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Activating without Transforming: The Use of Technology to Engage Activists in Political Campaigns

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ABSTRACT
We analyze how new technologies can be used to foster individual engagement that limits deliberation and reduces people's capacity for political action within parties. We present the results of an analysis of the case of the Argentinean Propuesta Republicana (PRO). Using data from in-depth interviews with key actors—party elites and political consultants—we show that new technologies helped to mobilize almost 1 million volunteers in presidential elections, without transforming them into party stakeholders. This incorporation, though successful for organization and mobilization, reinforced the existing distribution of power within the party, by activating new adherents without engaging them in a collective organizational structure.

Keywords: Argentina; ICT; party organization; campaigns; individual engagement

Introduction

How does the incorporation of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) affect the ways people engage in party organizations? Technology has dramatically changed social and political interactions. The literature has explained the historical evolution of parties' organizational structure and how technological changes affect party and society interactions (Katz and Mair 1995), especially how changes in political communication tools affect the way political campaigns are undertaken (Epstein 2018). In principle, technological innovations have reduced the costs of connecting, organizing, and engaging people with politics (Earl and Kimport 2011). However, changes in ICTs do not affect all parties uniformly; the change is mediated by preexisting organizational structures, the competitive context, and leaders' decisions (Piñeiro-Rodríguez et al. 2025).

One of the most important changes introduced by the ICTs revolution is the dramatic reduction in the cost of information and communication for organizing political action (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Earl and Kimport 2011; Karpf 2012). New ICTs help political parties and candidates to campaign, organize, and mobilize voters without having to pay prohibitive costs. Contemporary political campaigns have increased their ability to contact prospective supporters in a personalized way. This provides an opportunity not only to increase electoral mobilization but also to increase individuals' engagement with the party. However, not all parties use new ICTs to increase engagement in partisan or campaign activities (Römmele 2003). Before the Internet became a "mundane tool" (Nielsen 2013), it was only possible to engage supporters as activists through collective instances of participation. It was virtually impossible to activate adherents on

an individual basis to collaborate with party campaign activities. Activists, therefore, were typically organized in groups, with a geographical or a functional reference.

We claim that, for parties' organizational purpose, the most important change introduced by new ICTs is the opportunity for parties to contact and organize large numbers of prospective volunteers on an atomized basis; for example, campaign managers can reach many volunteers simultaneously in a personalized manner to solicit individual actions. We further argue that this substantive change in the relationship between campaigns and supporters has implications for the potential transformative effect of technology on the organization of parties. New ICTs have eliminated the need for collective instances to convene people to work for the party and to engage in party campaigns. We argue that engaging people in an atomized fashion prevents them from transforming into political actors within the party. Their only options are exit or loyalty (Hirschman 1970) because, in parties, voice can only be effective if one is part of a collective structure. New ICTs have not only reduced the cost of reaching out to prospective campaign volunteers and organizing them but also have the capacity to include them without needing to make them stakeholders of the organization.

Technology can be functional to the development of different types of organizations. Notwithstanding the potential expansion of possibilities for organizing people that technological changes enable, new ICTs also facilitate the construction or consolidation of organizational arrangements that can activate people for political action in atomized ways. Identifying how new ICTs affect organizing is crucial for understanding their impact on the strategies used to politically engage adherents. In the past, political action necessarily entailed organizing groups of people who had to meet on a regular basis. There was no costly effective technology to indicate a course of action without face-to-face encounters. Pyramidal organizational structures, where each node is in charge of different people in an individual manner was constrained by the capacity of each node to manage other people individually (e.g., the number of people the node could contact by telephone). In the present, new ICTs—especially email and every instant messaging app—make it possible to organize more people without relying on groups. Individuals can engage with the party on their own and the party can interact with them on an individual basis. This atomization can engender the extreme situation where two activists in the same area do not need to know each other. We claim that the ability to engage supporters on an individual basis, at low cost, without transforming them into party stakeholders, helps understand why party leaders who were reluctant to invest in enlarging party organizations by engaging people in party activities are now willing to develop electoral campaigns based on the activation of supporters.

In this article, we analyze why and how technology was incorporated and how it led a party organization to engage adherents on a grand scale for electoral campaigning. More specifically, we present the results of an in-depth analysis of the case of the Argentine Propuesta Republicana, (Republican Proposal, PRO). We show how new technologies helped the PRO mobilize almost 1 million volunteers in presidential elections, without transforming them into party stakeholders. We rely on data from in-depth interviews with party elites and political consultants. The PRO, a professional electoral party dominated by a small elite of party leaders (Vommaro 2023), was an early and successful adopter of technology for campaigning and organizing. It is a typical case in the Latin American context of a party that adopted new ICTs to engage supporters in an electoral campaign without needing to incorporate them into the party organization. This incorporation, though successful for engaging and activating supporters, reinforced the existing distribution of power within the party, by activating new adherents without engaging them in a collective organizational structure.

This article first discusses the impact of technological changes on the ways parties engage citizens as volunteers within party organizations. Second, we present the methods and case selection criteria of our study. Third, we present our analysis of the nuanced effect of technology

on organization in the case of the PRO. Fourth, we conclude our article with some additional theoretical and political implications of our analysis.

