

Political engagement 2.0

New activist networks within the socialist e-party

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IN **REVUE FRANÇAISE DE SCIENCE POLITIQUE** 2010/6 Vol. 60 , PAGES 1137 TO 1157

PUBLISHER **PRESSES DE SCIENCES PO**

ISBN 9782724631876

DOI 10.3917/rfsp.606.1137

Uploaded: 12/06/2010

Article available online at

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-revue-francaise-de-science-politique-2010-6-page-1137?lang=en>



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POLITICAL

ENGAGEMENT 2.0

NEW ACTIVIST NETWORKS
WITHIN THE SOCIALIST E-PARTY

Thierry Barboni and Éric Treille
Translated from French by Arthur Plaza

With Web 2.0,¹ the virtual political race has both accelerated and grown more complex. From the recent creation of partisan social networks to the development of micro-blogging from the campaign trail via Twitter, an important technological shift is underway. Some of the latest digital tools have thus been deployed in the context of strategically raising a party's profile and establishing a partisan presence on the web. Some recent examples include: Coopérative politique – or Coopool – for the Socialist Party (PS),² Créateurs du possible for the UMP,³ the Démocrates for the Modem,⁴ Think Centre for the Nouveau Centre,⁵ and, during the previous campaign for the regional elections, the SpaceMob for Jean-Paul Huchon,⁶ and the i-Phone application⁷ for Valérie Pécresse's campaign site.⁸

From now on, it will be imperative for political parties to maintain an internet presence. Consequently, it is important to understand how the web became a space for competition among political parties, how it emerged as a place where parties establish a virtual presence, confront one another, and recruit new members. The growing influence of political parties on the internet has initially been studied from the point of view of what each party offers.⁹ Forms of political engagement in the digital age have thus generated several studies, focused in particular on how activists make use of available technologies¹⁰ and on the sociology of online party members.¹¹ Furthermore, Jacques Ion's "critical rediscovery" of the model of

1. "Web 2.0" refers to second generation internet, which permits the collaborative creation of content, and aims to satisfy the needs of users by focusing on user behavior.

2. <http://www.lacoopol.fr>

3. <http://www.lescreateursdepossibles.com/>

4. <http://www.lesdemocrates.fr/>

5. <http://think-centre.fr/>

6. <http://huchon2010.fr/>

7. <http://itunes.apple.com/fr/app/valerie-pecresse/id355516786?mt=8>

8. "Régionale: La guerre des Netrooms", *Libération*, 13 February 2010.

9. Bruno Villalba, "Moving towards an evolution in political mediation? French political parties and the new ICTs", in Rachel Gibson, Paul Nixon, and Stephen Ward (eds), *Political Parties and the Internet: Net Gain?* (London: Routledge, 2003), 120-38. Nicolas Benvegna, "Au-delà de la technique: L'Introduction d'internet dans le répertoire de mobilisation électorale de candidats de campagne. Le cas des élections législatives de 2002", *Terminal*, 92 (2004): 15-25.

10. Fabien Granjon, *L'internet militant: Mouvement social et usage des réseaux télématiques* (Paris: Éditions de l'Apogée, 2001).

11. For the Socialist Party, see Thierry Barboni, Djamel Mermat, Éric Treille, "Made in Internet: Les nouveaux adhérents du Parti socialiste", in Fabienne Greffet (ed.), *Continuerlalutte.com: Les parties politiques sur le web* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2011).

“long-distance” members has provided the impetus for taking a closer look at established categories of analysis in order to distinguish in relationship to the internet what is really new, what constitutes continuity with past practices, and what amounts to an adaptation of existing forms of activist engagement and practices.¹

Among these questions, however, a blind spot remains, despite its significance for understanding political engagement on the internet: we need to understand those organizational mechanisms that enable support for a political party via the internet.

A party's organizational structure consists of objectified rules, procedures, operations, practices, and cultural references that facilitate the participation of its members. A party's transition to the internet requires the assimilation of new practices and forms of engagement, and thus can only be fully understood in the context of the organizational adjustments undertaken to effect the transition. In other words, the repertoire of activist practices in a political party cannot be studied independently of changes in the party's organizational structure.

This shift of parties onto the internet requires us to extend this concept further, whilst reformulating somewhat our hypothesis. Checking the organizational box as part of this theoretical reformulation is even more important because, over and above a number of obvious characteristics of political engagement that are foregrounded by the internet (the individualization of practices, for example), political parties' e-strategies and their consequences in terms of activism are still at the “black box” stage. The digital turn would thus represent a response to the need for a renewal of forms of political engagement, with new demands (such as more flexible membership) and expectations (more involvement and discussion),² contrary to the traditional workings of political parties.³ In this context, the decline in the number of party members in democratic countries⁴ appears to attest to the inability of these parties to attract henceforth more “fickle” members and therefore the need to develop more flexible means of engagement.

Confronted by the disaffection of members, often more problematic in terms of legitimacy and image⁵ than in terms of party operations,⁶ and aside from simply copying one another,⁷ political parties have begun the work of “democratizing” their organization – a means of granting members a greater say in the internal decision-making process and offering them a space for enhanced participation. This “democratization”

1. See the special issue on activists in the Socialist Party in *Recherche socialiste* (46-47), January-June 2009. More generally, see Lilian Matthieu, “Un nouveau militantisme? À propos de quelques idées reçues”, *Contre-temps*, October 2008, <http://contretemps.eu/node/127>. See also the report edited by Fabienne Greffet and Stéphanie Wojcik, “Parler politique en ligne”, *Réseaux*, 26(150), 2008, 19-256.

2. Loïc Blondiaux and Yves Sintomer, “L'Impératif délibératif”, *Politix*, 57, 2002, 17-35.

3. Russel J. Dalton, Martin P. Wattenberg, *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

4. Peter Mair and Ingrid Van Biezen, “Party membership in the European Democracies, 1980-2000”, *Party Politics*, 7(1), 2001, 5-21.

5. Holly A. Semetko, “Parties in the Media Age”, in Richard S. Katz and William Crotty (eds), *Handbook of Party Politics* (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 515-27.

6. See Philippe Juhem, “La production notabiliaire du militantisme au Parti socialiste”, *Revue française de science politique*, 56(6), 2006, 909-41. See also, Florence Haegel, “Un parti politique a-t-il besoin d'adhérents?” *La Revue socialiste*, 13, 2003, 22-7.

7. See Gérard Grunberg and Florence Haegel, *La France vers le bipartisme? La présidentialisation du PS et de l'UMP* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2007).

– whose effects are visible in the development of (often formal) deliberative and participatory procedures¹ – is perceived, however, as ultimately insufficient, as the stagnation in party memberships attests. The internet, therefore, represents the ultimate means for drawing citizens closer to political parties.²

Party leaders' rhetoric regarding their parties' democratization³ might lead one to suppose a collapse of traditional forms of political engagement and, more widely, anticipate a general restructuring of activist networking in which the internet would play a part. However, the issue is less about knowing *why* these party leaders turn to the internet than about understanding *how* they go about doing so. Parties approach the internet in different ways, just as they no longer expect their members all to participate in the same way. Thus the “digitization” of member involvement is in reality closely linked to organizational “encoding” which up until now has determined the shape of such involvement.⁴ This is the correlation we will examine in this article, based on the assumption that the extension of political engagement from the physical to the online sphere, although it may manifest itself through generic technological channels (such as forums), is characterized by individual member-defined purposes and uses.

