. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, some political parties have continued to rely on in-person campaigning. Some have followed strict safety measures, but others are flouting them. Due to the low level of Internet penetration, political parties in Burundi campaigned as usual for the 20 May 2020 elections, holding massive rallies without implementing any social distancing measures (Webb 2020). Similarly, in the run-up to the 23 June 2020 presidential elections, political parties in Malawi conducted door-to-door canvassing and held rallies with huge crowds, in defiance of a ban on public gatherings of more than 100 people (Africanews 2020).

In Mongolia, the government procedure for preventing the spread of COVID-19 during the 2020 parliamentary elections outlined prevention



measures for the conduct of elections, both during campaigning and for the voting procedures (General Election Committee of Mongolia 2020). The procedure favoured online campaigning but acknowledged the low level of Internet penetration in the countryside. It therefore also contained provisions on offline campaigning and guidelines on COVID-19 prevention measures. The regulation outlined that political parties, coalitions and candidates were responsible for following the procedure by maintaining safe distances while campaigning, carrying out checks on body temperature, sanitizing the campaign area, and ensuring the use of masks and protective gloves and their proper disposal, among other things.

In Poland, presidential elections were originally scheduled for 10 May 2020 and the official campaign period began on 5 February. Initially, in-person campaigning activities were limited to a maximum of 50 people. From 31 March 2020, however, public gatherings were officially prohibited, which restricted the usual activities. On 2 June 2020, the election was postponed to 28 June 2020 and most restrictions on public gatherings were lifted, allowing meetings of up to 150 people. Several candidates organized large-scale rallies that did not respect the regulations on the number of participants or social distancing measures (OSCE 2020).

## 2.2. Short message service (SMS)

‘Texting is just a humane, better, higher-engaged channel’ for political campaigns (Roose 2018).

The use of the short message service (SMS) or texting, including options for live chat between a political party or candidate and potential voters, has been increasing in recent years (Shaul-Cohen and Lev-On 2019). Unlike access to the Internet, access to mobile SIM connections is relatively high in all regions of the world (74 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa, 105 per cent in the Middle East and North Africa, 102 per cent in Latin America and 103 per cent in the Asia-Pacific) (GMSA 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020). The use of SMS for political mobilization during election campaigns is subject to national electoral laws, and political parties and candidates are required to comply with applicable national regulations. Despite the various legal obligations that can be associated with SMS use in many countries, the evidence from the field demonstrates its great potential for political parties and candidates, even in non-democratic or hybrid contexts. Hybrid regimes are defined as ‘having the combination of elements of authoritarianism with democracy . . . These often adopt the formal characteristics of democracy (while allowing little real competition for power) with weak respect for basic political and civil rights’ (International IDEA 2018b).

Nonetheless, there are concerns related to the use of personal data and the issue of public consent. In Georgia, for instance, it was reported that the ruling party

bombarded voters with SMS messages during the 2018 presidential campaign, raising questions about how the party gained access to private numbers given the country's strict personal data protection regulations.

During the March 2020 parliamentary election campaign in Mali, meetings of over 50 people were banned as a precaution against the spread of COVID-19. At the same time, a considerable proportion of Mali is held by Islamist groups, which makes it impossible for candidates and political parties to physically campaign in those areas for security reasons. Political parties and candidates therefore resorted to the use of SMS and community radio to communicate their political programmes and mobilize voters (TV5Monde 2020).

There are a number of advantages for political parties and candidates in using SMS to campaign and engage with the electorate (SendHub 2019).

- **Cost-effectiveness:** SMS texting is a simple, inexpensive and direct method of reaching a large number of people at the same time.
- **Keeping constituents/voters updated:** In political campaign contexts, political parties and candidates use SMS to remind voters not only of who to vote for but also the place and time of the election, while also offering registration information. Since political campaigns are always counting down the days to the election, SMS reminders help keep staff, donors, volunteers and supporters on track with regard to the deadlines they need to meet.
- **Fundraising purposes:** Political parties can use text messaging to ask for and follow-up donations. Instead of a simple 'thank you', many parties use messaging to say precisely what the donation contributed to.
- **Immediate response:** In the 2016 US election, for example, the average response rate to candidates' SMS texts was 45 per cent, compared to about 20 per cent for telephone calls and door-to-door canvassing (SendHub 2019).
- **Registration information:** SMS text messaging is an excellent method of sharing voting information, including registration information to voters on the constituency list. People appreciate a simple reminder and a link for such things, as the instructions in the voting materials sent by mail or even available online can be unclear or delivered late.