Theory

Changes in ICTs have facilitated collective organization by dramatically reducing the costs of collective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Bimber 2003; Bimber et al. 2012; Chadwick 2017; Earl and Kimport 2011). The massive penetration of the Internet and, more recently, the mobile Internet, has increased the number of people that can be organized and mobilized using new technological tools. Collective action in political parties is, by definition, complex and necessarily sustained (Aldrich 1995). New ICTs have introduced changes in the practices of traditional organizations. Yet, the effects of technological innovation on collective action in party organizations cannot be explained without considering how they use such technologies to engage people in their activities. Collective action in political parties is determined by organizational structure, rules, and leaders' decisions (Piñeiro-Rodríguez et al. 2025). As Fisher et al. (2023) highlight in their study of Nigerian parties, the use of new ICTs tends to reproduce the existing features and dynamics of party organizations. Raniolo et al. (2021) observed similar dynamics in their analysis of old and new parties in Italy, Spain, France, and Greece.

Before new ICTs became a "mundane tool" (Nielsen 2011), the organization of people to carry out an effective political action required their incorporation in a group—often with a territorial reference (e.g., the neighborhood, the city, the factory). In the past, to efficiently distribute information and organize large numbers of people, it was necessary to gather people in groups. People working in these groups were eventually transformed into activists (Han 2014). Moreover, in the past, when an organization called members or supporters to political action, they not only were eventually transformed into activists but also transformed the organization by becoming stakeholders in the organization. Including more members as stakeholders implied increasing the power of activists vis-à-vis leaders, because the former acquired the power to keep leaders accountable. While collective engagement (of members or supporters in groups) remains available as an organizational strategy to include people in the organization, new ICTs enable a new way to engage supporters that we call *individual engagement*.

Party elites can ask adherents to perform campaign actions individually, without needing to incorporate them as part of the party organization, in other words, without transforming adherents' status. The novelty of new ICTs, as Bennett and Segerberg (2013) claim, rests upon their capacity to foster large-scale personalized political engagement. New ICTs facilitate a massive one-to-one linkage between the organization and each adherent. For example, instant messaging apps or email not only reduce the cost of communication but also facilitate greater personalization of the messages and controlled interactivity. New ICT affordances enable leaders to individually interact with members of the organization (Stromer-Galley 2019).

The new ICTs that afford parties the capacity to activate supporters individually has impacted all parties. However, ICTs have been particularly important for understanding right-wing parties' ability to engage supporters in campaign activities (Gold and Peña 2021; Schradie 2019). Right-wing parties, especially in Latin America, have traditionally relied on small elite-based organizations developed in a top-down manner (Gibson 1996; Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser). As Gold and Peña (2021) highlight, new ICTs afford the opportunity to establish a new emergent linkage strategy to mobilize constituencies, a strategy that differs from the elite-centric model that characterized these parties in Latin America. The authors describe this linkage as "less demanding and confined to electoral periods [and] rests on the vertical strategies used by the party and its elite allies to rally individualized support or co-opted social blocs" (Gold and Peña 2021, 98). This "digitally intermediated" linkage strategy also facilitates interaction with autonomous digital activists who support the party (Gold and Peña 2021, 98). Notwithstanding these electoral

mobilizational strategies and the capacity to establish new linkages, these changes also affect the capacity of the party to activate supporters to perform campaign tasks. The individual engagement parallels the digitally intermediated linkages described by Gold and Peña (2021) for the role supporters play in the internal organizational structure.

Political parties, qua political organizations, can develop different organizational forms, with or without activists. According to Scarrow (2015), there are different types of parties with different types of membership: professional electoral parties with members, professional electoral parties without members (a cadre of professional politicians), and organic parties with members and activists. New ICTs can serve these three types and can be useful in changing from one type of party organization to another, helping to empower or substitute the power of grassroots activists and their collective engagement. Some of the literature on the incorporation of new ICTs in European parties describes the similarities and differences of these processes across parties (Barberà et al. 2021; González-Cacheda and Cancela Outeda 2024).

Electoral campaigns incentivize the incorporation of new ICTs. The promise of reaching voters at low cost and the availability of microtargeting strategies have increased politicians' interest in including technology in their campaigns (Issenberg 2012). According to Nielsen (2012), new ICTs have increased the value of personalized political communication and the value of using "people as media for political communication" (2012, 7). During electoral campaigns, adherents can be activated to engage with the party through their involvement with campaign activities. New technologies allow parties to decide whether to activate adherents in groups, as has traditionally been done, or to activate them individually. In the former scenario, parties build groups (or rely on autonomously-created groups) and delegate tasks and political actions to those groups in the field, as was the case in Obama for America (McKenna and Han 2014). In the latter scenario, adherents are individually asked to perform campaign tasks (distribute messages, share their personal contacts with the party, participate in rallies or other campaign events, and even asked to do canvassing).

Parties and campaigns traditionally carry out different combinations of engagement strategies at the same time, with the goal of involving people with different predispositions to engage with the party or the campaign. As Scarrow (2015) emphasized, parties develop membership with different levels of engagement, namely multi-speed membership. However, the novelty introduced by new technologies in political campaigns is that they have created the possibility of asking massive numbers of individuals to perform more tasks without becoming part of a collective structure; in other words, they expanded the possibilities of individual engagement. Doroshenko (2022) describes how Zelensky's 2019 presidential campaign in Ukraine made extensive use of new ICTs and facilitated different forms of engagement with the campaign.

