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Panel: Campaign Regulation as a Necessity to Fair Competition

Chair: Petia Gueorguieva (New Bulgarian University); Co-chair: Antonella Seddone (University of Turin)

Section: Digitally Enhanced Civic Culture

Section Chairs: Jasmin Fitzpatrick (JGU Mainz); Valeria Tarditi (University of Calabria)

While political competition offline is strongly regulated in many countries, only a few have adopted regulations for online campaigning. This Panel intends to show the consequences of (non-) regulation in campaigns for elections, intra-party democracy, and policy formation processes (e.g., direct democracy).

Digital technologies are critical drivers of innovation on the electoral campaign front and beyond. More broadly, they provide paths for new modes of interactions between citizens and parties, entailing thus profound implications on the very functioning of representative democracy (Nielsen & Fletcher, 2020). Research in the field of communication has investigated the interplay between new and old tools of political communication, emphasizing the dynamics of hybridization and the consequences concerning (a) supply, namely the ability of political parties to field innovative forms of interaction with citizens (i.e., Barbera et al. 2021; Vittori, 2020)- and (b) demand - that is the potential impact in terms of voting behavior, vertical trust, dynamics of mobilization or -conversely- de-mobilization (i.e., Lobera and Portos 2021; Boulianne, 2020; George & Leidner, 2019). However, beyond opportunities and new perspectives, literature has also highlighted some limitations stressing the need to analyze the rules that shape how digital spaces operate to better comprehend their implications. Moreover, this is particularly relevant in the case of online campaigning. Precisely, as far as environments of interaction between politics and citizens are concerned - whether they are formal and structured - such as party websites or digital platforms aimed to involve citizens in policy discussion or intraparty democracy processes - or whether they are informal and de-structured as, for example, social media are rules matter.

Nevertheless, the regulatory dimension of digital tools for communication and interaction between politics and citizens remains an area underestimated by research. The critical elements are numerous, such as managing funds for digital activities (i.e., Franklin Fowler et al. 2021a; 2021b). Similarly, parties' resort to online advertising raises some questions about privacy, given the increasingly sophisticated forms of micro-targeting enabled by digital technologies (Cotter, 2022; 2021). Most countries do not provide regulations on spending and campaigning on online referenda campaigns, which can put direct democracy at risk of abuse or being taken by the wealthy (Qvortrup, 2020). When there are tools for collecting online signatures for holding citizens' initiatives or referendums, it is important to assess if they ensure openness and inclusiveness of citizens. Studies are raising concerns about the risks of disinformation, bots, and astroturfing of the fourth wave of digital democracy (Garcia-Orosa, 2021) or even of the arrival of a fifth wave of campaigns – the “algorithmics campaigns” (Haleva-Amir, 2022). Digital parties' campaigns are related to the issue of citizens'

personal data protection. As far as intra-party democracy is concerned, the digital tools for candidate nominations and selection face the issues of the electorate's inclusiveness and selection methods (Hazan & Rahat, 2010).

F. von Nostitz et al. have developed comprehensive lists of democratic norms and technical standards for i-voting (von Nostitz et al. 2021). Studying e-decision-making and i-voting in the internal party governance, F. von Nostitz and G. Sandri argue that the “carefully designed, appropriately funded and effectively implemented regulations” are a prerequisite to answer security and technical challenges and risks, and to ensure democratic norms and voters’ trust (von Nostitz and Sandri 2021).

In highly personalized digital campaigns influencers, bloggers, and vloggers, along with popular personalities and stars are supposed to reach voters effectively and are selected as eligible candidates on the party’s lists with the risk of replacing party activists. Finally, a further dimension of concern relates to the modes of communication, the registers, and the tones used, which in digital environments can transcend to aspects of incivility or even hate speech, on which regulations are challenging to be implemented and, in any case, widely different among different national contexts (Kalsnes, 2021).

A risk of an unregulated digital public space is the malpractice of a kind of politicized censorship on social media that some parties can operate or their followers aiming to restrict or suspend their competitors' digital activities.

The panel intends to explore these issues by gathering paper proposals based on sound theoretical and empirical grounds, which by proposing single case or comparative studies would offer original analyses of the phenomenon.

Proposals can be sent.

Please send a) paper’s title; b) paper’s abstract; c) 3-8 keywords to to petiagueorgieva@gmail.com and antonella.seddone@unito.it by February 24th.

Please remember that you must have a myEcpr profile, please specify the mail you are registered with.

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