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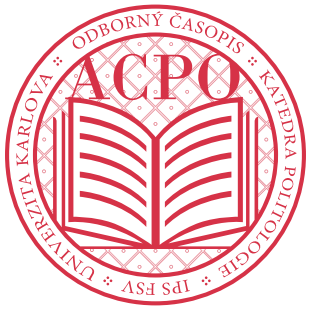

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Katedra politologie Institutu politologických studií
Fakulta sociálních věd Univerzity Karlovy

Department of Political Science, Institute of Political Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

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Digital Membership and Activist Strategies in Spanish Non-Statewide Parties

Adrià Mompó[1]

Abstract:

By leveraging new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), parties can promote online forms of engagement and multi-speed membership models, innovating in their recruitment strategies and creating new member roles. This paper aims to analyse the introduction of digital enrolment, multi-speed membership options and cyber-activism in Spanish non-statewide parties (NSWPs). Our findings are based on a comparative case study of twelve parties, and data have been collected through interviews with staff members, along with the observation of their recruitment websites and statutes. Most NSWPs in Spain have developed online and multi-speed membership options. The majority of these online-supporter roles are focused on campaign volunteering and activism, while democratic engagement is secondary. Moreover, NSWP membership structures present hybrid models, combining online and offline activities. This study contributes to a better understanding of small and regional parties' membership structures, bringing new evidence about the challenges and possibilities of digital membership beyond mainstream parties.

Key words*: digital enrolment**; multi-speed membership models; cyber-activism; membership strategies*

Introduction

European political parties traditionally endorsed an organisational model based on in-presence membership, where members play an important role providing linkage to the electorate, inputs for policy and a stable reservoir of voters (Duverger 1954; Sartori 1976; van Haute 2009; Polk and Kölln 2018). Activists used to constitute the core of highly mobilised militants with specific and more homogeneous sociodemographic characteristics (Whiteley and Seyd 1994; 2002). Nonetheless, since the late 20th century, parties have gradually transformed their membership structures, granting members and even citizens a more formal role in their decision-making to address a relative membership decline (Katz 2001). In parallel, digital Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been widely introduced in the internal structures of parties, initially to remain electorally competitive and later on to attract new members and strengthen their linkage with society (Gibson and Ward 1999; Ward and Gibson 2009). Especially since the Great Recession, there has been a

[1] Adrià Mompó, Research assistant at the CNSC group (Internet Interdisciplinary Institute-IN3), Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC). Rambla del Poble Nou 154-156, 08018 Barcelona. Contact: amompor@uoc.edu ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1727-058X. Researcher ID: KBO-9010-2024.

wide generalisation of ICTs use, partially for communication strategies, but also in response to a gradual transformation of citizens' participatory demands and increasing mistrust in conventional organisations (Deseriis 2020; Vittori 2020; Bennett et al. 2018; Gerbaudo 2019). This has motivated the adoption of more flexible models of membership beyond the traditional duties of partisanship, featured by the use of digital tools. They enable a diversity of possible bonds with the party, such as contributing only economically, volunteering at certain moments or attending specific activities of interest without further commitment (Scarrow 2014). Multi-speed membership models and the possibilities of cyber-participation have also affected the nature of activism, allowing new and less costly forms of online volunteering (Correa et al. 2021a; Power and Dommett 2020; Dommett et al. 2021; van Haute and Gauja 2015).

However, these changes constitute a general pattern modulated by organisational features and party strategies, mostly theorised on the basis of mainstream and highly digitalised parties. To the best of our knowledge, this phenomenon has not been yet investigated vis-à-vis small and regional parties, and there is scarce evidence as to how they are adapting their membership engagement to technological change. In this regard, non-statewide parties (NSWPs) may be affected by specific needs and challenges, constraining innovation in several ways. For example, the organisational limitations of regional parties have been shown to negatively affect their capacity to engage committed activists (Correa et al. 2021b). Even so, blurred membership options and digitalisation may constitute an opportunity to counterbalance these constraints.

Consequently, this article aims to analyse the digital membership and engagement strategies of Spanish NSWPs. To do so, we consider the different ways in which parties can innovate their membership structures: online enrolment, multi-speed membership models and recruitment of cyber-activists. We expect NSWPs to have developed some sort of online and multi-speed membership models. Probably, they pursue mixed formats of engagement, combining online technology and in-presence formats. In addition, we aim to qualitatively assess the goals of these changes, of which there are probably two: to promote activism with a focus on campaigning and encourage democratic participation in the internal decision-making of the party.

Working on a sample of twelve NSWPs from Spain, we have conducted twenty-four online semi-structured interviews to staff members, complemented with observations of their websites' recruitment options and party statutes. Our main findings are: first, most parties allow online membership and, to a lesser extent, multi-speed membership models; second, digital membership does not pursue exclusively online forms of engagement, but also in-presence activities where ICTs are used for support and coordination; third, new membership roles are overall focused on campaign activism, while further participatory goals are underdeveloped.

This paper is organised as follows: in the first section, we engage with the main debates around digitalisation's impact on party membership and new forms of activism, where we state our research question and expectations. The second section is dedicated to the research design and the composition of our sample. In the third section, we present the results structured in two main blocks: first, we analyse the introduction of online and multi-speed membership roles and the different functions of involvement they entail; second, we focus on their cyber-activist strategies. In the fourth section, we discuss and clarify these results with extracts from the interviews before concluding.