In this regard, the Socialist Party (hereafter PS) proves to be a useful case study. The political engagement of its members has changed profoundly, most notably due to the effects of a “democratization” that began in the early 1990s. This meant that the openings for “participating and redefining legitimate activist practices were adjusted to fit with the dominant representation within the PS of a more ‘distanced’ and individualized activism, which aimed to coproduce the party’s direction rather than simply assenting to it in principle”.⁵ Furthermore, introducing the internet into the party provided an opportunity to debate what the party was; these debates focused on the activist identity of party members. In fact, the PS was not a trailblazer in this regard, and only really embraced the internet during the 2007 presidential elections when it created a 20-euro membership offer online that allowed new members to participate in the nomination of the party’s presidential candidate. The operation was a success: nearly 85,000 new members joined the party, whereas it only had approximately 120,000 members in total beforehand. Subsequently, the defection of the “20-euro members” after the 2007 campaign was interpreted as further proof that the PS was still not “democratic” enough. Again, the “physical” party was denounced.⁶ This was enough to confirm the internet as a new space to conquer, made all the more pertinent because of the success of “the participatory experience” (a precursor to Ségolène Royal’s website, *Désir d’avenir*), which received widely favorable media coverage. This conquest of the web was based on the premise that the internet would allow the party to open up and therefore

1. See Rémi Lefebvre and Antoine Roger (eds), *Les partis à l'épreuve des procédures délibératives* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

2. Matthew R. Kerbel, *Netroots. Online Progressives and the Transformation of American Politics* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2009).

3. The idea of closeness that was promoted in this context fits perfectly with exchanges on the internet. Initially, of course, the internet put people who were geographically close in contact with one another. See Robert Castells, *La galaxie Internet* (Paris: Fayard, 2001).

4. Obviously, individual political engagement takes multiple forms. This argument focuses less on the extent of activist investment in and of itself, and more on the possibilities open to activists: it is difficult to designate the party's leader directly if the concept of individual voting is not inscribed in the party's statutes.

5. Rémi Lefebvre, “Le sens flottant de l'engagement socialiste: Usages et effets de la démocratisation interne au PS”, in *Les partis à l'épreuve des procédures délibératives*, 115.

6. See *Libération*, 23 November 2009.

encourage a level of participation that would satisfy the expectations of socialist activists. The internet would therefore be a means for recreating an activist community that was shrinking at the time, and to bring together a wider political community beyond the party's members alone. This form of aggregation would thus permit the "cohabitation" of "real" activists, who physically participated in the party, with the "virtual" members who engaged in the party only via the internet or very occasionally in person.

Engagement via the web, however, tends to obscure the federative dimension of the activist community. In the PS, physical participation creates a member community, which, although not necessarily very inclusive, nevertheless means that its members become familiar with the rules relevant to the functioning of the party.¹ The references, practices, and customs of "real" activists must thus be reconciled with those required in the virtual sphere. It is a fragile compromise, demonstrated on the one hand by the difficulty of physically integrating online members materially into the party, and on the other by the reluctance of "veteran" members, some of whom refuse to see the PS become a party of mere "supporters".

This difficult cohabitation is fundamentally linked to the transformation of the notion of party membership itself in the internet age. The PS case is a perfect example. Socialist Party members were originally considered as activists, the representatives of the socialist avant-garde. Yet, progressively, this conception of the member was eroded and replaced by that of the member-voter, a representative of the electorate within the party. The internet is accelerating this shift: the ease of engagement that the internet facilitates promotes a greater permeability in the party's boundaries so that physical distinctions disappear in favor of a digital egalitarianism between activists and supporters (*sympathisants*). Coexistence becomes conceivable on the web, where a virtual community is created with the explicit goal of recreating the conditions for socialist mobilization.

Benoît Thiéulin, the creator of Coopérative politique (Coopol), suggests that, "Coopol is a membrane that allows the 'blurring' of distinctions between supporters and activists. People are told, 'You don't have to pay before joining'.² The objective of this virtual community is to combine the online and the offline by linking the virtual campaign to the grassroots action."³ In other words, if the boundaries of the party are blurred on the net, the notion of membership is equally altered. On the web, activists and supporters are all potential agents for political mobilization. Significantly, moreover, Coopol is presented as the website for PS activists even though non-members can still register on the site. But until now, the term "activist" had been reserved for members only. This semantic evolution highlights that the physical and virtual boundaries of the party no longer correspond to one another; consequently, the party itself is now only considered as an element of a larger socialist enterprise that henceforth surpasses it. This evolution also illustrates the transformation of the PS into a partisan enterprise: the web must be above all a tool for mobilization with regard to future elections. Finally, it also confirms the necessary changes in the party's "real" organizational rules which must be adjusted to accommodate the development of rules governing its online presence.

1. For the ways in which activists become familiar with the rules, see Nathalie Ethuin, "La formation des militants communistes à l'heure du 'décentralisme démocratique'", in *Les partis à l'épreuve des procédures délibératives*, 87-104.

2. *Libération*, 29 December 2009.

3. *Libération*, 29 December 2009.

Consequently, the socialist expansion onto the web presumes making adjustments to the technical tool, which lie at the heart of the types of activism being proposed. What's at stake in the transition to the internet is therefore the necessity of making the material operation of the organization compatible with the anticipated effects of online participation. In other words, the internet is not thought of as necessarily leading to a dilution of party boundaries, but is, on the contrary, understood as a tool that should ultimately favor the functioning of these boundaries. Party boundaries become more flexible but, nonetheless, remain. In this sense, contrary to any technological determinism, the Socialist Party's transition to the internet demonstrates that the introduction of this tool into the party lends itself to a management strategy deployed by leaders who intend to use its functionality both to achieve internal objectives and to promote an external image of the party.

Thus, the growing permeability of party boundaries favors the emergence of political engagement without any formal party membership. This new form of engagement is not, however, a sign that by developing its presence on the web the PS is experiencing a digital de-institutionalization.¹ Quite the contrary: the party's material operations are readjusted based on its digital expansion: the real and the virtual are interwoven.

The creation of Coopool illustrates a double mechanism at work: first, the reworking of the notion of membership within the PS; second, the articulation of this notion and, therefore, the organizational changes that this evolution implies. Consequently, it makes sense to return to the political transformations that ultimately permitted the PS to turn itself into an e-party; and then to consider what was required organizationally in order to establish this new activism on and through the web. Reviewing the stages in this process requires a (brief) sociogenesis to better understand the recent developments that have facilitated online political engagement (e-activism).

Three stages in this shift can be identified: first, it was necessary to "democratize" the party; second, to "introduce the internet"; and third to envision its reconciliation with the "real" party. These three stages created an opportunity to redefine the notion of party membership at each step as part of the party's strategy to remedy its presidentialization, its sociological enclosure, and its mechanisms for internal nominations.

The democratization of the Socialist Party or the advent of the member-voter

If the internet creates a delocalized link between the member and his or her party, it also reinforces the individualization of socialist engagement as much in its modes of membership as in its activist practices.² In fact, participation is no longer constrained by traditional activist obligations such as attending section meetings in order to join the party. Likewise, the party is accessible to all on the internet, which enables it to transcend the party's physical partisan boundaries.

1. Laurent Olivier, "Les partis politiques saisis par les logiques militantes du mouvement social: 'Mouvementalisation' et désinstitutionnalisation partisane. L'exemple français", Conference of the Société québécoise de science politique (Québec, 2004), http://www.sqsp.uqam.ca/pdf/congresAnn/congres2004_olivier.pdf.

2. For a distinction between the individualization of users' practices and the uses of the internet, see Fabien Granjon, "Inégalités numériques et reconnaissance sociale: Des usages populaires de l'informatique connectée", *Les Cahiers du numérique*, 5(1), 2009, 19-44.

