# WHO HOLDS THE POWER IN DIGITAL PARTIES?
# THE CASE OF THE CZECH PIRATE PARTY[*]

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**Abstract.** Digital platforms play a dominant role in shaping (part of) the public sphere and are increasingly being adopted by political parties. These platforms connect people to various services, such as taxis and food delivery, by utilizing social media and Big Data to personalize their offerings. Political parties have embraced a similar approach, leading to the digitalization of political movements in two distinct forms: the gradual adaptation of existing parties, and the emergence of new (digital) parties. Most existing research on digital parties has primarily focused on movements in Western Europe, such as the Spanish Podemos, the Italian Five Star Movement, and the German Pirate Party. Shifting the focus to Eastern Europe and examining the case of the Czech Republic provides a unique opportunity. This paper specifically delves into the Czech Pirate Party, offering a comprehensive analysis of its intra-party democracy and power relations within the digital landscape. The analysis draws upon seven interviews conducted with party members, and an examination of party documents and websites. By addressing the question of who wields power in Czech Pirate Party, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding digital parties.

*Keywords:* Czech pirate party, digital party, intra-party democracy, power, pirate parties

## Introduction

The internet, along with the rise of social networks, has revolutionized the operations of political parties, transforming aspects such as campaigning,

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supporter engagement, and member mobilization. Consequently, the structure and functioning of political parties have undergone fundamental changes. For digital parties, the technological landscape offers opportunities to enhance intra-party democracy by facilitating member and supporter participation and mobilization through online platforms and dedicated software. Examples include the Plaza Podemos platform of the Spanish Podemos party, and the Rosseau platform of the Italian Five Star Movement, which are used for primary elections, program approval, party referenda, and more. While digital platforms have the potential to enhance intra-party democracy, recent research indicates that they have increasingly become tools for party leaders to exert control, leading to the centralization and personalization of digital parties.[1] The case of the German Pirate Party illustrates that digital platforms can also backfire, undermining a party's electoral success. The LiquidFeedback platform, deployed by the German Pirates for transparency and efficiency, faced resistance from members who perceived open ballots as an invasion of privacy. Sometimes, good intentions behind software innovations can pave the way to a digital party's downfall.[2]

Therefore, the crucial question arises: *Who holds the power in digital parties?* This article aims to address this question by focusing on one of the most successful Pirate Parties, the Czech Pirate Party. The Czech Pirate Party is often referred to as a digital or network party; however, it has not yet been thoroughly analyzed from the perspective of digital participatory platforms (except for the study of Andrea Lucarelli, Gregorio Fuschillo, and Zuzana Chytkova, which examines the role of technology in brand building).[3] Moreover, it is one of the few examples of digital parties in Eastern Europe.

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[1]   Paolo Gerbaudo, "Are Digital Parties More Democratic than Traditional Parties? Evaluating Podemos and Movimento 5 Stelle's Online Decision-Making Platforms," *Party Politics* 27, no. 4 (November 5, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068819884878.

[2]   Marco Deseriis, "Is Liquid Democracy Compatible with Representative Democracy? Insights from the Experience of the Pirate Party Germany," *Partecipazione E Conflitto* 15, no. 2 (July 15, 2022): 466-81, https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v15i2p466.

[3]   Andrea Lucarelli, Gregorio Fuschillo, and Zuzana Chytkova, "How Cyber Political Brands Emerge: A Socio-Material Analysis of the Italian Five Star Movement and the Czech Pirate Party," *European Journal of Marketing* 55, no. 4 (November 13, 2021): 1130-54, https://doi.org/10.1108/ejm-04-2019-0336.

The Czech Pirates made significant strides by securing twenty-two mandates (11%) in the national Parliament in 2017. They continued to expand their influence across Czech regions, major cities, the Senate, and the European Parliament. Before the 2021 Parliamentary elections, the Czech Pirate Party formed a coalition with the Mayors and Independents movement. The coalition garnered 15% of the vote and secured thirty-seven seats, of which the Pirates obtained only four due to preferential voting. Despite this setback, the Pirates became part of the government coalition, with three ministers in their ranks.

To date, only Petr Voda and Petra Vodová have explored intra-party democracy within this digital party, using the example of forming a local municipal coalition in the city of Brno; they identified distinct deliberative elements in its internal party communication.[4] In this study, we apply Susan Scarrow's conceptualization of intra-party democracy to analyze the Czech Pirate Party.[5] Scarrow's framework allows for a comprehensive examination of key components: inclusion, centralization, and institutionalization. To operationalize these concepts, we draw on two types of data: party statutes and documents, and semi-structured interviews conducted with seven party upper echelon members and employees.

The structure of this article is organized as follows: first, we provide an overview of current research on digital parties and pirate parties. Next, the theoretical section outlines the analytical framework of intra-party democracy and its constituent elements. Following this, we present the selected case, describe the data and methods employed, and proceed with the analysis results. Finally, the article concludes, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of power within digital parties, with the Czech Pirate Party serving as a compelling case study.

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[4]  Petra Vodová and Petr Voda, "The Effects of Deliberation in Czech Pirate Party: The Case of Coalition Formation in Brno (2018)," *European Political Science* 19, no. 2 (January 9, 2020): 181-89, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-019-00233-1.

[5]  Susan Scarrow, "Political Parties and Democracy in Theoretical and Practical Perspectives: Implementing Intra-Party Democracy," National Democratic Institute For International Affairs (2005), accessed May 15, 2024, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/1951_po lpart_scarrow_110105_5.pdf.

**The Crisis of Political Parties**

In the realm of politics, profound transformations and crises have been unfolding within political parties since the 1990s. These transformations primarily revolve around the organizational evolution of political parties and the prevalence of specific models of party functioning. It commenced with mass parties that dominated the industrial era, transitioned through post-war catch-all parties, and has further evolved into contemporary concepts like cartel parties, business-firm parties, franchise parties, personal parties, and digital parties.[6] Each of these types represents a response to the enduring crisis faced by political parties. Parties have ceased to fulfill their functions and have instead started behaving like factions – personal and self-serving organizations.[7]

Piero Ignazi highlights the decline of mass parties and the emergence of non-partisan parties, which he categorizes into two types.[8] The first type comprises social movements, such as left-libertarian and green parties, while the second type consists of right-wing movements advocating for order, tradition, identity, and security. A non-partisan party is characterized by the absence of a membership structure, lack of a broader decision-making process, and a dominant leader. This transformation

[6]   Maurice Duverger, Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State (London: Methuen, 1967), 490; Otto Kirchheimer, "The Transformation of the Western European Party Systems," in Political Parties and Political Development. (SPD-6), eds. Joseph La Palombara and Myron Weiner (Princeton Legacy Library, 2016), 496; Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy," Party Politics 1, no. 1 (January 1995): 5-28, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068895001001001; Jonathan Hopkin and Caterina Paolucci, "The Business Firm Model of Party Organisation: Cases from Spain and Italy," European Journal of Political Research 35, no. 3 (1999): 307-39, https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1006903925012; R. Kenneth Carty, "Parties as Franchise Systems," Party Politics 10, no. 1 (January 2004): 5-24, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068804039118; Mauro Calise, "The Personal Party: An Analytical Framework," *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica 45*, no. 3 (October 8, 2015): 301-15, https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2015.18; Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 224.
[7]   Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2005), 368.
[8]   Piero Ignazi, "The Crisis of Parties and the Rise of New Political Parties," *Party Politics* 2, no. 4 (October 1996): 549–66, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068896002004007.

in party dynamics is a reaction to the fundamental symptom of the political parties' crisis – the declining of the membership.