Different types of engagement, individual or collective, have different effects on parties. For example, exercising voice effectively inside an organization requires being part of a collective structure. Therefore, individual engagement only allows members the option of remaining loyal or simply exiting the organization, in Hirschman's (1970) terms. Even when political organizations that essentially promote individual engagement develop mechanisms to exercise voice, those instances remain as leadership-controlled mechanisms (Gerbaudo 2021) or as controlled interactions (Stromer-Galley 2019).[1] In such organizations, voice is characterized as an individual expression of preferences and not as the result of collective deliberation and decision-making processes. Leaders control these processes through their power to control the agenda and the aggregation of preferences. As a result, in these cases, new ICTs facilitate supporters' interaction

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[1]Stromer-Galley (2019) depicts individual engagement with presidential campaigns in the United Staes as "controlled interactivity": an interaction restricted to engaging people in campaign activities without including them in effective participation and deliberation. In his study of the new political movements Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy and Podemos in Spain, Gerbaudo (2021) also questions the democratizing effects of online decision-making platforms within parties.

with the party and the political activation of a large number of people, but without substantive political incorporation (Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017).

New ICTs have facilitated the massive inclusion of individuals within party structures and have engendered transformations in party practices (Gibson 2020). However, this inclusion does not necessarily challenge the concentration of power in the hands of party elites (Gerbaudo 2021; Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017). Massive individual engagement might actually indirectly dilute the power of those who, through collective engagement within the organization, seek to challenge or keep accountable the organization's leaders. The processes of massive individual engagement might legitimize the positions of the leaders vis-à-vis the position of collectively engaged activists. This is the explanation of an otherwise paradoxical leadership strategy and organizational outcome: on the one hand, the leaders' strategic choice to enlarge the membership and the establishment of channels for the individual expression of preferences and, on the other hand, the concomitant increase in the concentration of power in the hands of the elites. This is observable, for example, in the Brazilian Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers Party, PT). Since the early 2000s, this party has increased its membership and has included in its statutes different forms through which members can express their preferences, such as a members' plebiscite (Amaral 2010; Ribeiro 2014). However, this process paralleled the total concentration of power in the hands of Lula's faction, Campo Mayoritario (Majoritarian Camp) (Ribeiro 2008). Technology facilitates this type of strategy through the enactment of rapidly executed large-scale consultation of adherents or sympathizers. Technologically-enabled interactivity encourages individual engagement, but does not necessarily affect the structure of power in the organization and may even concentrate more power in the hands of the party elite.

Parties differ in how labor intensive their campaigns are (i.e., the number of activists they use to campaign). As a result of new technologies, campaigns can also vary with respect to how their volunteers engage with the campaign and with the party structure (Peña and Gold 2023). Parties can or cannot promote the engagement of volunteers in the electoral campaign. Once they decide to use volunteers in an intensive way, they can also decide what type of volunteer engagement they want to promote, that is, individual or collective engagement. In the case of the Obama campaigns (2008 and 2012), the organizers promoted the massive incorporation of volunteers in the campaign. While the Obama campaigns had a significant individual engagement component, the innovation of these campaigns was the introduction of collective engagement through groups of volunteers who were in charge of the field campaign at the local level, as McKenna and Han (2014) describe. The authors emphasize that this collective engagement implied the transfer of campaign responsibilities to groups of people in the field which, in turn, transformed supporters into activists and local leaders. These campaigns made intensive use of new ICTs and people to foster collective engagement. Conversely, as we will detail below, the campaigns of the PRO in Argentina in 2015 and 2019 made intensive use of new ICTs and volunteers, but mainly fostered individual engagement. Thus, supporters were not incorporated into any collective structure of the party or the campaign.

The most disruptive ICT innovation for party organizations is the possibility of engaging people individually as volunteers in campaigns and dispensing with collective instances of engagement. This atomized form of engagement prevents those volunteers from becoming party stakeholders. Therefore, incorporating new ICTs in this way allays the fears party elites may have that activating adherents in campaigns may pose to their control of the party organization.

Atomized individuals cannot exercise effective voice because the asymmetry between the individual and party elites is individually unsurmountable. The only way for individuals to acquire power is through organizing collective action inside the party, either to influence decision-making or to compete for office. As Gerbaudo (2021), Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein (2017) have emphasized, new ICTs facilitate massive incorporation without power distribution.

Methods and Case Selection

The PRO during its 2015 and 2019 campaigns is a "typical case" for our descriptive inference and theory (Gerring 2017). The PRO is a right-wing party in Latin America that relied on a small elite base organization developed in a top-down manner (Vommaro 2023) and thus can be characterized as a professional electoral type of party (Panebianco 1988). This organizational structure is typical in the Latin American context (Luna et al. 2022) where parties, especially those born during the Third Wave of democracy, often are electoral vehicles with weak organizational structures and a small elite that controls the party (Levitsky et al. 2016). Focusing on this case allows us to observe a process other parties in the region also underwent, in other words, the incorporation of new ICTs and its effects on the relationship between elites, activists, and adherents.

The PRO took advantage of new ICTs to activate supporters without changing the nature of its organizational structure. The PRO pursued this strategy of intensive use of technology to recruit and activate volunteers through individual engagement. Other campaigns and parties in Latin America have also adopted new ICTs to incorporate supporters in the campaign. One recent notorious case is Rodolfo Hernández in Colombia (Piñeiro-Rodríguez et al. 2025). This case shows how new ICTs can be used to obviate the need to engage volunteers via groups with territorial or functional reference. This case also shows how individual engagement does not transform individuals into party stakeholders. Finally, the case of the PRO also affords us the opportunity to explore the particularities of how parties incorporated technology to reach prospective volunteers and activate them for political campaigns in Latin America.

