

The digital ecosystem: The new politics of party organization in parliamentary democracies

Party Politics

1–11

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1354068820907667

journals.sagepub.com/home/ppq**Katharine Dommett**

University of Sheffield, UK

Glenn Kefford 

University of Queensland, Australia

Sam Power

University of Sussex, UK

Abstract

Since at least the 1980s, scholars have highlighted parties' reliance on external actors, with Panebianco's 'electoral–professional' party model spotlighting the increasing role of professionals in supporting party activities and campaigns. Over successive decades, our understanding of the role of external actors, and particularly consultants, has grown. As parties have begun to embrace digital tools and technologies, however, it has become apparent that our understanding of party organization does not reflect the array of actors who support party activities. In this article, we draw on extensive interview data from Australia and the United Kingdom to offer a new conceptual framework – that we call the 'party-centred digital ecosystem' – to highlight the functions that different types of external actor provide for parties. Introducing the classification of CLANS to describe these different actors, we discuss the significance of this trend, highlighting the potential for increasingly porous organizational boundaries as parties call on different types of external actor for support.

Keywords

campaigning, digital, party organization

Introduction

The organization of political parties has been a longstanding area of interest for many scholars. Offering an array of different models and frameworks, academics have sought to understand the way that parties work (Katz and Mair, 1995; Krouwel, 2012; Norris, 2000). One important component of this scholarship has been attempts to understand the type of actor that informs party organization and activities. In addition to party members, supporters, staff and representatives, attention has been devoted to the role of external actors. Highlighted clearly within Panebianco's (1988) 'electoral–professional' party model and work on the role of external consultants (Dulio and Thurber, 2003; Kolodny and Logan, 1998; Sabato, 1981; Sheingate, 2016), scholarship suggests that parties' varied activities are supported from outside. But who are these actors and what do they

actually do to assist the digital campaigns led by political parties? And, how does that affect party organization?

In this article, we show that political parties rely on a range of external actors to aid their digital activities. We argue that there is a need to map the ecosystem of actors that support parties' digital (and indeed non-digital) campaigns. While not wishing to overstate the impact of digital, we argue that party organization has become more porous than ever before as parties seek to respond to the fast pace of change and the accompanying demand for new skills and

Paper submitted 20 August 2019; accepted for publication 29 January 2020

Corresponding author:

Glenn Kefford, School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland 4072, Australia.

Email: g.kefford@uq.edu.au

competencies that technology fuels. As such, there is a need to understand the role different external actors play in supporting various party functions and how, organizationally, connections within this ecosystem operate.

Within existing analyses, there has been some attention directed to the role of external actors in supporting campaigns. However, to date this scholarship has reflected on particular types of actor in isolation. In this way, Kreiss and McGregor (2018) have highlighted the prominent role now played by commercial companies in election campaigns. Gibson (2015) has traced rise of citizen-initiated campaigns, while other scholars have shown how data brokerage companies and providers of campaigning technology are playing an important role (Bennett, 2016; Rubinstein, 2014). Despite these analyses, we presently have a limited understanding of the range of different actors supporting parties' digital campaigns and the functions that they perform.

In what follows, we present a conceptual framework to outline these developments. Highlighting what we refer to as the 'party-centred digital ecosystem',¹ we set out to clarify the functions external actors perform to support parties' digital activities and the actors taking up these roles. Identifying four functions and introducing the classification of CLANS (an acronym capturing different types of actor),² we demonstrate how parties are responding, organizationally, to the digital revolution. Through this analysis, we resist the tendency to claim that there is something intrinsically new or innovative about digital technology, rather we focus our analysis upon digital because we argue that certain traits about digital – in particular, the pace of change and constant need for innovation and new skills – have implications for how parties engage with external actors.

Our analysis focuses on cases besides the United States, which is overwhelmingly the focus of most analyses. Instead, we focus on party organization in two parliamentary democracies – Australia and the United Kingdom. In selecting these cases, we do not pursue a deductive approach that tests expected differences between the two countries, rather we use these cases inductively to generate new insights that can be applied to other cases and parties. This approach signals an alternative method of theory generation to the idealized 'models of party organization' approach often found in the literature (see Mair and Katz, 2002). It involves exploring variations and similarities between the two cases to highlight trends in party organization that can be used as benchmarks for analyses elsewhere (Stake, 2008: 124). Our analysis should, therefore, be seen in 'a context where future testing of general propositions is anticipated' (Ryan, 2017: 285), and the resonance of our findings is tested in other jurisdictions.

We study these cases not merely to increase the number of observations but because they are particularly useful for exploring the effect of digital on party organization due to

their institutional architecture. Notwithstanding the (nominal) similarity of both cases – in that they are parliamentary democracies in the Anglophone world with shared institutional and cultural histories – there are important differences. First, Australia is a federation and the major parties have organized themselves along federal lines, which means party authority and resources are at least somewhat decentralized. Second, Australia utilizes a mixed electoral system for federal elections, with the Alternative Vote in the House of Representatives and the Single Transferable Vote in the Senate. Voting is also compulsory. The UK's unitary system, while increasingly fragmented, uses non-compulsory Single-Member Plurality for the House of Commons and a method of appointment to the House of Lords. The institutional shape of competition is, therefore, different in each context. This helps us to draw our conceptual frame with more confidence than if we merely studied one context or cases with no clear institutional differences.