The decline in party membership is observable across Europe, resulting in reduced party mobilization and diminished intra-party democracy.[9] In extreme cases, parties may have virtually no members.[10] However, the decrease in membership does not necessarily signify detachment from social segments.[11]

Parties are striving to counter this crisis with novel strategies. One essential approach involves leveraging digital tools, especially social networks, which significantly influence political attitudes.[12] Through social networks, parties can attract new members and supporters. Scarrow also introduces the concept of multi-speed cyber membership, signifying the opportunity for online membership.[13] Parties utilize digital platforms to share information with members or sympathizers, via email or social networks. However, she points out the limitations of online membership, exemplified by digital parties like the Movement of 5 Stars and the German Pirate Party, where the disconnect between the party's online presence and its central offices deepens significantly.[14]

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[9]   Ingrid van Biezen and Thomas Poguntke, "The Decline of Membership-Based Politics," Party Politics 20, no. 2 (January 30, 2014): 205-16, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068813 519969; Russell J. Dalton and Martin P. Wattenberg, eds., *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Druk, 2002), 314; Piero Ignazi, "The Four Knights of Intra-Party Democracy," Party Politics 26, no. 1 (February 2018): 135406881875459, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068818754599.

[10]  Oscar Mazzoleni and Gerrit Voerman, "Memberless Parties," *Party Politics* 23, no. 6 (January 25, 2016): 783-92, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068815627398.

[11]  Susan E. Scarrow and Burcu Gezgor, "Declining Memberships, Changing Members? European Political Party Members in a New Era," *Party Politics* 16, no. 6 (May 11, 2010): 823-43, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068809346078.

[12]  Gideon Rahat and Ofer Kenig, *From Party Politics to Personalized Politics? Party Change and Political Personalization in Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 304; Andrew Chadwick and Jennifer Stromer-Galley, "Digital Media, Power, and Democracy in Parties and Election Campaigns," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 21, no. 3 (April 28, 2016): 283-93, https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161216646731.

[13]  Susan E Scarrow, *Beyond Party Members: Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilization* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), 240.

[14]  Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, "The Evolution of Party Organizations in Europe: The Three Faces of Party Organization," *American Review of Politics* 14, no. 4 (January 1, 1994): 593, https://doi.org/10.15763/issn.2374-7781.1993.14.0.593-617.

**The Digital Party – Can Digital Platforms Bring Power Back to Members?**

Although research on the influence of the internet on politics has been active since the early twenty-first century, the focus on political parties has only become significant recently. Pippa Norris's pioneering study on digital parties defines them as political organizations leveraging the internet to enhance civic engagement and democratic processes. Norris identifies key platforms such as party websites, email communication, social media, online voting systems, discussion forums, online newsletters, and virtual conferences. These platforms aim to increase transparency, inclusiveness, and participation. Norris concludes that while many parties have used the internet conservatively for campaign propaganda, it provides significant opportunities for smaller and insurgent parties to mobilize support and enhance visibility.[15]

Helen Margetts coins the term "cyber party," which she defines as a party whose key feature is using digital technologies to strengthen relations within the party and between voters.[16] This theme gained further attention with the development of new parties, namely the German Pirate Party and the Movement of 5 Stars. Analyzing these two parties, Florian Hartleb expands on the term with the attribute "anti-elitist cyber party," which he divides into two sub-types: (1) centrally controlled personalized cyber party, (2) bottom-up, horizontal organization aiming at deliberative and participatory elements.[17]

This conceptual severance is still valid within digital parties' research, as the scientific community is thus divided into cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists.[18] Cyber-optimists believe that digitization's influence on political parties has been repeatedly shown as something that increases

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[15] Pippa Norris, "Digital Parties: Civic Engagement & Online Democracy," ECPR Joint Sessions, January 2001, 1-20.

[16] Helen Margetts, "Cyber Parties," in *Handbook of Party Politics*, eds. Richard S. Katz and William Crotty (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications Ltd, 2006), 560.

[17] Florian Hartleb, "Anti-Elitist Cyber Parties?," *Journal of Public Affairs* 13, no. 4 (July 8, 2013): 355-69, https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.1480.

[18] Oscar Barberà, Giulia Sandri, Patricia Correa, and Juan-Rodriguez Teruel, eds., *Digital Parties: The Challenges of Online Organisation and Participation* (Cham: Springer Nature, 2021), 304.

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intra-party democracy. On the contrary, cyber-pessimists believe that current research has shown that the influence of technology on processes leads to party centralization and so-called hyper-leadership.[19]

The first to use the term "digital party" as a new type of political party, and to analyze it in depth is Paolo Gerbaudo. In his book, Gerbaudo defines digital parties as those that replace traditional organizational structures with digital participatory platforms and communication tools. These parties aim to replace conventional local branches with virtual meetings, streamline party membership through online registration, and empower all registered members to vote on internal party matters. This digital framework is designed to reduce organizational costs and attract a broader membership base.[20] Building on Gerbaudo's work, Marco Deseriis introduces the concepts of "platform party" and "networked party."[21] In the realm of ideal types, a platform party embodies a highly centralized structure led by a charismatic leader whose sole objective is active participation in electoral competitions. In sharp contrast, a networked party represents a decentralized digital party that encourages interactions within a network of members.

Within the framework of digital parties, the research focus was mainly on new political parties from Western Europe. The most frequent research objects in this field are the Movement of 5 Stars, Podemos, the German Pirate Party, and the Labor Party, especially its internal faction Momentum.[22] Studies focus mainly on party organizational innovations, the relationship between digital platforms, intra-party democracy, and online voting and digital platforms.[23]

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[19]   Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party*.

[20]   Ibid.

[21]   Marco Deseriis, "Two Variants of the Digital Party: The Platform Party and the Networked Party," *Partecipazione E Conflitto* 13, no. 1 (April 21, 2020): 896-917, https://doi.org/10.1285/i20356609v13i1p896.

[22]   James Dennis, "A Party within a Party Posing as a Movement? Momentum as a Movement Faction," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 17, no. 2 (December 12, 2019): 97-113, https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2019.1702608.

