ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

LOCAL POLITICAL PARTIES IN AUSTRIA DURING THE COVID-19 ERA: A COMPARATIVE CASE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines local political party organization of the SPÖ and its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The practices and initiatives adopted by local political, social, and democratic party groups in two Austrian regions, a rural town in Styria and an urban district in Vienna, during the COVID-19 pandemic were examined. Using Problem-centered interviews (PCI) and group discussions as instruments for data collection, it was investigated how these parties adapted their activities to maintain engagement and support from the population in the face of unprecedented challenges. The results showed that both parties transitioned to online formats for meetings and events. Measures such as telephone assistance for emotional support, projects to support local businesses, and social measures for those in financial need were introduced to meet the urgent needs of people in the communities. Despite some challenges such as fluctuating motivation, difficulties in maintaining online engagement, ICT competencies, and dealing with personal overload, local parties demonstrated resilience and adaptability during the crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19, local politics, ICT competency, political participation, communication

Introduction

Political parties are important components of democratic societies, operating at different levels, from federal to local communities. At the local communal level, proximity to voters is a defining feature, with parties relying on citizens' voluntary contributions and expertise. This study examines the experiences of two predominantly volunteer-driven local communal party organizations (SPs) as they navigated the challenges and opportunities presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in the areas of organizational and communication practices. Effective communication and adaptability became crucial when the pandemic disrupted operations. Therefore, this study focuses on the adaptation strategies of local political parties in the contrasting settings of Styria (rural) and Vienna (urban) during the pandemic. These adaptations range from the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to innovative canvassing methods, virtual events, and the deployment of social media tools. What makes this particularly intriguing is the reliance on volunteers who may not necessarily have prior expertise but need to quickly acquire skills to address emerging challenges. Furthermore, the research highlights not just outward-facing communications to voters but also internal dynamics, underscoring the importance of internal communications in these party structures. Using a qualitative, collective case study approach, this research gathered data from problem-centered interviews and group discussions involving sixteen individuals over a period of 1 1/2 years. This study provides new insights into the adaptability foundations of local party organizations during times of crisis. By shedding light on the nuanced adaptations made by political entities at the local-municipal level during an unprecedented crisis, this study contributes significantly to the literature on small- and micro-party research. The results not only demonstrate the resilience and adaptive capacity of local political party organizations but also present in this particular setting the various challenges faced by small party organizations at the local level as *loosely coupled systems*. This study contributes scientifically to small-party research. The results can also be a practical contribution to the party organization of the SPÖ. They could also be involved in reviewing and developing aspects, such as ICT skills and various aspects of internal training against the background of volunteers.

Literature Review

Party organizations in the local arena

This section outlines the functions and structures of local party organizations that the author considers essential to politics in general. First, local political party organizations can be classified according to organizational theory. Research contributions in the areas of organizational management and communication, spanning from leadership to diversity management, offer valuable insights. In particular, Harris and Sherblom (2002) provide a systems theory perspective on diverse group structures, while Katzenbach and Smith (1992) stress the importance of team potential and individual development in enhancing performance. Given the shift towards digital platforms and the consequent changes in organizational demands, Appelo's (2010) Management 3.0 provides a useful lens to explore the agility and complexity of modern organizations. This notion of evolving organizational structures can also be applied to community political groups, especially with Niemeier's (2016) focus on agency within such entities. Unlike large organizations, the team composition of local parties is dependent on the availability of volunteers, with their ICT skills playing a crucial role in achieving organizational objectives. In the author's view, these organizations do not fit Weber's (1921) bureaucracy model but align more with the description of *loosely coupled systems* or *organized anarchies* (Ingersoll, 1993; Lösche, 1993). Therefore, the decision to categorize local parties as groups or teams poses a challenge. This study proposes a hybrid perspective, viewing local parties as a blend of self-managing work teams (SMWT) and loosely coupled systems or *groups as subcultures* (Harris, 2002).