1. Digital transformation and new membership models in NSWPs

The introduction of ICTs has transformed every component of partisan structures, paving the way for innovation in various core functions (Fitzpatrick 2021). Digitalisation affects especially party membership, reformulating the channels and formats in which citizens participate in politics, and motivating parties to adapt their membership strategies as well. By strategies we mean those mechanisms that parties activate to recruit citizens as members or supporters, coordinate them and provide them with functional roles within the organisation. Traditional party membership, strictly regulated and associated with financial contributions, is becoming less attractive except for a very specific kind of citizen (Correa et al. 2021a). At the same time, members continue to be an important linkage to the electorate and offer a stable reservoir of voters (Polk and Kölln, 2018). Consequently, a growing number of parties are developing new membership models, aiming to promote citizens' engagement and make their organisations more open and inclusive (Boyd 2008; Bennet et al. 2018; Gerbaudo 2019; Barberà et al. 2021). These new types of involvement tend to establish more informal ties with the organisation, are entirely or partially structured online, and subjected to a low fee or even require no economic contributions (Gauja 2015; Gibson et al. 2017, Vittori 2020; Gerbaudo 2021).

We have identified two main strategies related to the transformation of party membership using ICTs: first, parties attempt to engage new members, offering innovative and adaptative participatory options embedded in wider digitalisation processes. Second, parallel to these transformations there is a new campaigning model emerging, featuring the intensive use of technology and the intervention of a diverse range of actors. As a response, parties are promoting cyber-activist roles to support their campaign efforts, which feeds back innovation in their membership structures.

1.1 Online and multispeed membership models

Regarding membership, parties are promoting new functions identified as multi-speed membership models, consisting of the diversification of the engagement options on several levels or intensities (Scarrow 2014). Its main characteristic would be the increasingly blurred line between formal membership and more flexible, spontaneous ways of affiliation, dissolving the traditional divide between the internal face of the organisation (members and activists) and the external (voters and supporters) (Peña and Gold 2023). Some of these possible multi-speed models include the sympathiser who registers in the party without paying a fee; the activist who campaigns for the party whether on the ground (canvassing door-to-door, distributing leaflets, etc) or through social media and the Internet; or a light supporter who subscribes to a newsletter or chat group to receive information and attends only certain activities of interest. None of them has to be conditioned to a formal registration, and all of them can be easily promoted and structured through the party website, platform or social media channels. Overall, such initiatives aim to reduce entrance barriers that could disincentivise participation (Dommett and Power 2020).

When first launched, platform parties such as the Italian Five Star Movement or the Spanish Podemos were seen as the main examples of those implementing innovative membership roles. They lacked any membership requirement and territorially-based branches. On the contrary, they mostly relied on an online crowd of supporters who engaged in the

different digital platforms through which the parties conducted debates and decision-making. The simple action of registering through an online form would automatically concede political rights to take part on party ballots and deliberation (Vittori 2019; Mikola 2018; Gerbaudo 2019). Nonetheless, this early dichotomisation between the online and the offline dimension of participation has been nuanced in several aspects. First, parties have not dispensed with formal membership to embrace a totally online and fluid participation model, so differences between external supporters and party members might still be relevant (Ramiro and Gómez 2019). In fact, these parties might have sought a more solid membership structure over time, reformulating their online participatory platforms and restricting participation rights to formal members (Meloni and Lupato 2022). Finally, online membership and digital processes have gradually spread to an increasing number of parties, and with them multi-speed membership models are likely to be found in a greater variety (Barberà et al. 2021; Raniolo et al. 2021). These innovations point to a hybrid format of participation, with a selective introduction of digital tools in certain functions while keeping some others in-presence (Thuermer 2021).

This might be particularly applicable to non-statewide parties. For them, having an exclusively digital membership is unlikely, given their integration within wider social movements based on identity issues and grassroots organisations (Barrio 2014). Even so, NSWPs are not necessarily niche parties, unchangeable or not sensitive to new electoral demands. On the contrary, they need to adapt to volatile environments as much as statewide parties do, in order to remain competitive and useful for the nationalist or regionalist movements which they try to represent (Barberà and Barrio 2016; Elias and Mees 2017). Indeed, they are not entirely excluded from the digitalisation trends, and innovative initiatives can be found in some of them (Mompó and Barberà 2023). For instance, we expect NSWPs to have developed online and multi-speed membership functions. Most likely, they pursue mixed formats of engagement, combining digital and in-presence formats of engagement, and using ICTs not just to organise online activities, but also to coordinate offline actions. As noted, these transformations are often oriented to attract new members to the party. Accordingly, we also expect to find multi-speed membership functions with participatory goals, such as opening intra-party democracy to unregistered citizens.

1.2 Activism and cyber-activism

Personalised, light affiliation options can also constitute an essential component of electoral campaigning and new communication models, in which social media and the internet are basic arenas (Galais and Cardenal 2017). Indeed, technological developments have been stressed as the main drivers of campaigns transformations, along with the evolution of resources and topics. However, increasing professionalisation and changes as to the actors involved are not less relevant (Schmitt-Beck and Farrel 2020). In this regard, Roemmele and Gibson (2020) have identified a series of patterns that define this "post-modern" stage of electoral campaigning, marked by the emergence of digital technology and the intensive use of data to orient the message and the activity. Moreover, parties have moved from top-down communication focused on mainstream media to a more networked approach, where horizontal communication through social media and online forums is essential. Target audiences have also been reformulated, based on personalised contents instead of massive

and homogeneous messages. Finally, the range of actors seeking to influence the election outcome has expanded and turned more complex, going beyond parties and media.