The socio-political contexts in which an election takes place determine the focus and topics that political parties and candidates will prioritise for their campaign issues and messages. To be sufficiently persuasive, SMS texts need to appeal to people's emotions and concerns, and hint at the solution that electing a certain party or candidate might bring about. Presenting clear policy issues in

SMS texts raises voters' curiosity, engagement and interest in following the next steps. This can be more effective than just saying 'vote for this person or political party', which can come across as 'pushy' (SendHub 2019). For each policy issue, the text must make a brief point about the current situation, the improvements that are needed and how the political party or candidate will bring about the desired change.

### 2.3. Television/radio talk shows and political advertising

The use of traditional media—television, radio and newspapers—remains a major plank of the strategies of political parties and politicians for reaching out to different constituencies either during electoral campaigns or for regular political engagement. In rural and remote contexts in some countries, community radio is the most common and effective mode of transmitting information. Community radio stimulates information acquisition and creates political awareness and has the added advantage of broadcasting in the language of the local community.

Live, interactive television and radio programmes allow citizens to directly engage with political parties in unique ways that mass rallies seldom achieve, and the same message can reach many thousands of voters. Run well, these platforms can also serve as two-way channels of communication, where phone-ins allow the public to ask questions of the candidates. To make such events accessible to everyone, radio and television networks often provide toll-free numbers so that the cost of the call is not a deterrent to participation.

During political campaigns, the purpose of political talk shows and political advertising is to define the political parties and their candidates and sell them to the voters, and to inform voters of what parties will deliver if elected. Parties and candidates should concentrate on highlighting their positive characteristics, their political programmes and the comparative advantage of choosing them over their competitors (Steenburg 2015).

A 2018 survey found that up to 60 per cent of Ghanaians rely on radio and television as their main sources of information, including during political campaigns and elections. Reliance on social media and Internet sources of information for engaging with politicians was cited by less than 25 per cent of respondents (Isbell and Appiah-Nyamekye 2018). In the United States, there is now almost equal reliance on television and the Internet for news, including on the 2020 primary elections (Mitchell 2018). In India, radio was the 'preferred' medium for communication and political advertising during 2019 general elections (Shashidhar 2019). A study on the performance of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the National Action Party and the Party of Democratic Revolution in Mexico found that popularity and electoral performance were boosted by political advertising and talk shows on television and radio,

particularly in the least economically developed parts of the country (Larreguy, Marshall and Snyder 2018).

During the current pandemic, political parties in South Africa are using community radio and television talk shows to engage with the public on measures to control the spread of COVID-19, but also to communicate their respective political programmes through political advertisements and interactive talk shows. South Africa has a large community radio sector. There are more than 200 radio stations with a combined listenership of over 8 million people (Krüger 2019). In Rwanda, both political mobilization against the spread of COVID-19 and information on the socio-political programmes available to support citizens are disseminated through television and radio talk shows, but also using vehicles and drones equipped with megaphones (Taarifa 2020). In Benin, physical campaigning, such as canvassing and political rallies, for the 17 May 2020 local elections was cancelled as part of a ban on gatherings of more than 50 people. Political parties and candidates were obliged to rely on radio and television appearances (Omondi 2020).

In the Dominican Republic, political campaigns are generally characterized by several months of large rallies and campaign caravans. This was not the case in the run-up to the presidential election on 5 July 2020, which was the first election held in Latin America since the pandemic began. Instead, most candidates resorted to non-traditional methods of campaigning using social media, television and radio. To mark the end of the electoral campaign on 2 July 2020, Luis Abinader of the Modern Revolutionary Party delivered a speech that was broadcast on more than 10 national and regional channels, as well as the main radio stations in the provinces. Gonzalo Castillo of the Dominican Liberation Party organized a televised music festival without speeches (Lantigua 2020) and a show on the party's radio station, La Voz del PLD.

