From open government to open parties in Europe. A framework for analysis

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Open government (OG) is an increasingly used management model among the public administrations of European countries and of the European Union, which is currently working on *The Path to the Digital Decade*. This supposes the application of measures to promote proximity and citizenship's prominence in many public policies, leading to improved quality of democracy. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a forced digitalization of many public services. Despite the fact that studies on OG do not usually focus on them, political parties are essential actors for the success or failure of OG measures, both from a bottom-up and a top-down perspective, on public administration transformation. Moreover, political parties are transforming themselves into more open organizations at the same time. We define open parties as political parties with high standards in transparency, participation, and collaboration. They also feature high degrees of organizational digitalization. This article proposes a framework for analyzing political parties' openness and explores available empirical data on different aspects related to OG in the European context. We have found that most parties possess a good level of local organizational strength but still need to reach better levels of anticorruption commitment, to form stronger ties with affiliated organizations, and especially to improve the participation of members and activists in their decision-making. Furthermore, elitism, clientelism, and populistic rhetoric represent significant obstacles that could hinder the party reform process.

KEYWORDS

political parties, open government, digital politics, European public policies, political transparency, e-democracy

1. Introduction

Although the concept is not new, and the Scandinavian countries have long implemented it (Curtin and Meijers, 1995; Grønbech-Jensen, 1998), since the initiative of President Obama (2009) to improve the performance of the United States administration, Open government (OG) has gained increasing prominence worldwide in both political and academic agendas (Lee and Kwak, 2012; Wirtz and Birkmeyer, 2015). This has been reflected in the constitution of a specific international organization such as the Open Government Partnership, in numerous measures adopted at every level of government—supranational, state, regional, and local—and in the proliferation of academic literature and case studies on the topic. OG is, therefore, a new paradigm of governance that develops in parallel—and irregularly—in different parts of the planet, which is linked to the digital revolution (Dai, 2000) and to new values of public service (Bryson et al., 2014), and which involves changes in the functioning of every political actor in a system. Significant empirical evidence points out that political parties have experienced a transformation similar to administrations on this dimension. Within the political system of the European Union, parties function as

permanently active organizations and not only as electoral platforms (Hix and Lord, 1997), so their changes affect the performance of institutions as well. That is why we explore the possibilities offered by the concept of open parties as a framework of analysis for political organizations' contemporary transformations.

This article makes several contributions. First, after providing a review of the literature on OG, we map the implementation of OG measures in the European Union, considering member states' commitments, EU institutions policies, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the subject. Second, we try to empirically answer our main research question: what are the stances of European political parties on openness and OG? To answer the question, we mobilize data about their role, particularly in the case of highly digitalized parties, in OG processes and about their positions on the matter based on Europarties' manifestos. Then, we analyze political parties' openness by exploring the available empirical data on different aspects related to transparency, participation, and collaboration in the European context. Finally, in the last section of this article we discuss our findings.

2. Theoretical framework and review of the literature

Open government has been defined by the OECD (2016; p. 25) as "*a culture of governance based on innovative and sustainable public policies and practices inspired by the principles of transparency, accountability and participation that fosters democracy and inclusive growth.*" This mode of governance is characterized by the more ethical functioning of institutional actors, which also become more open to the participation of civil society. The latter assumes a role of co-designer of public policies, being able to influence more directly their elaboration and evaluation. Consequently, this way of exercising government involves dismantling some traditional Weberian hierarchical structures in the public sphere to establish multilateral and bidirectional networks. Likewise, the penetration of technology into the political sphere is a key factor for the success of this style of government (Evans and Campos, 2013), allowing citizens to better control rulers and, also, to build easier and more direct forms of collective decision-making. This, in turn, increases the legitimacy of the political system (García, 2014; p. 85).

However, in accordance with Obama's 2009 initiative, several observers agree in defining OG "*as a management model based on transparency, participation and collaboration*" (Criado et al., 2018; p. 55). These three concepts are often used interchangeably, especially the last two, and they are continually being redefined, but each of them contributes to the design and development of public policies in different ways (Gascó-Hernández, 2014). While new dimensions for analyzing the degree of openness of a government must also be taken into consideration—such as information availability or information technology (Gil-García et al., 2020)—we consider that the three original ones are most appropriate, especially when conducting comparative analyses.