In consequence, current campaigns are in part characterised by the decentralised effort of amateur and volunteer canvassers, whose outsider status may no longer exclude them from the core functions of a party campaign. In its traditional conceptualisation, activists where highly committed members who would fulfil more specific and more demanding sorts of functions within the party (Duverger 1954; Scarrow 1996). However, online affiliation has favoured a diversification of activist roles, including informal and flexible ways to engage in a party without even registering as a member (Peña and Gold 2023). We can thus define an activist as any individual who engages in activities organised by and for a political party, regardless of his status as a fee-paying member or formal supporter (Demker et al. 2020; van Haute and Gauja 2021; Heidar 1994; Ponce and Scarrow 2014). A party can benefit from activists for several reasons, such as strengthening its linkage with society and maintaining committed campaigners on the ground defending the party's message. In the opposition, this might place them in a better position to win the next election, while in government, activists can help to sustain the current position and reinforce the internal cohesion. Also, for new parties they can constitute the avant-garde to build an organisation and recruit sympathisers (Correa et al. 2021a).

Digital platforms and social media can be used to recruit and build networks of activists, providing them with tools for organisation, coordination and socialisation. As a result of this technological transformation, some authors have theorised the emergence of cyber-activism as a specific model of engagement conducted completely through the Internet and segregated from the party's activity on the ground (Illia 2003; Peña and Gold 2023). Concretely, cyber-actions are originated by spontaneous interactions between many users on the Internet, where the political boost they create results from the network of relationships established. Therefore, the kind of pressure cyber-activists exert through social media is not the result of organised collective action, but of a chain of influencer-follower relations (Illia 2003). This assumption implies that the integration of cyber-activists in political parties is essentially different from traditional participation. Rather than a mere translation of party membership to the online sphere (participating through digital platforms as a member), it involves a more autonomous and fuzzy relationship where sympathisers and external supporters defend the party's positions in social media.

Hence, cyber-activists are prone to be focused on online campaigning activities, consisting of the promotion of the party's values and messages through their own social media accounts or websites (Scarrow 2014). Spreading the party's message beyond partisan accounts, they can generate a cascade effect of messages and posts that ultimately reach publics that parties cannot. Online volunteers can support partisan opinions from an autonomous position that can be perceived as less biased or at least unmonitored. Furthermore, some contents that could hardly be acceptable coming from parties' profiles, due to their satirical or inappropriate character, might be more easily generated and disseminated through private channels (Dommett et al. 2020). Parties can let these volunteers act freely, or they can actively coordinate their efforts, whether they establish cooperative relationships with digital influencers, or try to organise cyber-guerrillas. These consist of volunteer trolls or party-funded trolls who massively replicate partisan messages or attack the rivals (Peña and Gold 2023).

The formats and channels of cyber-activists have also evolved along with ICT's. In the 1990s and early 2000s, cyber-activism was conducted in websites and blogs of influencers, in what has been defined as a "cyber-activism 1.0". With the rise of social media, especially Twitter (now X), Facebook and YouTube, "cyber-activism 2.0" expanded and redefined the meanings of online activism (Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia 2014). Now we might be approaching a third era marked by video-based contents in Tik Tok, Twitch or similar, along with instant messaging services such as WhatsApp or Telegram. This evolution may affect the affordances and profile of cyber-activists: while posting in Twitter or Instagram does not involve much expertise and resources, generating high-quality videos for Tik Tok might be more challenging and not so easily monitored.

However, online technologies might not necessarily configurate a specific type of activism entirely focused on the online dimension. On the contrary, we should expect parties to promote hybrid activists, capable of engaging both online and offline, similarly to their membership strategies. For example, social and political activities might well have their transition into the digital sphere through webinars and online meetings, social media forums and other types of online gatherings. We should also consider traditional campaigning strategies that are organised through party platforms or social media accounts, but whose final outcome is to distribute activists in the streets: e.g. coordinating volunteers to set stands in different locations, organise electoral rallies or attend the party's activities.

Overall, what this may point to is a hybrid model of activism that complements online organisation with actions on the ground and on the net simultaneously. As for NSWPs, the literature has remarked their difficulties to engage highly committed activists in comparison to mainstream parties (Correa et al. 2021b). Nevertheless, lesser resources and lack of access to statewide mass media might make them rely more on voluntary work. Digital ICTs, in particular, can help small organisations to overcome mainstream media limitations (Galais and Cardenal 2017), and provide a new infrastructure for activism that does not need a great organisation to manage (Whiteley 2011). This is exemplified by recent experiences of newly created parties with rapid and considerable rises in membership, such as VOX or Ciudadanos in Spain (Correa et al. 2021b). Accordingly, we expect NSWPs to have developed activist functions focused on campaigning, oriented both to online and offline actions.