[23]   Marco Lisi, "Party Innovation, Hybridization and the Crisis: The Case of Podemos," Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica 49, no. 3 (November 12, 2018): 245-62, https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2018.20; Francesco Raniolo

New digital parties are examined mainly from the point of view of the development of their digital structure and its influence on the membership and voter base.[24] The digitization of the internal structure may lead to greater participation by members and citizens and brings new deliberative space. The relationship of digital platforms to intra-party democracy yields results that align with the direction cyber-pessimists take. Using the example of Movement of 5 Stars and Podemos, Gerbaudo describes digital parties as less democratic than traditional ones.[25] On the contrary, he notes that digital parties tend to have a high degree of centralization and a lower degree of institutionalization, and overall, the power is in its leaders' hands. In his study, Davide Vittori finds again,

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and Valeria Tarditi, "Digital Revolution and Party Innovations: An Analysis of the Spanish Case," Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica 50, no. 2 (September 18, 2019): 1-19, https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2019.27; Víctor Sampedro and Lorenzo Mosca, "Digital Media, Contentious Politics and Party Systems in Italy and Spain," Javnost – the Public 25, no. 1-2 (January 31, 2018): 160-68, https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1423959; Antonella Seddone and Marco Valbruzzi, "Beyond the Crisis … Resilience and Adaptation. Italian Political Parties and Their Organizational Transformations," Contemporary Italian Politics 12, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 394-410, https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2020.1853376; Marco Deseriis and Davide Vittori, "The Impact of Online Participation Platforms on the Internal Democracy of Two Southern European Parties: Podemos and the Five Star Movement," International Journal of Communication 13, no. 1 (2019), https://doi.org/5696-5714; Katharine Dommett, Luke Temple, and Patrick Seyd, "Dynamics of Intra-Party Organisation in the Digital Age: A Grassroots Analysis of Digital Adoption," Parliamentary Affairs 74, no. 2 (May 17, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsaa007; García Lupato, Fabio, and Marco Meloni, "Digital Intra-Party Democracy: An Exploratory Analysis of Podemos and the Labour Party," Parliamentary Affairs 76, no. 1 (June 21, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsab015; Davide Vittori, "Membership and Members' Participation in New Digital Parties: Bring Back the People?," Comparative European Politics 18, no. 2 (December 18, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-019-00201-5; Marco Deseriis, "Digital Movement Parties: A Comparative Analysis of the Technopolitical Cultures and the Participation Platforms of the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Piratenpartei," Information, Communication & Society 23, no. 12 (June 14, 2019): 1770-86, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2019.1631375; Marco Deseriis, "Direct Parliamentarianism: An Analysis of the Political Values Embedded in Rousseau, the «Operating System' of the Five Star Movement,» JeDEM - EJournal of EDemocracy and Open Government 9, no. 2 (December 18, 2017): 47-67, https://doi.org/10.29379/jedem.v9i2.471.

[24]   Gerbaudo, "Are Digital Parties More Democratic."

[25]   Ibid.

using the example of Podemos and the Movement of 5 Stars, that although digital parties might appear to be a suitable tool for increasing and mobilizing the membership base, the opposite is true.[26] Vittori's research indicates a decline in both membership and mobilization within digital parties. From current research, it follows that digital parties have become a tool of power for leaders and their political goals.

## The Pirate Party Family

The Pirate Party family is recognized as the original digital party originating from Sweden, where the first pirate party emerged in response to government policies on file sharing.[27] The ideology of Pirate Parties, as explored in the article, has evolved from its initial focus on file sharing and copyright reform to encompass broader issues of digital rights, freedom of expression, and privacy. Initially catalyzed by the Swedish Pirate Party's response to the raid on The Pirate Bay (a popular peer-to-peer file sharing service) in 2006, Pirate Parties across Europe began advocating for cyberliberties, net neutrality, and a criticism of restrictive copyright laws. Over time, these parties have integrated a wider range of cultural and participatory ideals, emphasizing transparency, civil liberties, and democratic engagement. Despite initial successes in raising awareness and influencing policy, the challenge remains in balancing their foundational digital rights agenda with broader political participation and adapting to local political contexts.[28]

The Swedish Pirate Party gained prominence in May 2006 following a police raid on the Pirate Bay hosting facility, sparking rapid growth in its membership. However, subsequent electoral setbacks led to a decline

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[26]   Vittori, "Membership and Members' Participation in New Digital Parties."

[27]   Johanna Jääsaari and Daniel Šárovec, "Pirate Parties: The Original Digital Party Family," in *Digital Parties: The Challenges of Online Organisation and Participation*, eds. Oscar Barberà, Giulia Sandri, Patricia Correa, Juan Rodríguez-Teruel (Springer Nature, 2021), 304.

[28]   Johanna Jääsaari and Jockum Hilden, "From File Sharing to Free Culture: The Evolving Agenda of European Pirate Parties," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (March 26, 2015): 870-99.

in its influence.[29] Notably, the Swedish pirates achieved a significant victory in the 2009 European Parliament elections, securing 7.1% of the vote and one seat. Despite this success, the party lost momentum and eventually became a marginal entity without political mandates.[30]

Emulating the Swedish model, Germany established its own pirate party in September 2006, focusing on issues such as free information access and privacy protection.[31] The party distinguished itself by adopting LiquidFeedback software, incorporating elements of *liquid democracy*, allowing voters to delegate their votes to fellow members for policy decisions.[32] The German Pirates managed to secure one seat in the European Parliament in 2009, and four seats in the Land Parliament in 2014.[33] However, internal disputes, particularly related to the use of LiquidFeedback, led to a decline in the party's significance and membership, paralleling the fate of its Swedish counterpart.[34]

Despite these challenges, certain Pirate Parties found success in national parliaments, notably the Czech, Icelandic, and Luxembourgish iterations.[35] Among them, the Czech Pirate Party stood out, securing positions in various political institutions. Previous research focused on election outcomes, anti-corruption efforts, digital structures, and deliberative processes, as demonstrated by a municipal coalition.[36] This article aims

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[29]   Nicole Bolleyer, Conor Little, and Felix-Christopher von Nostitz, "Implementing Democratic Equality in Political Parties: Organisational Consequences in the Swedish and the German Pirate Parties," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 38, no. 2 (January 21, 2015): 158-78, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12044.

[30]   Simon Otjes, "All on the Same Boat? Voting for Pirate Parties in Comparative Perspective," *Politics* 40, no. 1 (March 5, 2019): 38-53, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395719833274.

[31]   Deseriis, "Two Variants of the Digital Party."

[32]   Deseriis, "Is Liquid Democracy Compatible with Representative Democracy."

[33]   Hartleb, "Anti-Elitist Cyber Parties."

[34]   Bolleyer, Little, and von Nostitz, "Implementing Democratic Equality in Political Parties;" Deseriis, "Is Liquid Democracy Compatible with Representative Democracy."