Similarly, prior to the presidential elections in Poland on 28 June 2020, the incumbent President Andrzej Duda, who ran as an independent candidate allied to the ruling national-conservative Law and Justice Party, used the state television channel, TVP, for his main election campaigning. The Law and Justice Party wields significant influence over TVP, which is the primary source of news for approximately 50 per cent of residents in rural Poland (Santora and Berendt 2019). The television channel, which has been criticized for its perceived bias towards the ruling party, boosted Duda's campaign, providing him with more television time than his main challenger, Rafal Trzaskowski, and engaging in smear-campaigns that portrayed Trzaskowski as a threat to Polish values and the national interest. In its election observation report, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) criticized the state media for its biased reporting and for failing to 'ensure balanced and impartial coverage' (OSCE 2020). This highlights the need for regulation of public funding and party access

to state media during campaigns to ensure that there is a level playing field for all candidates.

Other forms of political advertising, such as the distribution of campaign material by post, which occurs for example in Sweden, and the use of vehicles fitted with loudspeakers, are strategies that can be used during a period of COVID-19 lockdown. In India, Malawi, Namibia, Nigeria, Singapore and Zambia, for instance, political parties, candidates and their supporters have used motor vehicles and scooters for information dissemination and political campaigning. The vehicles can drive round different communities broadcasting their messages or promises without requiring people to gather in one place or in large numbers.

## 2.4. Harnessing the power of music and art

Through songs/music and the use of catchy lyrics, slogans and rhythms, political parties and candidates have conducted electorally successful campaigns in states from Uganda to Venezuela, and South Africa. The People Power Movement (PPM) in Uganda conducted its campaigning through political songs in 2016, winning a small number of seats in parliament. During the current pandemic, the PPM is also engaging with its constituents and the public about preventing the spread of COVID-19, while also publicizing its political programmes through art and music in preparation for the 2021 elections (*The Guardian* 2020).

Political mobilization through music is not a new phenomenon and has been used successfully by political parties and candidates in many parts of the world. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez mobilized supporters using Ali Primera's songs when he was released from prison in 1994 until he came to power in 1999 (Marsh 2016). Similarly, South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) used the power of song throughout its many years of underground anti-apartheid political mobilization. In Kenya, music was an effective tool for political parties and politicians seeking to reconcile communities in the aftermath of 2007–2008 election violence.

In South Asian states such as India and Nepal, political parties and candidates often stage 'street plays' to get their messages across. During the 2019 general election campaign in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) hired artists, local singers and dancers to perform local songs, dances and plays on subjects ranging from inflation and poverty to unemployment. These performances were staged in local dialects to maximize their impact with rural voters. With so many people confined to their homes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has probably never been a better time for political parties to gain their constituents' attention through entertainment. Gonzalo Castillo, a presidential candidate in the Dominican Republic, organized a televised music party on the last day of campaigning. However, the event, which he called 'Triumph Party: Gonzalo

2020' (*Fiestón del Triunfo: Gonzalo 2020*), was criticized by many as appearing to celebrate his victory even before the voting had taken place.

### 3. Taking the political party online

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Online tools can help political parties conduct some of their functions more efficiently and effectively. Some political parties are using technology to improve their functioning, making them more transparent and efficient both internally and externally, and for outreach and engagement with citizens, especially youth who prefer their political activity online. Political parties are also conducting online surveys to understand the demographic profiles of their supporters in order to identify the most pressing issues facing their constituents. Other parties are attempting to change how they perform their representative functions through regular online consultations, collecting views that can help shape the party's position, or allowing party members and supporters to take decisions or vote for representatives.

A key goal is to close the gap between members and decision-making. This differs from the classic conceptualization of a political party, in which elected representatives just follow the broad guidelines of the party without having to consult the party's members on a regular basis on their decisions or voting in parliament. The various pirate parties in Europe, as well as Partido de la Red in Argentina and to some extent Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, have sought to delegate decision-making responsibility to citizens, using different online tools to reach out to and engage with their supporters and provide access to decision-making and policy development.