Starting with transparency, as a mode for operating institutions, it is "strongly associated with the right of access to information and accountability" (Criado et al., 2018; p. 69). The "right to know" implies a conflict of interest between who governs and the citizenship (Erkkilä, 2020), but the more people are guaranteed that right, the more the political system reinforces its legitimacy and generates political trust (Jaeger and Bertot, 2010). This dynamic has led to a huge effort in freeing governmental information as open data (Noveck, 2017). On the other hand, participation "is related to the involvement in political processes and, as a consequence, with consultation and deliberation with citizens, and participation in decision-making and public policy development" (Criado et al., 2018; p. 69). Participation requires direct communication tools to interact with public officials and politicians, which are frequently electronic ones (Tambouris et al., 2007). Finally, collaboration "moves beyond including and incorporating citizens' input to emphasize citizens' formal roles in government proceedings and policy implementation" (Rogers and Tonya, 2012; p. 2). This points toward opening to people, and also companies, the latter stages of the policy cycle: implementation, monitoring, and evaluation (Lucke and Große, 2014; p. 189). Both participation and collaboration have proven to be elementary for new ways of public innovation (Schmidthuber et al., 2019).

2.1. Open government within national and European institutions

If we focus on the evolution of OG patterns in the European Union, which is the focus of the current special issue, we should consider three different aspects: the commitment of EU member states toward OG, the OG policies that the EU is currently developing, and the boost given by the COVID-19 pandemic to OG both at the EU and at the member states level.

First, we analyze the diffusion of OG initiatives within EU member states. States bear the main responsibility for OG performance as they design national initiatives and also negotiate to establish international standards. The Open Government Partnership (OGP) is, since 2011, the international body supervising the commitments deriving from the Declaration of Open Government of the adhering public administrations at the state, regional, and local levels, helping the latter in designing and implementing OG reforms (Piotrowski, 2017). In the first edition of their Global Report, the Partnership noted that OG policies are necessary to curb the tendencies toward authoritarianism in some countries (OGP, 2019). Membership of the OGP provides an added level of accountability for public administrations, which is why this brand has become a kind of international seal of quality for governments. The governments who renege on commitments or act against the principles of the Declaration are marked as inactive and may be withdrawn from the partnership. As we can see in Table 1, a total of 19 EU Member States (MS) are active members of the OGP. Moreover, with the exception of Belgium, all EU MS that are inactive or non-OGP member countries score quite badly on a reliable indicator of democratic quality, such as the Liberal Democracy Index from V-Dem. It seems that the fact of not actively developing OG policies is related to lower democratic performances in comparison with other EU countries.

A second international reference organization on OG— working on this field even before the OGP—is the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which has also

TABLE 1   Role of the 27 EU member states within the Open Government Partnership and their score in the Liberal Democracy Index 2021.

Country	OGP status	LDI 2021	Country	OGP status	LDI 2021
Denmark	Active member	0.88	Austria	Non-member	0.75
Sweden	Active member	0.88	Lithuania	Active member	0.74
Estonia	Active member	0.84	Latvia	Active member	0.73
Finland	Active member	0.83	Czechia	Active member	0.71
Belgium	Non-member	0.82	Cyprus	Non-member	0.69
Germany	Active member	0.82	Greece	Active member	0.67
Ireland	Active member	0.82	Romania	Active member	0.64
Netherlands	Active member	0.81	Croatia	Active member	0.63
Portugal	Active member	0.81	Malta	Inactive member	0.63
Luxembourg	Active member	0.80	Slovenia	Non-member	0.60
France	Active member	0.79	Bulgaria	Inactive member	0.55
Spain	Active member	0.78	Poland	Non-member	0.41
Italy	Active member	0.77	Hungary	Non-member	0.36
Slovakia	Active member	0.77			

The authors, using data included in Boese et al. (2022).

promoted, since 2013, the Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI) and a good number of publications and case studies on the subject. Both organizations also cooperate with each other, an example being the joint publication of a guide for the correct communication of OG (OECD and OGP, 2019). The link between the OECD and the European states is strong as all EU countries are members of the OECD, with the exception of Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania—these three countries are candidates for entry since January 2022—Cyprus, and Malta. Thus, most countries contribute and, at the same time, benefit from the research and multilateral advances made by the OECD in the field of OG.

European states, therefore, adhere for the most part to OG goals, as reflected in the active membership of 19 of them in the OGP. The fact that 22 of the 27 EU MS belong to the OECD is another indicator of commitment to OG initiatives, although OECD membership does not imply the same level of commitment to OG as the membership of the OGP. This latter organization allows citizens to consult on its website the OG plans of the member countries and subnational authorities and the progress of each initiative.