Our analysis is based on 36 semi-structured interviews, conducted between January 2017 and March 2019. This includes 23 interviews with current and former party officials and elected representatives from seven parties in these two countries.³ This is complemented with 13 interviews with a range of other actors that inhabit what we refer to as the 'party-centred digital ecosystem'. This includes employees from large multinational digital agencies, specialist digital agencies in each country, as well as platform and infrastructure providers who have worked with parties in the digital space.⁴

Our interview strategy was as follows: we contacted current and former political staffers that we considered would have insights about digital and we were especially interested in staffers who would know about external sources of advice or party infrastructure. From an initial population contacted via email, those who replied and agreed to participate were interviewed in-person or over the phone.⁵ As part of these interviews,⁶ we asked interviewees for the names of other relevant intra-party and external actors we should interview, thereby using chain-referral sampling techniques. After completing 16 interviews with the parties, we conducted 12 interviews with external actors from a range of service and infrastructure providers.⁷ These providers were largely identified by researchers, as opposed to through party contacts. Once this was complete, we considered what our interview data were telling us and returned to complete eight final interviews to triangulate in on key themes or arguments interviewees were making and to ensure we were interviewing actors who potentially would have a range of views on these matters. We structure the remainder of the article as follows. We begin by considering the literature on external actors used by party organizations and identify useful classifications for understanding these actors' roles. Then, using our interview data, we explore what functions parties

are seeking support for in the realm of digital campaigning. Highlighting the range of actors performing these functions, we introduce our CLANS classification, to identify actors who have come to play a new or evolved role in party organization because of changes wrought by digital – suggesting the emergence of a party-centred digital ecosystem. We conclude by discussing the significance of these trends for our understanding of party organization.

Party organization and the role of external actors

The idea that political parties rely on external organizations to support their activities is far from new. Apparent in historic ties between parties and other civil society groups, parties can and often do rely on external bodies to support their campaigns. In the 1980s, increased attention had begun to be paid to the professionalization of parties and the growing reliance on external actors with specialist professional expertise. Panebianco's (1988) electoral-professional model suggested that parties were increasingly reliant on 'communications technicians' such as pollsters, advertising and television experts. The growth of such external support was seen to lie in these actors' ability to perform key functions for parties that were 'beyond the political parties' institutional capacity to deliver' (Farrell et al., 2001: 12) or to provide strategic campaign advice (Grossmann, 2009: 91).⁸ This signalled an important shift, showing parties were paying specialists for support.

In the digital era, it has been widely noted that the internet reduces costs and provides participatory opportunities (Boulianne, 2009; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2016), but it also has organizational implications. As captured in Chadwick's (2007) notion of organizational hybridity, the Internet has caused new organizational types to emerge and existing structures to adapt, shifting how we understand party activities and power structures. It is, therefore, widely acknowledged that there is a need to 'further examine how a fourth age of media politics may condition . . . core organizational and communicational processes' (Bennett et al., 2018). And yet, at present, we have – with the exception of the United States – a limited understanding of the range of actors who interact with parties as part of their digital operations (and which functions they perform).

Added to this lack of fine-grained analyses, the literature that does exist about digital campaigning and party organization often points in different, if not contradictory, directions. Some scholars suggest that digital reinforces existing hierarchies about campaign professionals and the centralized control of campaigns, the so-called normalization thesis (see Gibson and Ward, 2012), while others point to different developments. Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016) argue that digital affordances cause parties to be renewed and reshaped 'from the outside in' – in particular with regards to participation. Similarly, Gibson's (2015) account of the

rise of 'citizen-initiated campaigning' points to a decentralizing trend, which challenges more widely held models of professionalized campaigns – inclusive of the aforementioned rise in the use of consultants. Questions, therefore, remain about the effects of digital on party organization.

For this reason, we set out to map and explore the party-centred digital ecosystem, discussing where parties require support for digital, who they are turning to for support and assessing whether the technology itself is affecting the type of relationships we see between external actors and parties, thereby improving our understanding of party organization. While offline campaigning techniques, tools and approaches are very familiar to party operatives, digital technology brings an array of new affordances and potential strategies. For this reason, parties often turn to external actors to assist with their digital activities. Our analysis has identified four key functions that external actors perform in support of parties' digital campaigns:

- *Strategy* – External actors offer parties strategic advice about how best to utilize digital technology, they can also draw strategic insights from online data to inform overarching strategies, including offline.
- *Specialist knowledge* – Parties draw upon support from external actors to understand specific new digital technologies and capacities that they are unfamiliar with or unable to maximize.
- *Capacity* – External actors perform functions for parties such as designing social media campaigns or developing targeted advertising strategies.
- *Infrastructure* – External actors provide campaign infrastructure to deliver party objectives.

Interestingly, many of these functions are not unique to digital (for example, parties often require additional capacity for non-digital components of their campaign). Our purpose here is, therefore, not to claim that these functions are specific to the digital space but rather to use a focus on digital technology to consider the range of functions that external actors can perform – an analysis we supplement below by turning to outline *who* enacts these different roles.

Strategy

Parties' campaign strategies can come in very different forms. Comparing across countries, parties can deploy different tactics that reflect electoral dynamics (such as the presence or absence of compulsory voting in our cases), but they can also utilize different campaign affordances and mediums. While diverse strategies are evident offline, the advent of online campaigning platforms and tools have changed the way that parties' campaign. From the extensive message testing utilized in the campaign to elect Donald Trump to the UK Labour Party's use of social

media to spread campaign messages and mobilize supporters, digital can have both first-order and second-order effects. It can inform the way that campaigns are run and organized, but it can also provide new data that affect party strategy in other areas such as field campaigns or direct mail.