[35]   Lukáš Novotný and Daniel Šárovec, "Contemporary Pirate Parties in the Post-Material Era: Comparing Success Cases," *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review* 21, no. 1 (July 2021): 29-51.

[36]   Vladimír Naxera, "'Let Us Blow Them Down!': Corruption as the Subject of (Non)Populist Communication of the Czech Pirate Party," Politics 43, no. 4 (May 5, 2021): 026339572110109, https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957211010984; Jääsaari and Šárovec, "Pirate Parties;" Voda and Vodová, "The Effects of Deliberation in Czech Pirate Party."

to bridge the research gap concerning the Czech Pirate Party, delving into the functioning of its digital structures and exploring how intra-party power relations are set up.

**Intra-party Democracy**

Intra-party democracy is primarily associated with power distribution within political parties, *i.e.*, where power is located, who holds it, and how members participate.[37] These questions include, for example, the candidate selection process, the leader selection process or the organizational side.[38] Scarrow offers a three-dimensional framework, thanks to which it is possible to answer these questions: institutionalization, inclusiveness, and centralization.[39] This structure is also used in research on digital parties or deliberative parties.[40]

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[37] William P. Cross and Richard S. Katz, eds., *The Challenges of Intra-Party Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[38] Shlomit Barnea and Gideon Rahat, "Reforming Candidate Selection Methods," Party Politics 13, no. 3 (May 2007): 375-94, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068807075942; Reuven Y Hazan, Gideon Rahat, Democracy within Parties: Candidate Selection Methods and Their Political Consequences (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Richard S. Katz, "The Problem of Candidate Selection and Models of Party Democracy," Party Politics 7, no. 3 (May 2001): 277-96, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068801007003002; Gideon Rahat, "Which Candidate Selection Method Is the Most Democratic?," Government and Opposition 44, no. 1 (2009): 68-90, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2008.01276.x; Nicholas Aylott and Niklas Bolin, "Managed Intra-Party Democracy," Party Politics 23, no. 1 (July 9, 2016): 55-65, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068816655569; William Cross and André Blais, "Who Selects the Party Leader?," Party Politics 18, no. 2 (January 26, 2011): 127-50, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068810382935; Thomas Poguntke, Susan E Scarrow, Paul D Webb, Elin H Allern, Nicholas Aylott, Ingrid van Biezen, Enrico Calossi, Marina Costa Lobo, William P Cross, Kris Deschouwer, Zsolt Enyedi, Elodie Fabre, David M Farrell, Anika Gauja, Eugenio Pizzimenti, Petr Kopecký, Ruud Koole, Wolfgang C Müller, Karina Kosiara-Pedersen, Gideon Rahat, Aleks Szczerbiak, Emilie van Haute, and Tània Verge, "Party Rules, Party Resources and the Politics of Parliamentary Democracies: How Parties Organize in the 21st Century," Party Politics 22, no. 6 (September 23, 2016): 661-78, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068816662493.

[39] Scarrow, "Political Parties and Democracy in Theoretical and Practical Perspectives."

[40] Gerbaudo, "Are Digital Parties More Democratic than Traditional Parties?;" Nino Junius and Joke Matthieu, "Who Rules the Deliberative Party? Examining the Agora Case in

First, inclusiveness outlines how wide the circle of people who participate in intra-party processes within the party, whether it is a narrow circle around the leader, or a wider field of the membership base. A prerequisite for a high degree of intra-party involvement is the possibility of involving all members, possibly also sympathizers or citizens, in voting on the program, selecting candidates, voting on leadership, *etc*.[41] The more inclusive a party is, the more room there should be for intra-party deliberative communication.[42] Deliberative processes in political parties increase the rights and opportunities of the member base, *i.e.*, overall internal party democracy.[43]

Second, centralization describes how large the group of party members decides the direction and functioning of the party. An extreme case of centralization is when only its leader, or a narrow elite group around the leader, decides for the party. This can lead to extreme cases of personal parties that serve their lead figure only as an electoral vehicle when members are needed only during the election campaign, after which they are no longer considered. There is no effort to involve them in the party's functioning.[44] In contrast, excessive decentralization and involvement of the entire membership (or even the civic base) in the decision-making process can lead to a gap between the party in the central office and the party on the ground. The party on the ground, with its demands, may hinder the central office party from governing cohesively. In this context, the German Pirates can be considered an illustration of this attempt.[45]

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Belgium," *Party Politics* 29, no. 5 (July 14, 2022): 135406882211144, https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221114404.

[41]   Susan E. Scarrow, Paul D. Webb, and Thomas Poguntke, "Intra-Party Decision-Making in Contemporary Europe: Improving Representation or Ruling with Empty Shells?" *Irish Political Studies* 37, no. 2 (March 4, 2022): 1-22, https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2022.2046430.

[42]   Scarrow, "Political Parties and Democracy in Theoretical and Practical Perspectives".

[43]   Sergiu Gherghina, Sorina Soare, and Vincent Jacquet, "Deliberative Democracy and Political Parties: Functions and Consequences," *European Political Science* 19, no. 1 (January 9, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-019-00234-0.

[44]   Glenn Kefford and Duncan McDonnell, "Inside the Personal Party: Leader-Owners, Light Organizations and Limited Lifespans," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 20, no. 2 (February 6, 2018): 379-94, https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148117750819.

[45]   Deseriis, "Is Liquid Democracy Compatible with Representative Democracy?".

Third, institutionalization focuses on the extent to which the party is organizationally stable.[46] Scarrow considers it essential to monitor two elements that determine the degree of institutionalization. The first is the extent to which intra-party decision-making processes are transparent and formalized. The second is the level of coordination that occurs between the various structures of the party.

Built upon the selected concept, it is essential to assess the indicators that enable measurement of the levels of inclusiveness, centralization, and institutionalization: *membership and decision-making process, deliberation, formal power divide, party leadership centralization, intra-party consultations procedures, party structures.* By leveraging these indicators, we can delve into the intricate workings of internal power dynamics within the Czech Pirate Party to determine whether the party is centralized or decentralized, as well as assess the extent to which members are given the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes, and whether these processes are governed by clear and transparent rules. The aim of the analysis it to provide insights into the organizational structure to answer the following research question: *Who holds the power in the Czech Pirate Party?*

## Case Description

The Czech Pirate Party was established in 2009, when programmer Jiří Kadeřávek initiated a petition for its formation on the web portal *AbcLinuxu.cz*.[47] This online petition soon garnered one thousand signatures, leading to the official founding of the party. The influence of digital technologies on the party's operations can be traced back to its inception. The Czech Pirate Party differentiates itself from other Pirate Parties primarily through its strong emphasis on transparency and participatory democracy. Unlike its counterparts, the Czech Pirate Party has implemented a robust system for internal party communication and

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[46]  Vicky Randall and Lars Svåsand, "Party Institutionalization in New Democracies," *Party Politics* 8, no. 1 (January 2002): 5-29, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068802008001001.