This individualization of differentiation¹ is facilitated precisely by the process of democratization that French parties have undergone since the 1990s, characterized by the recognition of individual rights for members, the easing of membership requirements, and, finally, the establishment of internal competition which focuses more on the personality of leaders.² Thus individualization favors the acceptance by political parties of two factors necessary to the introduction of the internet: the “atomization” of the member and the “blurring of boundaries” within the organization. The first factor refers to the recognition of member rights (direct nomination of candidates, for example). The second consists in lowering the costs of membership, thereby obscuring the distinction between party members and non-members³ (and the creation of statutes concerning supporters generally). These two factors led to partisan groups becoming more inclusively focused around the recognition of individual members.⁴ Like every procedural innovation,⁵ democratization, therefore, presupposes an institutional embodiment, from which individualized procedures emanate which then constitute the framework for introducing the internet.

The democratization of the PS will be studied from this perspective in this article. Begun in 1990, the process concluded in 1995. These five years were painful ones for the socialists on more than one count: to the electoral defeats in 1992, 1993 especially, 1994, and 1995, one must add the angry confrontations between leaders over the party’s direction. A profound stalemate within the party ensued, which democratization was then supposed to remedy. The crises that gripped the PS demonstrated the exhaustion of the party’s traditional ways of doing things (proportional representation; competition between factions, etc.), whereas structural evolutions, notably the growing presidentialization of the party had not yet found any efficient organizational outlets. The dizzying succession of First Secretaries at the head of the party – Pierre Mauroy (1990-1992), Laurent Fabius (1992-1993), Michel Rocard (1993-1994), Henri Emmanuelli (1994-1995), and Lionel Jospin (1995-1997) – gives an indication of the depth of the crisis that the party underwent. At this point, democratization appeared as the only possible solution to leaders of a party “adrift”⁶ who were seeking to right its course.

Representative logic versus embodied logic

The first stage in the “democratization” of the Socialist Party was the fractious 1990 congress in Rennes, marked by the open combat between Jospin and Fabius. For the first time since Épinay, the competition between factions failed to produce the election of the party’s leader and, therefore, the one who would be its candidate in the presidential elections.⁷ What’s

1. “An individualization of differentiation is an affirmation of individuals as unique individuals, differentiated, and irreducible to another or to any other social role”, wrote Christian Le Bart in *L’individualisation* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2008), 26.

2. Patrick Seyd, “New parties, new politics”, *Party Politics*, 5 (3), 1999, 383-405. On the effects of this personalization, see Howard Tumber and Silvio R. Waisbord, “Political scandals and media across democracies”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47(8), 2004, 1031-1137. See also, Raymond Kuhn, “The public and the private in contemporary French politics”, *French Cultural Studies*, 18(2), 2007, 185-200.

3. See Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, “Changing models of party organization and party democracy: the emergence of the Cartel Party”, *Party Politics*, 1(1), 1995, 5-28.

4. See Kay Lawson, “When linkage fails”, in Kay Lawson, and Peter H. Merkl (eds), *When Parties Fail: Emerging Alternative Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 13-38 (14-16).

5. See Andrew M. Appleton and Daniel S. Ward, “Party response to environmental change: a model of organizational innovation”, *Party Politics*, 3(3), 1997, 341-62.

6. See Eric Dupin, *L’après-Mitterrand: Le Parti socialiste à la dérive* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1991).

7. The motions for Mauroy, Jospin, Mermaz, and Fabius were nearly equal: 28.94% compared to 28.84%, while M. Rocard obtained 24.2%.

more, the party's internal voting rules were completely discredited following efforts by various candidates to manipulate them to their own advantage.¹

The party's democratization thus appeared as a means of sorting out its internal functions, and especially of introducing a new way of legitimating partisan leadership. The first step was to introduce the principle "one person, one vote", reversing the Socialist Party's historical and organizational foundation as a mass party. The PS was effectively structured around "interlocking mechanisms, with indirect election at various levels (congress, directory committee, national secretariat) [:] this system gave all legitimacy to the party instrument and guaranteed the superiority of the collective over the individual, by privileging a delegated democracy",² as the reliance on a mandated system of voting indicated. The principle "one person, one vote" leads to a rapprochement with the foundations of liberal democracy, according to representative logic, instead of the socialist form of democracy, which assumes an embodied logic of the social body.³ This "shift in representation" brought about an initial disruption in forms of participation: it turned the member into an individual and, therefore, a mirror of the electorate. This then implies a relaxing both of internal rules and, in particular, of the party's boundaries since the goal is to promote greater accessibility in order to improve the party's representativity.

This principle was accompanied by practices related to deliberative and participatory democracy: an activist "right of initiative" was created and, although the rule of mandated voting was maintained, the results were henceforth calculated solely on the votes of those present. In addition, an annual individual membership card was created, and the principle of the secret ballot ratified. At this stage, the recognition of individual rights for members did not call into question the party's organization according to factions. These factions remained a source of obstruction however in a party that was becoming more and more presidentialized.⁴ The parliamentary factional logic and the presidential logic contradicted one another, as the confrontation between Fabius and Jospin demonstrated, previously members of the same faction.

However, it was already clear that democratization, although favoring a renewal of the participation of socialist members, also had as its objective the redefinition of internal procedural rules. This "instrumentalization of the instrument" is even more visible in the growing atomization of members and the weakening of party boundaries that had previously been extremely rigid.

The introduction of the direct vote

The second phase of the democratization process was spearheaded by Laurent Fabius in 1992, then by Michel Rocard in 1993. It enacted the principle of "one person, one vote", in order to limit the influence of factions. Daniel Vaillant observed:

1. See the sections entitled, "pressions", "verrouillage", and "truquages", in the *Nouvel Observateur*, 1 March 1990.

2. Laurent Olivier, "Ambiguïtés de la démocratisation partisane en France (PS, RPR, UMP)", *Revue française de science politique*, 53(5), 2003, 761-90 (766).

3. Richard S. Katz, *Elections and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 287.

4. See Christine Pütz, "La présidentialisation des partis français", in Florence Haegel (ed.), *Partis politiques et système partisane en France* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2007), 321-57; see also Alain Bergounioux and Gérard Grunberg, *L'ambition et le remords. Les socialistes français et le pouvoir (1905-2005)* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

“The party's renewal must be founded on democracy. That is to say, a greater participation by activists [notably] in the nomination of leaders at all levels, and of candidates to stand for elections; only in this way can we put an end to co-optation. Only election bestows democratic legitimacy.”¹

Confronted by the decline in membership² and its shrinking electorate, socialist leaders chose to make direct election a systematic tool for internal selection. But although an enlarged space for expression would be granted to supporters,³ only members retained the right to participate in the internal selection process.

These reforms tackled a central point in the “democratization” of the PS. Similarly, for socialist leaders the idea of the election as the purpose of their professional activity became the yardstick for distributing power within the PS. In this sense, members enjoyed formally reinforced decision-making power: henceforth they directly designated (federal or national) party delegates, who then elected the party's First (national or federal) Secretary by a unanimous majority ballot with two rounds, while the national council and the federal councils continued to be selected according to proportional representation. Consequently, this second wave of democratization was aimed specifically at overcoming the factions in order to better implement the party's presidentialization.

Here the statutes were an instrument of political action. At the same time, the mechanisms of internal selection and the boundaries of the organization were being reconsidered. These two movements were still not combined: the boundaries of the organization were certainly more flexible, but supporters still only enjoyed limited rights within the party. At the same time, the necessity of gaining majority support in the nomination of leaders gained the upper hand over the proportional method, rather than actually replacing it. In other words, if affiliation to a faction was no longer as central in the acquisition of positions of power, it still remained an unavoidable fact of party life.⁴

The search for a new internal order was expressed therefore by the introduction of democratized procedures for member participation. The incremental process at work demonstrates how the PS adapted to individual-member representation, thus embracing an atomistic conception of engagement and of internal voting.