Technology development facilitated construction of the PRO and the electoral campaign that brought Mauricio Macri to the presidency in 2015. However, the case also shows the nuanced effects of technology on the type of political engagement of volunteers. The party made an early and intensive use of different new ICT tools for electoral mobilization. Most of these tools were used during Mauricio Macri's mayoral administrations (2007–15). In the 2015 and 2019 presidential election campaigns, the PRO, and Cambiemos, intensively used new ICTs for electoral mobilization in general and, more specifically, to engage volunteers in the campaign. After Macri lost the 2019 presidential election, his leadership was increasingly contested and two factions competed for the party leadership. The party no longer had a unified strategy for the use of new ICTs, which were now handled by each faction separately. Our case study consisted of an in-depth analysis of the process and decisions that led to the PRO's incorporation of new ICTs to recruit and activate supporters in campaigns.

The evidence presented in this article is based on our extensive research regarding the PRO (Vommaro 2023). We have expanded this research with 19 in-depth interviews with key actors to elucidate the process by which the PRO incorporated new ICTs. The interviewees included communications consultants, former campaign managers, and PRO leaders and members. We selected the interviewees based on their knowledge and on their participation in the process of incorporating new ICTs in the PRO (see Table 1 for a list of interviewees). In the analysis of the interviews, we considered the proximity to the outcome of interest and the eventual bias of interviewees (Fynn et al. 2022). We selected interviewees to accomplish three different goals. The first type of interviewees (type 1), consultants and service providers, provided contextual information about the incorporation of new ICTs in Argentine parties and campaigns. The second type of interviewees (type 2), PRO leaders, members, and communications officers (especially at the local level), provided information about how the new ICTs interacted with the existing structure and how they were used in practice during the campaigns. Finally, the third type of interviewees (type 3), people who carried out the process of incorporating new ICTs in the PRO, allowed us to obtain first-hand information about how and why the leaders of the PRO decided to use new ICTs to recruit and engage volunteers in campaigns (Riera, Morales, and Bianchi) (see Table 1). We also triangulated the evidence with press and party documents. All interviewees read

Table 1. List of Interviewees

Name	Position	Affiliation	Type of interviewee
Hugo Alconada Mon	Journalist specialized in the use of new ICTs in government	La Nación	1
Renata Avignolo	Journalist, community manager, and political communication consultant	PRO, Senior community manager at the Ministry of Government of the City of Buenos Aires and head of press at the Chamber of Senators of the Province of Buenos Aires.	2
Federico Bais	Big data consultant	ENCOM	1
Esteban Bianchi	Communications office	PRO	3
Fabricio Cheiro	Municipal councillor	PRO, Municipality of José C. Paz	2
Ana Clemente	Digital media officer	PRO, Ministry of Public Affairs, Province of Buenos Aires	2
Gastón Douek	Owner of one of the main consulting firms in Argentina, specialist in the use of ICTs for campaigns and government management.	Illuminati Lab—Social Media Intelligence	1
Pablo Fernández	Journalist and specialist in ICTs. Throughout the Macri administration, he conducted investigations into the government's use of ICTs.	Chequeado	1
Matías Ferreiros	Municipal councillor	PRO, Municipality of José C. Paz	2
Sol Figueroa	Communications officer	PRO, Municipality of Quilmes	2
Luciano Galup	Big data consultant	Menta Comunicación	1
Federico Morales	Political campaign consultant in charge of developing the PRO's network of volunteers	PRO	3
Juan Pablo Ruiz	Data analyst	Gallup	1
Nicolás Pechersky	Communications officer	PRO	2
Guillermo Riera	Digital marketing Consultant in charge of developing new ICTs in the PRO	PRO	3
Gonzalo Roqué	Marketing consultant	Roqué-In	1
Ramiro Serrano	Digital marketing party officer	PRO	2
Estefanía Smole	Digital activist	PRO	2
Federico Suárez	Minister of public affairs, in charge of the government's political communications	PRO, Province of Buenos Aires	2

and signed an informed consent form.[2] All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. We analyzed the transcripts and the audio files to obtain evidence regarding the process of incorporating new ICTs in the PRO (Collier 1999, 2011; Mosley 2013). We have also conducted an extensive review of the press and party documents that discussed the PRO's use of new ICTs. We

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[2]Ethics in Research Committee. 2019. Universidad Diego Portales, Chile. Project #004-2019, April 29.

conducted the bulk of the fieldwork for this article between July and December 2019 and during the first semester of 2021.

Empirical Analysis and Results

The PRO is a center-right party in Argentina. Its main leader and founder is Mauricio Macri, a businessman and president between 2015 and 2019. The party was born during the major economic and political crisis of the early 2000s. The PRO was founded in the city of Buenos Aires, the epicenter of the 2001–02 crises of the traditional parties. The PRO won the mayoralty of the city in 2007. The city of Buenos Aires has remained, since then, its electoral stronghold.[3] The PRO incorporated leaders from different backgrounds and so has a heterogeneous composition; some were former Peronists, members of the Unión Cívica Radical (Civic Radical Union, UCR) or traditional right-wing politicians (Morresi and Vommaro 2014). Others were entrepreneurs, CEOs or activists or leaders from NGOs.