2. Case selection and methods

The case selection (listed in table 1 with some basic characteristics), encompasses the majority of the Spanish population of NSWPs. However, there are some important actors missing who we could not reach or whose contact references decided not to participate in the study. In total, we approached fourteen parties from which twelve agreed to be included in our research. All are key actors of regional party systems, holding representation in the parliaments of the Autonomous Communities, with many having served in regional governments. Most also have MPs in the Spanish Parliament and are relevant actors in Spanish politics, supporting government coalitions or being part of them. However, they differ greatly in terms of ideological and organisational features, political weight and resources, covering also the very diverse geography of the country and all the possible changes this involves (socioeconomic differences, population and urbanity levels). Although some parties in the sample are actually sister parties of major statewide parties (PSC and CeC), their level of organisational autonomy and their differentiated political strategies over time are sufficient to consider

them autonomous organisations. In particular, the Party of the Socialists of Catalonia (PSC) is the Catalan sister party of the Spanish Workers' Socialist Party (PSOE). As for Catalonia Together (CeC), it was originally federated with the Spanish new-left *Podemos*, but it has followed a differentiated path and practically acquired total independence.

Our focus on NSWPs is justified by their specific features, which differentiate them from the usual case studies (new-left and mainstream parties). For instance, our approach is to test the main expectations stressed by the theoretical models on least likely cases. We expect our findings in Spanish NSWPs to provide new evidence on multi-speed and digital affiliation in small and regional parties beyond Spain.

Table 1: composition of the sample and main features

Party acronym	Party name in English	Year of foundation	Number of MPs in national lower chamber (350)	Percentage of MPs in regional parliament	Have been in regional government	Number of interviewees
PSC	Party of the Socialists of Catalonia	1978	19	24.4	Yes	1
CeC	Catalonia Together	2016	7	3.7	No	3
ERC	Republican Left of Catalonia	1931	7	24.4	Yes	2
JuntsxCat	Together for Catalonia	2017	7	23.7	Yes	3
EH Bildu	People of the Basque Country	2012	6	28	Yes	2
NaBai	Yes Navarre	2004	0	16	No	1
BNG	Nationalist Bloc of Galicia	1982	1	33.3	Yes	2
Compromís	Compromise	2010	2	15.2	Yes	4
Més per Mallorca	More for Mallorca	2010	0	6.8	Yes	3
NC	New Canary Islands	2005	0	7.1	Yes	1
AA	Andalusia Forward	2021	0	1.8	No	1
CHA	Aragonese Union	1986	1	4.5	Yes	1

Source*: Author.*

For the data collection, we interviewed twenty-four party officers or key actors of the campaign, who were asked about volunteering and activism strategies, the composition of campaign teams and the role of volunteers in them, and the use of digital technologies and data sources for coordination and decision-making. The interviews were semi-structured and online, with a duration of sixty to ninety minutes and conducted between October 2023 and June 2024. The intention was to capture recent innovations developed for the

campaign of last year's electoral cycle: in May 2023, there were local and regional elections in many autonomous communities, and general elections in July. The interviewees' profile is priorly technical, being members of the party staff dedicated to communication or organisational tasks. Even though, some were campaign directors or held leading positions. The majority works at the central headquarters focused on the regional level or supporting local branches from the main office. The others are or have been part of the campaign team of the main capital cities. For the sake of anonymity, each participant has been coded with a number according to the order in which they were interviewed (for more information, see Appendix). To approach them, we established a first contact with the party office (through the official email or telephone number) so they could re-direct us to an officer of their choice (in two cases, we had two interviewees simultaneously: BNG and Bildu). At the end of each interview, we asked for additional names following a snowball approach, which explains the variation in the number of interviews per each party.

In addition to the interviews, we have also explored the parties' websites and statutes to find evidence supporting possible multi-speed memberships and, particularly, online recruitment strategies. For the statutes, our goal was to find formal recognition of these membership models as indicative of a stronger institutionalised commitment. As a general rule, we have considered parties to have online membership if it is possible to register as a party member or supporter entirely through the website, without any face-to-face step. Moreover, we have also noted down if the party has several engagement options that include active participation in the party's campaign or its decision-making (assemblies, online platforms), without formal registration requirement and no fee payment. For example, if it is possible to join the party's information/coordination channels with a simple click, subscribe as a digital supporter or a campaign volunteer, or take part in voting or a deliberative process simply by inscribing in the system.

We follow a comparative case study approach and thematic analysis to process the data, tracing specific processes (membership models, activism, coordination strategies and use of digital technology) and analysing their interaction with the contextual conditions defined by each party (Barlett and Vavrus 2017). Our strategy is not to perform a case analysis, but to compare and contrast the different parties and establish general trends in two specific issues that we have built upon a battery of questions: digital membership, multi-speed models and activist strategies. The findings are based on the exploitation of the interviews and the observations, and we have included some direct quotations when they can support a particular statement.

3. Digital membership strategies and activism in Spanish NSWPs

3.1 Multi-speed membership strategies

Table 2 summarises our findings in the exploration of parties' websites and statutes. We have considered three items: if the party allows online membership (it is possible to join the party entirely though the website without any face-to-face step); if there are different options for enrolment (donors, volunteers or supporters for different tasks, besides members and sympathisers); if the party has a specific figure of cyber-activist among these engagement options; and if non-registered members can participate.

Table 2: membership models.

Party	Allows online membership	There are different membership options available on the website	There is a specific role of cyber-activist	Recognise participation rights to non-registered members	The statutes include several membership roles
NaBai					
Bildu	X				
BNG	X	X	X		
CeC	X	X		X	X
CHA					
Compromís	X	X	X	X (only in primaries)	X
ERC	X	X			X
JuntsxCat	X	X	X		
MxM	X				
NC	X	X			
PSC	X	X			
AA	X	X			

Source*: Author.*

Only NaBai and CHA do not have joining options on their websites. It is possible to register online for all the other parties, but not all of them offer multi-speed membership models as well. Usually, there are two affiliation options: a member who pays fees and has full rights, or a sympathiser whose participation prerogatives vary according to the party. The other common option is to become a donor, easily making a payment through the website, as is the case for every party except NaBai, Bildu, CHA and Més per Mallorca. However, only BNG, Compromís, Junts and ERC have a "menu" of membership options that actually assign different roles depending on the function selected. Of these, just ERC and Compromís have formally recognised such roles in their statutes. As for CeC, we did not find activist options, but it contemplates participation rights unattached from formal membership.