The individualization of political engagement

With the reforms initiated by Lionel Jospin in 1995 this third stage of democratization came to a close. These reforms definitively confirmed the individualization of membership; effectively renewing forms of political participation and definitively enacting the personalization of internal competition.

Although he no longer enjoyed the support of any faction, Jospin emerged strengthened by his score in the presidential election of 1995 and rose to head the party, replacing Henri Emmanuelli. This transition illustrates the transformations underway: Jospin used a

1. Daniel Vaillant, *PS Info*, 512, 18 April 1992, 24.

2. In 1994, the party numbered barely 100,000 members.

3. Supporters were granted an official status as “friends of the PS”, but could not vote at the congress or nominate candidates to stand for elections.

4. See Frédéric Sawicki, *Les réseaux du Parti socialiste: Sociologie d'un milieu partisan* (Paris: Belin, 1997).

questionnaire submitted to members to legitimize his assumption of leadership, closely associating this takeover with the democratization of the PS.¹

This new mode of allocating leadership was definitively ratified and was applied at all levels of the party. In the questionnaire, Question 5 proposed electing the First Secretary, the heads of the federal councils, and Section Secretaries by direct, secret ballot of the party members. This direct link with members was further reinforced by two additional measures. Federal representation was first calculated on the basis of the number of members who were up to date with their dues, a condition that ended the practice of delegated mandates. Then, the six-month waiting period before new members could vote was suppressed (temporarily), thereby formally challenging the distinction between members and non-members, and hence the party's boundaries themselves.

What had up until then not been possible became feasible thereafter through the knock-on effect of the presidential election. Thus, through these measures, Jospin established the foundations of inner party workings based on interlocking procedures of direct and representative democracy. The party's electoral tropism was confirmed: the presidential election would determine who would be the First Secretary.

These reforms did not put an end to the factions, however, since a proportional system of voting was retained for the composition of the leadership group. But they definitively reconciled the individualized promotion of internal leaders and the redefined role of the party's leadership.

This third phase in democratization thus very directly affected the ways in which members participate in the party: the notion of individualization is encouraged, and the procedures of direct democracy are definitively inscribed in the party's operations, whereas the costs of engagement are reduced. In other words, the move by Jospin aimed to make the PS a party "for" activists and no longer a party "of" activists: the representative dimension is privileged, demonstrated by direct communication with members.

This cycle of democratic reforms came to an end in 1995. The phenomenon of imitating representative democracy was obvious; in its concrete manifestation, the act of voting; in the methods deployed (secret ballots of individuals), or the instruments through which the action was expressed (installation of polling stations, transparent ballot boxes, and individual voting booths).² The intent of these reforms was less, for the time being, to yield to the demands of socialist members to participate "differently", and more to establish new modes of internal legitimization and regulation. The easing of voting restrictions nevertheless attests to the individualization of membership and its corollary, the blurring of party boundaries.

With the *de facto* abandonment of the mass-party model, the first barrier to the relaxation of political constraints on engagement was lifted. These reforms, therefore, represent the foundation on which individualized forms of participation would be able to develop later on via the internet – but still as a function of the organizational necessities to which they must respond.

1. The very first question was: "Do you wish Lionel Jospin to become the First Secretary of the Socialist Party?" See *Vendredi*, 20 October 1995. 94.2% of voters replied affirmatively.

2. See Éric Treille, "Des affinités électives. Délibérations partisans et désignations des candidats socialistes aux élections législatives", in *Les partis à l'épreuve des procédures délibératives*, 131-54.

The presidentialization of the Socialist Party or the invention of the e-member

Nearly a decade later and coming in the wake of two losses in the presidential elections, the PS underwent another transformation. From April to June 2006, close to 85,000 members joined the party. Instead of studying the mechanisms that encouraged their entry and the specific role played by information and communication technology (ICT), however, more attention was paid to the sociology of these new members.¹ It was as if the massive entry of these “made on the internet” members had obscured the (albeit brief) history of the invention of socialist e-membership. Yet, this episode in the life of the PS permits us to simultaneously examine the integration of the web into party organization and its effects on ways of engaging politically. Whereas these two types of questions are generally analyzed separately,² bringing together the nature of party reform and its consequences on the organization of the PS can provide an account of the manner in which both leaders and members prepared, accepted, and utilized the integration of the internet into the party.

Simplifying activist practices

During the 2005 congress, a group for the “development of the party” through the use of new technologies of communication was formed around Jack Lang. He envisioned creating *ex nihilo* socialist e-activists, renewing the party’s website for this purpose. The right to vote of these activists was central to the program: the objective was less to increase the mobilizational capacity of the PS and more to organize the upcoming presidential primary.³ In other words, the reform aimed less to promote the organizational pluralism that the party had established at Épinay,⁴ and more to favor pluralism within the internal competition generated by the presidential elections.⁵ This was about increasing the organization’s size via a strategy that was focused entirely on the electoral process.⁶

Lang favored, however, a representative logic – instead of a participatory logic – seeking foremost to change the structure of the socialist electoral corps. Indeed, as a “candidate for the candidacy” in 2007, but lacking a faction of his own, Lang knew that he could not win this internal competition without new members. Buttressed by his popularity, he wagered that he could break through the “perimeter”⁷ that encircled the PS as an organization. To accomplish this objective, it was necessary to circumvent the registration of members within

1. Thomas Décarý and Rémi Lefebvre, “Les militants ‘à vingt euros’: Les conditions socio-politiques d’un impossible engagement”, *Recherche socialiste*, 46-47, January-June 2009, 43-66.

2. R. Gibson, P. Nixon, and S. Ward, (eds), *Political Parties* focus in particular on the organizational effects of the internet, whereas Viviane Serfaty (ed.), *L’Internet en politique: Des États-Unis à l’Europe* (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2002) primarily considers the practices and uses of this tool.

3. On the nomination vote, see Olivier Nay, “Les règles du recrutement politique. Pour une approche institutionnaliste de la sélection politique. L’exemple des candidats à l’élection régionale”, *Politix*, 11(44), 1998, 161-90.

4. See Henri Rey and Françoise Subileau, *Les militants socialistes à l’épreuve du pouvoir* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1991), 194.

5. See G. Grunberg and F. Haegel, *La France*, 66-71.

6. On the strategies used to introduce ICTs as a function of the types of political parties, see Karl Löfgren and Colin Smith, “Political parties and democracy in the information age”, in Gibson, Nixon and Ward (eds), *Political Parties*, 39-52.

7. Rémi Lefebvre and Frédéric Sawicki, *La société des socialistes* (Bellecombe-en-Bauges: Éditions du Croquant, 2006), 154.

local sections: for a potential member, the difficulty resided less in their willingness to join the PS than in overcoming the practical obstacles to doing so.

In the first place, the Lang reform thus aimed to simplify activist practices by promoting the right to nominate the socialist candidate for presidential elections. The question was no longer: how can I join the PS?¹ Rather, the question became: what must I do to “choose the candidate in 2007?” The primary objective of Lang’s reform was to grant new members the right to vote on the socialist platform and, especially, to nominate the socialist presidential candidate in 2007. Thus, the new member was at the center of a party that no longer considered itself the product of the interplay between the party’s different territorial layers. Instead, the party was an entity defined by the presidential question.