## Online-ready or adaptation

The preparedness of political parties to adapt to the current situation can be categorized in two groups. Some parties are naturally used to coordinating, acting and engaging online. These parties had already created a structure around digital communication, both internally and externally. Some parties, such as Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, can be said to have been established with a digital mindset from the outset. Others, such as the Democratic Alliance in South Africa, have adapted to online technologies in recent years. Even though their readiness does not make these parties immune to the current challenges, they are better prepared to face exceptional circumstances and to maintain their basic structures and functional operations.

The second group comprises parties that will be compelled to adapt by adopting online technologies to carry out their day-to-day functions. These parties will require a larger leap of adaptation. While all these parties had incorporated online technologies to some extent, not many had created online structures that can sustain their activities in the current scenario of social distancing and lockdowns. Moreover, few of these parties had changed the way they are managed and operate internally to embrace the possibilities of digital technologies. In order to maximize the benefits from these technologies, parties will need to modify their existing structures and to implement the use of technologies.

To some extent the current COVID-19 challenges are affecting political parties in both groups. The lack of close engagement and interaction with and physical proximity to citizens is an unprecedented disruption even for the most tech-savvy political parties. Many will have to function for some time without mass rallies or gatherings, and door-to-door engagement with society will be severely disrupted. This will affect key aspects of policymaking and representation, while the finances of political parties are likely to suffer and they will encounter difficulties raising funds for their activities if the world economy plunges into an economic slump.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are five potential areas in which technology can assist political parties to sustain their functions and operations. First, engagement platforms can increase the capacity of political parties to interact with their members and supporters. The example of the Green Party in Germany is illustrative here (Thuermer 2019). Second, political parties can use different systems to take decisions internally. The experience of parties implementing online voting can provide key lessons. Third, targeted online outreach and campaigning can have significant benefits for political parties, especially during a lockdown or social distancing. Political parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters and the Democratic Alliance in South Africa have harnessed the power of online communications to conduct campaigning online. Fourth, the current push for political parties to go digital can also be an



opportune moment to implement further digitalization of their work. For instance, the utilization of digitalized tools for constituency mapping, compiling voter databases and canvassing can enhance the targeting of campaigning. Other examples might include extending transparency tools or creating further space for political activism online. La Republique En Marche! (LREM!) in France or Podemos in Spain might be considered useful examples. Fifth, political parties will face an unprecedented economic crisis and techniques for raising funds through crowdfunding online are likely to be useful. Such crowdfunding has proved a key tool in Ghana, India and the United States.

### 3.1. Engagement platforms

Online engagement platforms have, to a certain extent, become a cornerstone of online political party activity, revolutionizing the speed and scale at which movements and campaigns are built. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are networks that allow people to engage with each other based on their personal connections or shared interests. Political parties have tried to replicate these networks internally to facilitate engagement among their members. These engagement platforms attempt to replicate the public square, both internally and online (Thuermer 2019; Gerbaudo 2019). Such platforms seek to act as an internal social network with distinctive features such as groups, open discussion forums and the sharing of activities. Some political parties, such as the Alliance 90/the Green Party in Germany, have chosen to create their own (Thuermer et al 2019). There are also commercial and open-source options such as Freedom, DemocracyOS or Discourse (International IDEA 2020b). Several parties and politicians around the world have used these commercial digital platforms for campaigning and to stay connected to their constituencies. The digital platform NationBuilder, for instance, has been used by Jacinda Ardern, Boris Johnson, Emmanuel Macron and Donald Trump, among others.

Political parties can give their platforms different attributes, such as discussion forums, voting mechanisms or direct decision-making features. The number of features available depends on the chosen platform, and whether the party uses off-the-shelf software or designs its own containing the type of features that the party wants to use. If well designed and publicized, these platforms can become the living public square at the centre of a political party. They can also act as a discussion space for policy positions and policy development, as well as the digital gathering place for supporters and members.

A key element in the creation and management of these platforms should be inclusion. Physical meetings can discriminate based on distance, timing, procedures or access. Online discussion spaces can replicate some of this and even create new types of discrimination. As with physical debates, political parties need to ensure that all those who wish to participate in the discussion platform are able

to access it. Access to the Internet and Internet literacy are the primary barriers but these can be combined with several others, such as discrimination based on social status, gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity. There are also widespread concerns related to the vulnerability of digital platforms to disinformation and manipulation. This will require appropriate legislation and its oversight.

