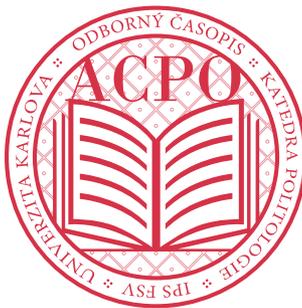


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Does Intra-party Democracy Enhance Party Digitalisation? Evidence from the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (2014–2024)

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Abstract:

In recent times, political parties have increased the options for their members to participate in their decision-making processes. The widespread use of the internet has facilitated this process, affecting the parties' organisational structures. The article analyses how the digitalisation of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) has been affected by the introduction of two new options for internal democracy: primary elections to choose its leader and consultations with its members. The research period begins in 2014, when for the first time this party elected its general secretary through primary elections and analyses the state level of this organisation. The article argues that while the PSOE has introduced new tools for internal participation, these have not allowed for a significant increase in its digitalisation.

Key words: *political parties; internal democracy; primary elections; digitalisation*

1. Introduction

Political parties are one of the most prolific areas of study in political science (Montero and Gunter 2007: 16). One of the key themes in this literature is the capacity of these organisations to adapt to the context – also in crisis situations – as a necessary condition for their survival (Panebianco 1982; Harmel and Janda 1994; Gauja, 2016). This is particularly true for the crisis of social democracy (Kitschelt 1994; Przeworski 2001; Bailey et al. 2014; Benedetto, Hix and Mastrococco 2020). Some political parties belonging to this family have been pioneers in introducing primaries as a way of reconnecting with citizens. Examples are the French Socialist Party or the Democratic Party in Italy (Bernardi et al. 2015; De Luca and Venturino 2017). Furthermore, the widespread use of the internet has offered these and other parties an opportunity to develop new formulas for participation (Barberà et al. 2021). In this context of crisis of social democratic parties, it may be of interest to analyse the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), which has engaged in an active process of democratization and digitalisation that has been seen as a stepping stone to regaining power in 2018 (Correa et al. 2019; Delgado y Cazorla 2023).

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More specifically, this article aims to describe and connect both the new democratisation and digitalisation practices within the PSOE. The main object of this research is the party's state-level primaries and internal consultations, a key element in the transformation of its party participation and digitalisation structures. Some features of the PSOE's digital evolution have been analysed by comparing it with other parties in the Spanish party system (Lupato and Meloni 2022) or with parties of the social democratic family, such as the Portuguese Socialist Party (Díaz-Montiel 2021). However, the main contribution of the article is that it tries to determine how the PSOE's new participation options have impacted its digital transformation. The timeframe starts in 2014, when the party introduced the election of its leader through primaries and ends in 2024. The main expectation is that the new options for internal participation have not promoted a significant increase in their digitalisation. The PSOE has offered few effective options for digitised participation, they have not been incorporated into its rules, and their use by members has been very limited.

The article is structured as follows: the following section will summarise some of the main theories on organisational change, democratisation and internal participation and digitalisation in political parties. The methodological design of the article is then developed. Next, it will analyse the evolution of the instruments of internal participation in the PSOE that are addressed in the article, primary elections and consultations with the members. Finally, the main conclusions of the analysis will be summarised.

2. Internal democracy and digitalisation in political parties

It has been argued that in countries where disenchantment with politicians and parties is widespread, parties may decide to implement internal avenues of democratic participation as a way of trying to win elections, recruit and select good candidates, and retain popular support (Scarrow 2005). There are various interpretations of why a political party decides to democratise its internal workings. Firstly, to try to respond to the need for participation of younger social sectors (Dalton et al 2011). Second, to approximate the democratic ideal in which parties operate (Caul-Kittilson and Scarrow 2003). Third, in response to electoral defeat and the corresponding demand for change (Cross and Blais 2012). Finally, to combat the parties' legitimacy deficit in public opinion (Keman 2014; Kriesi 2014).

Scarrow, Webb and Poguntke (2022) showed that it has become increasingly common for parties to offer their members the right to participate in important decisions. These authors argued that, in some cases, this increased participation may help to energise the organisation, but in others it may serve only to provide a semblance of legitimacy to the leadership. Cross and Katz (2013) argued that this process of internal democratisation was not taking place uniformly across parties. The way internal democracy was designed was conditioned by decisions related to organisational issues and the distribution of internal power. In addition, this process was also determined by other contextual factors, such as the electoral environment and competition, the party's own previous formulas for participation, state regulation, or whether the party was in government. Ignazi (2021: 389) argued that the democratisation of a party – a necessary step for its re-legitimation by citizens – could not only consist of selecting leaders and candidates but must include three further elements. First, involvement in party policy-making (deliberation). Second, the vertical and horizontal diffusion of decision-making power among the different actors that make up the

party (inclusion). And finally, the guarantee of minority rights within the organisation, as a way of ensuring internal diversity (pluralism).