The internet was to provide a means of circumventing the federations and, to a lesser degree, a means of overcoming internal factions, by creating a national section without any direct link to the geographic implantation of the PS. In contradistinction to those French political parties that accept looser relations with the overarching national party apparatus² and use the internet to spread a non-hierarchical political culture,³ the PS uses online membership to recentralize its political brand, relying on the software program that it recently developed – the ROSAM system.

Thus, the presidentialization of the rules of the game in the PS favors the homogenization of a socialist “partisan milieu”, which is reduced by the primary to the status of a single, large electoral district, instead of just existing over and above the regional framework.⁴

Becoming a member for 20 euros

Yet, with the approach of 2007, the party with the highest number of activists, in terms of absolute numbers, was no longer the PS. The UMP led by a wide margin here.⁵ In addition, the UMP permitted online membership, whereas the PS did not. The PS thus lost the battle of modernity. We will therefore consider the reform of the ways of joining the PS and the makeover of the socialist website in conjunction with one another.⁶

At the beginning of March 2006, the possibility of allowing political engagement from a distance and without intermediaries was enacted by the national secretariat. From then on, socialist supporters could join for 20 euros “if they wish to benefit from the right to vote for the socialist candidate who will run in the presidential elections”. The membership recruitment drive was short (it lasted two and a half months) and temporary, ending on 1 June exactly, or six months before the nomination of a candidate for the presidential elections, a period of time which also happened to be the minimal waiting period to earn the right to participate in the PS internal election. The goal, therefore, was not so much to prepare the party in anticipation for its contest with the UMP, but rather to transform the

1. Earlier, diverse initiatives had been launched, but unsuccessfully, such as the associate membership card, which was created in 2005, or the “collaborators in the project” initiative, conceived by François Hollande.

2. Alan Ware, “Les partis français et la science politique comparative”, in Haegel (ed.), *Partis politiques*, 414-17.

3. Fabienne Greffet, “Les partis politiques français sur le Web”, in Fabienne Greffet and Laurent Olivier (eds), *Les partis politiques: Quelles perspectives?* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001), 161-78.

4. F. Sawicki, *Les recherches du Parti socialiste*, “Pourquoi le cadre départemental”.

5. Florence Haegel, “La mobilisation partisane de droite”, *Revue française de science politique*, 59(1), 2009, 7-27.

6. Illustrating the “domino effect” identified by Rachel Gibson and Stephen Ward, “The first internet election? United Kingdom political parties and campaigning in cyberspace”, in John Bartle, Ivor Crewe, and Brian Gosschalk (eds), *Why Labour Won the General Election of 1997* (London: Franck Cass, 1998), 93-112 (95).

structure of the Socialist Party's electoral corps. On 9 March 2006, the PS revealed its new internet site on which it was now possible to join the party. The impetus for organizing the nominating primary was directly connected to the presidential ballot since the new Socialist Party member was simultaneously invited to vote on the party platform, nominate its candidate, and to defeat the right in the process.

Beyond the matter of joining the PS,¹ the website's makeover therefore shows that, as for the debates regarding the Treaty on the European Constitution,² the party no longer considered the general repertoire of its relations with activists as disconnected from electoral questions. The internet is the key element in this strategy. It was less important that it facilitated membership and more significant that it created what had previously been rejected – a national PS section. While the membership recruitment drive of March 2006 was clearly presented as a campaign with three pillars – joining by mail, by telephone, or by the internet – it was the third pillar that garnered the bulk of the attention. The reason was simple: only e-membership permitted the centralization of new members entering the PS. Whereas memberships obtained through the mail or by telephone could be forwarded to federations, e-membership delocalized the activist's connection to the party, and also thus circumvented the filters of factions, and local strategies for recruitment.

Thus, even if the socialist membership card accorded an equal right to validate the 2007 platform, it essentially represented a means for changing the rules of the game for the November 2006 primary ballot.

The denunciation of “delocalized activists”

The membership recruitment drive became a strictly internal issue. The Fabius faction denounced it vigorously, less for the principle of using ICT than for the ways in which it could be used. Thus, the internet was perceived as the means for multiplying fraudulent cards since it was impossible to verify the identity of new members.³ It would especially threaten the party's character as a party of activists. Writing in *Le Monde*, Henri Weber noted:

“There exists the risk that within the PS two categories of members would co-exist: the traditional activists in the local section or company [...] and the individual members, ‘delocalized’ socialists who possess voting rights and act as supporters during electoral campaigns.”⁴

This denunciation of upheaval in the repertoire of activist practices shows that it was precisely the ways in which members formed local alliances, which up to then had enabled factions within the party to form, that the internet called into question. From now on, two rationales for the affiliation of members co-existed within the party (delocalized/presidentialized and localized). Both require a re-examination of the nature of Socialist political engagement in the internet age. Jacques Salvator has observed that:

1. Michel Offerlé, “Entrées en politique”, *Politix*, 9(35), 1996, 3-5 (4).

2. See Éric Treille, “Désunions européennes. Le référendum interne du Parti socialiste sur le Traité constitutionnel européen de décembre 2004”, in Antonin Cohen and Antoine Vauchez (eds), *La constitution européenne: Élités, mobilisations, votes* (Brussels: Presses de l'Université libre de Bruxelles, 2007), 183-95.

3. On the question of phantom membership cards fraudulently requested by federations, see F. Sawicki, *Les réseaux du Parti socialiste*, 139.

4. Henri Weber, *Le Monde*, 22 August 2006.

“2006 was an auspicious year: we saw the vote on the party platform and the nomination of the candidate for the presidential elections. It was the perfect window of opportunity to launch a membership recruitment drive. We organized a superb campaign: an attractive offer with membership for 20 euros as a loss leader for the first year. [...] The problem is that we cheated people. We told them that they could join online, while in reality, what they completed was a request for membership. But they believed that they had joined. We oversold the product, you could say.”¹

Ségolène Royal’s rapid emergence as the major beneficiary of this membership drive would “restore order” to the internal competition: cutting off access to the party for new members became a rational means of prolonging the traditional repertoire of activist practices. The Fabius faction thus obtained an amendment: in order to validate their membership cards, twenty-euro members would have to physically attend a section meeting before the date of the primary vote. In short, the virtual member would have to meet the real local party chapter. This hybridization remained, however, very theoretical, as demonstrated by the fact that only 40% of new members had their say on the socialist platform compared to 47% of all members.² The new arrivals therefore exercised their voting rights specifically during the nomination of a candidate for the presidential elections and transformed this electoral moment into a unique trial period, which all factions had to adapt themselves to: on the eve of June 1, their websites thus relayed the details of the process.³

The creation of the e-member, therefore, required the party to rearticulate what was ‘in’ and what was ‘out’, a process that was as problematic as it was rapid. In so doing, it also permitted the development of a socialist internet activism.

Online activism

One of the major novelties of this internal campaign was that it permitted new members to express directly on the website what led them to join the PS. In fact, the PS internet site was conceived from the outset as a tool generating its own content, simultaneously mixing the party’s framing of impressions and the recognition of subjective particularities.⁴ It did this by on the one hand favoring new forms of viral activism by promoting membership via co-optation (mailing e-cards); and on the other by publishing a blog carrying promotional podcasts developed by PS leaders and especially by e-members. Each new member is welcomed by another internet member who recounts, in a written testimonial or a filmed interview, the reasons for his or her involvement. Then, in turn, the member can also explain why he or she joined the party. Thus, the PS transferred one part of its communication strategy to its members, who themselves promote the benefits of the new membership recruitment system for the PS.⁵ This revamping of the personal testimonial makes private political speech partisan; whilst partisan discourse is nourished by private speech.⁶

1. Jacques Salvator, responsible for party coordination, interview, 23 March 2007.

2. *Le Figaro*, 23 June 2006.