With regard to the importance of inclusion, political parties will need to decide *who* should have access to the platform. Political parties such as Podemos in Spain, Aam Aadmi in India and Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy provide access to their platform to everybody who registers as a supporter (Gerbaudo 2019). These parties do not have paid membership, but a model whereby people who sign up are given the right to take part in the decision-making of the party without becoming a formal member. All parties whatever their model of membership need to understand the implications of who has access to their platform. For parties with different layers of membership, answering this question is especially important, but at the same time can assist the process of outlining the rights that each level of membership provides (International IDEA 2020a) For instance, full members can access all the features, while *lite* members or supporters may only be able to use some of them, and not be able to vote on or take part in making binding decisions.

It is equally important for political parties to capitalize on the opportunities that digital platforms provide to reach out to youth. Young people all over the world have become increasingly dissatisfied with ‘politics as usual’, and party membership among young people is declining in all regions. However, young people are not completely indifferent to politics and continue to search for other channels through which to engage. It is evident that young people are catalysts for political movements for democratic and political reform, even if they tend to be less engaged in traditional party activism and voting compared to older generations.

Digital platforms provide political parties with an opportunity to bridge the gap, connect and engage with young people, either through commercial platforms such as Snapchat, Tik Tok, Instagram and Facebook, or by tapping into existing youth-led issue-focused engagement platforms such as Youth For Climate and Youth Against Corruption. For instance, it is reported that about two-thirds of the visitors on the International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (iKNOW Politics) platform in Arabic, English, French and Spanish in 2019 were aged between 18 and 34 (iKNOW Politics 2019).

### 3.2. Online voting

Online voting can serve multiple purposes for political parties. A growing number of parties are using online voting for different elections. It can serve as a mechanism for decision-making, for the conduct of internal elections for leaders

and the composition of the management of the party. Online voting is often regarded as a more easily implemented digital feature that can place politics more in consonance with current times. That said, implementing online voting has notable implications that parties should consider carefully.

Implementing online voting technologies tends to present two main challenges for a political party. The first challenge is clarifying the purpose in terms of the anticipated use and reach of online voting. This is fundamental if a party is to identify and select an appropriate tool for deploying online voting across the organization. It may also inspire certain changes in the way the party functions. The second challenge is technical, as online voting technology tends to be highly sophisticated due to the tight security measures that are required. Due to the complexity of such services, private sector software companies usually supply these to political parties. The complexity of an online voting platform for internal decision-making is less if voting is not to be opened up to all members, or even beyond the membership.

Obtaining a suitable software solution depends on careful study of security needs and the intended purpose of the online voting system. A general rule-of-thumb for parties should be that it is better to have too much security than too little, and too much ownership than too little. Political parties have to consider the cost of implementing online voting systems as parties might need to enhance their digital infrastructure to make use of such systems. These expenses need to be sustained in the long run and must be adequately planned for.

In principle, a well-managed online voting system requires security measures just like a physical one, such as guarantees on the secrecy of the vote and that people will not be able to vote more than once. Guarantees that counting and tabulation are open to audit and that results will be publicly shared by the organizer of the election also have to be built into the system. Securing these electoral principles with online voting for a political party might be a challenge in many cases if the key elements of security measures of the online voting system are not put in place.

Other important factors are who will have access to the software, and how much control and ownership of the platform—and the data generated—the party will have vis-à-vis the software provider. By having extensive control over the platform, as in the case of the Green Party in Germany, the party can change how the platform works and adapt it to new needs as they arise. For security reasons, a political party like any institution or organization will benefit from increasing cybersecurity in terms not only of the architecture, but also of training for its staff to be more security conscious online.

In addition, parties need to decide who the electorate is—those with the right to vote—and how they will obtain their credentials to vote. There are two basic options. The first is to send credentials by regular mail or email to those with the right to vote. These credentials can be a link, a unique PIN or another unique

source of identification. Usually, a second method of identification is requested before the vote is cast as a second layer of security. This method also means that the party will need to maintain an up-to-date database with every voter's email or postal address, which might also present challenges if the party is not fully prepared. The second possibility is to ask the electorate to register to obtain a unique voting link or identification. This method allows the party to implement better identity control but might discourage participation (Goodman and Stokes 2018).