Our analysis reveals that parties in both Australia and the United Kingdom looked to a range of actors for advice on how to best use digital affordances but also how to use information gathered digitally to inform and test their wider strategies. Whether considering questions of party messaging, policy positioning, election strategy or party image, interviewees often referred to the role that other actors played in supporting the decisions parties made. In some instances, this support was offered by large, multinational companies that were recognized as experts in campaigning strategy, but in other instances, actors with more specialist knowledge of, for example, effective online advertising strategy were utilized.

In considering what these actors did, one interviewee from Australia noted that in most modern campaigns, external actors often ‘have a strong say in the strategy’ (Australia, Liberal Party Interviewee 2). A different Australian interviewee reflected that external actors advised on your ‘broader political strategy about your broader messaging’ (Australia, Liberal Party Interviewee 3). In the United Kingdom, one interviewee described how these actors help a party ‘understand what it wants to say to the public and how to say it’ (United Kingdom, Green Party Interviewee 4). Another UK interviewee argued that advice often had to be sought from outside because it is ‘very hard for political operatives to lift their eyes up’ from day-to-day politics. In this sense, external actors were often seen to have the time and space to consider strategic questions that parties did not have themselves (United Kingdom, Non-Party Interviewee 18). The nature of this advice was not always focused on parties’ entire strategy (for an election or more generally) but was often sought around specific questions. A UK interviewee, therefore, reflected that external actors were often bought in to look at ‘very discrete questions for us and influence how we look at things’ (United Kingdom, Green Party Interviewee 4).

Despite a common emphasis on how external actors can offer advice, what emerged from these interviews was that there were multiple actors that offered advice. While some interviewees, therefore, focused on how they received advice by ‘talking to someone from the United Kingdom or Canada or the United States’ about digital strategies (Australia, Liberal Party Interviewee 4), others spoke about receiving strategic advice from ‘a social media agency’, ‘professional advisors’, ‘HR consultancy’, ‘professional media consultancy’, ‘three or four people in the United States who are embedded in some of the key campaigns’,

individuals (often with political experience), international sister parties and academics.

Specialist knowledge

Digital technology has, as indicated above, provided parties with a range of new affordances. Whereas in the past party campaigns were defined by door-step canvassing, political speeches, advertising billboards, garden stakes and direct mail, today parties can call upon tools including social media, canvassing applications, peer-to-peer texting, online advertising, data analytics and much more. Given the rapid pace of digital change, new functions are constantly emerging, making it challenging for parties to know what to do online and how to maximize the effectiveness of that activity. As parties themselves do not tend to lead these innovations, they have once again turned to external actors for support.

Faced with the question of how parties stay on top of the technological changes in the digital campaign environment, interviewees suggested that external actors were often required. The breadth of advice and activity sought was large, but we found evidence – supporting Farrell et al.’s argument – that parties often lacked their own ‘specialized technical services’ and were, therefore, reliant on external actors (2001: 12). This was the case for tasks including determining media strategy, online advertising, social media content production, website curation and design, database management and segmentation and targeting.

For many party interviewees, those beyond parties were often seen to be at the cutting edge of new practices that parties were unfamiliar with. One interviewee from the United Kingdom suggested that spending on external actors had increased precisely because this was ‘the natural place to put money, partly because people have seen it working but also partly because it’s new, it’s easier for people to understand they don’t have the skills to do it’ (United Kingdom, Non-Party Interviewee 5). While those in political parties were seen to have expertise, their practices were often not at the cutting edge, making it important to supplement existing knowledge. Reflecting this idea, one Australian campaigner suggested that:

... the real value-add that they brought was on our paid advertising and social media where you’re sort of scrounging around in the dark with both the access that Facebook gives you in terms of how you can target... but then also with all the data that we held as a political party, that we can use to try and segment and build for campaigning purposes, they really helped us try and make best use of that because it’s sort of overwhelming how much data we have access to. (Australia, Labor Party Interviewee 6)

Another interviewee in the United Kingdom similarly noted that external actors ‘knew advertising techniques around social media that we don’t necessarily have, so they give us some added skills’, especially in relation to targeting (United Kingdom, Green Party Interviewee 4).

As before, interviewees tended to cite different actors as sources of specialist knowledge. Many placed emphasis on international companies, with one actor in the United Kingdom – who worked for a large company that had advised parties around the world – commenting that the company aimed to help parties ‘understand how to use new digital tools, social media, email, websites and so on’ (United Kingdom, Non-Party Interviewee 7). But other interviewees spoke of other actors – small (often specialist) companies, individuals, activists and political parties in different countries – who offered this kind of support. One interviewee from Australia explained how their digital campaign team are highly skilled . . .

...but if they need specialist help on a particular platform, well, that’s where you call in someone who is the expert on Facebook or Instagram or whatever the latest platform is. (Australia, Liberal Party Interviewee 8)

It was, therefore, seen to be valuable to draw on insights from specialists.

Capacity

Recognizing the availability of new affordances, it is notable that parties themselves have retained limited capacity to perform a wide range of tasks. While our analysis showed that parties’ recognition of the importance of digital had increased, it also revealed that permanent digital teams within parties remained small. In most of the parties we spoke to, digital staff tended to number under 20, with many parties boasting considerably fewer staff devoted to digital activities. In such a climate, parties become reliant on external actors to deliver additional functions and create additional capacity.