3. On the net campaign, see Bernard Dolez and Annie Laurent, “Une primaire à la française. La désignation de Ségolène Royal par le parti socialiste”, *Revue française de science politique*, 57(2), 2007, 133-61 (144-6).

4. Fabien Granjon and Julie Denoël, “Exposition de soi et reconnaissance de singularités subjectives sur les sites de réseaux sociaux”, *Sociologie*, 1 (2010): 25-43.

5. On the shift from the narrative itself towards its validation by witnesses or by actors, see Renaud Dulong *Le témoin oculaire: Les conditions sociales de l'attestation personnelle* (Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, 1998).

6. See Dominique Mehl, *La télévision de l'intimité* (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

This process also permits new members to campaign on behalf of the PS from the moment they join the party. This is accomplished, not by distributing leaflets or sticking up posters, but by turning new members into spokespeople for the PS membership recruitment drive. For these newly enrolled members, stating that they had just joined the party already represents a form of campaigning for the PS. The act of writing is transformed into engaged writing since the power of this form of communication is that it “is accomplished by spelling out what is in the process of taking place”.¹ With the internet, getting out the party’s message is no longer the sole domain of professional politicians and consultants, rather everyone can participate in this role.

The adoption of these promotional podcasts also permits the party to avoid the criticism that they are creating “delocalized” activists because the website is itself transformed into a section of the PS. If the localization of the e-member is virtual, their incarnation is very real since podcasts make flesh what at the outset was only a political media tool. Finally, by focusing the party’s development campaign on members, it is no longer the nomination of the future candidate which is at the core of the process; rather, the focus becomes a socialist voter committed to “becoming his own official cause”.²

The introduction of 20-euro memberships by the PS confirms that “political parties made the internet into an opportunity to revitalize, and in particular to reinforce their central apparatus”.³ In addition, it allows the PS to make forms of engagement more flexible because the physical boundaries of the party no longer pose an obstacle to membership, and the figure of the member-voter, sketched out at the beginning of the 1990s, can become a reality. From this perspective, the defection of two-thirds of the 20-euro members by 2008 was a problem for the party: it gave credence to the notion that sociological boundaries existed, coupled with a fossilized organizational structure, while the urgency for opening up the party grew all the more pressing. Confronted with this situation, party leaders chose to validate the proposition made by the committee chaired by Arnaud Montebourg, national secretary for renewal, to organize “open primaries”, and a new statutory right was created which allowed all French citizens⁴ to select the PS nominee for the 2012 presidential elections. Only two conditions were stipulated for the entire population’s participation in the electoral process: first, it would be necessary to sign a declaration promising to support the values of the left. Second, voters would have to pay one euro to defray campaign costs.⁵ What was, before 2007,

1. Christian Jouhaud, *Mazarinades: la fronde des mots* (Paris: Aubier, 1985), 98.

2. F. Granjon, *L'Internet militant*, 114.

3. Nicolas Sauger, “Les partis sur le Net: Première approche des pratiques virtuelles des partis politiques français”, in Serfaty (ed.), *L'Internet en politique*, 179-93.

4. Using the primary in this way opens up the possibility of voting in it to those under the legal voting age, foreign socialist activists, and members of allied parties in the election.

5. A “primaries party” was created to formalize the participation of voters in the nomination of the socialist candidate for the presidential elections in 2012. This new political party will never be a “single issue party”. Temporary by definition, it should be considered as a legal invention created to comply with the regulations that are imposed by political financing legislation. Thus, no membership card will be issued; signing up to an electoral list is all that is required to attest to the formal link between the voter and the organization of the primaries. In addition, it will not create any activist ties; at most it will create a service relationship between a voter/donor and a political service provider. Its unique function is to be found in the accountability of expenses and receipts required by the National Commission for Campaign Accounts and Political Financing (CNCCFP); the relationship to donors is thus duly recorded according to the framework for gifts to associations and their associated tax liabilities. On political campaign finance laws and primaries, see Éric Treille, “L'économie des primaires. L'encadrement financier de la démocratie interne au sein du Parti socialiste”, in the section on

the exclusive privilege of PS activists, and the privilege of PS membership in 2007, became the right of all voters in 2011. As a measure of how much members' own conception of what it is to be a socialist activist has shifted, the PS's project for renewal was approved on Thursday 24 June 2010 by a large majority of 76.9%. This score is all the more significant in that it completely stripped party activists of the exclusive right to nominate socialist candidates. But it also translates the members' acceptance of the ways in which the party boundaries had been transcended. Henceforth, engagement via the internet and physical engagement could be syncretically combined and generate the appearance of an unheard of political activism within the PS: political commitment without membership. The final phase in the restructuring of the PS's links with its activists is the emergence of new forms of e-activism out of the more interactive nature of Web 2.0.

The "social networking" of the Socialist Party or political commitment without membership

The individualization of engagement and the transcendence of party political boundaries seem to have found their highest form of expression in *Coopérative politique*, or Coopol, the online community website created for the PS that was inspired by the content on the site: www.mybarackobama.com,¹ as well as by the functionality available in Facebook. On this site, "online" and "offline" activists are invited to work together. At the same time as a socialist community is being created online, a new conception of activism is emerging within the PS. Yet, Coopol is not only designed to recreate a link with activists; it is also considered as a tool for the physical mobilization of activists. In this sense, far from leading to its "virtual dilution", the permeability of party boundaries, the remaking of the meaning of engagement, and the rationalization of methods of mobilization are all developments that benefit the PS.

From the virtual community to physical activism

In practice, party political attempts to make use of the web have fallen short of political parties' stated objectives, up to now.² As Coopol illustrates, the emergence of Web 2.0, with its easily accessible technical features, favors the creation of party political sites that can be seen as shaping the interaction between the party and citizens.

In the first place, this site fulfills a deliberative imperative; it emphasizes "exchanging, informing, co-producing, and sharing".³ Thus, it is a site whose members freely produce its content. One crucial distinction between this and the real party: *a priori*, Socialist Party officers do not have control over these exchanges, nor over the course that they take. Managing the website in this way attempts to foster the conditions needed to revive enthusiasm

political funding, organized by Abel François and Eric Phélippeau at the Tenth Congress of the Association française de science politique, Grenoble, 7-8 September 2009.

1. Barack Obama's website was inspired by an initiative launched by Howard Dean, which associated communication via the internet and mobilization both online and offline in groundbreaking ways. See Joe Trippi, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet and the Overthrow of Everything* (New York: Reganbooks, 2004).

2. Françoise Blum, "Internet, militantisme et engagement: Jalons sur les usages politiques et sociaux d'une technique récente", *Recherche socialiste*, 46-47, January-June 2009, 109-22.

3. <http://www.lacoopol.fr>.

for Socialist activist commitment, by contrasting it with the actual ways in which the real party functions, which tends to engender disappointment and disengagement.¹ A virtual community, accessible to all and based on hypertext and video has thus been created. Coopool promotes a digital egalitarianism between “friends” [coopains, a pun on Coopool], a term that evokes proximity, in a manner intended to transcend physical party boundaries to the benefit of the larger community of supporters.

This does not mean that the PS is dissolving into a nebulous community, blurred around the edges. If the site is supposed to reveal a virtual Socialist community to itself, its purpose is also to organize physical mobilization of its supporters through the medium of the web. The welcome message on its homepage recalls this dual function:

“Use Coopool to discover a new generation of tools for organization and political mobilization, helping you to share ideas online, and to act together in the real world. Whether you're a PS activists or supporter, or elsewhere on the left, everyone can join! Now it's your turn to get involved!”