Authors such as Katz (2001) argued that leaders democratised candidate selection in form, while centralising control in practice. In this sense, it has been pointed out that the move to electing leaders through primaries, while increasing the electorate, has allowed elites to control these procedures and may limit their competitive character (Cross and Pilet 2015: 173). Astudillo and Lago (2021) argued that, other things being equal, candidates selected through primaries are no more successful than those selected through other procedures. However, these authors showed that there is a punishment for parties that do not select their candidates through primaries when the rival party does. Especially when primaries do not generate internal fractures and take place just before the elections for which they are intended. Another consequence of the democratisation of political parties has been the diminishing power of the middle levels of the party organisation (Detterbeck 2012; Rahat and Hazan 2010). Peter Mair (2013: 16) noted that party leaders benefited from the diminished power of the middle levels, as they were freed from constraints.

On the other hand, the spread of the internet has offered parties a powerful tool through which to develop these new forms of participation. The internet offers excellent opportunities for political actors and social movements to receive attention and gain support (Semetko 2006: 515). Ward (2008) noted the widespread use of these new digital tools within a wide variety of political organisations. Moreover, it has been estimated that the use of internet-supported technologies has sought to tighten the relationship between voters and parties, replacing traditional forms of membership with much more diffuse ones (Margetts 2006: 530). Digitalisation has allowed for the disempowerment of intermediate party bodies and bureaucrats, although the debate around its effects on internal democracy remains contentious (Gerbaudo, 2019: 103). In this sense, the digital revolution seems to be affecting parties in various ways, increasing their organisational complexity (Dommett et al. 2021: 855). However, the new parties seem to have been more innovative in introducing digital elements into their organisational structure than the mainstream ones. It has also been noted that the last dimensions to adapt to the digital world are those related to democracy and internal decision-making in political parties (Barberà et al. 2021: 10).

On balance, there are many academic studies which establish that party digitisation can increase members' participation options (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016; Gerbaudo, 2018; Dommett et al. 2021). However, there are fewer studies that establish a reverse relationship: to what extent new forms of member participation can increase a party's digitisation. This is the theoretical approach followed in this article, trying to differentiate between two participation options, primary elections and membership consultations. Parties with a strong culture of internal participation can use digital tools to increase transparency in decision-making processes and hold leaders accountable. However, in more established parties, a strong culture of traditional methods of participation can slow down its digital transformation, as members and leaders may resist changing familiar processes (Sezen and Alper 2021). In conclusion, a strong culture of internal participation can be an important driver of digital transformation in political parties, which could lead to more innovative, transparent and member-driven organisations. But the extent and pace of this transformation may vary depending on factors such as the age of the party, its size, its ideology and the preferences of its membership base.

3. Case selection and methods

This article is a case study of primary elections and consultations with members in the PSOE. According to Gerring (2004: 341), case studies can make an indirect contribution to the generation of hypotheses and thus to the construction of theories in political science. This type of research allows for better access to sources and greater depth while avoiding the problems derived from conceptual equivalence, those difficulties related to the use of the same concepts in different realities (Szmolka and de Cueto, 2011: 218).

The choice of the PSOE is justified for several reasons. Firstly, it is the party that has led the government in Spain for the longest period of time, having been the subject of research that studied its organisational and programmatic evolution and its governmental action (Méndez 2000; Verge 2006; Sánchez-Cuenca 2012; Delgado and Cazorla 2017; Correa et al. 2018). It is also a paradigmatic case study of how a social democratic party facing an important crisis after losing control of the government decided to introduce new forms of internal participation and direct voting through primaries and internal consultations (Luena y López 2023). The timeframe begins in 2014 and runs until 2024. The party had already held a primary election to choose a candidate for the presidency in 1998, and Josep Borrell defeated Joaquín Almunia. However, the PSOE continued to select its leader – the secretary general – by a vote of the party’s congress delegates. This changed in 2014, when the party elite decided that the new leader would be chosen through primaries in which all members could vote. This change was incorporated into its Statutes in 2015. Because of this major change that affected the way the party leader was elected and that meant a deepening of the options for participation, the research analysis starts specifically in 2014. A few years later (in 2017), this party incorporated member consultations, the other element of participation analysed, into its Statutes.