Medialization and Mediatization in Political Communication

To secure the public endorsement of their positions, political parties utilize online media as part of their communication strategies (Borucki, 2019; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). An actor-theoretic consideration of political communication classifies actors into three broad groups: parties and politicians, media and journalists, and citizens (McNair, 2018; Perloff, 2013; Reinemann, 2010). For political actors to succeed, their ability to mediate and represent is imperative (Delle Donne, 2019; Kamps, 2013). According to Dolata and Schrape (2014), it is important to recognize political organizations as *corporate actors* with formalized processes and differentiated capabilities for decision-making (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011) when understanding the implications of medialization on them. Because local par-

ties are typically made up of small organizational structures, it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between collective and corporate actors, which requires a consensus decision-making process within each group. Regardless of their type, all actors are affected by medialisation's influence, as political parties continue to rely on the media for public communication, which can influence their decision-making processes and actions (Marcinkowski, 2015; Strömbäck & Van Aelst, 2013). In light of the demands of medialization, the professionalization of party apparatuses has been viewed as a response (Krouwel, 2012), involving strategies such as communication management, media training, and specialist involvement. To achieve these goals, an organizational structure must be developed that centralizes communication as a key task and integrates it directly into political action (Jun, 2009, 2022). However, there is a double edge to the mediatization of political communication (Korte & Fröhlich, 2009). While it facilitates the dissemination of information, it can also oversimplify and sensationalize political messages, leading to a turn towards 'politainment' (Brants, 1998; Dörner, 2004). In the digital age, representational politics have gained importance over decision-making politics, significantly affecting the everyday communication of political actors (Korte & Richter, 2022). To communicate effectively in politics, political actors must adapt to the changing prerequisites and resources required (Kamps, 2013). Failure to adapt can weaken an actor's resonance with citizens, thus reducing their influence (Korte, 2019). Due to the increasing speed of social media communication, the quality of discourse may be reduced, making it necessary for political actors to manage their communication to maintain their power base (Korte, 2012). This study examines how these factors influenced the political communication of local SP community organizations and their predominantly volunteer actors during Covid-19.

Media Transition and Professionalization Challenges in Local Party Organizations

Scholars across disciplines have long studied the rapid transformation of media, including the rise of the Internet and social media platforms as political communication platforms (Schulz, 2004). Because of these digital platforms, politicians have been able to reach out, interact, and participate in real-time communication with a wider audience (Franck, 2016; Heinze, 2012). However, as a result of these changes, local party organizations face several new challenges. It has become more difficult for parties to communicate effectively, both internally and externally, necessitating adjustments

to both internal and external communication strategies (Borucki, 2022). Norms, rules, institutionalization, resources, and actor constellations contribute to shaping communication avenues and impacting decision-making processes (Kamps, 2013; Sarcinelli, 2013). Political communication behavior has become increasingly professionalized because of its ability to mediate and represent (Delle Donne, 2019; Kamps, 2013; Korte, 2006). Consequently, traditional communication strategies must be supplemented by new, egalitarian, and direct formats, both online and offline. Local party organizations tend to act independently, with actors able to establish direct interpersonal relationships with their environments (Carty & Eagles, 2005; Le Galès, 2021; Reeves, 2013; Songer, 1984; Wien & Franzke, 2014). As part of this trend, campaign management tasks have been outsourced to specialized agencies, where external consultants supplement internal party resources in areas such as public relations and media planning (Negrine et al., 2007). The local level, however, has traditionally been conducted by so-called party soldiers or volunteers who provide time and resources (Negrine et al., 2007; Schulz, 2011). There is often a lack of experience among these volunteers in political marketing and advertising. Although technical resources may be limited, personal contributions may be required to position political offerings at a local level. Campaigns on social networks have become a central feature of contemporary democracy, with research by Bright et al. (2020) suggesting that Twitter-based campaigning can influence vote outcomes. However, evidence of the effectiveness of these campaigns remains limited.

Methodology and Research Question

In this study, Covid-19's impact on the performance of social democratic parties in the local communal arena within Austria was examined using a qualitative collective case study approach (Stake, 1995, 2010). The research question central to this study is: "How did the Covid-19 pandemic affect the party work of social democratic organizations on in the local arena?" The methodology facilitates an in-depth understanding of complex issues in real-world settings and captures the intricate dynamics of the party organizations under consideration.