Given the wide range of tasks that modern parties need to execute within and outside of a given campaign period, interviewees suggested that one of the key functions of the various digital companies was to add additional bandwidth. Especially discussed in the context of election campaigns, interviewees described how external actors were used to ‘inflate’ parties during an election campaign and then subsequently ‘deflate’ afterwards. One UK interviewee put it this way:

I think at a national level people are very aware that party organisations are small. I can’t remember what Labour’s staffing is but [if] it’s 200 people, once you get down to how many people work in data in the Labour party it will probably be two or three. I think people are quite aware that you . . . need

external people to flesh that out . . . it was a capacity issue around elections as well because of the volume of stuff that needs to be done in an election is just so much bigger. (United Kingdom, Non-Party Interviewee 5)

Other party interviewees reflected that because they possessed only a small permanent staff – and often only a few with required expertise – they were reliant on external actors to add additional capacity. While parties sometimes have the skills to perform the function themselves, at busy periods such as an election campaign, external actors were brought in so more could be done (United Kingdom, Conservative Party Interviewee 9).

Other interviews revealed that external actors could also be brought in to provide services where parties lacked expertise. A UK interviewee reflected on how their party had used external actors:

...to try and assist us with [social media] strategy . . . some of them knew advertising techniques around social media that we don’t necessarily have, so to give us some added skills, and to just give us added resource around testing what’s working and evaluating stuff because the numbers of people we’ve got are very small. So they give us that extra facility. (United Kingdom, Green Party Interviewee 4)

These examples demonstrate the overlap that can exist between this function and the last, as external actors can be utilized to build capacity and bring specialist knowledge to deliver a specific task. Such adaptability was highly valued as external actors were seen to build short-term capacity but also to feed into longer term skills development, helping parties to acquire new expertise.

Again, different actors were seen to be of value here. While large companies were valued because they contained large digital teams that parties could call upon to deliver tasks, we also found evidence of parties turning to skilled groups of activists or non-party ‘satellite campaigners’ (Dommett and Temple, 2018) to build capacity. In one instance, a group of digital activists were bankrolled by a UK party to build a computer game that could be disseminated on social media – using an external actor to perform a task that those within the organization itself could not perform (United Kingdom, Labour Party Interviewee 14)

Infrastructure

Our interviews also showed that digital technology was creating an additional demand on parties. As parties identified new affordances and activities, they also required new platforms and systems on which to conduct their activities. The majority of parties we studied had internal party systems and software but often these were not equipped to facilitate digital activities. We found evidence that many

parties turned to external actors to provide infrastructure on which they could perform their activities.

Some of the infrastructure the parties use is commonly reported on in the media (Cadwalladr, 2017; Halpern, 2017) and has received significant scholarly attention. This includes parties' use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. However, there were other examples of the provision of infrastructure that were less well-known. Within interviews, we found considerable evidence that external actors were creating or offering infrastructure or software that could enable parties to perform their tasks more easily. Many of these actors were large international companies. One interviewee described how their company had developed basic campaigning systems and platforms that parties could use to optimize the conduct of their campaign (United Kingdom, Non-Party Interviewee 1). Other similar companies we spoke to indicated that they offered website building tools, fundraising tools and analytical tools in terms of mobilization and polarization indexes (United Kingdom, Non-Party Interviewee 10).

It was not, however, just large international companies that were building and offering infrastructure for parties to deliver their objectives. We also found evidence of local activists and non-party campaigners developing their own systems and tools to conduct party activity. Whether developing their own apps or writing their own code to facilitate campaign activity, local activists were often also building infrastructure for parties' campaigns. We found evidence in the United Kingdom of one local activist who 'built a site called "reasons to vote Green," just totally off my own back, and because I had an idea that I thought would be cool, to help to promote the politics that I was, am enthusiastic about' (United Kingdom, Green Party Interviewee 12). In Australia, one interviewee suggested that before and during election campaigns, a range of actors are engaged in producing the websites and social media infrastructure the party uses (Australia, Liberal Party Interviewee 4).

Who are the actors that support parties' digital activities?

As evidenced from the previous discussion, interviewees made reference to a range of actors working with political parties on their digital campaigns. While some of these actors have been recognized in existing literature, few attempts have hitherto been made to map the ecosystem of actors who support party activities. In this sense, our analysis mirrors that of scholars in the area of party membership (Duverger, 1969; Scarrow, 2015). Adopting a focus on digital – but recognizing the significance of these actors in other realms of party activity – we identify the presence of the following groups of actors (or CLANS):

- Companies;
- Local volunteers and activists;
- Academics and professional researchers;
- Non-party campaigners and groups (some of which synchronize their activities with the parties, while others are entirely separate);
- Sister parties (at an international or devolved level).

At multiple points throughout our interviews, each of these actors was cited as playing an important role in supporting the digital campaigns of parties in these countries. While it is not possible to determine the extent to which these actors are 'new' to the party ecosystem, we argue that these organizations should be studied to appreciate the organizational dynamics of parties today. This is because, in the context of digital, we argue that technological developments have made it easier than ever before for external actors to support parties, suggesting they are a more prominent feature of the landscape than historically.