### Case study: The use of online voting by political parties in Canada

Political parties in Canada have experimented with online voting since 2003, when the New Democratic Party introduced online voting. Today most parties, especially at the local level, use online voting, often as the only voting method for candidate and leadership selection processes. According to Goodman and Pruyers (2019), there are three main reasons that push political parties in Canada to use online voting. First, online voting enlarges accessibility and makes it possible for more people to participate in the voting process, who otherwise would have been excluded for their inability to participate in the party's congress. Second, it makes election administration easier, as counting and tabulation are done automatically. Third, online voting has become a natural choice for political parties as they move towards more democratic leadership elections.

Online voting in Canada is used primarily for party leadership elections. Two of the three main national parties—the New Democratic Party and the Liberal Party of Canada—have elected their leaders using online voting (Goodman and Pruyers 2019). In addition, parties have used online voting to take internal decisions, such as confidence votes for leadership, voting for mergers or joining alliances and coalitions or general consultations among members. The contextual factors in Canada also made online voting a rational choice. The shifting model of party leadership elections and an extensive geography with harsh winters enlarge the possibilities for members to participate especially from the comfort of their homes. However, there have been several challenges that political parties have faced in implementing online voting that can be a lesson for those considering this mechanism. Parties have particularly struggled to maintain an updated database of emails and/or addresses of those with the right to vote. In many instances, technical problems have led to frustration and concern for cybersecurity among voters.

## 3.3. Online outreach

The online realm has become a public participation square where people come together to have conversations and exchange thoughts and ideas. Online conversations are as influential as other channels, or even more so, and the only

conversations possible in times of social distancing. Although many political parties have in one way or another joined key social media platforms from TikTok to Instagram, this does not automatically mean that political parties are driving the conversation online. The online public square works with its own logic and social norms. Similar to the way in which television changed political communication, online platforms, especially social media, have changed the debate (Gerbaudo 2019; Norris 1999). Digital technologies are enabling citizens to voice their opinions much more directly than before, which is creating horizontal rather than vertical spheres (International IDEA 2017).

A good example of creating a comprehensive social media strategy can be found in the Democratic Alliance in South Africa (International IDEA 2020a). The party has created an online ambassador programme, which focuses on enlisting supporters, influencers and sympathizers, and providing them with guidelines and campaigning material to enable them to act as online representatives of the party. The purpose of the programme is to coordinate the diverse voices that support the party. The programme is considered a success as it has created a clear, unified and organic message from the party without having to resort to inauthentic techniques (International IDEA 2020a). The party has obtained a visible voice online while also being able to coordinate that voice to send messages on public issues.

The current pandemic has pushed political parties to strengthen their online outreach, particularly in countries where elections are taking place in 2020. In the United States, for instance, presidential campaigning such as traditional fundraising events, campaign rallies, door-to-door canvassing and speeches have been largely switched online. After the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued social distancing protocols, the campaign team of the Democratic Party's presidential nominee, Joe Biden, curtailed all physical events and has instead been hosting virtual conventions, virtual town halls and virtual fundraisers, in addition to podcasting and sending updates to supporters through Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The campaign of Republican Party nominee and incumbent Donald J. Trump, which already had a strong digital presence before the pandemic, has further strengthened its online outreach strategy. In its bid to be innovative in its outreach efforts, the Trump campaign has launched a mobile application that uses gaming to connect with the voters. In addition to providing updates, the application uses a 'rewards points' system where users who recruit more people to download the app can win prizes ranging from VIP seats at future rallies to a photo opportunity with the president. It is also worth noting the impact of party-affiliated online movements such as the Lincoln Project, which has 'sparked a nationwide movement with the singular mission: To defeat Donald Trump' in the November elections (The Lincoln Project n.d.). This online movement has transformed the campaign space with innovative content and videos such as 'Mourning in America', which is critical of the Trump

Administration and has garnered more than 3 million views on its YouTube channel (The Lincoln Project 2020).