Data Collection and Instruments

The data material comes from the author's dissertation study and was collected between February 2021 and December 2022, and has not been exploited so far. Thus, this article is based on research material collected during the Covid-19 cri-

sis. Data were collected through problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 2000; Witzel & Reiter, 2012) and group discussions (Lamnek & Krell, 2010) with 16 key actors from local communal case organizations, providing a rich pool of first-hand observations. As a result of these interviews, the central issues contributing to the Covid-19 crisis were revealed and understood, while group discussions gave the participants a platform to share and discuss their diverse views and experiences over a time interval of 1 year (Case 1) and 1 1/2 years (Case 2).

Data Analysis

Structured qualitative content analysis (QDA) was used to process the data collected following the methodology of Kuckartz (2018). This methodology was chosen for its effectiveness in identifying and exploring patterns and themes within the material.

Table 1.
Overview of selected cases

Key Dimensions	C1	C2
Federal location	Party Activists in Urban Vienna	Local Party in rural Styria
Population	~76.000 Inhabitants (district)	7,500 to 15,000 (city)
Typology	urban	rural
Special Characteristic	A loose association of party activists, 25 members, 10-12 individuals at the core; most of the respondents hold academic titles.	A classic social democratic party organization; 265 members ranging in age from 26 to 98 years
Gender ratio	The interviewees had a gender ratio of 4 (male) to 3 (female).	The actors interviewed had a gender ratio of 5 (male) to 4 (female).
Age range (participants)	27 to 50	28 to 71
Majority/minority of mandates	No mandates.	Majority
Mayoral Office	-	Mayor
Online Presence	Social Media	Website, Social Media

Data analysis was structured around three main categories: (1) Adaptation to Digital Communication and Experience; (2) Impact, Challenges, and Limitations of Digital Communication; and (3) Community Engagement and Support Initiatives. By exploring these categories, a comprehensive understanding of the crisis phenomenon was achieved in two different local communal party organizations. This led to a Cross-Case Report that provided an analysis of these phenomena. The following section presents and discusses the results derived from the coded segments of the interviews based on these categories.

Table 1 lists some of the key characteristics of the cases.

Findings

The following statements relate to the research question posed to the actors interviewed in both cases. This anonymized study summarizes the actors and labels them with an abbreviation, where C1 represents Case 1, and the subsequent P + number represents the person interviewed.

Case 1

The actors interviewed from the local party activist group shared their experiences and perspectives on how the pandemic affected their activities and interactions in a loosely coupled system. C1P1 explained that due to Covid-19 related restrictions on indoor meetings, their group tried to resort to outdoor activities such as street campaigns and pop-up stands to maintain their presence and engagement with the public. They mainly moved to online meetings, which were deemed adequate but not a complete substitute for physical gatherings. C1P1 acknowledged that online meetings worked for their group because many members were used to them and were able to work from home, but pointed out that the social aspect of physical meetings could not be replicated virtually. C1P2 shared a similar sentiment, stating that the closure of the group's favorite meeting places, such as local pubs, made it difficult for them to hold regular meetings. They resorted to using online platforms such as *Zoom* or *WhatsApp* but noted that not all members participated in these digital gatherings equally. C1P2 also expressed a preference for in-person meetings, citing the limitations of online communication in expressing ideas and ensuring that messages were accurately conveyed. According to social media and advertising, C1P1 stated that they used advertising only for a couple of events. C1P2 also pointed out that not all members were tech-savvy, even in their constellations consisting of younger and educated actors, so online communication was not always an ideal option for the group. C1P3 mentioned that physical meetings became difficult, and they