BNG has a "ciberbloqueir" possibility, consisting of becoming a digital supporter of the party joining one or several of their social media channels. It is not required to fill in any form or provide any information, and the specifically mentioned goal is to distribute content with the aim that the cyber-member will share them afterwards. However, these "ciberbloqueirs" are not recognised anywhere in the statutes, and they constitute a different body from the parties' core of online volunteers. This core is constituted separately by members and sympathisers, actively identified and coordinated by the party through internal channels. Probably, such distinction entails two different speeds of activism: one more spurious and punctual, and one more committed to the organisation.

Regarding Compromís, membership roles vary across the three parties that form the coalition. We only found multi-speed membership options in the main party, Més Compromís. There is a "volunteer" option along with members and sympathisers, which are not incompatible: any affiliate can subscribe as a volunteer if he wishes to perform campaigning functions. In the process, the volunteer must select his preferred participatory option

depending on the tasks he wants to perform (e.g., distributing leaflets, organising meetings or being a "social media activist"). The party's strategy is to keep a register of new recruits to reach them and offer personalised coordination once they have provided contact information. The interviewees conceptualise this as "sectoral recruitment", in opposition to the "generic recruitment" of members (P4). The party statutes do not define the specific duties of these volunteers, but they are recognised as "activists" who identify with the political principles of the party, and who wish to collaborate in the activities organised without further involvement. They are, thus, formally included as a third pillar of party membership, along with members and sympathisers, but only membership entails participation rights. Besides Més, there is also the option to subscribe directly to Compromís as an "enrolee", without being a member of any member party. Nevertheless, the coalition does not have a common membership structure or any organic development beyond the parties that constitute it, so the enrolee option is virtually empty of content. The exception is the selection of candidates, which is conducted through open primaries where any citizen can register to vote. This is the only involvement mode that involves participatory rights without formal registration.

Junts follows a similar strategy to that of Compromís, offering a volunteering option, although there is no mention of such in the statutes. The target individual must fill in an online form expressing his preferred activities (administrative or communication support, organisation of demonstrations or activities, social media, members recruitment, setting stands), and also his availability of time and mobility. As a peculiarity, Junts allows double membership as long as there is not direct electoral competition, which is explained by its foundation as a movement-party aiming to embrace different pro-independence political organisations.

ERC also has three engagement options called "member", "friend" or "republican". Subscribing as a friend entails receiving general information on the daily activities of the party, but also having formal rights and obligations recognised in the statutes, in particular the possibility of taking part in the party's internal decision-making. It must be noted, though, that this possibility must be approved ad-hoc before each participatory process and is not par default. As for republicans, they are those who aim to know about specific activities or campaigns, for which they express their preferred topics or interests. For instance, friends' functions are essentially those of a sympathiser with participation rights but no fees obligation, while becoming a friend is a mere expression of interest to receive information. If this interest can turn into a mobilisation appeal for specific campaigns (and therefore, an activist), it is something plausible although not explicitly stated in its goals as for Junts and Compromís.

Differently, CeC's membership options have a focus on participation rather than campaigning. The party has been featured by its open participatory platforms and an absence of formal membership requirements, in line with other new-left parties born from the Spanish 15-M movement. However, it seems to have retained these features to a greater extent than its statewide counterpart, Podemos (Guerrero, 2023; Meloni and Lupato, 2022). The party has indeed been defined as a "networked" participatory party that promotes direct-democracy through its online platform and decentralised system of assemblies (Deseriis, 2020). The statutes distinguish between an activist role, with the right to vote in the decision-making and get elected for office, and the sympathiser, who can attend and participate without suffrage in the party's assemblies. What differentiates this otherwise classic categorisation is the absence of obligatory fees for full members. On the contrary, economic contributions are stated to be voluntary, so the only difference between activists and sympathisers seems to be the level of commitment.

Their roles are better differentiated in the autonomous local branch of the capital, *Barcelona en Comú*, which is the core of the party and its most important base in terms of members. On the one hand, activists are members of the grassroots organisations in which the party is structured (e.g., neighbourhood branches), with the right to be elected to the party bodies and participate in organisational decisions. On the other hand, sympathisers are not direct members, but individuals who register in the party's deliberative platform *Decidim* to vote in referendums and elect the candidates in primaries. For instance, activists are more oriented to organisational questions, while sympathisers constitute a grassroots community interested in the local political process. Moreover, the party does not require registration of any kind to join the different neighbourhood or sectoral assemblies in which it is structured: "to access *Barcelona en Comú* voluntarily (…) you can just come and say 'I am from Gràcia (neighbourhood of Barcelona) and I want to participate in the Assembly of Gràcia'" (P21).