Second, we provide an overview of the current EU open government policies. As noted previously, "*the European Union prominently features open government in the first articles of its foundational Treaty*" (Meijer et al., 2012; p. 11). Indeed, the Treaty on European Union[1] states in its Art. 1 that "*this Treaty marks a new stage in the process of creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe, in which decisions are taken as openly as possible and as closely as possible to the citizen*." Art. 10.3 also states that "*every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. Decisions shall be taken as openly and as closely as possible to the citizen*." In addition, Art. 11.2 declares that "*the institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue*

with representative associations and civil society." Despite this strong commitment to open government in the treaties, the European Union has not adopted a European Open Government plan as such, entailing the responsibility of the member states to develop targeted OG initiatives.

However, there are numerous EU initiatives that we can identify within this area creating a common framework for both the European institutions and the member states. Open government is in fact mentioned in some of the most important measures for European digital transformation included in the *eGovernment Action Plan* (2016-2020), which aimed to create transnational electronic public services within the EU, such as the Digital Single Gateway or electronic medical prescriptions. The plan was designed to receive new proposals from the Commission, from all levels of public administration in the EU, and from the stakeholders. Currently, two of the six strategic priorities of the European Commission for the period 2019–2024[2] are directly related to OG: *A new push for European democracy*, a priority that focuses on the political empowerment of European citizens facing disinformation and external interference—from which the *European Democracy Action Plan* is derived—and *A Europe fit for the digital age*, which aims to transform the EU economy and society based on more digital and ecologically sustainable models. This second priority is marked by *The Digital targets for 2030* of the *Europe's Digital Decade*, which was presented in March 2021 as an ambitious set of digitalization targets for the European institutions and member states and whose implementation was defined in *The Path to the Digital Decade* package of measures and in the funding program called "*The Digital Europe Programme*".

Alongside specific digitalization efforts, other European Union policies also foster OG goals. One of them is the official

portal for European data, which has made more than 1.200.000 databases available to the public. Another one is the Transparency Register for lobbies that interact with the European Union institutions, approved in 2011, and which entails the acceptance of a common code of conduct. Moreover, all officially registered Europarties, namely, the European federations of national political organizations, have been put under the supervision of the Authority for European Political Parties and European Political Foundations since 2014. Another EU policy instrument for promoting, albeit indirectly, OG goals is the European Citizens' Initiative, which is a mechanism allowing citizens to participate directly in the development of EU policies by calling directly on the European Commission to propose a legal act (notably, a Directive or Regulation) once the signatures of at least 1 million citizens who are nationals of at least seven member states are collected. In addition, in terms of scientific research, the European Commission has also declared its support for open access policies to promote more efficient science and greater innovation in its *Open Science* strategy.

Third, we look at how OG initiatives evolved in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic. The global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, with lockdowns and social distancing measures, forced administrations to transform their procedures for delivering public services to citizens, favoring digital over face-to-face interactions. A trend that developed slowly over decades had thus been suddenly accelerated. The need for governments to face the health crisis without having too many essential services and productive sectors to cease their functions implied rapid and substantial changes in decision-making, communication, production systems, and relations between citizens and administrations. Digital transformation strategies were among the highest national priorities in 2020–2021, when 34 OECD countries had put in place targeted national digital strategies coordinated at their highest levels of government, even though 5 of them were already developing similar strategies since 2016 (OECD., 2020; p. 4). As shown in a recent report by the European Investment Bank, before the pandemic, pioneering digital technologies were mainly used by the most innovative and disruptive companies, but the COVID-19 crisis brought the digital transformation to the broader business sector and also to public administration and society (EIB, 2022).

As the European Commission has pointed out, during the coronavirus crisis, its Digital Strategy gained greater prominence, while new digital tools have been developed and strengthened to monitor infections and to guarantee the safety of the population, allowing citizens to connect among them and with public services remotely[3]. In addition, the *NextGenerationEU* recovery plan, endowed with more than € 800 billion budget, has among its priorities fair climate and digital transitions via the Just Transition Fund and the Digital Europe Programme. For their part, national governments also made great individual efforts, as evidenced by the rapid implementation of infection tracking apps (Villaplana, 2021; p. 13).

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3 European Commission's website: Digital solutions during the pandemic. https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/digital-solutions-during-pandemic_en (visited on 20/07/2023).

2.2. Open government within and according to main political actors: the role of parties

Political parties play a dual role in current political systems as an institutional actor, in government and in parliament, and as a non-institutional actor, in the form of a civil association of free individuals, also acting as key intermediaries between state and society (Neumann, 1956). From their privileged position, parties can interfere in the functioning of Open Government initiatives by either promoting or hindering government or EU plans for fostering OG and by making OG one of their own policy goals or, alternatively, by making OG one of the policies they oppose. Thus, they can show a positive or negative attitude toward OG depending on the political and electoral incentives they associate with this issue. Surprisingly, so far political science scholarship has devoted little attention to the relationship between political parties and open government. Therefore, we should better understand the role political parties play in helping or hindering EU or national government performances in the field of OG.