The PRO unified different center-right political organizations and expanded its national reach (Vommaro 2017). The party developed high levels of coordination between leaders and an efficient mechanism of interest aggregation (Vommaro 2021). However, while Macri and his inner circle maintained control of the brand and party strategy, they were less successful in their attempt to expand the electorate in other districts (Vommaro 2023). In 2015, the PRO built an alliance with the UCR and other parties. This provided the PRO with the necessary roots in districts where it had weak support. The alliance also included other minor parties, such as the Coalición Cívica (Civic Coalition, CC) and other niche parties. This electoral alliance, Cambiemos, won the national election in 2015 and Mauricio Macri became president. It was the first time in Argentina's history that the center-right won a democratic national election. Four years later, Macri lost his bid for reelection against Alberto Fernández, from the Partido Justicialista (Justicialist Party, PJ). The PRO, and its coalition Cambiemos, campaigned on socio-cultural issues based on aesthetic and ethical repertoires and presented itself as a new, pragmatic party associated with concrete problem solving (Vommaro 2017). In the 2023 national elections, the presidential candidate of the PRO, Patricia Bullrich, finished third in the first round, behind Sergio Massa (the Peronist candidate, a member of the Alberto Fernández government), and Javier Milei (a far-right candidate from La Libertad Avanza—Freedom Advances). The PRO joined the legislative coalition of president Javier Milei.

Since its inception, the PRO has always invested heavily in political communication, especially in digital communication. It was an early adopter of new ICT tools for different purposes. The use of new ICTs to recruit and manage volunteers in the 2015 electoral campaign is the product of the interaction between Guillermo Riera and Federico Morales. The former was the person in charge of digital political communication for the PRO, with previous experience in digital communication for the banking sector. The latter, Federico Morales, was a consultant with vast experience in field campaigns in Central America. As Kreiss (2016) and Kreiss and Saffer (2017) emphasize, innovation in political parties' use of new ICTs emerges from what they term "structural folding" and "cognitive diversity" (Kreiss and Saffer 2017). This description seems applicable to the digital communications team led by Riera and the field operation team led by Morales. These two cohesive teams, with different expertise and backgrounds (cognitive diversity), overlapped (structural folding). The combination of these two teams engendered an innovative relationship between technological tools and field campaigning. The party did not originally pursue an organizational development strategy that used digital communication and data management to promote activism. The massive use of volunteers for electoral campaigning was an

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[3]Buenos Aires is the capital city of Argentina, the most developed city in the country and a major metropolitan urban center. A high proportion of the city's population has access to the Internet and use it.

initiative promoted by Federico Morales and Guillermo Riera, who suggested it to the leaders of the party (personal interview with Federico Morales and Guillermo Riera).

Party leadership was reluctant to include activists, which, they believed, would entail enlarging the organizational structure. Two main reasons have been offered to explain their reluctance: first, the leaders did not want to lose control of the party and, second, because the inclusion of new activists would have challenged the local leaders' authority and their structures (personal interview with Federico Morales). Before 2015, the recruitment of activists and candidates was heavily controlled by the upper echelons of the party, and it was centered on students from private and Catholic universities, businessmen and businesswomen, and famous showbusiness people and sports stars (Grandinetti 2015; Vommaro 2017). This strategy was not successful in building a national organizational electoral structure. To remedy the party's weak nationwide mobilization capacity, the party authorities initially decided to use traditional media (i.e., TV) to distribute campaign messages, as well as social networks and digital communication in general. This is the typical choice of what Panebianco (1988) termed "professional electoral parties."

In the midterm elections of 2013, Riera and Morales developed a campaign to recruit volunteers, called Sumate (Join us). As part of this campaign, they created an online volunteer sign-up form to attract prospective volunteers. This online form was available on the party's website and was advertised through social networks. Without much investment in advertising this online form and with little support from the party and campaign structure, the campaign was able to recruit 15,000 people interested in working for the party. Because of the success of Riera's and Morales' initiative, the low costs associated with it, and their insistence, in 2015 the PRO mounted a campaign that assigned a significant role to volunteers. This campaign was called Voluntarios por el Cambio (Volunteers for Change). The entire campaign was centrally controlled from the party's headquarters.

New ICTs made it possible to recruit a massive number of people to work as volunteers. Without new ICTs, this would have been impossible for a party like PRO, which had a weak organizational structure and lacked national reach. New ICTs not only help a party contact people, but also facilitates the administration of data, the delivery of information, and the personalized assignment of tasks. The PRO performed all this in a centralized, top-down manner.

The development of an intensive use of volunteers for electoral mobilization using new ICTs involved a process of trial and error. The party developed the software, the infrastructure, and the procedures as the campaign progressed and different needs emerged. The PRO decided not to outsource the process of gathering and administering the data. Instead, it built a communications and digital mobilization team of 25 people, led by Marcos Peña (Director of Communications during the 2015 presidential campaign and a prominent member of the party's leading coalition), Riera, and Morales. The team comprised programmers, communication experts, community managers, designers, people in charge of direct communication via email and instant messaging apps, and people in charge of administering bots for automatic conversation. The process consisted of contacting people, getting their data, and including them in the communication loop. The campaign also asked these volunteers to distribute campaign messages and information, and to provide contact information for other prospective volunteers (personal interview with Guillermo Riera).