[47]  Jiří Kadeřávek, "Petice Pod Vznik Česká Pirátské Strany," [Petition for the Establishment of the Czech Pirate Party] www.abclinuxu.cz, April 19, 2009, accessed May 15, 2024, https://www.abclinuxu.cz/blog/BoodOk/2009/4/petice-pod-vznik-ceska-piratske-strany.

decision-making that leverages digital platforms to a greater extent. This approach allows all registered members to participate actively in discussions and vote on key issues, thus promoting a more direct form of democracy. Additionally, the Czech Pirate Party places a unique focus on local issues and integrates its digital rights agenda with broader civic and social concerns specific to the Czech context, such as privacy and anti-corruption measures. This blend of local focus and advanced digital participation distinguishes the Czech Pirate Party from other Pirate Parties across Europe.[48]

The electoral trajectory of the Czech Pirate Party illustrates its progressive establishment and growing influence within the Czech political landscape. Initially, the party struggled to secure significant traction, as evidenced by the 2010 parliamentary elections, where it garnered a mere 0.80% of the vote, failing to obtain any seats. Similarly, in the 2013 parliamentary elections, the party's vote share increased to 2.66%, yet it remained insufficient to secure representation in the Chamber of Deputies. A notable breakthrough occurred during the 2014 European Parliament elections, where the Czech Pirate Party achieved 4.78% of the vote, though this was still insufficient for any seats. The major turning point arrived in the 2017 parliamentary elections, where the party's distinctive anti-establishment campaign, featuring an old prison bus highlighting corruption, and the slogan "Let us blow them down!" resonated with the electorate. This resulted in 10.79% of the vote and twenty-two seats in the Chamber of Deputies, marking their first significant parliamentary representation. The party continued its upward trajectory in the 2019 European Parliament elections, securing 13.95% of the vote, which translated into three seats. The 2018 municipal elections were also noteworthy, with the Pirates securing the pivotal post of Mayor of Prague, highlighting their increasing local influence. The 2021 parliamentary elections were contested in coalition with the Mayors and Independents (STAN). Discussions about forming a coalition of at least some opposition democratic parties had been ongoing since 2017, primarily due to the electoral system's disadvantageous nature for smaller parties. In 2020, speculation regarding a coalition between the

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48    Jääsaari and Hilden, "From File Sharing to Free Culture".

Czech Pirate Party and the STAN movement intensified. These two entities had already tested their collaboration under the name Pirates and Mayors during the 2020 regional elections in the Olomouc Region, where they secured the position of governor for Josef Suchánek. Despite the coalition achieving 15.6% of the vote and thirty-seven seats, preferential voting allocated only four seats to the Pirates. Nonetheless, they managed to secure three ministerial positions in the new government.[49] Most recently, in the 2024 European Parliament elections, the Czech Pirate Party obtained 6.20% of the vote, securing one seat. This result marked a setback for the party, as it represented a loss of two seats compared to the previous European Parliament elections.[50]

*The Pirate Party Forum*

The Czech Pirate Party utilizes an internet forum as a central platform for communication and organization. Despite its longevity since the early days of the party, the forum's appearance may be perceived as outdated by some. Structured into several sections, the forum serves multiple purposes, with its primary role being membership acquisition. Those interested in joining the party introduce themselves on the forum within a specific regional section.[51] To formalize their membership, applicants submit their applications through Onboarding, where they receive a pirate identity upon registration, granting access to a wide array of digital tools within the Czech Pirate Party's ecosystem.[52]

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[49]   iDNES.cz and ČTK, "Piráti Budou Mít Tři Ministry, ODS Pět a Premiéra, TOP 09 Jen Dva," [Pirates Will Have Three Ministers, ODS Five and a Premier, TOP 09 Only Two] iDNES.cz, November 3, 2021, accessed May 15, 2024, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/vlada-ministerstva-koalice-ods-kdu-csl-top-09-pirati-stan.A211103_143825_domaci_remy.

[50]   "Volby.cz – Český Statistický Úřad | ČSÚ," [Czech Statistical Office | CZSO] volby.cz, accessed November 13, 2023, https://volby.cz/.

[51]   "Fórum Pirátské Strany – Stát Se Členem," [Pirate Party Forum - Become a Member] forum.pirati.cz, accessed November 13, 2023, https://forum.pirati.cz/viewforum.php?f=418.

[52]   "Nalodění," [Registration] nalodeni.pirati.cz, accessed November 13, 2023, https://nalodeni.pirati.cz/.

The forum's second important objective is facilitating communication. Members and registered supporters engage in discussions on various topics, including legislative proposals, candidacies, and even everyday matters unrelated to politics. At the same time, members can submit their own proposals, comments, and candidacies. The forum also plays a pivotal role in organizing individual regional and local associations, each of which has its dedicated section for discussions ranging from new member admissions and financial budgets to primary elections and coalition agreements.

An additional function of the forum is the Public Tenders section, offering a comprehensive overview of job positions available within various party bodies. It also outlines selection procedures for filling positions in administrative and supervisory boards occupied by the Pirates.[53] This multifaceted approach emphasizes the forum's significance in the party's internal workings. As evidenced by its diverse functionalities, the forum stands out as the Czech Pirate Party's primary tool for intra-party functioning.


*Onboarding and Octopus*

Individuals interested in becoming members can register through the Onboarding platform, where they obtain a unique "pirate identity" for accessing party systems and applications.[54] Onboarding functions as a self-service portal addressing the needs of party members and registered supporters participating in party events. Here, interested individuals can subscribe to newsletters, manage their profiles, and fulfill membership fee payments.

The verification of identity, membership status, or registered supporter status is handled through the Octopus platform. Due to the sensitive nature of the personal data managed, access to the platform is restricted. Regional chairpersons, coordinators of regional organizations, and representatives of party expert teams are granted access, with all users required to sign a confidentiality agreement. The platform

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[53]  "Veřejná Výběrová Řízení – Fórum Pirátské Strany," [Public Selection Procedures – Pirate Party Forum] forum.pirati.cz, November 9, 2023, https://forum.pirati.cz/view forum.php?f=572.