2.2.1. (Digital) parties as key actors for fostering open government

In the context of open government and models of governance, parties play a crucial role that is influenced by two main factors: first, the need to achieve their electoral and/or power objectives (Strøm, 1990), and second, the requirement to adapt to changes in their environment (Gauja, 2017). One significant challenge has been the necessity to adjust to the dynamics of European integration (Poguntke et al., 2007).

While several traditional studies have shown evidence of parties resisting change (Panebianco, 1988; Harmel and Janda, 1994; Norris, 2002), the conservative nature of party organizations has not entirely prevented them from undergoing transformations over the past decades. These transformations include the emergence of new digitally focused party models and the digitalization of existing ones (Gibson and Ward, 2009; Gerbaudo, 2019; Borucki, 2022). Parties have been internally and externally adapting to this new environment, leveraging the opportunities offered by new technologies to engage in actions associated with open government.

Barberà et al.'s (2021) preliminary findings show that the digitalization of parties does not entail a homogenous process of convergence toward a new mode of managing party organizations. Instead, the spread of digitalization is producing substantial differences among political forces in both the degree and the pattern of implementation of ICTs in intra-party functioning. The growing use of social media platforms as a tool for political communication has led to considerable speculation about the redistribution of power away from established players to previously unheard voices in society (Penney, 2017). As Fitzpatrick (2021) has pointed out, one of the main consequences of party digitalization concerns the public image of political parties, that is, how the party wants to be perceived by the public. The main dimensions analyzed by Fitzpatrick are transparency, accessibility, and responsiveness. Transparency refers to information availability, accessibility relates to having user-friendly platforms and websites, and responsiveness

refers to the parties' reaction to the inputs from their members and supporters. Nonetheless, as Borucki and Fitzpatrick (2021) have shown, processes of organizational digitalization do not always improve political parties' transparency, neither are parties often very responsive toward party supporters and members in the digital sphere on their social media fan pages. On the other hand, as Vittori (2020a) suggests, digital party platforms have tried to expand direct democracy in parties' internal decision-making but with low participation results, indicating that a constant political mobilization is needed in any case.

More detailed data and research on how parties are digitalizing their organizations and therefore increasing their internal transparency (through complex and multifunctional websites), participation (through online voting and deliberation), and collaboration channels (through digital tools for policy elaboration and through campaign apps and social media practices) can be found in the work by Sandri et al. (2021). However, among all the internal structures, party communication channels showed the highest level of digitalization. This is because communication is the easiest dimension in which to implement digital strategies, and it remained persistent over time due to the advantages offered by digital platforms' affordances. Furthermore, the study revealed that certain parties had achieved high levels of accessibility of content and processes on their digital platforms, making them available to both members and the general public. However, some parties limited certain options exclusively to registered members.

Moreover, several parties are now developing their own campaign applications or apps to provide their supporters with a virtual space to congregate, to express their support for a candidate or party, to share election moments, and to make their voices heard. Sometimes, they incorporate elements of gamification and community building, which help turn otherwise casual supporters into activists (Bashyakarla, 2021). However, like many of the other technologies employed by political campaigns, campaign apps can present a source of concern with respect to the degree of transparency of their own functioning and can be sometimes invasive with respect to the voter data they collect and their use for political purposes. In any case, online intra-party decision-making requires effective rules guaranteeing the transparency and accountability of the voting/decision processes and verifiability of the votes (Nostitz and Sandri, 2021). This can be achieved by the use of opensource software and an independent audit of each e-decision, but—often—political parties fall short of the required standards (Deseriis, 2020).

Despite the challenges faced, political parties that actively implement open government principles, both in-person and particularly online, are crucial for the success of this model of democratic governance.

2.2.2. European political families' support to open government

Considering parties according to ideological families is a common and useful approach to understand them better (von Beyme, 1985; Ware, 1995). Let us begin by examining European political families to understand their stance on this particular issue. Regarding the European political groups or European

federations of national parties, also known as Europarties, their manifestos from the last European Parliament elections in 2019 revealed varying degrees of support for open government policies, depending on the specific group[4]. For instance, the European People's Party declared that they wanted citizens "*empowered to face a future shaped by an ever-increasing digital revolution (...) engaged and truly feeling represented by our elected leaders and institutions*" (EPP, 2019; p. 12). For their part, the Party of European Socialists included in their manifesto that "*civic engagement, public accountability and fair and transparent decision-making processes must be enhanced at all levels*" (PES, 2019; p. 2).