The organization was strictly pyramidal. At the top level were a few highly qualified professionals and party leaders who controlled the operation. In the second level were provincial teams. In the third tier were leaders at the municipal level. Finally, under the leader at the municipal level, there were neighborhood or block activists. This chain of command had different traits depending on the previous organizational strength of the party at the provincial and municipal level. In those districts where there was no formal organizational structure available, the communication with local activists was directly managed from the national headquarters. In contrast, in those districts where there were formal organizational structures available, the top level—in other words, the national campaign team—transferred individuals' contact information

to local party branches. In turn, the national campaign team monitored the lower levels contacting people. National campaign managers monitored territorial organizers through an online platform.

The overall strategy was to ask people to engage more volunteers in the campaign, to distribute campaign literature, and to participate in canvassing and other mobilization activities. The idea was to emulate the 1×10 strategy of the Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party, PAN) in Mexico (a center-right party), in other words, each volunteer must recruit ten new volunteers to join the campaign network. However, in contrast to the strategy of the PAN, the PRO's 1×10 strategy was essentially digital and, after consolidating the database, the campaign went to the territory. Guillermo Riera summarized how they monitored the evolution of the campaign: "Our [online customer relationship management] tool provides a way to monitor goals. This technological tool receives the data, sets goals, and monitors their fulfillment" (personal interview with Guillermo Riera). Nicolás Pechersky, a young leader from Buenos Aires, described the online tool and the process as follows: "you open the app[4] and see all the contacts you have available to reach, and the central team knows how many you have contacted, and if any [local leader] is not performing well, they will mention it to you. It is like a control dashboard" (personal interview with Nicolás Pechersky). Therefore, recruitment combined online and offline strategies to contact new supporters.[5]

The mobilization was a complete success, and the party was able to gather the data of over 900,000 volunteers (personal interview with Federico Morales). Some of these volunteers were reactivated in the 2019 presidential election.[6] According to a survey of volunteers conducted in September 2020 by the PRO[7] using their database of supporters, 39% live in the province of Buenos Aires and 26% live in the city of Buenos Aires (CABA); 48% were women and 51% were men, and the mean age of supporters was 52 years old (67% were between 36 and 65 years old). This distribution of party supporters is representative of the Argentine population distribution in terms of sex, age, and place of residence.[8]

Even though the strategy was successful, it did not introduce any change to the organizational dynamics of the party and, more critically, it did not change the power dynamics at all (this issue was raised, for example, by Sol Figueroa).[9] As Federico Morales recalled, Marcos Peña insisted in that their goal was not to build more organizational structure. Rather, their only focus was achieving electoral success. Even though there was variation in how the campaign manifested in the territory, the strategy always implied bringing more volunteers and essentially creating a one-on-one relationship with them. The campaign provided materials and asked volunteers to contact people from their personal network to spread campaign messages or to help disseminate calls for mobilization. The campaign adopted more organizationally-brokered forms of engagement (e.g., asking adherents to distribute specific campaign messages in a specific manner at a specific moment, or to share their contacts with the campaign) as well as more organizationally-enabled

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[4]In 2015, the app designed for this campaign enabled the distribution of registered volunteers' mobile phone numbers so that they could be contacted by territorial representatives and it enabled the campaign to monitor the number of contacted people. In the 2019 national elections, the PRO launched another app for volunteers to facilitate the distribution of online campaign materials and the incorporation of new contacts, and to build lists of potential party supporters among the lists of contacts. For more details, see *Perfil* (2019).

[5]According to an online survey that we conducted among PRO supporters in 2021, 40% of our respondents joined the party through its online social networks, webpage, or via email contact. The rest of the supporters joined the PRO's network of supporters through different offline means. We distributed the survey using the party's mailing list between June 17, 2021 and July 19, 2021. The survey was completed by 1,169 PRO supporters (Piñeiro-Rodríguez et al. 2025).

[6]See *La Nación* (2019). This article highlights that the number of volunteers mobilized for the 2019 presidential election was around 300,000, and that this is a fraction of the number of volunteers mobilized for the 2015 presidential election.

[7]The PRO provided us with the internal report of the survey. The survey was completed by 10,601 volunteers throughout the country.

[8]Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (2010).

[9]Personal interview with Sol Figueroa. At the time of the interview, she was director of communications in Quilmes, a municipality in the Buenos Aires province.

forms of engagement (e.g., the provision of digital campaign materials that supporters could customize to promote the PRO in their social networks). This was exemplified in the guide prepared for volunteers in 2019.[10] However, the campaign managers and those in charge of this campaign of incorporating volunteers sought to avoid holding meetings in the party locales. They thought that people did not want to attend party locales and that people preferred to act on their own. As a result, the party "has recruited volunteers where there is no party structure" (personal interview with Federico Morales), which improved the national reach of the party's campaign. However, the campaign and volunteer recruitment did not improve the reach of the party structure. The persistent limited reach was not a failure of the strategy; expanding the party structure was simply not the party leaders' goal and was explicitly rejected as an option. When the people recruited via the online form were incorporated into the party, it occurred on an individual basis, by coopting renowned people at the local level who could serve as prospective candidates for the party. This only occurred in those places where the party did not already have established candidates. Aside from this, there was no incorporation of volunteers to the party structure at all.