[54]  "Nalodění."

operates akin to task management software, registering each request and assigning it to the relevant party members or personnel. Octopus also features data synchronization with other systems.[55]

*Helios*

Helios is an open-source online voting system designed with a built-in ballot tracker, ensuring that technical staff or administrators cannot modify votes in any way. The system employs encryption directly in the voter's browser, guaranteeing the security of each individual vote. Importantly, only the sum of all votes for a given option is decrypted, not the individual choices. The integrity of voting anonymity is safeguarded through the involvement of designated trustees.[56] This system finds extensive use among pirates for voting in various types of meetings, particularly within the National Forum. In the Czech Pirate Party, the management of Helios falls under the jurisdiction of its technical department.[57]

**Data, Methods and Operationalization**

The article is based on a single case study of the Czech Pirate Party, aiming to dissect both its formal and informal dynamics within power relationships. The formal aspect of the study involves a thorough analysis of sources provided by the party itself, publicly accessible for scrutiny. This primarily encompasses the party's statutes, offering insights into the formal configuration of membership and organizational structures. Furthermore, the study will leverage the party's official websites and its own Wikipedia platform, which contain comprehensive information on the operation of digital platforms, party structures, voting mechanisms, as well as historical data pertaining to the evolution of the party.

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[55]  "Chobotnice," [Octopus] pirati.cz, accessed November 13, 2023, https://wiki.pirati.cz/ao/chobotnice.

[56]  "Helios Voting," vote.heliosvoting.org, accessed November 13, 2023, https://vote.heliosvoting.org/.

[57]  "Hlasovací Systém Helios," [Helios Voting System] pirati.cz, accessed November 13, 2023, https://wiki.pirati.cz/ao/navody/helios?s.

Turning to the informal facet of the analysis, a method employing semi-structured interviews has been adopted, involving discussions with seven politicians and party employees. The respondents in this study comprise a diverse cohort with varied roles and statuses within the Czech Pirate Party. This includes a regional structure coordinator who is a registered supporter, a former head of the media department who is now no longer a party member, the head of the administrative department who is also a former MP, the head of the technical department, a current Member of the European Parliament, a chairman of a local organization, and a current member of parliament. This diverse representation facilitates a comprehensive examination of the party's internal dynamics. This approach facilitates the acquisition of insider perspectives from diverse positions within intra-party structures. The goal is to compare these perspectives with the outcomes of the formal source analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of the Czech Pirate Party's multifaceted functioning. An overview of the respondents' background and details can be found in the appendix (Table 2).

As previously indicated, this article adopts the conceptual framework proposed by Scarrow, employing the specified indicators to assess three integral components: inclusiveness, centralization, and institutionalization.[58] This evaluation will focus on six chosen indicators.

Inclusiveness, a critical dimension, will be gauged through the indicators of *membership and decision-making* process and *deliberation*. The former will be examined by delving into the party statutes, wherein an analysis will reveal the requisite steps for acquiring membership and whether the process leans towards selectivity or inclusivity. A parallel analysis of the decision-making process will be conducted using the party statutes, complemented by insights derived from semi-structured interviews. Moreover, the deliberative process will be investigated by analyzing not only the party statutes but also by probing its practical implementation. The article will delve into a specific case study, namely the debate on entering the government, recognized as a pivotal juncture for any political party.[59]

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[58]   Scarrow, "Political Parties and Democracy in Theoretical and Practical Perspectives".

[59]   Oscar Barberà and Juan Rodríguez-Teruel, "The PSOE's Deliberation and Democratic Innovations in Turbulent Times for the Social Democracy," *European Political Science* 19, no. 2 (January 9, 2020): 212–21, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-019-00236-y.

Focusing on the 2021 Forum debate on government entry, the analysis will encompass the temporal scope of the discourse, the participants involved (categorized as members, registered sympathizers, or citizens), the quantity of contributions, and the diversity of perspectives presented during the debate.

Centralization will also be scrutinized utilizing the previously mentioned indicators: *party leadership centralization* and *formal power divide*. The analysis of party-leadership centralization will draw upon responses obtained from interviews. Participants were queried on their perception of whether the Czech Pirate Party exhibits centralization or decentralization, as well as their views on the role of a leader within the party. The assessment of *formal power divide* will be conducted through a thorough examination of the party statutes to discern the formal mechanisms by which power is distributed within the party.

In the final segment, the analysis will shift its focus to the process of institutionalization, gauged through *intra-party consultation procedures* and *party structures*. Regarding the analysis of *intra-party consultation procedures*, party statutes and interviews will be employed to ascertain whether the initiation of these procedures is a complex process, reserved solely for the party central body, or if ordinary members can also instigate them. Furthermore, insights from interviews will be utilized to understand the practical aspects of this procedural process. The exploration of *party structures* will entail a thorough examination of both party constitutions and party websites. This analysis aims to discern the presence of internal party structures and shed light on their powers and operational mechanisms between them.

## Empirical Evidence

### Membership and the Decision-making Process

As previously detailed in the section discussing the digital platforms of the Czech Pirate Party, individuals interested in joining must initiate the membership process through Onboarding, which is facilitated by Octopus. The approval of membership applications is contingent upon review by

either the regional organization board or the local organization.[60] Respondent 6 underscores that prospective members typically need to introduce themselves to a local organization, where they undergo a comprehensive interview conducted by other members probing their political views and visions.[61] In addition, candidates are required to regularly attend party and other meetings. The acceptance of a new member typically takes weeks or a few months. However, there are instances where applicants are not accepted and are instead encouraged to engage as registered sympathizers.[62] Consequently, the membership registration process in the Czech Pirate Party is a selective and protracted procedure, reminiscent of the membership processes seen in cadre parties. This exclusive membership is an unusual characteristic in digital parties.[63] For example, the Swedish and German Pirate Parties have completely open membership processes, requiring only online registration and identity verification.[64] The same approach is observed in the Movement of 5 Stars and Podemos.[65] This deviation from Gerbaudo's concept of digital parties contributes to the Czech Pirate Party's minimal membership base.[66] While the Swedish Pirate Party peaked at 50,000 members, the German party had 35,000, Podemos had 480,000, and the Movement of 5 Stars had 250,000.[67] In contrast, the Czech Pirate Party had a maximum of 1,238 members in 2023, an exceptionally low number compared to other digital parties.

On the other hand, membership itself is highly inclusive. Every party member enjoys equal rights and opportunities. In terms of rights, each party member has the privilege to vote in any National Forum poll, predominantly conducted online throughout the year. Voting options for each member include selecting leadership, choosing candidates for political and party positions, coalition agreements, changes to statutes,

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[60] "Stanovy České Pirátské Strany," [Statutes of the Czech Pirate Party] pirati.cz, February 25, 2021, https://wiki.pirati.cz/rules/st.

[61] Respondent 6, Zoom online call, March 25, 2023.

[62] Respondent 1, Zoom online call, April 20, 2023.

[63] Deseriis, "Two Variants of the Digital Party".

[64] Bolleyer, Little, and von Nostitz, "Implementing Democratic Equality in Political Parties."

[65] Gerbaudo, "Are Digital Parties More Democratic than Traditional Parties?"

[66] Gerbaudo, "The Digital Party."

