Political Parties in the Digital Age
A Comparative Review of Digital Technology in Campaigns around the World

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The emergence of digital information and communication technologies has reshaped how political parties operate. These technologies have shifted how political parties engage supporters and potential voters, communicate with supporters and members, organize their party structure, and raise funds. However, adoption of these tools entails tradeoffs. The benefits and costs of adopting specific ICT tools depends on both the degree of democratic institutionalization and the level of technological development of the context in which parties operate. This report uses six case studies -- Germany, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela, India and Tanzania -- representing a range of political and technological contexts, to demonstrate how these factors shape the risks and opportunities associated with digital tools for political parties.

The benefits of digital technologies for political campaigns are straightforward. Across several contexts, parties were able to communicate relatively cheaply with large audiences. In the case of large or established parties, these tools complemented existing campaign tactics, expanding the party audience on the margins. However, in some cases digital tools made previously impossible degrees of communication accessible even to newer, smaller, or more poorly resourced parties. In both cases, and across countries, digital tools strengthened other core party functions, including building party infrastructure to recruit candidates, leaders and members; coordinating members and branches on logistics and messaging; and raising funds.

Despite the potential advantages of using digital tools for core party functions, these tools entail risks and challenges, including:

- The difficulty of tailoring messages to specific segments of the population without violating norms or laws about privacy or misleading voters about the party or candidate’s broader agenda.
- Whether (and how much) to reallocate resources from familiar analog tactics to untested digital tools.
- How to communicate policy issues to a broad audience without incentivizing party members, candidates or supporters to engage in mis- or disinformation, hate speech, or online harassment.
- How ensure individual candidates or party branches abide by legal constraints on campaigns, given that monitoring of digital communication has not kept up with its proliferation.
- How to mitigate security risks associated with digital technology. Cybersecurity and digital safety require infrastructure and a culture of security. Meanwhile, digital platforms are cheaply and widely available, potentially leaving sensitive data and documents vulnerable to hackers, foreign countries, and state surveillance.
Common Benefits
Across case studies, parties used digital technologies to complement analog campaign strategies. Parties expanded their public reach and improved internal functions by using digital tools to communicate within the party, to amplify party messages across different platforms, to conduct more efficient voter outreach, and to use online interaction to encourage offline engagement. Smaller and newer parties used digital technology to achieve surprising electoral gains, whereas larger and more established parties often used digital platforms as additional forums for strengthening their party brand and reputation. In more closed spaces, digital technologies allowed parties to communicate directly with voters while circumventing some media bias or censorship.

Common Challenges
A review of these cases revealed several challenges shared by political parties across different contexts. Ensuring that digital technologies are adopted in a manner that does not compromise the security of personally identifiable information (PII) of voters or supporters, or the integrity of party communications and infrastructure is critical and requires a robust and proactive technical training. In some cases, this training and expertise lagged the adoption of digital tools, resulting in security vulnerabilities. Furthermore, digital platforms often facilitated negative campaigning, dis- and misinformation campaigns, online harassment, and perceptions of violations of privacy. Ensuring that party candidates, members, and supporters abided by norms and laws on political campaigns was a common challenge. Finally, in several contexts, individual leader preferences, party norms, and/or traditional repertoires of engagement impeded party adoption of digital tools for party functions.

Variation in Technological Development
Parties operating in countries with low levels of internet penetration were forced to consider how digital tools constrained outreach to specific demographic or geographic groups of voters. In many cases, urbanites and younger voters were disproportionately represented among internet users. Those parties operating in low-tech contexts often relied on lower-tech digital technologies (like Short Messaging Service – SMS or text messages, and mobile telephones) to reach out to voters.

Variation in Democratic Institutionalization
Countries with strong democratic norms and institutions often had to walk difficult lines related to legal restrictions and widespread norms related to the collection of PII for voter data or fundraising. In countries with less established democratic institutions and norms, parties were often forced to confront repressive legislation or regulations related to digital technology, including online content regulation, online harassment, and mis- and disinformation campaigns. In these cases, broad regulations and enforcement discretion allowed incumbents to monitor and sanction political opponents. These case studies suggest that digital technologies are not inherently good or bad for democratic development, but rather that their implications for democracy depend on whether they are used to advance democratic debates or to close political space and sow false information.

The associated report catalogues the challenges and opportunities of digital tools for campaigns across political and technological contexts, and provides donors, implementers, and local partners with a framework for assessing whether and how specific digital tools can be incorporated into core party functions campaigns. Equipping parties with the tools to implement these tools safely and effectively is critical to improve and expand democratic practices.