In summary, we have found online membership in nine out of twelve parties, and multi-speed membership options in seven of them, although in some cases these are limited to donating, or to receiving information, as a party supporter. Only five parties have developed specific roles for external supporters that involve some sort of active engagement, whether in campaigning or democratic participation. For the former, multi-speed options consist of subscribing as a campaigner, as for the case of Més Compromís, Junts and BNG. They have, thus, a mobilisation goal. For the latter, they involve participation and voting rights regardless of formal membership and fee payment, therefore seeking for a democratic goal. This includes ERC's "friends", although the concession of participation rights is discretionary and punctual. Compromís' open primaries also imply opening some of the party's participatory processes to the citizenry, with no formal links to the member parties, although to take part in the organisational affairs it is necessary to join formally one of the member parties. Only CeC has formally recognised equal participatory rights *par default* to all members and is featured by a grassroots structure open to external supporters.

3.2 Activism strategies

As said, few parties in the sample have actually developed specific roles for cyber-activism. In most cases, these multi-speed membership functions are oriented to a hybrid model of participation, where activists recruited online are assigned to in-presence activities. For the majority of the interviewees, volunteers are essentially a force for street canvassing and a key source for local campaigning: "to face a local campaign without volunteers would be impossible" (P20). To a great extent, "volunteers are linked to the (…) local branches" (P11) and "few people aren't members of the party" (P1). For instance, the activist roles developed by some of the parties analysed are thought to provide highly mobilised members with specific functions and tools for campaigning: setting stands in the streets, organising meetings, distributing leaflets or canvassing door to door. NSWPs are considerably "rooted in local organisations, and for instance its activists generally come from these same local networks" (P6).

Digital tools and organisational platforms are used not just for online engagement, but also to coordinate face-to-face activities. In particular, chat groups (in Telegram and WhatsApp) and mailings lists are widely used to organise volunteers, set the campaign agenda and distribute them across the territory. Sometimes, parties rely on volunteers for those activities that do not require a great number of resources and organisation, contributing to decentralise the campaign and give it a bottom-up component. For example, "there

were things that required permits, like setting up a stand (…) and for instance that is more centralised. But those things that do not need a permit are going to be decentralised to generate initiative" (P7). Online enrolment is also perceived as a first-contact with the party, aiming to introduce that person gradually into the organisation: "when a member or sympathiser registers, we make contact, arrange a meeting with those who have joined during the last month, to meet them" (P4).

Even so, some parties also contemplate a specifically online membership strategy. Both BNG and ERC point that cyber-activist functions are not necessarily integrated in the multi-speed membership options they have developed. Indeed, we have found evidence of cyber-activism in parties that do not offer multi-speed membership roles, such as the PSC. In that sense, every party manages Telegram or WhatsApp groups to distribute online content and inform about activities, but only some parties offer an actual cyber-volunteering option. This guarantees there can be non-members registered as activists, and thus online volunteering beyond the party's more direct control. Their main features are, on the one hand, the creation of chats and distribution channels where the party shares content and coordinates online activities; and, on the other hand, the development of Canvas-like tools for posts, image or video editing. Moreover, training sessions for the activists to learn how to communicate or use the tools are usual.

Parties attempt to coordinate their bodies of activists to a certain extent, using Telegram or WhatsApp groups. For example, CeC mobilises them during electoral debates sharing key moments, sentences and video shorts, aiming to create trends in social media and generate expectation around the debate. Sharing the candidates' agenda and alerting volunteers about the key topic of the day is also common, such as the case of CHA. Although their goal is to distribute the content they create, they are aware that "many people go in their own" direction (P6). Meanwhile, JuntsxCat or PSC trust their networks of activists to spread the message they distribute through their channels and mark the daily conversation in social media. They define this strategy as a "cascade" (P23) or an "oil stain" (P18), and "overall, it consisted of creating WhatsApp or Telegram groups to send messages that they (the activists) can disseminate later in social media" (P1).

With regard to activism tools, Compromís has developed a tool for creating social media posts with a standardised style. Is called *Generador de targes* (posts generator) and is available in a specific website open to everybody. Users can find a menu of options to create posts in X, Instagram or Facebook, following the party's corporate colours and typing. There are templates for posting media news, comparing headlines, generating simple graphs, etc. Additionally, there is a style book also on the Internet (*Compromís-Dissseny*), where the user will find indications on which colours to use depending on the topic (e.g., purple for feminism) and other instructions to keep a certain homogeneity in the posting. Opening these tools to any user responds to a decentralised cyber-activist approach, where the party renounces its control, seeking a bigger reach: "it is a tool in principle open to any person… mostly is used by local branches making content for local branches, but sometimes other people use it to make some memes…" (P4). Other parties, such as NC, also offer instructions or design manuals for activists, available on their websites or distributed through their chat groups. JuntsxCat has created models for the local teams to edit or adapt the specific content using Canvas. In addition, the party has developed an organisational platform with campaigning materials for registered activists.

These tools and coordination attempts are, however, conditioned to the reach of the channels and the followers of each activist. The activist strategies described above are mostly linked to text-based social media such as X (former Twitter), while video-based apps occupy a secondary role. Cyber-activism "is very focused on Twitter, basically because other platforms demand a much greater level of work… (on the contrary) … to have Tik Tok you need video, you have to make the video, and this requires much more time than tweeting" (P17). In that sense, some interviewees point to an incipient decline of X, doubting the capacity of cyber-activists to reach new electorates and surpass information bubbles, "because in the end, Twitter is a community of politicians and journalists and there is no one there to convince" (P1).