were forced to move their activities to the internet, which led to a reduction in the frequency of meetings by about a third or even half of the usual number. C1P4 also mentioned that they had to rely more on digital events, which had become less frequent. They also discussed the difficulties in planning anything specifically, except for online events, and how online events were not as good a replacement for social interaction as physical meetings. They also mentioned that online events tended to be less efficient in terms of discussions and interactions, and lost their usual spontaneity. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, C1P4 expressed hope that they would soon be able to resume their usual activities, such as meeting in person at cafés and parks, and having discussions in a more relaxed and social setting. Overall, both C1P3 and C1P4 showed that the pandemic had a significant impact on their organizational work, and they had to adapt to new circumstances. Despite these challenges, they remained optimistic and continued to work towards their goals. As a follow-up to the PCIs, Case 1 stakeholders had a group discussion to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their ability to organize and engage in their communities. C1P3 noted that while the digital events were successful, they still missed the social aspect provided by the in-person events. C1P4 added that it was more difficult to attract new people to online events and missed the lower-barrier events they would typically organize, such as outdoor picnics or public booths in parks. C1P2 suggested that when they could meet again in person, they could organize walks or excursions to strengthen group dynamics. The actor also noted that online events could lead to less commitment and lower motivation for participants, but it was easier for people to join because they did not have to travel. C1P5 highlighted a successful project that they carried out during the pandemic, which involved making videos with local restaurants and bars to show support during lockdowns. When asked about whether they would keep any successful formats or approaches after the pandemic, C1P2 suggested recording talks by speakers and posting them on their YouTube channel to expand their reach.

Case 2

C2P2 mentioned that activities were limited and that virtual meetings replaced face-to-face meetings. The actor had missed face-to-face contact and social aspects of in-person meetings. C2P6 mentioned that the pandemic had affected the operation of their political organization in general, especially in terms of meetings and events. Despite the fact that the actors involved were mostly older

than 50 years and had to adapt to online communication because of the pandemic, this had worked well. In general, the organization was able to adapt well to the challenges of the pandemic. In the group discussions that had been conducted more than a year after PCI, C2P4 reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had been very challenging for all organizations, including their political party organizations, as many people had not been easily reached due to restrictions and security concerns. As a result, there were fewer events and gatherings, and people had been more withdrawn and more afraid due to feared health risks. However, C2P4 also saw the pandemic as an opportunity to demonstrate the importance of having a trusted and reliable institution or party to turn to in times of crisis. As the majority party in the community, the SP had a good reputation and was seen as a constant that people could rely on. Despite this advantage, the party faced challenges in organizing events and meetings and had to rely on videoconferencing and other technologies and continue its work in this way. C2P6 mentioned that the pandemic also resulted in personal disengagement from organizing work. C2P6 also noted that the use of videoconferencing tools made it easier for members to participate in meetings and other activities. For C2P6, this option was convenient and well suited for all active actors in the local organization. However, the actor acknowledged that there were also differences, especially in technical skills related to age. C2P6 noted that it was more difficult for older members and those not involved in daily operations to adapt to changes caused by the pandemic. C2P6 also mentioned that there had been much peer support from other stakeholders in the community, which had contributed to a smoother transition. However, with the support and assistance of other volunteers, all participants were able to participate in these activities. The study author and interviewer asked if there were individuals who had used the pandemic as an excuse to distance themselves from the organization. C2P8 responded that he had not observed any "submarines" or individuals who had stayed away from the online meetings. However, C2P8 also expressed his dislike for online meetings and felt that face-to-face contact was essential in local political work. He also acknowledged that the pandemic made it more difficult to reach out to the community. C2P9 explained that in the early stages of the pandemic, the citizens of the municipality had been overwhelmed by Covid-19-related restrictions. However, as an organization, they adapt relatively quickly to the changing situation by helping people as much as possible and supporting them with informational resources. They used various means to accomplish this, including WhatsApp and social