Companies

In detailing the form of party organization, attention has previously been focused on the role of professional consultancies. Often focused on US election campaigns, where consulting companies proliferate, this picks up an important part of the ecosystem but overlooks many of the other types of company that inform parties' digital campaigns. Within our analysis, we did indeed identify examples of consulting companies such as Edmonds and Elder, Messina, Blue State Digital and CrosbyTextor. We also encountered other companies such as NationBuilder and ECanvasser who provide campaign platforms and materials. Parties also drew on the services of technology companies such as Facebook, Twitter and Google. But interviewees suggested that there was more diversity than this, with a plethora of other companies working on specific aspects of parties' digital campaigns. These companies ranged from boutique organizations with less than five staff who were specialists at data optimization or targeting, or full-service advertising and digital strategy organizations that plugged into pre-existing digital team operations and amplified content, fundraising or voter contact activities. These companies were engaged for different periods of time, with different degrees of scope (and resource) and with varying degrees of loyalty.⁹

Our analysis additionally showed that parties are frequently in contact with and contacted by organizations hoping to claim the digital business of the parties. An interview with a former high-ranking digital staffer in Australia placed these interactions in the following context and spoke of how various international companies:

came through pitching and a lot of people had an app that would win us the election, but not a distribution channel and,

you know, they were very good at – as consultants are, they’re good at the talk. (Australia, Labor Party Interviewee 6)

Similarly in the United Kingdom, party staff reflected on how they ‘frequently have people trying to sell us social listening tools . . . one of the world’s leading IT companies tried to sell us something which was going to totally transform the way we understand the public’ (United Kingdom, Labour Party Interviewee 13). Importantly, parties’ perceptions of the value or feasibility of working with different companies varied in accordance with the task they wanted performed, ideology and cost. Many calculations were also affected by the dynamics of digital technology itself, resulting in a willingness for more porous and changing interactions between parties and these different actors.

Local volunteers and activists

Another established component of the literature on party organization focuses on the role of local volunteers and activists. These are individuals who could be ordinary party supporters or those with an individual profile. As Duverger’s (1969) classic work on party organization acknowledges, party activists and supporters play a crucial role in party organization. In both countries, activists would trial new technologies, platforms and strategies. One Australian interviewee, for example, spoke of how they began using a content management system (CMS) that was not approved for use by the central party organization. The interviewee spoke of how they were despondent with the party infrastructure and believed the alternative system would give them the best chance to succeed. After successfully using the CMS, the local activist was asked to teach others in the party how to use the system and it was slowly integrated into other campaigns at the subnational level (Australia, Non-party Campaigner 2).¹⁰

In the United Kingdom, similar behaviour was found, as there was evidence of local activists developing their own campaign infrastructure, systems, content and strategies. At the grassroots level, in particular, we found evidence of this, including a local activist writing a computer programme to simplify the direct mail process (United Kingdom, Labour Party Interviewee 22). And yet, the degree of activist involvement varied by party. Some parties – notably Labour and the Greens – encouraged local activity. Indeed, the Green Party took efforts to convene a group of digital experts from their membership to advise on party strategy (United Kingdom, Green Party Interviewee 4). But, in contrast, the Conservative Party – aware of their smaller support base – devoted less attention to working with these individuals. We, therefore, found evidence that local activists and volunteers supported campaigns to different degrees and were often seen to be an important source of innovation. Significantly, digital technology itself often empowered these activists to undertake their

own activities and initiatives, providing them with greater power and reach than previously available through non-digital media.

Academics and researchers

The least well-known or understood actors working in the party-centred digital ecosystem are academics or professional researchers. Interestingly, in Australia, there was little evidence of academics or professional researchers playing a role in digital. And yet in the United Kingdom, we found evidence of parties – and especially smaller parties – calling on academic expertise to inform their work. An interviewee, therefore, described how they sought information and advice from researchers who are commissioned to do pieces of work that ‘influence how we look at things’ (United Kingdom, Green Party Interviewee 4). This work included modelling parties’ support base and analysing electoral data to inform parties’ (online and offline) targeting strategy. Although not all parties drew on this source of insight, this demonstrates a previously understudied aspect of campaign architecture.

Non-party campaigners and groups

Some of the other well-known actors in the party-centred digital ecosystem were non-party campaigners, advocacy organizations and civil society actors, and we found significant cross-fertilization of ideas, staff and strategy between these organizations and parties. In the Australian context, this included staff working for organizations such as interest groups representing business interests and then going to work for the Liberal Party or vice-versa. Or on the progressive side, organizations such as GetUp!, trade unions and other non-governmental organizations featured prominently.

In the United Kingdom, we found evidence of formal links between some parties and non-party campaign groups. In the Labour Party case, Momentum provided considerable support, developing campaign material, disseminating content and training activists in digital skills. The organization helped to develop apps like ‘My Nearest Marginal’ which helped to show people where to campaign and even developed a car-sharing app to coordinate travel (United Kingdom, Labour Party Interviewee 14). In other instances, these groups were not formally tied to the party but provided external support to enhance the campaign. ‘Satellite campaign’ organizations such as More United, worked to coordinate activists wanting to campaign for progressive candidates (directing people to campaign for certain candidates using a digital sign-up process and coordination approach) (Dommett and Temple, 2018). While non-party campaigners have historically been a feature of campaigns, our analysis revealed that the Internet had unleashed the potential of these groups, making it easier

for activists to come together and receive attention for the ideas online.