Consequently, other parties such as ERC or BNG have a different approach, whose main strategy is to capture influencers. For ERC, cyber-activists are more of a spontaneous group of sympathisers that share or like to their content on social media. It is not, however, a systematic strategy. On the contrary, their main concern is to establish contact with digital influencers, whether they are close to the party or not. Aware of their impact and prestige over their followers, their aim is to keep a favourable relationship with a network of influencers, convince them to interview their candidates and achieve a positive image to these leaders of opinion. An interviewee describes this relationship as the contacts between parties and the press: "it is what we sometimes do with journalists, which is being in touch with them (…) give them some information, meet with them for lunch, to talk quietly" (P17). This approach is shared with BNG, whose interviewees claim to be in touch with influencers they have detected to be ideologically close, aiming to coordinate them and establish common points.

To capture influencers is also a segmentation strategy additional to the party's advertisement and micro-targeting in its own social media accounts. Each influencer is expected to carry the party message to his specific audience. Nonetheless, some interviewees have conflicting views on this strategy, as these leaders of opinion can overshadow the candidates if they stand on a very partisan position and openly campaign for it. Video apps such as Tik Tok or YouTube might require a "more personalist style of communication" (P21), meaning corporative messages do not work well. To depend on influencers raises questions about its efficacy: "if you try to make a Tik Tok (…) and you don't put a face on it, it ends up losing credibility. And if you put a face, that person is going to take that credibility with him" (P23).

In the end, influencer strategies are in a lower stage of development in comparison to more established and spread cyber-guerrilla approaches. While in the second case parties seem to keep a higher control over the activities of these online volunteers, the first case points to an incipient development.

4. Discussion

Our findings support our first and second expectation: on the one hand, online membership is accepted by the majority of parties in our sample, and to a lesser extent, many parties also promote multi-speed membership options through their websites. On the other hand, these functions point to hybrid models of membership, combining online and offline formats. Although some parties have created specific cyber-activist roles, such functions coexist with in-presence formats. These are perceived to be performed by highly mobilised sympathisers who also engage in organisational activities and actions on the ground. In this regard, ICTs are used not just to coordinate digital activism, but also to back face-to-face activities. Our fourth expectation also received empirical support, given that multi-membership roles

are overall focused on activism. On the contrary, democratic engagement is less developed, and we found few membership strategies with a clear participatory role. Accordingly, we must reject our third expectation.

Multi-speed membership models have been found generally in big parties, as opposed to very small organisations. Nonetheless, big and important regional actors such as the PSC and Bildu are comparatively behind. These differences are probably explained by organisational features and resources, although it seems to be, fundamentally, a decision of each party based on its own preferences and electoral needs. Among the parties with more in-presence-based memberships, we found generally small parties, with a constrained territorial range of action and a small electoral base, such as NaBai, Més per Mallorca, CHA and AA, but also NC, a federation of island parties with considerable autonomy. For those parties that endorsed multi-speed and digital membership models, we found Junts, Compromís, ERC and BNG. They experienced fast electoral growth over recent years, and some have been recently created, facing a remarkable competition from other left parties and being relatively excluded from mainstream media circuits. Under these conditions, developing innovative digital strategies and rapidly enlarging their bases was probably essential for survival.

In a third group, we found big parties whose multi-speed membership options are underdeveloped or focused on different aims. Bildu has adopted an engagement model based on grassroots organisation and in-presence formats, so it has not built a digital base of activists and volunteers. As a coalition, its only distinction is between direct members and those who are enrolled in one of the member parties. As for CeC, it was originally constituted by a confluence of parties and civil associations, but it managed to expand its base beyond them thanks to a highly digitalised structure and light supporter options. Building an online participatory party was a foundational goal of this new left party, which might explain the democratic engagement orientation of its membership model. In a separate dimension is the PSC, a traditional social-democrat party with a relatively stable base and a comparatively high visibility in traditional media, as it is also the biggest Spanish NSWP and is associated with a statewide party. The social characteristics of its electoral base probably discourage the type of membership that the other parties look for.

Digital engagement often consists of registering through a simple form expressing interest to join specific activities or support the campaign from several positions, both online and offline. On the contrary, membership roles oriented to participation and democratic engagement are less common, and so far, we only have evidence of one party with a clearly open participatory structure. For instance, the main divide seems to be in terms of the content and aims of each membership strategy: supporters' mobilisation for campaigning, or democratic engagement to reinforce parties' social linkage. These are, certainly, two approaches towards a common objective, which is recruiting party members and strengthening the social base of the organisation.

In this regard, NSWPs prefer to build hybrid membership models, where activities on the ground are not in contradiction with the use of digital tools for coordination and strategic organisation of activists (chat groups, contact lists). Therefore, digital tools can represent a change on the channels to participate and volunteer, even when the activities they carry out are essentially offline.

Specific cyber-activist roles are less common, and they are frequently performed by members or sympathisers who are particularly engaged. Most interviewees state that these individuals are mostly linked to the party and their activism is focused on local campaigning.

Indeed “the volunteers (…) of a local campaign are mostly identified with the people in the (electoral) lists” (P19). Even when the party promotes open tools for cyber-activism, the users are “mostly local branches generating content for local branches” (P4). These findings support previous research on platform parties’ membership, stating that the differences between insider and outsider members remain mostly unaltered under digital and multi-speed membership structures (Gómez and Ramiro 2019). Even so, cyber-activism opens the possibility of more bottom-up and networked linkage strategies, which some parties are trying to promote. We can differentiate between two main approaches, which are not incompatible but just different dimensions implemented alternately.