This deliberative imperative does not constitute the site's entire purpose. But devoting the site to debate allows it to solicit the subsequent participation of activists in real world political activities. Significantly, in the age of Web 2.0, activist practices on the internet are thus associated with a technical use of the web that aims to organize physical activism.

However, if Coopool promotes an individualization of activist practices by calling on its members to make themselves “self-starters in political mobilization”, this apparent freedom does not hide the fact that the political skills or legitimacy for proposing such actions largely determines their success. The most popular “events” are those that deal with the regional election campaign where the distribution of leaflets, meetings, and poster mounting are the predominant suggested activities.² Yet, these most classic forms of political participation are most frequently solicited by party officials (section secretaries) or by members in charge of coordinating activist initiatives. In other words, Coopool perpetuates the real world party hierarchy in the virtual space of online activists.

1. This disenchanting vision of the socialist organization is not recent. See Françoise Subileau, Colette Ysmal, and Henri Rey, “Les adhérents socialistes en 1998”, *Les cahiers du Cevipof* 23 (May 1999). More broadly, see Olivier Fillieule (ed.), *Le désengagement militant* (Paris: Belin, 2005). According to Benoît Thieulin, more than 30,000 “friends” joined the community in June 2010.

2. The analysis of the site was conducted over a period of time from its creation to the end of the regional electoral campaign in March 2010.

Welcome to the Coopol!

Once registered on the website, each new member of Coopol may access an interface with multiple functions by using his or her personal account. For the most part, this functionality is identical to what is offered by typical social networks. Moreover, from this point of view, the similarities between the interfaces of Coopol and Facebook are numerous. The principal immediate and obvious difference between the two, however, consists of the (discreet) reinforcement of Coopol's socialist political identity. Neither the PS logo, nor photos of party leaders crowd the on-screen personal space of "friends". Yet, "friends" cannot fail to notice the affinity between the site and the PS. Among the tabs users may select on the interface, the "PS" and "MJS" thus signal the website's political affiliation. This link is also explicitly and especially obvious in the tools available in the personal account of all users. These tools permit each user to organize his or her calendar, their list of "friends" and groups, and to join discussions between members of his or her Socialist Party section. Each user can thus, if he or she wishes, be part of a physical section of the PS. Thus, Coopol reintroduces a localized party membership on the web, which is intended to turn participants into activists.

More generally, the tools for managing an account permit users to follow the discussions between Coopol members if they're "friends", if they participate in the same groups, or if they belong to the same section. To do this, the website has a custom feed where the actions of the "friends" in question appear (the most frequent message here informs others that "X and Y are now friends"). In addition, a space entitled, "Posts in my network" allows users to follow the written comments, frequently responses to current events, made by "friends", or to post comments themselves.

It is in this space that the PS presence is most evident: here the party directly informs users about its activities (public meetings) and suggests initiatives, frequently framed as 'fun'. Prior to the 24 June 2010 protest against the retirement reform, a post encouraged users to "make some noise for our retirement pensions by blowing the PS vuvuzela". Each "friend" can upload an image to illustrate his or her profile; it is also in this space that the PS logo is most visible, whereas it rarely, if ever, appears elsewhere on the interface.

Finally, the "continuous" online discussions are complemented by a rubric informing users of events taking place in their network. In addition to the creation of groups that anyone can join, Coopol is also organized around Party "events", in other words the activist initiatives proposed by a "friend". These "events" appear on the user's wall. Using the same principle as Facebook, Coopol users can reply, "I am attending", "I am not attending", or "Maybe", to these activities.

Through this latter functionality, it consequently appears that Coopol's true purpose is to organize the mobilization of the enlarged socialist web community. Moreover, the only PS logo that is permanently visible on the interface illustrates a rubric that takes a user to activist mobilizations on behalf of the party. This part of the site is not intended to be prescriptive but collaborative, given its title: "What grassroots actions seem the most effective to you?"

Party organizers thus currently control the site and its material ends. Moreover, the site can easily function in top-down mode by coordinating actions proposed by site administrators, and therefore under the party's direction.¹ In so doing, and while still developing a new mode of participation, the PS is redefining the criteria for how socialist political activism identifies itself.

1. On Barack Obama's campaign website as a model, see Thierry Vedel, "Le marketing politique de l'après-Obama", *Constructif*, 24 (2009): 53-56. For a more general discussion, see Thierry Vedel and Yves-Marie Cann,

“Friends” first

Studying the way in which the internet was introduced into the PS leads to a re-examination of the classic paradigms of party affiliation. Political scientist Maurice Duverger envisioned four circles of participation (the voter, the supporter, the member, and the activist); each circle illustrating increased proximity to the party. Proximity was interpreted as increasing personal commitment that deepened the closer one drew to the nucleus, which was represented by the political party.¹ The activist, then, is the one who participates most in the party’s activities and is also the one who identifies with it the most. The activist combined two elements that have since been dissociated by Coopool: the intensity of political activities corresponded to the intensity of engagement. Thus, with the internet, the dematerialization of membership leads to a rupture with “Duverger’s other law”: the decision to participate is disconnected from the obligation to join the party, which was automatically assumed previously. The only goal of political mobilization, then, is the support that it can muster: it seeks to be temporary, part of a network, sporadic, and focused on certain issues. The hierarchical relationship that Duverger established is inverted: the party no longer commands the member; submitting oneself to a party disappears. The objective elements of different levels of engagement, linked to the intensity of practices, disappear when engagement is determined subjectively by each “friend”.

Coopool accounts for a novel form of engagement: commitment without membership: ‘membership’ in the strict sense of the term, since belonging to the party is no longer “officially” necessary to participate in and to organize activist actions. Nor is there membership in the figurative sense, since the links between “friend” and party are placed under the sign of reciprocal independence. Coopool is a type of marketplace for socialist political activity, whose goal is, beyond the (re)creation of a virtual community, to offer opportunities for potential involvement to “engaged” individuals who will exploit the opportunity as they see fit. In other words, Coopool enlarges the pool of possible activists while still permitting each “friend” to put together their own degree of political activism. But this individualization of modes of engagement is based on the weakening of activist links that are all the more strained because the partisan community is formally limited.

The instability of the party link, as well as its reversibility, leads to an engagement that, while it still embodies political proximity, is closer to a form of action whose means are its own ends.² Thus, it is also significant that, with Coopool, the PS gave itself a tool for political mobilization that institutionalizes the dichotomy between joining the physical party and the repertoire of activist activities. From this point of view, Coopool can be interpreted as the practical translation of naturalized representations of contemporary political engagement. On the one hand, the politically engaged individual takes a rational step (even if it’s a gut reaction translated into a mouse click) based on a dissociation between political issues and political activists; on the other hand, the site allows you to ‘commitment hop’,³ something that is made even easier by both the dematerialization of political activism on the internet and its low cost.

¹ “Internet: Une communication électorale de rupture”, in Pascal Perrineau (ed.), *Le vote de rupture: Les élections présidentielle et législative d’avril-juin 2007* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2008), 51-75.

1. Maurice Duverger, *Les partis politiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1992 [1951]).

2. Devotion is no longer necessarily a central resource in the constitution of activist capital. See Frédérique Matonti and Franck Poupeau, “Le capital militant: Essai de définition”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 155, 2004, 5-11.

3. See J. Ion, *La fin des militants?*

Furthermore, it's no longer a matter here of social embodiment, as would be the case for a mass party, nor of truly representing the electorate,¹ since the "friends" are barely known to the party itself. Thus activism loses its physical status: an activist is no longer necessarily someone who pays membership dues to the party, but can be anyone who calls themselves one.