The research focuses on the state level of this organisation. In the case of the PSOE, these innovations are usually decided at the state level, and then incorporated in the territories. This was the case with the primaries and members consultations. In addition, the article analyses both rules and processes. On the one hand, it examines the changes in the party’s internal documents concerning the new options for member participation. On the other hand, it analyses how these changes have been carried out, when they have been held, with how much participation and the role of the digital tools in the process.

4. New options for internal democracy and digitalisation in the PSOE

4.1 Primary elections

The most important way for members to participate in party decisions is through primary elections. The PSOE incorporated them into its Statutes after the XXXVI Congress (2004), in which José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero was re-elected leader. Although this procedure had already been used to elect the candidate for Prime Minister in 1998, until then the participation of members in the party’s major decisions had been practically non-existent (Verge 2007: 332). During the XXXV Congress (2000), the party had committed itself to regulating them, for which it created a Federal Census and Affiliation Office to purge the membership list. Subsequently, the primaries were formally incorporated into the party’s Statutes (2004). Article 37 regulated the process, limiting it in its first section to the selection of

candidates for the presidency of the national government, the presidencies of the Autonomous Communities, the autonomous cities, the Island Councils, the General Councils and the mayoralties of municipalities with more than 50,000 inhabitants, provided that there were at least two candidates. It was also specified that, in the case of the PSOE being at the head of any of these governments, primaries could only be held if the Federal Committee – at the national level – or the similar body at each of the levels so requested. Article 49.3 stipulated that the proposal for candidates in the primaries could be made by the Federal Executive Committee (CEF), the Federal Committee (CF) or through the endorsement of 10 per cent of the party's militants. The Federal Committee was in charge of calling the primaries, at the proposal of the Federal Executive Committee, with the possibility of participation by militants and affiliates. Article 9 stipulated that sympathisers could be consulted as long as this was stipulated in the regulations, and they had been members of the party for at least six months.

The CEF's preference at the time was for primaries to be held on a limited basis (Verge 2007: 335). In fact, in the following years it was not a decision-making tool that was particularly used. During Rodríguez Zapatero's leadership, there were few innovations in terms of democratic deepening (Luena and López 2023: 8). When, following Rodríguez Zapatero's resignation to run again in the 2011 general elections, the possibility arose of holding a primary to decide the candidate between Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba and Carme Chacón, the latter finally declined to run.

The primaries did not undergo any changes in the 2008 or 2012 statutory renewals. No specific position emerged from the Seville Congress (2012) regarding the possibility of increasing the channels for the direct participation of activists, only the option of holding an Organisational Conference in the future to analyse these issues (Luena and López 2023: 10). This situation began to change after Pérez Rubalcaba's resignation as secretary general of the party a result of the poor results in the 2014 European elections and subsequent calling of an Extraordinary Congress in July 2014. A few days after Rubalcaba's resignation, the movements of possible candidates for the leadership of the party that would emerge from this internal process began. The Basque MP Eduardo Madina made his candidacy conditional on the possibility of the militants electing the new secretary general through primaries, instead of only the delegates of the Congress, as stated in the party's Statutes. As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, the 2012 Statutes had maintained the formula according to which the secretary general was elected by the delegates of the Congress at the relevant level (federal, regional or local), in addition to the need for the endorsement of 20 per cent of the delegates of the respective Congress. Finally, a formula was found to take the PSOE members into account with regard to the election of the new secretary general. This formula consisted of consulting the members, so that later in the Congress the delegates would ratify the decision taken by the members. Specifically, the regulations drawn up by the CEF for the holding of the Extraordinary Congress stipulated the following in its point number 8 (PSOE 2014):

“In accordance with what was approved by the Federal Executive Committee at its meeting of 2 June 2014, a consultation is convened among all socialist members in relation to the election of candidates for the General Secretariat of the Federal Executive Committee of the PSOE,

prior to the holding of the Extraordinary Federal Congress. The Organising Committee shall present to the Extraordinary Federal Congress an Opinion on the process carried out and the result of the consultation regarding the nominations for the General Secretariat of the PSOE”.