Volunteers were not invited to join a group of campaign volunteers or party activists. As Esteban Bianchi[11] recalled, gathering activists in groups was part of the "old politics." Rather, they were asked to amplify the campaign's message, to organize meetings at home with acquaintances, to participate in campaign rallies and talks, and to provide more contacts to the digital campaign. As Federico Morales narrates, in the 2019 national election campaign, he gave a talk to a group of volunteers in Santa Fe and Córdoba.[12] For each of those events,

> a WhatsApp group was formed (. . .) and the people in those groups started to say that "if you do not call us, we will start meeting on our own." I told them that we understand that people have an elastic relationship with politics. People join closer to the presidential campaign. That is when they show an interest in participating and then people step back. But, I said, "if you want to meet and be part of the party, do it, you are welcome to do so." And, well, people are organizing despite us.

The strategy was, thus, strictly aimed at recruiting volunteers to perform campaign tasks individually, essentially using new ICTs. People could gather spontaneously and eventually demand space to participate. However, the party did not initiate such gatherings nor did it provide channels for collective participation. Whenever collective activity occurred, the party discouraged it, especially when the participation was not controlled by local party authorities.

The campaign did solicit feedback from its supporters about people's concerns and preferences, but this information was collected to enrich campaign data, improve campaign deployment in the territory, and improve communication with prospective voters. Thus, as Gerbaudo (2021) and Stromer-Galley (2019) observe, this campaign strategy involved interaction with activists and volunteers but in a controlled manner focused on getting more votes for Macri's presidential bids. Federico Morales illustrates this idea as follows:

> The people's main task is to persuade one or two people. This is the way to optimize people's energy. Why? Because, always, when campaigns begin, people show up and want to help. At one point, you ask yourself, what shall I do with all these people? [one person told me] "I had a plan to modify a bridge [in the area]" "No, dude, I need votes."

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[10]See *Política Argentina* (2015).

[11]Personal interview with Esteban Bianchi. He was the coordinator of the digital mobilization campaign of Macri's 2019 presidential campaign.

[12]Santa Fe and Córdoba are two Argentine provinces.

Even though the campaign was extremely efficient in building a large database of volunteers and in getting information from people, the party's lack of organizational capacity prevented it from fully using those resources in its field operation. Although the campaign headquarters prepared campaign materials and provided information for canvassing in towns and neighborhoods across Argentina, the field operation was messy and varied from place to place (cf. Nielsen 2012), as occurs in most campaigns. In the case of the PRO, this was especially evident in the field operations led by local party leaders. The information gathered in the territory was not processed and delivered back to support the field operations at the local level. As local leaders of the PRO in José C. Paz[13] told us, they preserved a copy of the information that they collected during canvassing and sent to the campaign headquarters, because it was the only way to have this information to work with (personal interview with Matías Ferreiros).

Since the focus of the mobilization of volunteers based on new ICTs was strictly electoral, once the election was over, the party had no incentive to maintain and improve its data infrastructure and communication apps. The electoral incentive, by itself, is not enough to invest in these new ICT tools over the long term. Guillermo Riera referred to this issue as follows:

> It was extremely hard to convince the party that this had to go on [after the elections], because parties are not prepared for this. The campaign is over, and they tell you "see you next year" What "next year"?! We have to keep working! . . . but no. (personal interview with Guillermo Riera).

In 2021, two years after the 2019 national election, in the year of the legislative midterm election, Esteban Bianchi confirmed that the party was not able to continue operating its communications system or its connection with volunteers between elections (personal interview with Esteban Bianchi). After Macri's defeat in the 2019 presidential election, the party experienced internal disputes over the party leadership. As a result, the centralized technological infrastructure that had been built was "frozen," awaiting resolution of the internal conflict regarding the party leadership. In the 2023 presidential primaries, Rodríguez Larreta, mayor of Buenos Aires, faced Patricia Bullrich, minister of the interior during Macri's presidential term. Macri gave his support to Bullrich and from then onwards, she had at her disposal the ICT infrastructure located in the party's central offices. The top-down mode of operation, with atomized adherents who had no voice in the party, was maintained.

Discussion

The case of the PRO shows how the use of new ICTs can have varied effects on the engagement of volunteers in a party organization. As the case of the PRO illustrates, the incorporation of new ICTs can serve a highly centralized organization that explicitly seeks to avoid diffusing power within the structure and throughout the territory in order to prevent challenges to the party elite. Thus, new ICTs can facilitate the large-scale recruitment and activation of volunteers for electoral campaigns. It also reduces the cost of centrally contacting them, as well as the cost of distributing personalized political messages and information, and of asking for personalized tasks that volunteers can perform individually (without the need to join a group). Yet, the decision about how those volunteers will be engaged is not automatically determined by the use of new ICTs. In the case of the PRO, the party's strategy of individual engagement (Piñeiro-Rodríguez et al. 2025), in other words, the lack of opportunities for adherents to participate collectively and deliberate within the party, prevented the transformation of volunteers into party stakeholders. This helps explain why a right-wing party that relies on a small professional elite is willing to reach out to supporters to engage them in campaigns, because it can do so without having to redistribute power

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[13]José C. Paz is a municipality in the Buenos Aires province.

in the party. At the same time, this represents a low-cost shortcut for weakly organized parties to engage more volunteers and increase their territorial coverage in electoral campaigns (Gold and Peña 2021; Nocetto et al. 2024).

