

# Digital Democratic Innovations within New European Political Parties: The case of Alternativet

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This paper explores the potential of digital democratic innovations in the context of emerging political parties exemplified by a case study of the Danish political party Alternativet. Similar to a range of other political parties that have emerged across Europe in the last decade including Podemos in Spain and the Pirate Parties in Iceland and Germany, Alternativet promotes democratic renewal by calling for 'a new political culture' that more fundamentally relies on the participation of citizens in policy formation and decision making. Consequently, in the pursuit of this vision they have been experimenting with various digital tools to broaden party member and citizen participation in the development of their own political program.

One of the big challenges of various democratic innovations has been to scale them up; both in terms of covering larger populations beyond the local level or mini-publics, as well as in terms of ensuring that citizen participation results in actual impact (Davidson and Elstub 2014). This is not least the case for digital democratic innovations (Moss and Coleman 2014) despite the ambitious democratic promises of the Internet (Lindner, Aichholzer, and Hennen 2016, 4). However, because parties seek to gain access to empowered spaces such as legislatures and governments via elections, if these new parties actually manage to involve citizens more directly in “doing politics”, they might be able to constitute the missing link between opinion formation in the public sphere and decision making in the legislative sphere and thereby scale-up citizen participation and deliberation, and make it consequential.

Political parties are one of the most important political institutions in modern liberal democracies and constitute one of the primary links between civil society and decision makers both locally and nationally (Schattschneider 1942). Political parties still dominate governments and parliamentary politics in European democracies despite having lost much of the connections with civil society that previously allowed them to act as a link between decision makers and citizens (Katz and Mair 1995). Yet, insufficient attention has been given to the potential role political parties could play in democratic innovation. Political parties have more often been the focus of analyses of the causes of democratic malaise than in explorations of solutions to democratic disillusionment (Mair 2005; Schmitter 2001). Meanwhile, democratic theorists have increasingly acknowledged that democratic innovations “...must begin with some elements of existing social life” (Young 1995, 207). Political parties could potentially be such an existing element that allows democratic innovation to be promoted within political institutions well known and easily understood by citizens.

In order to further investigate the potential of digital democratic innovation in new European political parties this paper focuses on the Alternativet party in Denmark. This party constitutes a very recent example of a new political party which advocates a new and more inclusive way of doing politics, keen on experimenting with various digital platforms, and which has quickly achieved electoral success at the parliamentary level. Through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in the party, the paper examines what democratic participation means to this party, why they find it important, and what role digital technology plays in terms of involving members and citizens in policy formation and decision making; thus inductively constructing a model – or models – of democratic participation as understood by practitioners themselves.

## References

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