This was the regulation of an internal process in which, in the end, three candidates competed: the MPs Pedro Sánchez and Eduardo Madina, as well as the university professor and representative of the Izquierda Socialista faction, José Antonio Pérez Tapias. The primary campaign was heated, with controversy surrounding the internal support of each of the candidates. An example of this was the controversy over the number of endorsements presented by each candidate. Sánchez won, with 45,000 internal endorsements, while Madina garnered 26,000 and Pérez Tapias 12,000. However, Madina requested that the origin of the endorsements of each candidate be made public, implying that the party apparatus in Andalusia, and also in Madrid and the Valencian Community, had been involved in collecting endorsements in favour of Sánchez. In the end, the result was a wide victory for Sánchez, who obtained 48.7% of the votes in the primaries, while Madina obtained 36.2% and Pérez Tapias 11.2% (PSOE 2014). Weeks later, the Extraordinary Congress was held in which the delegates ratified Sánchez as the new secretary general. With regard to the use of digital tools throughout this internal election process, the regulations (PSOE 2014) that governed both the primaries and the subsequent Congress did not include any possibility of digital participation. Annex I of the regulations specifically regulated the primary process. It only contemplated the possibility of voting in person, in the grouping in which one was affiliated or in the voting centre that the organising commission had established. Nor was it possible to endorse any of the pre-candidates – 5% of the total membership needed to be endorsed in order to be a candidate – by telematic means.

The introduction of primaries was institutionalised in the new Statutes (PSOE 2015), drawn up after the Congress. Thus, article 5.1 established that the secretary general was to be elected by individual, direct and secret ballot of the party’s militants in the corresponding territorial area. The Federal Committee was responsible for drawing up the regulations and calling primary elections, at the proposal of the Federal Executive Committee (PSOE 2015: 18). In addition to the electoral prospects and the internal vicissitudes that the party was experiencing, there was also the strong emergence of Podemos (Rodríguez-Teruel et al. 2018) following the 2014 European elections, a party that tried to make the primaries one of its main features. In this sense, the existence of an electoral penalty has been pointed out when a party has not chosen its candidate through primaries if its rival has done so (Astudillo and Lago 2021). In line with the postulated hypothesis, it can be observed that the appearance of an electoral rival such as Podemos was a powerful element that conditioned the incorporation of primaries by the PSOE.

Although in the end they were not held because there was only one candidate (the party’s leader, Pedro Sánchez), in 2016 a regulation was made in case it was necessary to hold primaries to choose the candidate for president of the government. On this occasion, the possibility of presenting the endorsement digitally was contemplated, through the party’s web application: *miPSOE*. Supporters who wanted to participate had to register and pay two euros, something that could also be done digitally. However, it was not possible to vote online at that time (PSOE 2016a).

After two general elections (in December 2015 and June 2016) and poor results in some regional elections, the PSOE experienced a serious internal crisis that ended with the resignation of Pedro Sánchez as secretary general. This was followed by a new primary process in May 2017. Sánchez, despite not having the support of most of the territorial structures, was the winner of the primaries with 50.2% of the votes. Meanwhile, the then president of Andalusia, Susana Díaz, obtained 39.9% and Patxi López, who had been president of the Basque autonomous community, 9.8%. The party's deep crisis following Sánchez's resignation led to the need for a new primary process. On this occasion, the regulations governing the process did not allow the presentation of endorsements in favour of any of the candidates through the miPSOE web application, nor was it possible to vote digitally. Since then, despite the fact that – as we will see – the primary system has been modified, there have not been any more primaries at the PSOE state level. This has coincided with years of internal stability in the party around Sánchez's leadership.

Table 4.1.1: Relationship between rules and digitalisation in the PSOE primary elections (2014-2024)

Rules	Digitisation elements
Primary Regulations 2014	No
Statutes 2015	No
Primary Regulations 2016	Yes
Primary Regulations 2017	No
Statutes 2017	No
Statutes 2021	No

Source: Prepared by the authors based on data provided by the PSOE.

Table 4.1.2: Relationship between processes and digitisation in the PSOE primary elections (2014-2024)

Year	Participation (%)	Digital endorsement	Digital vote
2014	66,76	No	No
2015	-	Yes	No
2017	79,9	No	No

Source: Prepared by the authors based on data provided by the PSOE.

The primary system was modified again after the XXXIX PSOE Congress (2017). In the new Statutes (2017), the election of the leader through primaries in article five was modified in several respects. Firstly, it was established that the primaries would be conducted through a two-round system. It also stated that if a candidate obtained more than 50 per cent of the votes in the first round, he or she would be elected general secretary. If none of the candidates exceeded that percentage, the two candidates with the most votes would go to the second round, and the one with the most votes would be elected. An important aspect to bear in mind was the percentage of endorsements required to be a candidate. At the federal level of the party, 1 per cent of the members' endorsements were required.