[67] Bolleyer, Little, and von Nostitz, "Implementing Democratic Equality in Political Parties;" Gerbaudo, "Are Digital Parties More Democratic than Traditional Parties?"

government entry, and the removal of members from party functions. Members also have the right to vote in their respective regional and local organizations.[68] Regarding the options available to members, Respondent 6 describes them as diverse, although the full extent of these options is not easily understood, and it generally takes time for members to fully utilize their rights.[69] In comparison to the selective member selection process, membership itself is inclusive, with all members enjoying equal rights and possibilities to get involved.

*Deliberation*

The research conducted by Voda and Vodová serves as a conclusive demonstration of the presence of deliberative elements within the local branch of the Czech Pirate Party situated in the city of Brno.[70] As elucidated in the dedicated section on the National Forum, a predefined temporal framework is allocated for deliberation and contemplation during voting processes, exhibiting temporal variability yet generally encompassing periods of several days or even a week. The analytical focus is directed towards the pivotal vote on governmental accession in the year 2021. Commencing on November 8, 2021, the deliberative process on the Forum continued until November 12, 2021. During this deliberative phase, a substantial corpus of 350 contributions was submitted by 126 distinct contributors, comprising 123 party members, two registered sympathizers, and one unaffiliated Forum user. The termination of the debate witnessed the exposition of positions by both the proponent and antagonist, culminating in the initiation of the voting procedure. Notably, an impressive 91% of the party membership actively participated in the voting process, constituting the highest turnout recorded since the party's inception into parliamentary proceedings in 2017. This decisive engagement led to the successful integration of the Czech Pirate Party into the government. The analytical scrutiny unequivocally substantiates

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68   "Stanovy České Pirátské Strany."
69   Respondent 6, Zoom online call, March 25, 2023.
70   Voda and Vodová, "The Effects of Deliberation in Czech Pirate Party."

the existence of deliberative structural components within the operational framework of the Czech Pirate Party. Respondent 7 affirms that the intentional inclusion of deliberative elements was ingrained in the party's founding ethos.[71] Nevertheless, an astute observation is made regarding instances where the deliberative process diminishes in significance, as participants lacking expertise in the pertinent subject matter contribute, thereby considerably attenuating the expeditiousness of the decision-making process.

This procedural modality, delineated within the context of governmental voting, is uniformly applicable to all other voting scenarios across various hierarchical levels. The temporal extent of the deliberative discourse may exhibit variability but typically extends over several days.[72]

*Formal Power Divide*

The Czech Pirate Party operates with a tripartite structure at the national level, comprising the apex entity known as the National Forum. This paramount organ encompasses the entire membership, each vested with voting rights. The National Forum exercises jurisdiction over all party affairs, including the establishment and dissolution of commissions and expert teams. Additionally, it holds the authority to elect and dismiss the other two integral organs of the party: the Republic Committee and the Republic Presidency, led by the party chairman. Functioning akin to a party parliament, the Republic Committee is constituted by fourteen members elected by regional organizations, with each organization appointing one representative. The National Forum further elects an additional ten to thirty members to the Republic Committee. The prerogatives of the Republic Committee encompass pivotal responsibilities such as determining the value of membership fees, sanctioning budgetary and financial reports, assigning tasks to the Republic Presidency, and endorsing programmatic and conceptual documents. In extraordinary circumstances, the Republic Committee holds the right to modify the list of candidates. The final

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[71]   Respondent 7, Zoom online call, March 28, 2023.
[72]   "Stanovy České Pirátské Strany."

organizational body is the Republic Presidency, comprising five members, one of whom assumes the role of chairman. As the statutory and executive body, the Republic Presidency assumes responsibility for the party, executing the mandates issued by the National Forum and the Republic Committee. Externally, the party's chairman represents the party.[73]

An analysis of the formal distribution of power, as per the party's statutes, indicates a concerted effort by the Czech Pirate Party to decentralize power. This is evident in the predominant authority vested in the National Forum, a body inclusive of all members. The party chairman, in turn, wields minimal authority within the party's formal structure. From a formal perspective, it is thereby discerned that the Czech Pirate Party adheres to a decentralized model, dispersing power across a broad spectrum of its membership.

## *Party Leadership Centralization*

From a formal power division standpoint, the Czech Pirate Party appears decentralized; however, an examination of its actual operational dynamics yields varied perspectives among respondents. Three participants characterized the party as centralized, while the remaining four deemed it decentralized. Respondent 1 contends that centralization is evident in the active management of the party by thirty-five individuals, namely, the Republic Committee and the presidency.[74] These entities play a proactive role in formulating party policies, subject to endorsement by the National Forum through plebiscite voting. Respondents 2 and 4, who assert an even higher degree of centralization.[75] In contrast, Respondent 3 challenges the characterization of the party as centralized, citing the substantial regional control over nearly two-thirds of the party's financial resources.[76] Respondent 7 contributes that all candidate selection processes, excluding European elections, transpire at the regional and local levels, thereby limiting the central leadership's influence

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[73]  "Stanovy České Pirátské Strany."
[74]  Respondent 1, Zoom online call, April 20, 2023.
[75]  Respondent 2, Zoom online call, April 5, 2023; Respondent, Zoom online call, April 18, 2023.
[76]  Respondent 3, Zoom online call, March 20, 2023.

over these processes.[77] Additionally, Respondent 5 acknowledges a minimal role for the central leadership within the party, but highlights their advantageous position in terms of media visibility and the potential for building personal notoriety, thereby enhancing their power and popularity within the party.[78] The respondent notes a perceptible uptick in centralization after the party's entry into Parliament in 2017. The analysis reveals subtle centralization tendencies within the Czech Pirate Party, although it falls short of indicating dominance by a singular leader or a narrow group of elites. This increment in centralization could be attributed to the personalization of party leadership. Conversely, the noteworthy decentralization is underscored by the substantial financial autonomy of regional party organizations, acting as a safeguard against undue centralization of power.

### Intra-party Consultation Procedures

As mentioned above, the highest body of the Czech Pirate Party is the National Forum, where members can vote and submit membership proposals. A membership proposal may concern a legislative proposal, a recall proposal, a request for an extraordinary review, changes to statutes, or the nomination of a candidate for a political or party position. A member submits their proposal and creates a survey with options: *for*, *against*, and *abstain*. The proposal must obtain the required number of votes to be sent by the administrative department to all party members. The required number of votes is always the square root of the total number of members. For a membership of 1238, thirty-six votes are needed, representing the support of 2.9% of the membership base. For the proposal to be included in the national forum agenda and be subject to voting, it needs to garner two square roots of the total number, which is seventy-two votes and 5.8% of the membership base. Additionally, the proposal must have more positive votes than negative ones. Following this procedure, the consultation is submitted to all members for voting.[79]

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[77]   Respondent 7, Zoom online call, March 28, 2023.

[78]   Respondent 5, Zoom online call, March 19, 2023.