media. The team in the case had used WhatsApp to share information internally. They also relayed public information from the community administration to these channels. C2P4 noted that the Covid-19 pandemic severely affected their ability to connect with people and maintain personal contact. C2P8 reported that he had not made any home visits during the pandemic, mainly due to possible negative reactions from people who had been very concerned about social distancing. Moreover, it was feared that other political competitors would easily exploit this criticism. The interviewee mentioned incidents where people had become angry when others in the pharmacy or grocery store did not strictly adhere to the distance rules. According to C2P8, they would only go to someone's home if nothing else was available and if it was absolutely necessary. C2P4 stated that during the pandemic, all political parties, with the exception of the communist party (KP), had deviated from party politics and worked together to ensure the safety and well-being of all parties. C2P8 had stated that digital formats for thematic or political offerings had hardly been used during this COVID period; however, certain events, such as the city festival, had been organized differently to adapt to the situation. These adaptations were well received by the public, and C2P8 noted that they had been a positive change. C2P8 responded that there were not many changes beyond the modified events but that these changes were effective. C2P2 reported that during the Covid-19 pandemic, she worked as a counselor at a counseling center, similar to a telephone counseling center. She also sought out people in person when needed. C2P4 commented that she had not given her personal phone number, but C2P2 had given out her number and had still been receiving calls after the counseling center had closed. C2P2 noted that this service had been a party's tool to keep in direct contact with people during the pandemic, and C2P4 added that it would be developed even further in the future. The author of the study and the interviewer asked the participants if there had been special initiatives or activities to contact young people during the pandemic. However, participants could not recall the special activities that targeted this age group. However, the participants noted that it had been a difficult time, especially for younger people in the community.

Discussion

The Covid-19 pandemic presented unique challenges for political engagement at the local level, as shown by the experiences of political actors in both cases. This discussion explores the main findings and highlights the challenges, adaptations, and implications for future political engagement.

The adaptability of these organizations in the face of a global crisis and their strategies for engagement in two disparate settings - a rural town in Styria and an urban district in Vienna - provides detailed insight into the operations of social democratic parties during this period. The pandemic had a significant impact on local party organizations in Austria.

The qualitative findings reveal a spectrum of ICT capabilities within these organizations. While some members transitioned seamlessly to digital platforms, indicating pre-existing familiarity with digital tools, others, particularly older members, had difficulty transitioning. This variance underscores the inherent diversity of ICT capabilities and their impact on operational continuity during unexpected crises. According to Gao et al. (2020), the inherent diversity of ICT capabilities can pose challenges to operational continuity. Organizations with a wide range of ICT capabilities may face compatibility issues and difficulties in integrating different systems and technologies. This can lead to disruptions in communication, collaboration and access to critical resources. Additionally, organizations with limited ICT capabilities may struggle to provide the necessary infrastructure and support for remote work, leading to decreased productivity and operational disruptions.

However, during the pandemic, organizations had to find new ways of communicating and organizing due to social distancing, digitalization, and remote working, which was also reported by Arregi et al. (2022). In light of the present study, both cases shifted to online meetings in times of crisis, thus underlining the importance of digital engagement. Consequently, several challenges are associated with this transition. Case 1 illustrates that online meetings are an imperfect substitute for in-person interactions, and that certain intrinsic values, especially the social aspect, are irreplaceable. As in Case 2, online platforms provided continuity, but could not replicate the richness of face-to-face interactions. Even in relatively educated groups, there is a digital divide that persists among participants in these digital gatherings. As shown in Case 2, older demographics are hesitant to participate in online meetings, highlighting a challenge faced by many organizations: the friction between rapid technological change and entrenched habits that was already covered by Levinthal (1998). Collaborative ICT support has emerged as a defining theme. The element of collegial support, which was particularly emphasized in the second case study (Styria), illustrates the collaborative nature of ICT learning.

To the extent that some members demonstrated their skills, they became important advisors to their less-technically savvy colleagues. This underscores the importance of fostering collaborative ICT skills in organizations as well as the social dimensions of technology adaptation. However, training opportunities from higher-level organizational units of the party were not associated with Covid-19 needs. This suggests that social democratic organizations at the district or state level did not see or could not serve this need (Ackermann et al., 2023). Efforts to maintain connections with the community, whether through videos with local institutions or the dissemination of information via WhatsApp, sporadically suggest a higher level of ICT literacy in these areas. Here, technology was not just a communication tool, but was used strategically for broader organizational outreach. However, this discussion clarifies the importance of ongoing ICT training. The observed disparities in ICT skills and the resulting challenges faced by some members underscore the urgency of regular training, especially in organizations characterized by diverse demographics. Creating an environment that fosters continuous learning is essential for sustained, inclusive engagement.