In Mongolia, which held its parliamentary elections on 24 June 2020, campaigning had officially begun on 2 June. A directive from the General Elections Committee (GEC) of Mongolia recommended that political parties organize meetings online. Several parties engaged in campaigning on social media, especially Twitter. The use of hashtags by political parties and their supporters, which was not popular in the country prior to the pandemic, increased during election campaigning.

### **Case study: Electoral campaigning in South Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic**

The 2020 National Assembly elections in South Korea were held as scheduled, making it the first country to hold national elections during the COVID-19 pandemic. On 15 April 2020 about 44 million South Koreans turned out to vote for 300 members of the National Assembly.

According to the information provided by the National Election Commission, parties and candidates used a number of campaigning methods, such as signboards and placards, posters, leaflets and booklets, as well as campaigning on the streets, in markets and in squares, making speeches and using loudspeakers to seek support from voters. Campaign teams also wore shoulder sashes, nameplates, handheld flags and mascots, and used the mass media, including newspaper and broadcast advertisements, and television and radio channels. Parties also campaigned using information and communications networks, such as webpages, bulletin boards or chat rooms, email, telephone calls and text messages (but not voice, picture or video clips).

According to electoral law, campaigning starts only two weeks prior to the national elections. Although South Korea was not under strict lockdown and social distancing protocols during the 14-day campaign period, conventional election campaigning was seriously affected as most of the on-site campaign activities and candidates' face-to-face interactions were halted after the Korean Center for Disease Control issued advice on limiting physical contacts. Even though most South Koreans have easy access to the Internet, it is traditional for electoral campaigns to be conducted in-person. Public speeches, handshakes with voters, the use of loudspeakers, and colourful, loud and flamboyant political rallies with cheerful music and dancing are a hallmark of South Korean elections. These were replaced with low-key events, where candidates wearing masks and gloves were seen greeting voters from a distance with fist and elbow bumps. There were no vans with loudspeakers, no music, no K-Pop style dancing and no political chants.

### Case study: Electoral campaigning in South Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic (cont.)

Most of the campaigning moved online using social media, text messages and telephone calls to canvass support. Many candidates uploaded their campaign videos to social media channels, which they also used to convey their messages to voters. Some candidates undertook voluntary work related to the COVID-19 pandemic response. Former Prime Minister Lee Nak-yon of the ruling Democratic Party and Hwang Kyo-ahn, leader of the main opposition United Future Party (UFP), for example, sprayed disinfectant in Jongjo, central Seoul, while lawmaker Lee Hae-sik was seen sweeping the pavement, picking up litter and disinfecting public surfaces. Another candidate, Ahn Cheol-soo, who is a licensed medical doctor, conducted medical voluntary work for 15 days in the hardest-hit southern city of Daegu.

As the date of the election drew near, the content of the campaign also shifted to focus on South Korea's COVID-19 response. In January, political parties were focused on issues such as the economy, employment and the relationship with North Korea. By the end of February, the campaigns were focused on South Korea's pandemic response. This gave the incumbent Democratic Party an advantage, given the country's praiseworthy response to the pandemic, through a mass testing capability and innovative technical solutions.

## 3.4. Digital political activism

Taking the party online needs to be a comprehensive effort and requires political parties to implement initiatives that transform and adapt the traditional political party activism experience. Political activism cannot be fully transferred online but some parties have put in place innovative approaches to digital activism. One example is the initiatives taken by LREM! in France on local level coordination through messaging apps, which each local unit of the party coordinates. The party has also created online platforms for members to engage with and undertake political activism online. These include *Projets Citoyens* (citizen projects), *Formations*, a training platform, and *Atelier des idées*, the workshop of ideas. These platforms have a distinctive function, but each aims to replicate traditional political activism online. The workshop of ideas is a mechanism for the party to grasp and harness the ideas and proposals of its members and incorporate them into the policy development process. Through the *Formations* platform, the party offers complex training in certain policy areas to provide better informed and more capable party structures. The training platform takes into consideration the fact that many party officials in LREM! have no political background, or come from the country's national, regional or local public administration levels.

Although political party activism has gradually moved to the online sphere, physical interactive meetings remain an anchoring feature, especially at the highest levels of internal decision-making within political parties.