[79]   "Členské Podněty – Fórum Pirátské Strany," [Member Suggestions – Pirate Party Forum] forum.pirati.cz, November 13, 2023, https://forum.pirati.cz/viewforum.php?f=350.

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A member can calculate the current number of required votes using the web calculator, which is part of the party platform Tools.[80] Submitting a proposal for a vote in the national forum is not demanding. Respondent 3 considers this system functional because most National Forum votes come from membership proposals, aligning with the party's vision of direct democracy.[81] Respondent 6 describes the risks associated with a low threshold for proposal submission.[82] According to him, situations arise where a portion of the membership can disrupt the party's continuity in the central office by making decisions that weaken their position. He suggests that a high level of membership inclusion can, in certain phases of party development, pose more of a problem than a solution, citing the example of the government engagement of the Czech Pirate Party.

*Party Structures*

In accordance with its statutes, the Czech Pirate Party features a comprehensive organizational framework.[83] Beyond the pivotal National Forum, the party encompasses regional and local organizations within its membership structures. These entities wield substantive powers, with regional organizations exercising control over approximately 60% of the party's financial resources, thereby enjoying significant autonomy. This financial autonomy is further distributed among local organizations. In matters pertaining to the selection of candidates and leaders, considerable autonomy is afforded to regional organizations. The election of the board, both at the regional and local levels, is within the purview of the respective organizations. Additionally, regional organizations exercise autonomy in selecting candidates through primary elections for regional, parliamentary, and senate elections. Noteworthy, however, is the exception in the case of local elections, where candidates are nominated by the local

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[80] "Kalkulačka Velikosti Skupiny Členů," [Member Group Size Calculator] tools.pirati.cz, accessed November 15, 2023, https://tools.pirati.cz/vypocet-skupiny-clenu/.
[81] Respondent 3, Zoom online call, March 20, 2023.
[82] Respondent 6, Zoom online call, March 25, 2023.
[83] "Stanovy České Pirátské Strany."

association.[84] The territorial coverage of regional and local organizations extends across all Czech regions, encompassing regional and major urban centers.

Beyond membership structures, the Czech Pirate Party has established expert teams sanctioned by the National Forum. These teams specialize in diverse domains such as technical administration, HR management, administrative affairs, *etc*.


## Conclusion

This study has investigated the structure and functioning of the Czech Pirate Party, aiming to answer the question of who holds power within this digital party and whether it is organized top-down or bottom-up. The analysis, grounded in both formal and informal processes and structures, has been evaluated according to Scarrow's criteria. The Czech Pirate Party exhibits a medium degree of inclusiveness, a low degree of centralization, and a high degree of institutionalization.

Unlike other digital parties with open membership processes, the Czech Pirate Party requires new members to attend local organization meetings and undergo detailed interviews, making it cadre oriented.[85] However, once individuals become members, they experience a high degree of inclusiveness, with the ability to vote on all party matters and propose alternative suggestions.

The party adopts a deliberative approach, allowing members to express their opinions on all votes and present alternative proposals. However, this open deliberative process has drawbacks, such as slowing down decision-making, and reducing its quality due to a lack of expert knowledge. Deeper research is necessary to better understand the overall functioning of the deliberative space within the party. The current analysis focused primarily on structures and formal processes, while practical aspects of deliberation, such as the quality of discussions, the level of expertise, and the efficiency of decision-making processes, remain underexplored.

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[84]   "Stanovy České Pirátské Strany."
[85]   Deseriis, "Two Variants of the Digital Party."

The Czech Pirate Party is decentralized, with leadership positions being mainly representative without substantial powers. Most processes occur either at the National Forum level or within regional structures, which also manage 60% of the party's annual budget, preventing centralization by the party leadership.

The analysis of institutionalization indicated that the Czech Pirate Party has well-defined roles in the decision-making process, which is highly transparent. The option to submit member proposals for voting in the National Forum is not overly demanding and requires a relatively small portion of the membership for validity. However, this inclusiveness also has negative impacts, such as weakening the party's position in the central office and reducing its legitimacy, creating a gap between the membership and the central office.

This study contributes new insights to the existing literature on digital parties. While existing research suggests that digital parties are organized top-down, with decision-making controlled by the central leadership, as seen in Podemos and the Five Star Movement, our study demonstrates that digital parties can also be organized bottom-up, where members play a significant role in the decision-making process.[86]

It is important to note that the general conclusions of this study are limited by the small membership size of the Czech Pirate Party and the specific conditions of the Czech political context. The maximum number of members in 2023 was 1,238, which is very low compared to other digital parties. This fact may affect the generalizability of the results to other digital parties.

Future research should test the generalizability of these findings in other digital parties, especially Pirate Parties. A quantitative analysis of intra-party voting could provide a closer look at the distribution of power in these digital parties. Additionally, in-depth qualitative research focused on deliberative processes within parties should be conducted to better understand their functioning, efficiency, and impact on the overall dynamics of party decision-making.

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[86] Deseriis and Vittori, "The Impact of Online Participation Platforms on the Internal Democracy of Two Southern European Parties;" Gerbaudo, "Are Digital Parties more Democratic than Traditional Parties?;" Gerbaudo, "The Digital Party;" Vittori, "Membership and Members' Participation in New Digital Parties."

Overall, this study reveals that power in the Czech Pirate Party is held by its members, who control the direction of the party through the National Forum. The party is thus organized in a bottom-up manner, which can bring a high degree of democracy but also some negative consequences, such as a loss of continuity between the leadership and the membership and reduced efficiency in decision-making processes.

*Appendix*

*Table 1*

**Electoral results of the Czech Pirate Party**

| Candidate Party | Year | Election Type | Vote Share | Seats |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Czech Pirate Party | 2010 | Parliamentary | 0,80% | 0/200 |
| Czech Pirate Party | 2013 | Parliamentary | 2,66% | 0/200 |
| Czech Pirate Party | 2014 | European | 4,78% | 0/21 |
| Czech Pirate Party | 2017 | Parliamentary | 10,79% | 22/200 |
| Czech Pirate Party | 2019 | European | 13,95% | 3/21 |
| Pirates and Mayors (Coalition) | 2021 | Parliamentary | 15,6% | 4/200 |
| Czech Pirate Party | 2024 | European | 6,20% | 1/21 |

*Source:* volby.cz

*Table 2*

**Description of respondents.**

| Designation of the respondent | Function | Status |
|---|---|---|
| Respondent 1 | Regional structure coordinator | Registered supporter |
| Respondent 2 | A former head of the media department | Former Member |
| Respondent 3 | Head of the administrative department, former member of Parliament | Member |
| Respondent 4 | Head of the technical department | Member |
| Respondent 5 | Member of the European Parliament | Member |
| Respondent 6 | Chairman of the local organization | Member |
| Respondent 7 | Member of the Parliament | Member |

*Source: author's own elaboration,* based on the semi-structured interviews.