The first strategy is the creation and support of an online body of activists to spread the party’s message through their personal social media accounts, something that the literature has defined as “cyber-activism 2.0” (Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-García 2014). Although these cyber-activists can exist and act freely and in an uncoordinated manner, frequently the goal is to keep a track of them and orient a common strategy. Coordination is carried out through chat groups in Telegram or WhatsApp, where the party shares content aiming that the activists will repost it or forward it on to their contacts. Activists’ actions can take place in these same apps (resending the messages to their groups and contacts), or via social media. In this regard, X has been an essential channel for cyber-activists, which is making some parties question the efficacy of cyber-guerrillas and innovate in their strategies. Their decline might be related to a decreasing trust in former Twitter to reach their target electorates and surpass information bubbles.

Consequently, some parties are transitioning towards a second strategy that is precisely motivated by the popularisation of video-based social media (above all, Tik Tok). Rather than recruiting volunteers massively, some parties are starting to identify and reach influencers, trusting their influence on their followers’ opinions to be favourable. To some extent, they follow this strategy trying to escape the echo-chambers in which more partisan cyber-activists move. More importantly, they seek support from individuals who are already acknowledged as influential and somehow professional communicators, a trend that is related with the emergence of video formats. Interviewees generally agree this is the most powerful type of content in social media, contrary to a perceived decline of text messages. Online guerrillas of volunteers have tended to be focused on platforms such as X, where posting and testing has low costs in terms of time and expertise. On the contrary, video apps such as Tik Tok require a greater dedication for preparation and editing, which few users are readily able to do. They think thus it is convenient to identify and capture those profiles who are already talented and popular in this sphere. The character of such relationship is exposed in similar terms to that long established between parties and journalists: assuming their independence and own point of view, while trying to keep a fluent and constructive communication with them.

However, we should question to what extent these cyber-activist models can be considered as such if the influencer is not recruited or keeps some relationship with the party. Certainly, the border between cyber-activism and other forms of online communication, completely externalised, is increasingly blurred. We might probably expect mixed approaches in the future. Similarly, offline and online activism are part of hybrid membership strategies in which actions on the ground are supported by online tools and vice versa. All in all, these results point to multi-directional usages of technology and the many different possibilities of multi-speed membership models, adding further complexity to the linkage strategies and organisational functioning of political parties.

Conclusion

This article analyses how non-statewide parties (NSWPs) are using technology to transform their membership structures and enhance their capacity to mobilise and recruit supporters. The majority of NSWPs in Spain allow online enrolment and many have developed multi-speed membership options. In general, new membership functions are focused on campaigning activities, while participatory goals are secondary. Mostly, they configurate activists' roles, focused on promoting the party's message and contributing to the campaigning effort, both online and offline. In this regard, NSWPs' membership strategies point to hybrid models, in which actions on the ground are supported and coordinated by digital tools, while online engagement is set to lead to a more stable and face-to-face participation.

These results add new evidence to the study of multi-speed membership models and the impact of digitalisation in small and regional parties. Most importantly, the organisational constraints of NSWPs do not seem to hamper innovation. On the contrary, they are also coping with the transformations of party membership using technology and innovative approaches. Far from establishing a dichotomy between offline and online engagement, membership in political parties can be structured online to perform functions offline. Furthermore, this article contributes to a better understanding of the role activists play in electoral campaigns and provides practical examples adding to the literature on cyber-activism.

Our case comparison is limited to a single country, however, and it is not possible to say how the national context might interact with these outcomes. Moreover, further analysis should include a complementary approach focused on activists' attitudes and how parties' initiatives affect their behaviour. This might help to sustain or relativise the impact of new engagement models in the membership structures of parties. In this regard, cross-national comparative studies should add more cases and enhance our knowledge on regional parties' digital transformation.

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Appendix 1: characteristics of the interviewees.

Interviewee	Party	Scope of activity	Field	Self-defined role
P1	Més	National*	Communication	Press Secretary
P2	BNG	National	Strategy/narrative	Coordinator
P3	BNG	National	Communication	Technic assistant
P4	Compromís	National	Communication	Technic assistant
P5	Compromís	National	Strategy/narrative	Advisor
P6	Compromís	National	Organisation	Local branches' coordination

Interviewee	Party	Scope of activity	Field	Self-defined role
P7	CeC	Local	Organisation	Technic assistant
P8	CeC	Local	Communication	Strategy advisor
P9	Compromís	Local	Organisation	Campaign chief
P10	NC	National	Organisation	Coordinator
P11	Més	National	Strategy/narrative	Advisor
P12	Bildu	National	Organisation	Campaign chief
P13	Bildu	National	Strategy/narrative	Data expert
P14	ERC	National	Organisation	Campaign chief
P15	CHA	National	Communication	Secretary of communication
P16	Més	Local	Organisation	Coordinator
P17	ERC	National	Communication	Secretary of communication
P18	Junts	National	Organisation	Deputy campaign chief
P19	Junts	National	Organisation	Local branches' coordination
P20	Junts	National	Communication	Digital media chief
P21	CeC	Local	Communication	Technic assistant
P22	NaBai	National	Communication	Secretary of communication
P23	PSC	National	Communication	Digital media chief
P24	AA	National	Communication	Digital media chief

Notes: * As NSWP do not have State-level branches, those interviewees working at the central (regional) headquarters are considered to be ascribed to the "national" level.