This system was maintained in the revision of the Statutes that took place after the celebration of the XL PSOE Congress (2021), although a modification was introduced in relation to the number of endorsements required to run as a candidate for the general secretariat. It went from 1 per cent of endorsements – at the state level – to 3 per cent (PSOE 2021: 8). This is related to theories that argue that party leaders have ended up

centralising internal decision-making and may even limit the competitive nature of primaries (Katz 2001; Cross and Pilet 2015).

4.2 Consultations with the members

One of the most important organisational changes, related to member participation, of the period was the incorporation into the Statutes of consultations with the members. This modification took place after Pedro Sánchez's victory in the primaries of May 2017. Consultations with the members are the kind of tool that allows the party leader to have a direct connection with his members, something that enables him to strengthen his internal position vis-à-vis powers or middle elites critical of his leadership (Rahat and Hazan, 2010; Detterbeck, 2012; Scarrow, 2015). They were developed in article 53 (PSOE, 2017: 30), where it was established that the Executive Commissions of the national, regional, insular, provincial or municipal level can call for consultations with the members on issues of special importance and that have to do with their territorial scope. However, it was also stipulated that in order for these consultations to be held, they would have to be previously authorised by the Executive Committee of the area above the proposer. The second paragraph of the article added a clarification, stipulating that consultations with the members would be obligatory when government agreements are reached in which the PSOE is a party; also, on the direction of the vote in investiture sessions that result in another party leading the government. This was one way in which Sánchez and his ruling elite tried to make it difficult to avoid a situation like the one that occurred during the second half of 2016, and which led to the PSOE's abstention in the investiture of Mariano Rajoy, as well as the resignation of Sánchez himself as secretary general.

In the Statutes resulting from the 2021 Congress, some aspects related to consultations with the members were modified. Thus, it was added that the CEF could oppose the holding of consultations with the members when these could conflict with decisions adopted by the competent bodies at the higher territorial level. Furthermore, with regard to the obligation to hold them when signing a government agreement or supporting the investiture of another party, the latest Statutes (2021) stipulated the possibility of making exceptions to this provision for reasons of urgency (PSOE, 2021: 50).

During the period of the investigation, the PSOE has held three consultations with the members at the federal level, all of them related to investiture agreements that the party had signed. The first took place in 2016, when this tool had not yet been incorporated into the statutes, in relation to the investiture pact signed with Ciudadanos, which did not garner the necessary support. The census of party members who could participate in this consultation was 185,246, of which 95,763 took part, 51.7% of the total. The result was that more than 98% of the votes cast supported the investiture pact agreed with Ciudadanos. Regarding the digital participation options, the bases of the consultation established that (PSOE 2016: 3):

“To maximise the participation of the members, in addition to the usual procedure for voting in the groupings, a voting period will be enabled through the digital platform miPSOE for those militants who request it.”

With regard to digital participation in the consultation, the bases established a period of nine days to register digitally in order to be able to vote and, subsequently, a period of three days to exercise the vote in the party's application (PSOE 2016b: 4). According to the data provided by the party, 13,699 militants applied for the digital voting option, of which 7,638 finally voted, 55.7% of the total number of applicants and 4.1% of the total census. Of these, 96.7% voted in favour of the pact signed with Ciudadanos.

In 2019, after the November rerun elections, the PSOE reached a government agreement with Unidas Podemos. On that occasion, once this participatory tool had been incorporated into the Statutes, consultation with the members became obligatory. The turnout was 63 per cent of the total census, of which 92 per cent supported the agreement with Unidas Podemos, which included the coalition government formed by both parties. The consultation rules again contemplated the possibility of online voting, with an obligatory prior application and two days to exercise the vote through the application (PSOE, 2019: 2). However, unlike in 2016, on this occasion the rules indicated that, with regard to counting votes and the transmission of results, only the electoral roll, votes cast, blank votes, invalid votes, votes in favour and votes against would be reported (PSOE 2019: 4). In other words, no information was given on the territorial distribution of the results or the percentage of members who had voted digitally.

After the general elections in July 2023, there was another consultation with the members regarding the government agreement reached with the Sumar coalition. A total of 63.4 per cent of the total electorate (172,611 members) voted in the consultation, of which 87.13 per cent ratified the agreement. This was the lowest percentage of support of the three membership consultations held, although in all of them the affirmative vote was overwhelmingly in the majority. On this occasion, the party also offered the option of digitally verifying that one was part of the membership census through the Militancy Portal. Subsequently, five days were given to vote online, also in this Portal (PSOE 2023: 3-5). Of the total of 172,611 members who made up the census, 5,055 requested the digital vote, and 4,349 finally took part. Only 2.5 per cent of members voted digitally in this consultation.