The picture described thus far resembles the conventional idea of a party organization with a few activists and many adherents (Duverger 1954; Scarrow 2015; Scarrow et al. 2017). This is precisely the point we wish to make: new ICTs can improve communication, can increase a party's ability to contact people, and can engender the sporadic activation of adherents, all tasks that can be performed without having to organize people in groups. In the past, high engagement necessarily involved the activation and organization of groups which, in turn, facilitated the politicization of adherents (especially regarding the politics within party organizations). New ICTs have eliminated the need to organize people in groups to engender engagement. The PRO pursued a strategy of high volunteer engagement in electoral campaigns. However, the promotion of individual engagement did not alter the conventional picture of right-wing internal party organizations.

The incorporation of new ICTs in the PRO to contact and activate supporters on a large scale is also observed to varying degrees in other parties or electoral vehicles in Latin America (Piñeiro-Rodríguez et al. 2025). In the case of the PRO, this strategy incorporated supporters in campaign activities without transforming the organizational structure of the party. In other cases, where there is no organizational structure in place, new ICTs also facilitate the recruitment and activation of supporters without the need to develop any permanent structure of participation (Piñeiro-Rodríguez et al. 2025), as in the case of Rodolfo Hernández's presidential campaign in Colombia.

Van Dyck (2021) argues that parties in Latin America that achieved early in their evolution access to state resources and mass media do not build strong organizations because these resources substitute the need to build an organization to achieve electoral success. From this perspective, this initial advantage hinders long-term party survival in the region. New ICTs lowered the costs to develop an organization. However, as the case of the PRO illustrates, parties and candidates do not necessarily use new ICTs to build party organizational structures that incorporate supporters in a permanent and meaningful way. And without this incorporation, parties lack the resources to survive over time (Cyr 2017).

Conclusions

The incorporation of technology has transformed party organizational structures since the early twentieth century. The recent ICT revolution has also engendered dramatic transformations in how parties pursue electoral campaigns and organize their activities. These innovations imply changes in the distribution of power within parties. Changes in political communication orders (Epstein 2018) not only alter the relationship between political elites and the public, but also transform the distribution of power between party elites and activists. The "Information Political Communication Order (PCO)" described by Epstein (2018) implied a revalorization of the use of activists for canvassing and electoral mobilization in general, in other words, the use of people as media for political communication (Nielsen 2012). However, these technologies allow for different ways of incorporating activists in campaigns. In turn, different forms of incorporating activists (individual or collective) have different effects on the distribution of power within parties; it can either concentrate (individual engagement) or distribute (collective engagement) power. Ultimately, the decision about how to use technological tools is political and rests in the hands of the leadership.

Internet-based ICTs have introduced significant changes in different dimensions of politics and society. One of those changes involves the capacity of new ICTs to foster large-scale personalized political engagement at low cost. More specifically, new technologies facilitate a massive one-to-one linkage between an organization and its followers. For example, instant messaging apps like WhatsApp or Telegram facilitate greater personalization of messages and have the capacity to

control the interaction with users. In the past, the only way to organize people for electoral campaigns was to gather them in groups and transfer to them the responsibility for staging field operations in their area.

As the case of the PRO shows, new technologies eliminate the need to gather volunteers in groups in the field. This occurs because new technologies introduce two main changes. First, they improve the economic efficiency of the use of resources. In the past, campaigns did not have the capacity to communicate directly with each volunteer or adherent, without placing hundreds of phone calls or sending a vast number of letters. Those efforts consumed significant material and human resources (and time). With new technologies, campaigns can now personalize what they communicate to each supporter and what they can ask of each volunteer. They can do this instantly and at low cost. Second, campaigns now have the capacity to monitor what occurs in the territory and can decide what the campaign should accomplish in the territory according to the available information. This capacity to incorporate information about the territory allows electoral campaigns to decide what to ask to each volunteer without needing to convene the volunteers who reside in the same area. In the past, before these technologies were available, there was no option but to convene the volunteers of one neighborhood or area and, since the campaign did not have detailed information from the territory, it had to transfer responsibility to neighborhood leaders and local campaign managers to decide how to operate locally. Local leaders, qua candidates and organizers, are still needed if the party wants to compete in elections throughout the territory.[14] However, party elites and campaign managers at the national and local level now have the capacity to take politics out of the territory and eliminate the interaction between volunteers in neighborhoods. There is no longer the need to delegate campaign decision-making to groups of volunteers and party activists at the neighborhood level. Campaigns can now operate and manage volunteers from the top, without convening volunteers in local groups.

Individual engagement with the campaign and the party does not empower people to act within parties. As a result of this strategy of engaging volunteers individually, the spaces for political interaction and connection disappear. Parties do not need to provide institutional spaces for deliberation and decision-making. This dissolves the capacity of activists to exercise voice and collectively keep party authorities accountable, and eventually challenge their authority. The interaction with the party is, instead, limited to expressing preferences individually or exiting the organization. New technologies create the illusion of empowerment and political inclusion. However, without collective engagement, politics does not transform people and people cannot transform politics and parties.

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[14]Local structures exist and develop their strategies tied to a candidate, not necessarily to the party structure or the party's national campaign. They are a tool of (and are dependent on) the local government (personal interview with Sol Figueroa and Matías Ferreiros).

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