The liberal group, ALDE (Renew Europe), stated that "*we will continue our efforts to bring more transparency and more efficiency to the EU institutions. (...) We want to see greater involvement of the European Parliament in decision-making by giving it the right to initiate legislation, and a greater degree of transparency of negotiations and voting within the European Council, and the Council of the EU. A more open, legitimate, and democratic European Union, closer to its citizens, can only be a good thing*" (ALDE, 2018; p. 10). On the other hand, the European Left group proposed to "*strengthen the fight against corruption through independent control. Take back power from finance capital by respecting popular sovereignty and by promoting citizens' involvement in EU decision-making*" (EL, 2019: 10) and "*promote digital democracy, Internet neutrality and freedom of speech*" (EL, 2019; p. 11).

Although there is no electoral manifesto available, the Group of European Conservatives and Reformists defend on their website that "*increasing democratic accountability and transparency are objectives at the heart of the ECR Group's agenda for guaranteeing reform of the European Union. Without increased transparency and accountability of the EU's institutions, agencies, budget and policies, then public faith and trust in the EU will continue to be eroded*"[5]. Likewise, the European Free Alliance "*believes that greater use of the internet would make it possible to better inform people and make public action more transparent –especially nowadays, as the spread of internet use makes it easier for governments to interact with those they govern*" (EFA, 2019; p. 20). There are no records of the Identity and Democracy (ID) group regarding OG proposals for the EU, although it seems consistent with their values as this group defends the sovereignty of member states and calls for the reduction of the size and competences of the European institutions. Finally, the positioning of European Greens is quite clear on the matter as they developed their commitment to transparency policies and participation in their manifesto:

> "*We want to radically increase transparency in European institutions, including the European Central Bank. Citizens have the right to know how decisions are made and how their*

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money is spent. All positions taken by Member States in the Council should be made public. We want a mandatory legislative footprint for EU laws, a binding lobby register for all EU institutions and to close the revolving doors between politics and big business by cooling-off phases. These transparency and ethics rules should be supervised by an independent body at the EU level. Decisions must be based on best available evidence and genuine consultation with stakeholders.

The European Citizens' Initiative is a welcome mechanism to engage people in European decision-making. However, its promise has not fully materialized due to bureaucratic hurdles and poor political support from the European Commission. The procedures should be simplified, and it should be possible for citizens to propose reforming the EU treaties. The rules must also be enhanced so that initiatives get a response and lead to concrete action" (EG, 2018; p. 11).

In conclusion, except for ID, which does not show any position on the matter, all Europarties officially position themselves in favor of OG measures, with different levels of intensity and emphasizing different aspects, whether transparency and accountability, participation, or digitalization. However, we should remember that these were positions that were assumed prior to the coronavirus pandemic and that, in view of the 2024 European Parliament elections, European political groups would probably devote greater attention to issues related to OG, given their recently increased importance. This can provide us with an idea of what we can expect from parties at the national level across Europe, as we will explore below, in terms of individual positions on open government and its different dimensions.

3. Data and methods

This article is primarily theoretical and descriptive, drawing on existing literature and primary sources such as parties and governments' official websites, reports, and electoral manifestos. We also use data on party organizational features and policy positions from the V-Party V2 dataset (Lindberg et al., 2022), the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2020), and the Global Party Survey data (Norris, 2020) for all the parliamentary parties in the 27 EU member states.

The inclusion of parties in each figure is subject to data availability for the selected variables, and it is possible that the total number of parties may vary across figures. However, all parties from the 27 member states of the European Union are included by default. The graphs in this article display median and/or trend lines. Because the aggregated dataset's sample of parties varies depending on the considered variable and data source, we have decided not to conduct further multivariate analyses to ensure accurate results.