Table 4.2.2: Relationship between rules and digitisation in PSOE member consultations (2014–2024)

Rules	Digitisation elements
Regulation consultation 2016	Yes
Statutes 2017	No
Regulation consultation 2019	Yes
Statutes 2021	No
Regulation consultation 2023	Yes

Source: Prepared by the authors based on data provided by the PSOE.

Table 4.2.2: Relationship between processes and digitisation in PSOE member consultations (2014–2024)

Year	Participation (%)	Digital vote	Digital participation (%)
2016	51.7	Yes	4.1
2019	63	Yes	-
2023	63.4	Yes	2.5

Source: Prepared by the authors based on data provided by the PSOE.

5. Discussion and conclusions

One of the common changes that political parties have undergone in recent times are those related to the introduction of new forms of member participation. This article has analysed how the new modalities of internal participation and decision-making – primary elections for the election of the leader and consultations with the members introduced in the PSOE have affected the party's digitalisation process. More specifically, the aim was to answer to what extent the introduction of new formulas for participation and internal democracy has led to greater digitalisation. The main contribution of the article is to show how the PSOE has been more in favour of digitising its processes than its rules. There are no elements in its statutes related to the digitisation of its primaries or member consultations. However, in the internal regulation of these processes the party has offered, in practice, more options for digital participation. In addition, the analysis also shows that the PSOE has digitised membership consultations more than primaries. This might be explained by the party leadership's intention to have greater control over the election of their leaders. Despite this, members have made very little use of digital participation options.

The primary elections held by the party during this period have not led to significant progress in its digital transformation. In none of them has the option of digital voting been made possible, nor the possibility of presenting the endorsement in favour of some of the candidates online. The only exception was designed in 2015 for the election of the candidate to the presidency of the Government, a process that finally did not take place since there was only one candidate. This rejection of the introduction of digital options in intra-party democratic processes – such as primary elections – has been pointed out in the academic literature (Ward and Gibson 2009).

Compared to primaries, member consultations have introduced more elements of digitisation. Although this internal participation option was incorporated into the Statutes in 2017, in 2016 the PSOE held a consultation for members to vote on the government agreement with Ciudadanos. Subsequently, there were in 2019 and 2023, also related to government agreements. In all of them, it has been possible to register beforehand – which is compulsory – digitally. Online voting was also allowed. However, the digital participation available in members' consultations has been very low. In 2016, only 4.1 per cent of those who voted did so digitally. This figure dropped in the 2023 consultation, when only 2.5 per cent of members voted digitally. Although the party has offered more options for digital participation in this case, members have made very little use of these opportunities.

Thus, from the analysis of the primary elections and member consultations carried out since 2014, several ideas emerge. On the one hand, that the party incorporated new formulas for participation in times of crisis or owing to the emergence of a new electoral competitor, such as Podemos. On the other hand, these new tools for internal participation have not favoured the digital transformation of the PSOE. The analysis also reflects that the PSOE has had more apparent than real interest in digitising its participation options: although it has offered digital participation in some of its processes – member consultations – there is hardly any trace of digitisation in its rules. Moreover, in the most important internal participation process – the primaries to elect the leader – the option of digital participation has never been offered.

All of this is related to the greater difficulty of mainstreams parties, such as the PSOE, in digitalising of their participatory structures (Barberà et al. 2021). In the case of

the PSOE, we can observe what González-Cacheda and Cancela (2023) also established in reference to the modest digitalisation of mainstreams political parties, which has not been focused on improving their internal participation tools. Analyses on, for example, Podemos (Meloni and Lupato 2022) show a stronger digitalisation of this party compared to that observed in the case of PSOE.

The article is based on a single case analysis, with a limited time frame (2014–2024). In the future it will be important to pay attention to what extent the possibilities offered by the PSOE to participate digitally in its decision-making processes increase. Also, whether members are willing to use these digital participation options. Indeed, the access to the Spanish government in 2018 has conditioned the party's digitalisation and internal participation practices. On the one hand, the consultations have been related to government agreements. On the other hand, being at the head of the government has meant that there have been no state-level primaries since 2017. It will be interesting to analyse how all these elements evolve when the party no longer leads the government and whether the digitisation of participation options is further developed.

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