Despite these challenges, both groups exhibited adaptability, particularly in their attempts to remain visible and engaged within their communities. The various initiatives, ranging from street campaigns between the Covid-related lockdowns in Case 1 to support videos for local businesses, speak to the parties' innovative strategies to remain present and useful during trying times. The emphasis on community, both in the sharing of public information and the provision of emotional support, paints a picture of local parties striving to remain socially relevant amidst an unprecedented health crisis. The collaboration noted among political parties, as highlighted in Case 2, further signifies the commitment to community well-being over political divide during such periods. Newer scientific contributions show that a local government's perceived quality mediates the effects of the pandemic on political trust (Bottasso et al., 2022).

However, as the data indicate, the two local party organizations under study face a number of challenges. During the digital shift, maintaining the frequency of engagement, ensuring a broad spectrum of participation, and dealing with *digital fatigue* were challenges. The difficulty in reaching out to young people in the community, as mentioned in the latter part of Case 2, suggests that this is an area that could benefit from improvement and focus in the post-pandemic era. In addition to the adapta-

tion of events, such as the *city festival* (Case 2), it is important to note that the post-pandemic period may see a blend of traditional and modified forms of engagement. This underscores the need for local parties to have a dual approach in their operational strategies - one that allows them to rapidly pivot to digital platforms when needed and another that ensures they remain deeply rooted in their communities, recognizing the irreplaceable value of face-to-face interaction. As we move ahead, these organizations might also need to bolster their strategies to engage younger demographics, ensuring a multi-generational representation and participation in their activities.

Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the functioning and organization of local political activist groups and their engagement strategies. This study, conducted with representatives from two cases, provides insights into the challenges and adjustments made by these groups during unprecedented times.

The data show that, in Case 1, the pandemic posed substantial challenges to the customary activities and interactions of the local party activist group. The restrictions imposed by the pandemic forced the group to adopt digital tools for meetings and communications. Although online platforms provide a solution for maintaining continuity in activities, they are unable to replicate the social essence of physical meetings. This sentiment was shared unanimously across all actors interviewed in Case 1. The closure of their customary meeting places, such as local pubs, further disrupted their regular engagement. Moreover, the technological barrier surfaced, with not all members being equally technology-savvy, leading to disparities in participation.

Case 2's insights revealed that, as in Case 1, moving to virtual meetings was imperative. Despite the older demographics, the transition to online platforms was relatively smooth. However, the challenge was to retain the richness and depth of face-to-face interactions. The pandemic's impact was not only limited to logistical challenges, but also extended to psychological dimensions, with citizens feeling overwhelmed due to the restrictions. Despite this, there was a commendable collaborative spirit observed among the political parties under study during the crisis, emphasizing communal well-being over party politics. For instance, the unique initiative of using a counseling center as a medium to stay connected with the community stands out,

underscoring the importance of direct contact in times of crisis. However, there seemed to be a void in specifically targeting the younger demographic, pointing towards a potential area of focus in future engagement strategies.

The adjustments made during the pandemic from online meetings to community support initiatives highlight the adaptability and resilience of these groups. However, the longing for in-person interactions and the challenges posed by online communication underscores the irreplaceable value of face-to-face engagements.

While the data from this Small N study show that local social democratic organizations generally have ICT skills and are certainly adaptable to some degree, they also show that there were gaps in the handling of the pandemic. Addressing disparate digital tool capabilities through continuous improvement of ICT skills and understanding the benefits and limitations of digital tools are important for these organizations, as they also navigate the local political arena of an ever-evolving digital landscape. Based on the findings and conclusions of these two qualitative case studies, further quantitative studies are required to investigate the general everyday digital skills of volunteer actors in the local political arena. Since this study focuses on Austrian political micro-organizations of the Social Democratic Party, the use of the Austrian adaptation of the European DigComp framework (Nárosy et al., 2022) is obvious. In summary, the pandemic undeniably strained the work of local political organizations. The shared experiences, challenges, and innovations during this period can also serve as a basis for establishing a framework for future policies and actions and provide evidence for future studies.

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