4. Empirical analysis: do "open parties" exist?

Open parties can be defined as political parties that meet two criteria: (1) They uphold high standards of transparency, participation, and collaboration, and (2) they actively promote

open government initiatives within their organization and the broader political system, namely, they adopt political stances supporting OG goals. This concept has only been studied so far in the context of the Spanish case (Díez-Garrido, 2020). The findings revealed that parties in Spain still need further development in adopting open government principles, particularly concerning their levels of engagement and interaction with the public.
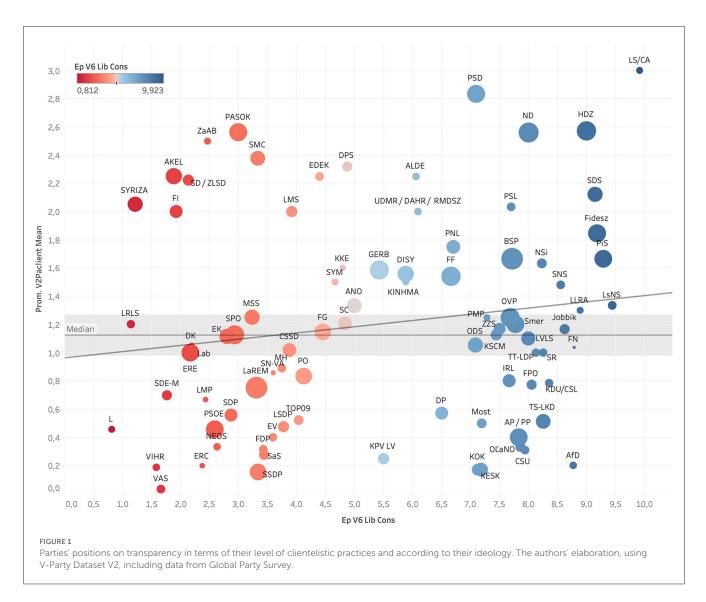
In the following discussion, we will delve into the available expert data on national political parties across the European Union to gain a realistic understanding of their practices concerning transparency, participation, and collaboration.

It is important to note, though, that the relationship between parties and open government is quite tricky conceptually. In this regard, we try as much as possible to separately analyze what parties stand for and what the parties implement within their organizations. These two aspects are not only different but also tackle two different areas of literature: one related to party positions (Breyer, 2023), which might vary for a number of reasons and which is dependent on what parties think is best for the country in terms of open government, and one related to the party organization, which is related to how parties conceive open government in their structure (Gauja, 2017). For example, it is plausible that in order to provide efficient public services, a political party thinks it is normatively good to use open government practices in the public administration, but at the same time, the very same party might think that fostering participation in a private/semi-public organization as a political party is bad because, for example, open candidate selection generates unexpected and negative outputs (Sandri et al., 2015).

4.1. Parties and transparency

Transparency is closely linked to providing unrestricted access to information, ensuring accountability, and building public trust. It is often regarded as a natural deterrent to corruption since corrupt activities thrive in secrecy (Ponti et al., 2021). After being labeled by Transparency International as "the most corrupt institutions in the world" in 2004, political parties have taken steps to enhance transparency and be more accountable to public opinion, through digitization and the adoption of more demanding internal and external regulations on transparency of information and on the control of their finances. It is now common for parties to publish a large amount of information daily about their political statements, especially through social networks, but also other types of data on their websites such as the CVs of the executive committee members, the results of internal votes, or balances of accounts.

However, the recent results of Special Eurobarometer 523 about corruption show that there are only three EU member states where a majority of the population agrees there is enough transparency and supervision of political parties' funding in their country: Sweden (53%), Poland (47%), and Finland (47%). In the remaining 24 countries, only a minority of respondents agree, with proportions ranging from 40% in Romania to 16% in Bulgaria. Indeed, in 20 countries, more than half of the respondents disagree (European Commission, 2022; p. 41). Although the question is about the control exercised by public bodies over the internal

FIGURE 1
Parties' positions on transparency in terms of their level of clientelistic practices and according to their ideology. The authors' elaboration, using V-Party Dataset V2, including data from Global Party Survey.
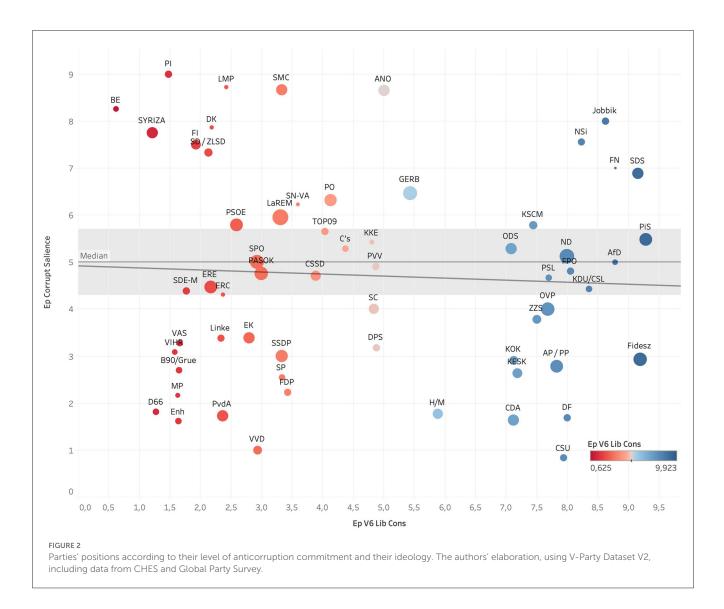
finance and functioning of parties, we must not forget that it is the parties themselves—through the exercise of executive and legislative powers—that set the standards and intensity of control over themselves, with notable differences between countries (van Biezen, 2004).