### 3.5. Online crowdfunding

Raising funds for political parties is becoming increasingly challenging, especially at a time of massive economic downturns when the ability to raise funds from private sources has been severely curtailed. This could even undermine the survival of a political party or its ability to maintain its functions. Online crowdfunding could be an avenue for parties to raise much-needed funds.

Online crowdfunding can be defined as an organized drive by a political party or candidate to raise funds through small donations made online. Technically, it is usually done using automated payment options in which the potential donor chooses the amount to be donated (International IDEA 2018a). Online crowdfunding not only serves as a fundraising mechanism, but also helps political parties and candidates measure their support and understand better the characteristics of their support base. Donations made through online crowdfunding, even if small, can signal a commitment to the party that surpasses the financial value (International IDEA 2018a).

Crowdfunding needs to be in line with existing financial legislation and regulatory measures, especially in relation to foreign and anonymous donations. Parties are required to ensure that the technical solution selected for collecting donations is compliant and allows the gathering of information on compliance with political finance legislation, such as identity of donor or origin of payment. This includes understanding what the payments processes are, where the data is stored, who has access to the data and what type of use the party can make, or not make, of that data.

Online crowdfunding can take many forms. Podemos in Spain initially used earmarked crowdfunding to finance specific events or actions, such as organizing a congress or buying a vehicle for the party to use for campaigning. Donors could contribute to support the organization of these events and actions and if the required amount was not raised, the party would cancel the crowdfunding and return whatever money was raised. The Austrian People's Party, on the other hand, has used indicative earmarking that stipulates what every donation could be used for—for example, EUR 10 could buy 250 leaflets—but does not link the donation to the suggested purchase (International IDEA 2018a).

The most traditional crowdfunding, however, is regular, small donations to the party. Donations can be made during the campaign, as in the case of the New Patriotic Front of Ghana or the campaigns of US Senator Bernie Sanders in 2016 and 2020. Others, such as Aam Aadmi in India, seek small donations, either monthly or sporadic, for the operational expenses of the party.



As part of its fundraising strategy, US presidential candidate Joe Biden's campaign has been undertaking online crowdfunding whereby supporters can make small online contributions through the campaign website (Biden for President 2020). An online grassroots fundraiser that Biden organized with former President Barack Obama on 23 June 2020 raised USD 7.6 million from 175,000 grassroots donors, giving a huge boost to his fundraising efforts (Nagle and Verhovek 2020).

## 4. Conclusion

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Political parties are social entities so lockdowns and social distancing will have an acute effect on all their operations. A future without mass rallies, door-to-door campaigning or close physical contact between party leaders and constituencies is a future that will call for serious adaptation.

Parties have been using non-digital tools for many decades and social distancing will accelerate the push for political parties to increase use of such tools. SMS and radio campaigning will become more prominent in the future and possibly also a stronger space for politics in the future.

Digital tools present solutions for political parties in countries with high levels of Internet penetration, or where the influence of social media is high, such as in India. Moreover, as the speed of Internet adaptation increases globally, the digitalization of politics will remain a key issue even after social distancing measures have been lifted.

Digitalization, however, cannot be introduced into political parties without changes to some of the underlying structures for decision-making, management of and even financing the party. As the various examples have shown, political parties have been successful in their adoption of digital tools when these have been incorporated into structural changes. To become digital, a party needs to embrace a new form of organization and change its structure to one that is compatible with digital activities such as online voting and outreach to citizens. In addition to adapting party structures in order to embark on digitalization, political parties should explore optimal use and opportunities for expanding and reaching out to different geographical, social and age groups, particularly youth. Almost everywhere, it is the youth that have the most active presence in the digital space, but youth are also the group that tends to be least interested in traditional politics as usual. It would therefore be politically prudent for political

parties to invest in remaining connected and engaging with the youth as a largely untapped support and voter base.

Social distancing measures will eventually be lifted but they are likely to remain in place for long enough to change the way political parties function both internally and externally. While social distancing measures remain in place, political parties will need to continue to explore channels that enable them to remain relevant in socio-political life without physical contact. This adaptation will have a lasting effect. It will therefore be prudent for political parties to go through a process of adaptation with a long-term view not of resolving a temporary problem, but of embracing a new normal.

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