Sister parties

One of the most surprising findings in our study was the importance of the transnational relationships between sister political parties. In the majority of interviews with party staff, we found the role that sister parties played was important both during and between election campaigns. In both countries, there were a range of formal and informal exchange programmes and processes that facilitated the development of relationships between like-minded operatives. This included formal political exchange programmes, as well as relationships developed out of international networks of like-minded parties such as the International Democratic Union for centre-right political parties as well as the Progressive Alliance for centre-left political parties. Such interactions with foreign parties were used to share expertise, with one party on the centre-left in the United Kingdom reflecting on how an individual

who ran their [sister parties] Facebook campaign . . . talked to us a lot about quality of content, you know, the focus on social media, reaching out to people, the very clear strategy that they had which was that they weren't worried what 80% of the electorate thought. (United Kingdom, Green Party Interviewee 4)

They were also often fuelled by the electoral cycles, with parties keen to gather expertise from those that had just undergone an election and had trialled the latest techniques.

A number of current and former digital staffers in Australia and the United Kingdom were also sent to work with and for like-minded parties during and between election campaigns. For example, current and former digital staffers interviewed in both countries spent time working with and for the Barack Obama re-election campaign, the Hilary Clinton campaign for president, Republican congressional campaigns and the 2015 Canadian Conservative Party campaign. There was also evidence of interaction between the two case studies we examined, showing a clear tradition of inter-party sharing and exchange.¹¹

Discussion

In our analysis thus far, we have shown what functions actors perform and who these actors are, adopting a specific focus on the actors involved in digital campaigns. Importantly, we do not suggest that these are new or specific to digital, but we do argue that it makes a significant contribution to scholarly understanding by highlighting who is involved in campaigns and how party organizations have evolved in an (increasingly) online political landscape. In

focusing on digital we do, however, argue that there are certain *dynamics* and certain *effects* created by digital technology that need to be recognized.

The dynamics of digital technology are defined by a rapid pace of change. New innovations and tools are constantly emerging and being refined within the wider technology sector, and many of these innovations are tested, trialled and sold to parties for their campaigns. As organizations that often lack specialist expertise in digital or which possess only limited digital teams, parties face a distinct challenge when it comes to digital as they need to navigate and adapt to a rapidly changing landscape, while having limited internal capacity and expertise. Moreover, this process is constant and fast-paced, with new innovations and ideas emerging and needing to be implemented.

The effects of these traits on party organization are two-fold, resulting in a *diversification* of the type of actor supporting parties' use of digital technology and a more *porous* relationship between parties and external actors. While parties have long been surrounded by external actors, in the context of digital, the range of individuals and bodies who possess digital expertise is magnified. Whereas in the past only a small number of large companies contained, for example, the expertise needed for polling activities, digital skills can now be possessed and mastered by a far wider community. Indeed, an array of people from different walks of life know how to build apps, create viral content or commission an advertising campaign. This is why some scholars have noted the rise of 'citizen-initiated campaigning' and considered the way this challenges top-down approaches to campaigning (Gibson, 2015). Operating in this new environment, parties have a larger pool of talent to choose from when in need of support with their digital activities.

In having access to a wider community, it is also notable that the relationships between parties and these actors have become more porous, as parties are able to forge short-term links with specific actors for specific tasks that can be dissolved to reflect changing priorities or technological affordances. Whereas in the past parties would contract the services of one or two external actors for entire campaigns, parties can work with a far wider range of individuals for varying degrees of time and with differing levels of formal partnership. Within our interviews, we found recurring evidence that parties were not permanently reliant on external actors but often had short-term or punctuated interactions. An interviewee in the United Kingdom, therefore, argued that external expertise is:

. . . a sort of tap you can turn on and switch off post campaign, but what you need to do is make sure that you use the party and in-house team, so that part of that engagement is that the agency transfers some of their skills to you and your team so that, for the on-going period or the period in between elections,

you've built up some of that skill base and then you push your agency to come up with new stuff for the next one. (United Kingdom, Non-Party Interviewee 7)

Similarly, in Australia, an interviewee reflected that 'best practice would say that you should be trying to build your in-house capabilities' (Australia, Non-Party Interviewee 2), and others suggested that for their party this was exactly the trajectory they were on (Australia, Labor Party Interviewee 4). Such examples suggest that parties may call on external actors to greater or lesser extents over time. In part, this reflects efforts to improve internal staffing capacities, but it also reflects the constant development of expertise that parties need to access in the digital era. As one interviewee (United Kingdom, Conservative Party Interviewee 19) reflected, parties in most countries outside the United States 'aren't innovators' themselves and accordingly need to constantly identify and work with those who are developing new practices and capacities. The boundaries of party organization appear to have become more fluid with the advent of digital.

For those interested in party organization, this suggests a more flexible and dynamic set of organizational boundaries than was previously apparent and raises interesting questions about how new sources of expertise are found and how relationships with external actors change. This organizational hybridity is indicative of a changing type of politics, one in which traditional, hierarchical forms of party organization are unhelpful for the party in achieving its goals (Chadwick, 2007). In our study, we have found evidence that suggests that party innovation came from the 'party in central office' and 'the party on the ground' (Mair and Katz, 2002) as well as from outside the party.¹² We therefore suggest that the notion of the party-centred digital ecosystem is useful in helping scholars develop a better understanding of how political parties are responding to the digital revolution.