We have selected two indicators to measure transparency and analyze the distribution of policy positions among political parties in the EU: clientelism and anticorruption commitment. Additionally, we have taken into account parties' ideologies concerning social and cultural issues, rated on a scale from 0 ("very liberal") to 10 ("very conservative") in both cases. The size of the points in the figures also represents the parties' electoral weight in their respective countries.

To assess clientelism, we used the following item from the V-Party Dataset V2: "To what extent do the party and its candidates provide targeted and exclusive (clientelistic) goods and benefits, such as consumer goods, cash, or preferential access to government services, in an effort to gain and retain votes?" This measure ranges from 0 ("not at all") to 4 ("as its main effort").

In Figure 1, we can observe that most parties are positioned at low levels of clientelism (in terms of practices), with the median

value being <1.2. This suggests that these parties are closer to providing goods and benefits to a minor extent (1) rather than a moderate extent (2). However, certain parties fall between moderate and large (3) extents of clientelism. These parties include the Greek parties Pasok, Syriza, New Democracy (ND), and Popular Association–Golden Dawn (LS/CA), as well as the Portuguese Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). Parties with scores above 1 on the scale may struggle to implement effective transparency actions as they continue to engage in clientelistic practices that cannot be made public. Regarding ideology, we have not found a significant impact on explaining clientelism. However, there appears to be a slight trend indicating that right-wing parties are somewhat more inclined toward clientelism compared to liberal ones.

Next, parties' anticorruption commitment is assessed through the following item from the dataset: "What is the salience of reducing political corruption?", which is measured on a 0 to 10 scale, ranging from "not important at all" to "extremely important." Similar to the previous figure, Figure 2 also displays a significant variation in party positions, with the median falling exactly in the middle at 5. Notably, many

FIGURE 2
Parties' positions according to their level of anticorruption commitment and their ideology. The authors' elaboration, using V-Party Dataset V2, including data from CHES and Global Party Survey.
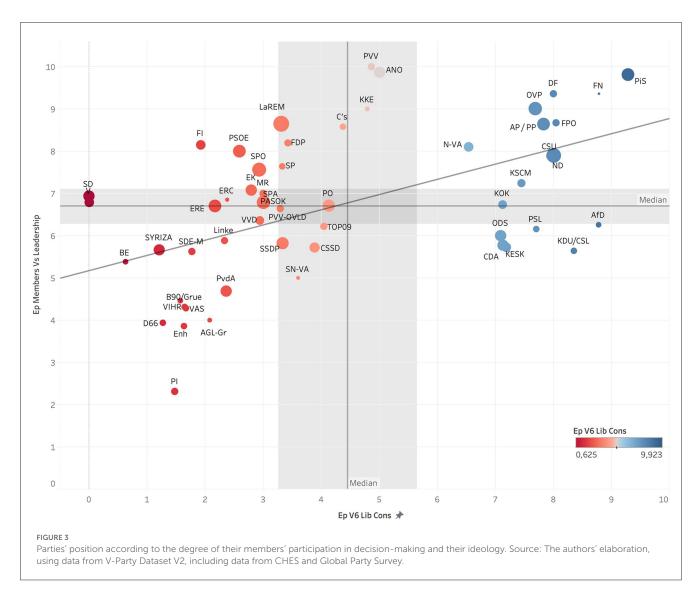
German and Dutch parties show low levels of anticorruption commitment, possibly because they do not consider corruption as a major concern in their respective countries. However, this relaxed stance could provide an opportunity for troublemakers to exploit.

On the other hand, only a small group of medium and small parties score above 7 on the scale, indicating a higher level of anticorruption commitment. This group includes parties such as Syriza, Czech Ano 2011 (ANO), and Sloven Modern Center Party (SMC). Larger parties such as Macron's The Republic on the Move (LaREM) and the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) fall in the middle range of anticorruption commitment, scoring between 5 and 6. Polish Civic Platform (PO) and Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) show slightly higher levels of commitment, but it is evident that some important and governing parties have low levels of anticorruption commitment. This lack of commitment poses a challenge to achieving transparency for most parties.

