The Digital Party

Political Organization and Online Democracy

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Over two centuries political parties have stood as one of influential organizations in humankind. Besides playing several functions such as capturing and exercising state power, political socialization and interest aggregation, these organizations have not been free from controversies. At the centre of these controversies is the mass-elite divide which Robert Michels referred to as Iron Law of Oligarchy. Michel's revelation was a revelation that elite interests were not necessarily compatible with those of the mass. This observation notwithstanding, political parties have remained the very influential actors in politics irrespective of some speculations that globalization is likely to lead to the withering away of political parties and the nation-state.

Despite the fact that this predicted crumbling of the two is yet to be witnessed, digital technologies seem to be significantly changing the way political parties and their functioning have been construed for centuries. Owing to the effects of digital technologies on political parties, Gerbaudo dedicates his book to exploring the digital parties. While drawing experiences from popular digital platforms such as the Five Star Movement in Italy and Podemos in Spain, he shows how the formation of digital parties has transformed party politics. Unlike the traditional parties which rely on vertical communication with much of the information flowing from the party headquarters, the digital party is presented in the book as anti-hierarchy as it puts participation, expressed through the participationism ideology at the fore front.

Gerbaudo shows that digital parties mainly draw their support from the digitally savvy youth who have long felt excluded from the political mainstream. From chapter 2 to chapter 9 the author provides a very rich and detailed account pertaining to the manifestations of the digital parties. Underscored in these chapters is the emphasis that digital parties bring in an empowerment dimension to politics as party leadership is not based on Weber's hierarchical authority but on charismatic leadership in which the hyperleader magnetically appeals and enjoys immeasurable support from the "*connected outsiders*". The digital party is thus seen as a revamping strategy to resuscitate party politics at the time when the traditional political parties are presumed to be in a decline. Gerbaudo shows that the advent of digital parties presents a message that unlike traditional parties that have tended to operate from the party headquarters, the digital party is electronically everywhere whenever there is internet connection, but physically nowhere. Online networking and politicking thus make the presence of a party cadre superfluous as whoever is connected to the digital political network or platform automatically becomes a cadre.

The book is very insightful as it offers an informative overview of the evolution and controversies related to both the traditional parties and the digital parties. The author tries as much as possible to present a balanced opinion regarding the plausibility of the claims made by the proponents of

digital parties; particularly on issues such as the role of the hyperleader, the horizontal nature of interactions and the inevitability of party headquarters.

Despite showing some concerns regarding the practicability and functioning of digital parties, the author seems to be convinced that the digital parties are on their way to taking over traditional parties. The basis upon which this position is taken is nonetheless doubtful as despite being cherished, there are several aspects related to digital parties that are not adequately addressed by Gerbaudo.

To start with, the presentation on the ascendancy of the digital parties does not clearly show whether this new form of political parties is a means to an end or an end in itself. As the digital party is presumed to have overtaken the traditional party, what happens after the digital party takes reign is not clear. Given that the digital party claims to dismantle the hierarchical tendencies of traditional parties, it is not clear how the invisible party would run the traditionally hierarchical government. It is also not clear whether taking over the traditional parties implies the transition to digital or invisible government. Lack of this clarity reduces the status of digital parties to mere pressure groups.

In addition, at the heart of the digital party lies a belief that the connected outsiders should take charge of the political processes. The insider–outsider relationship seems to be vicious given that the outsider becomes an insider and the insider becomes an outsider. The fate of the toppled traditional insiders remains uncertain. It is not clear whether the traditional insiders are assimilated or marginalized due to their digital illiteracy. In addition, the euphoria of digital party does not consider the digital divide that has tended to marginalize the poor. While the idea of the digital party takes care of the excluded educated youths, nothing is said regarding the welfare of the poor whose participation in politics through traditional political parties has always been minimal. The digital party does not seem to have an agenda for the poor.

Likewise, the idea of an existence of a digitally talented hyperleader seems to be confusing. Despite the concerns raised by Gerbaudo regarding the operationalization of the hyperleader, his/her presence presents him/her like a top figure in an invisible hierarchy, that is not substantially different from the top leader of a traditional political party. Based on the way the hyperleader is described is not clear whether that leader is charismatic or just popular due to his/her online political activism.

The book also does not adequately consider the question of accountability. Leaders of digital parties seem to be taken for granted as the mechanisms through which they should be held accountable are not addressed in the book. If capturing and exercising state power is one of the goals of digital parties, as it has always been the case for traditional parties, digital parties ought to be accountable to the electorate. Even through electronic democracy, the citizenry need to have power to hold the behaviour of their leaders in check. As it has been the case for traditional parties, the existence of physical party headquarters provides opportunities for the citizenry and party members to at least express their grudges towards the party and the government serving them. In cases of a soured relationship, aggrieved persons have physically confronted the party headquarters or the state. The digital party seems to be a ghost in times of crisis as it is difficult to hold an invisible leader accountable. The digital party also does not clearly show how intra party conflicts and controversies can be addresses beyond the wisdom of the charismatic hyperleader.

The digital party as discussed by Gerbaudo seems to overgeneralize the traditional parties by treating them as aversive to digital technology. Experience shows that even traditional parties have been opting for digital platforms in order to attract some sections of members such as the youth (Mustapha et al., 2016). To a great extent, much of what is being done by digital parties is somehow being done by traditional parties. The difference mainly rests on the degree of the use of the digital

platforms. As the normalization perspective shows, the adoption of digital technology does not necessarily change the status quo (How et al, 2016). The digital euphoria might thus not be realistic.

The digital party as discussed by the author seems to be ideologically fragile. It lacks a clear ideology that puts its sustainability in jeopardy. A sense of deprivation and exclusion that is held among what Gerbaudo calls the connected outsiders cannot hold these parties forever. As Gainous et al. (2018) argue, some users of digital technologies are partisan and thus their use of the social media platforms does not affect their entrenched partisanship It is worth noting the traditional political party has tended to have a clear ideology. On the contrary, the digital party seems to be anchored on participationism as an ideology. Beyond embracing the participatory culture, the digital party ought to have a clear ideology through which the cherished participation is anchored. Short of a clear ideology their political agenda becomes blurred.

These observations notwithstanding, this book is very useful for political scientists as it opens the windows for more discussion on the fate of both the digital and traditional political parties.

References

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Book information