One final observation from our analysis concerns the insights from our two chosen cases. In electing to study Australia and the United Kingdom, we set out some of the differences and similarities between our two cases. Our intention was to understand how the specificities of each political system informed the nature of the party-centred digital ecosystem in each case. In practice, however, we found minimal evidence of difference between the two cases. Indeed, the only area of variation concerned the use of academic expertise, which was not evident in the Australian case. These findings suggest the need to extend the scope of analysis in future studies, exploring the universality of these trends elsewhere around the globe.

Conclusion

While scholarly interest in digital campaigning continues to grow, the role external actors play in the digital

campaigns of political parties, and who these actors actually are has received far less attention. In this article, we have demonstrated that to systematically understand how political parties are utilizing digital as well as what role external providers are playing, we need to understand the diversity of actors within the party-centred digital ecosystem. We have demonstrated that this ecosystem is characterized by diversity and porous relationships. These insights are vital for scholars interested in party organization as they suggest the pertinence of a range of new actors and raise questions about the way that these organizations interact with parties over time. In particular, we have shown across two countries and seven parties that parties are responding to the digital revolution in different ways and that this is increasing organizational hybridity.

While not claiming that parties' reliance on external actors is new, we do contend that the dynamics of digital technology are resulting in rapid changes in the number and type of individuals and organizations that do support parties. Digital technology, therefore, appears to be diversifying the type of actor supporting parties' and, along with other related phenomena, this is affecting how parties organize themselves. Organizational boundaries are more fluid and porous than analyses from the pre-digital era suggest was the case. We also suggest that while these dynamics are particularly apparent when studying parties' digital activities, the potential for wider, digitally facilitated, changes in how party activities are performed are also likely.

With any study, there are caveats and areas for future research. With our own study, clearly more cases would improve the confidence we have as to generalizability. Perhaps we could have considered how different the party-centred digital ecosystem is in parliamentary democracies compared to presidential systems. We could have also placed non-party actors at the centre of our analysis, such as online advocacy organizations, to see if their relationships in the ecosystem were similar to the parties. We could have explored the power given to external providers and the degree to which different parties in different contexts devolve decision-making power. These possibilities suggest directions for future research. Noting this, we argue this article is an important contribution to the scholarly literature on party organization and digital campaigning as it takes the idea of a wider ecosystem seriously and demonstrates that the digital campaign environment is complex and diverse. Hopefully, this begins a larger conversation – and sparks further research – into the actors and the interconnected relationships which are evident in the party-centred digital ecosystem.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank participants at 'The New 'Data Science' of Election Campaigning in Comparative Perspective' workshop at the ECPR Joint Sessions (Mons 2019), staff at the University of Exeter that attended an initial presentation of these

findings, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by an Australian Research Council grant (DE190100210) and an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) grant (ES/NO1667X/1).

ORCID iD

Glenn Kefford  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6733-3323>

Notes

1. This idea is derived from Lilleker (2018) who suggested parties are in touch with a ‘political ecosystem where they may interact with and learn from consultants, experts, enthusiastic amateurs and the everyday folk’.
2. Companies, Local volunteers and activists, Academics and researchers, Non-party campaigners and groups and Sister parties.
3. This includes the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the Liberal Party of Australia (Liberal’s), the Australian Greens (Greens), the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Green Party of England and Wales. All interviews were conducted on the basis of anonymity, which was a condition of us being given ethical clearance from our universities to conduct this research. While we, therefore, cannot say who the interviewee was, we provide as much detail as we can without risking disclosure of their identity.
4. Our analysis and interview data focus on developments from 2012 onwards, with current and former staffers we interviewed reflecting on changes and developments since this time.
5. Twenty-three interviews were conducted in-person, whereas 11 were conducted over the phone. In addition to this, two interviewees who, time and location could not be finalized, provided responses via email. Nineteen interviews related to developments in Australia and 17 in relation to the United Kingdom. The interview sample consisted of five from the ALP, five Liberal’s, four from the Greens, three from the Labour Party, four from the Conservative Party and two from the Green Party of England and Wales. The remaining interviewees were consultants and external vendors the parties in these countries had utilized – five from Australia and eight in the United Kingdom.
6. Our questions to the party operatives asked interviewees, among other things, about: their experiences working on campaigns; how they measure the success of digital campaigns; what external providers the parties use; what

functions these external providers were brought in to work on; whether and why they think their party will need to keep using external providers; who the external providers reported to in the campaign organization and whether these external actors were embedded in the campaign or based elsewhere during the campaign.

7. Our questions to the external actors that had worked on party campaigns, among others things, included: their experiences working on campaigns; whether they had previously worked for a party; how they measure the success of digital campaigns; what they were employed to do for the parties; whether and why they think the parties will need to keep using external providers; who they reported to in the campaign organization and whether they were embedded in the campaign or based elsewhere during the campaign.
8. For more on the consulting literature, see, for examples, Sabato (1981), Plasser (2000); Plasser and Plasser (2002), Medvic (2003) and Johnson (2000); and Farrell et al. (2001).
9. Indeed, while in some cases, the same companies were re-contracted at successive elections; at other points, our cases showed parties to be willing to shop around to gain the best deal for a particular service or to tap into ‘new’ sources of expertise that previous providers were not seen to possess.
10. This campaigner while now working for a non-governmental organization was previously employed in one of Australia’s major parties.
11. The extent of the transnational sharing of ideas and the development of digital knowledge networks was made apparent when one Australian interviewee outlined how in their network of operatives they use technology such as WhatsApp groups to share competency-based advice and to troubleshoot with international colleagues (Australia, Liberal Party Interviewee 5).
12. See Kefford (2018) for a discussion of this in Australia.