Stripped of its party political finery, of its most visible external signs of belonging, this form of political engagement reveals a distant relationship to political parties. It also reveals the reconstruction taking place in the division of political labor.

Not taking sides

Yet, far from being problematic for the PS, this evolution fits with both the reality of its organization and its internal functions. The PS is now run by a professional elite for whom the party is a tool permitting them to carry out their roles successfully; the socialist organization is becoming a provider of mobilizing services by and for its leaders.² In this perspective, Coopool appears as a functionally neutral tool: it organizes activist mobilization through enlarging the partisan community; it does not aim to upset the party's internal equilibrium.

Coopool demonstrates the externalization of the organizational costs of political engagement. "Blurring the lines between supporters and members", to use the expression of Coopool's creator, Benoît Thieulin, thus comes down to functionally disassociating the party's internal operation and partisan mobilization. Since it's no longer necessary to be a party member in order to be a party "activist", it's also no longer necessary to physically take part in the workings of the party. Thus, partisan boundaries will continue to exist as long as the party's physical boundaries are reinforced. This paradox is linked to the fact that, in the end, digital egalitarianism only reproduces the inequality of actual status between party members and non-party members. If each "friend" can participate in the party's actions, then the only ones whose opinions count are those who have a status within the party; in other words, those who possess the official title of members. The socialist activist in the "classic" sense of the word is not disappearing, nor are activist practices disappearing.

The organizational cost of engagement – in other words, the statutory counterpart to membership – is in this way reduced for the PS: only one segment of the members belonging to the enlarged community created on Coopool enjoys actual membership. In this way, the physical community of supporters and the virtual community of supporters are not one and the same, although the latter does encompass the former. Consequently, Coopool permits the party's leadership to retain a "reserve force of activists", without them being called upon to "shake up" the party's real membership numbers. Significantly moreover, there have been no further confrontations between factions over the internet members' right to vote on the presidential nomination during the development of the Coopool website.³

1. See Pippa Norris, "Who surfs? New technology, old voters and virtual democracy", in Elaine C. Kamarck and Joseph S. Nye (eds), *Democracy.com? Governance in a Networked World* (Hollis: Hollis Publishing, 1999), 71-98.

2. Thierry Barboni, "Les changements d'une organisation: Le Parti socialiste, entre configuration partisane et cartellisation, 1971-2007" (Doctoral Thesis in Political Science, Paris: Université de Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne, 2008), 350ff.

3. The site's creation was preceded, moreover, by a presentation of its objectives prior to all other motions, a sign of the issue's importance for party leaders. See *Libération*, 29 December 2009.

Simultaneously, while methods of selecting socialist elites remain “partisan-centric”, the repertoire of activist activities is largely open to outsiders. The division of political labor deepens as positions are attributed within the party on the basis of modes of participation within the party organization. While party elites are physically recruited, activists self-select online. In other words, the introduction of the internet to the Socialist Party, far from provoking a digital dilution of the organization, has been adapted to the party’s internal management.¹

Coopol proposes a unique combination of political activities that are simultaneously online and outside the party. This combination is based on the effective dissociation between the category of activist, which has become extremely flexible, and the opportunities for activist activity. Basing itself on the individualization of activist practices, this combination promotes a virtual blurring of partisan boundaries, which in the end reinforces the efficacy of internal selection methods by concealing them, to the advantage of a federative representation of a virtual community. Thus, by redefining the meaning of socialist engagement, Coopol transforms the representation of activist roles, erasing their meaning, privileging practical action to the detriment of political identity that becomes more opaque even while it is more vibrant.

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With Coopol, the PS acquired an internet tool whose official objective is to facilitate the mobilization of a socialist community expanded beyond the physical boundaries of the party and the limited circle of its members. The transition of the PS to the internet required the integration of the practices, usages, and principles permitted by this technology. Coopol is supposed to offer technical solutions to the party’s limitations, which include functioning within a network, proximity, procedures for discussion, and flexibility. In so doing, the site favors a “looser” connection to the party, without which engagement 2.0 would not find any real practical outlet. In addition, it permits a hybridization of action repertoires: by developing a new organizational tool for mobilization, Coopol encourages the PS to rationalize its own range of activist practices and makes efficiency a determining criterion for evaluating political participation. According to this measure, Coopol demonstrates the emergence of a new expression of physical and virtual political activities, rather than the replacement of the former by the latter.

For the time being, socialist engagement in the age of web 2.0 does not imply a dilution of party political organization into a virtual community that would transcend it. On the contrary, the expansion of activist activity within the PS illustrates how much forms of engagement depend on the political conditions of its production. To be an activist in the PS without being a member requires that the party organization’s members accept, manage, and regulate this “usurpation” of their prerogatives. In this sense, the party boundaries have certainly been relaxed, but have in no way been toppled. In the occurrence the party’s democratization in the 1990s constituted an indispensable foundation, making possible the introduction of the internet into the party nearly a decade later.

1. The members of the VVD in Holland currently choose party representatives for election via the internet, an example that is not envisioned by the PS.

Facilitating partisan engagement required the development of organizational outlets for the individualization of activism. Reconciling the individualism of (e-)practices by activists and the organization's collective functioning presumed registering and legitimizing the individualization of membership and the blurring of party political boundaries. It was only at the end of a long period of maturation that the PS recognized the individuality of activists in its statutes. This occurred during the 1990s as the PS progressively abandoned delegated mandates, introduced 20-euro memberships, and finally created its online community, Coopool, today. The individuation of activist practices was assimilated into the individualization of partisan representations of engagement. In this sense, the internet is merely the technological extension of an earlier transformation, which is visible in parties' processes of democratization.

The apparent freedom enjoyed by socialist "friends" online requires, first of all, the conjugation of the singular activist experience with the plural (collective) experience, and then the shaping of the move to 'self-assumed accountability' by political activists. Thus, Coopool encourages activist "empowerment" with party officials serving in the end as the principal architects and beneficiaries of the process. "Activist empowerment" highlights how much the techniques for individualizing engagement are in fact a technology for deploying power. The new socialist organization that is developing, the Socialist e-Party, aims to renew the modes of internal regulation by domesticating the political effects of technical innovation. With the internet, the party's functional autonomy is called into question because, for the leaders, it is a matter of guaranteeing organizational continuity beyond the desired permeability of social space. This continuity is permitted in the first place by incorporating technical changes inspired by a party political culture reinvigorated for the occasion. It is especially predicated upon the physical territorial logic that continues to unite the party. The fact that local registration of members is not a central aim of Coopool consequently means that internet members inevitably seek material integration into the party on the local level, and it begs the question of the "compatibility" of new members with the routine practices or customs already existing within the PS.

If partisan boundaries have been lifted online, their physical maintenance represents a guarantee of the maintenance of internal positions acquired within the party. Similarly, political involvement will be all the more free on the internet if it is "controlled" offline in the physical world. The perpetuation of a partisan community based on the physical engagement of individuals allows socialist leaders to ensure relative control of the internal workings of the party by excluding any "new" members who do not wish to embrace these territorialized and material rationales for engagement.

In these conditions, a new partisan division of labor is arising. We can only speculate about its growth because the conversion rate of e-members into physical members and their activities are still unknown. At this point in political engagement 2.0, answering this question is all the more important because the virtual and the real are coalescing. A new research agenda is thus opening up in which the sociology of members, their modes of engagement, and contemporary forms of political participation are all intimately interconnected. Investigating the mechanisms, processes, and actors in this evolution will allow us to reassess the resilience of political parties – the "democratic phoenixes" that are all the more firmly anchored in the real world because they have successfully expanded their presence onto the web.

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