References

- Bennett WL (2016) *News: The Politics of Illusion*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bennett WL, Segerberg A, Knüpfner CBJI, et al. (2018) The democratic interface: technology, political organization, and diverging patterns of electoral representation. *Journal of Information, Communication & Society* 21: 1655–1680.
- Boulianne SJPC (2009) Does internet use affect engagement? A meta-analysis of research. *Political Communication* 26: 193–211.
- Cadwalladr C (2017) *Revealed: Tory ‘Dark’ Ads Targeted Voters’ Facebook Feeds in Welsh Marginal Seat*. *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://goo.gl/xpf3dA> (accessed 10 June 2017).
- Chadwick A (2007) Digital network repertoires and organizational hybridity. *Political Communication* 24: 283–301.
- Chadwick A and Stromer-Galley J (2016) Digital media, power, and democracy in parties and election campaigns: party decline or party renewal? *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 21: 283–293.

- Dommett K and Temple L (2018) Digital campaigning: the rise of Facebook and satellite campaigns. *Parliamentary Affairs* 71: 189–202.
- Dulio DA and Thurber JA (2003) The symbiotic relationship between political parties and political consultants: partners past, present, and future. In: Green J and Farmer R (eds) *The State of the Parties: The Changing Role of Contemporary American Parties*, 4th ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Duverger M (1969) *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*. London, UK: Methuen.
- Farrell DM, Kolodny R and Medvic S (2001) Parties and campaign professionals in a digital age: political consultants in the United States and their counterparts overseas. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 6: 11–30.
- Gibson RK (2015) Party change, social media and the rise of ‘citizen-initiated’ campaigning. *Party Politics* 21: 183–197.
- Gibson RK and Ward S (2012) Political organizations and campaigning online. In: Semetko H and Scammell M (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Political Communication*. London, UK: Sage, pp. 62–74.
- Grossmann M (2009) Going pro? Political campaign consulting and the professional model. *Journal of Political Marketing* 8: 81–104.
- Halpern S (2017) *How He Used Facebook to Win*. New York Review of Books. Available at: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/06/08/how-trump-used-facebook-to-win/> (accessed 22 June 2017).
- Johnson DW (2000) The business of political consulting. In: Thurber JA and Nelson CJ (eds) *Campaign Warriors: Political Consultants in Elections*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, pp. 37–52.
- Katz RS and Mair P (1995) Changing models of party organization and party democracy the emergence of the cartel party. *Party Politics* 1: 5–28.
- Kefford G (2018) Digital media, ground wars and party organisation: does stratarchy explain how parties organise election campaigns? *Parliamentary Affairs* 71: 656–673.
- Kolodny R and Logan A (1998) Political consultants and the extension of party goals. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 31: 155–159.
- Kreiss D and McGregor SC (2018) Technology firms shape political communication: the work of Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, and Google with campaigns during the 2016 US presidential cycle. *Political Communication* 35: 155–177.
- Krouwel A (2012) *Party Transformations in European Democracies*. New York, NY: Suny Press.
- Lilleker D (2018) Prototype politics: technology-intensive campaigning and the data of democracy by Daniel Kriess, Oxford University Press: book review. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 15: 402–403.
- Mair P and Katz R (2002) The ascendancy of the party in public office: party organizational change in twentieth-century democracies. In: Gunther R, Montero JR and Linz J (eds) *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, pp. 113–136.
- Medvic SK (2003) Professional political consultants: an operational definition. *Politics* 23: 119–127.
- Norris P (2000) *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Panbianco A (1988) *Political Parties: Organization and Power*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Plasser F (2000) American campaign techniques worldwide. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 5: 33–54.
- Plasser F and Plasser G (2002) *Global Political Campaigning: A Worldwide Analysis of Campaign Professionals and Their Practices*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Rubinstein IS (2014) Voter privacy in the age of big data. *Wisconsin Law Review* 861–936.
- Ryan M (2017) Comparative methods. In: Lowndes V, Marsh D and Stoker G (eds) *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. London, UK: Palgrave, pp. 271–289.
- Sabato L (1981) *The Rise of Political Consultants: New Ways of Winning Elections*. New York, NY: Basic Books (AZ).
- Scarow S (2015) *Beyond Party Members: Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilization*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Sheingate AD (2016) *Building a Business of Politics: The Rise of Political Consulting and the Transformation of American Democracy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Stake RE (2008) *Qualitative Case Studies. Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 119–149.
- Vaccari C and Valeriani A (2016) Party campaigners or citizen campaigners? How social media deepen and broaden party-related engagement. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 21: 294–312.

Author biographies

Katharine Dommett is Senior Lecturer at the University of Sheffield. Her research focuses on digital technology, political parties and public perceptions. She is author of *The Reimagined Party* and is currently serving as Special Advisor to the House of Lords Democracy and Digital Technology Committee.

Glenn Kefford is a Lecturer in the School of Political Science at the University of Queensland. His research focusses on political parties, campaigns and elections. For the period 2019-2021, he is an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) Fellow.

Sam Power is Lecturer at the University of Sussex. His research focuses on campaign financing, online campaigns, corruption and political parties. He is the author of *Party Funding and Corruption*.