Ideology does not appear to be a significant determining factor, but there seems to be a subtle trend suggesting that

conservative parties are less actively involved in efforts to reduce political corruption.

It seems that despite the many efforts made by many European political parties for increasing information availability and keeping active communication channels with citizens, if we want to better grasp political parties' positions on transparency, we should pay attention to other indicators such as their clientelisti9 practices and their commitment against corruption. If parties' clientelistic practices are too widespread and their commitment against corruption too weak, there is a concern that parties, even those that are highly digitalized, may unintentionally hinder open government principles instead of promoting them. Therefore, it is crucial for parties to adopt robust anticorruption standards to foster a sense of trust and confidence in them. While most parties are not entirely clientelistic, it is still worrying that many display significant levels of clientelism. Furthermore, the overall commitment to reducing corruption is not strong enough to assert that European parties have achieved adequate levels of transparency at this point.

FIGURE 3
Parties' position according to the degree of their members' participation in decision-making and their ideology. Source: The authors' elaboration, using data from V-Party Dataset V2, including data from CHES and Global Party Survey.
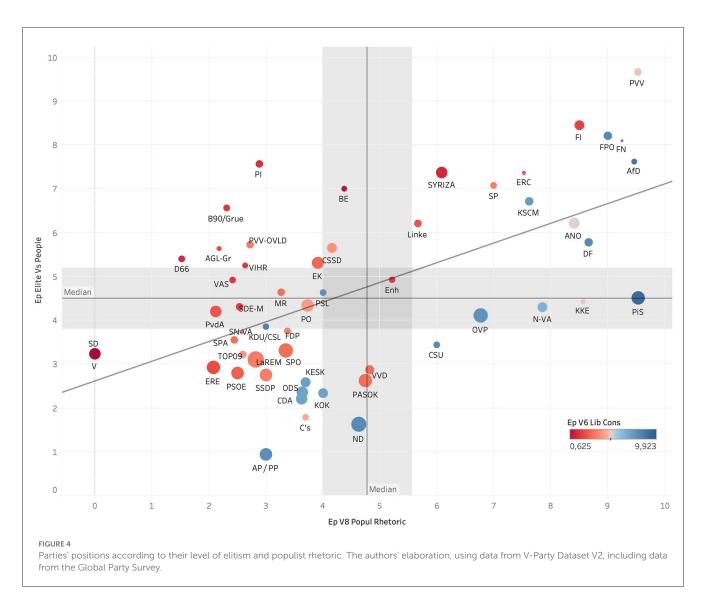
4.2. Parties and participation

The concept of participation refers to citizens' involvement in political processes: voting, consultation, and deliberation, often with help of electronic tools. Political parties have moved toward higher levels of participation in recent years, incorporating primaries as mechanisms for selecting leaders and candidates (Sandri et al., 2015; Cross et al., 2016) and making more frequent use of intraparty referendums (Scarrow, 2021). In addition to the previous evidence, an analysis of European parties based on expert survey data from the V-Party Dataset V2 provides valuable insights into their inclinations on important issues such as membership participation in decision-making and the level of elitism.

Figure 3 examines members' internal participation, measured on a scale from 0 to 10. with 0 representing "Members/activists have complete control over party policy choices" and 10 indicating "Leadership has complete control over party policy choices". We can observe that, except for a small group of socially liberal parties on the left, the majority of European national parties tend to favor decision-making by their leaders rather than involving members

or activists. The median value is close to 7, indicating a higher concentration of power among party leaders. Furthermore, there is a trend toward conservative parties, located on the right, displaying a greater concentration of decision-making power.

Interestingly, ideologically moderate parties such as the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) and ANO 2011 show the highest levels of hyper-leadership in decision-making, alongside the ultra-conservative Polish Law and Justice (PiS). This overall tendency of concentrating party power across Europe presents a significant challenge for the development of Open Government policies. It is unlikely that parties, which do not prioritize internal co-decision making, would actively advocate for such practices within the political system.

On the other hand, in Figure 4, parties' elitism is assessed through the following item from the dataset: "What is the position on direct vs. representative democracy?" This measure is represented on a scale from 0 to 10. where 0 indicates a preference for "Elected office holders should make the most important decisions," and 10 signifies a preference for "≪The people≫, not politicians, should make the most important decisions." Besides ideology (represented by the different data points' color in the

FIGURE 4
Parties' positions according to their level of elitism and populist rhetoric. The authors' elaboration, using data from V-Party Dataset V2, including data from the Global Party Survey.
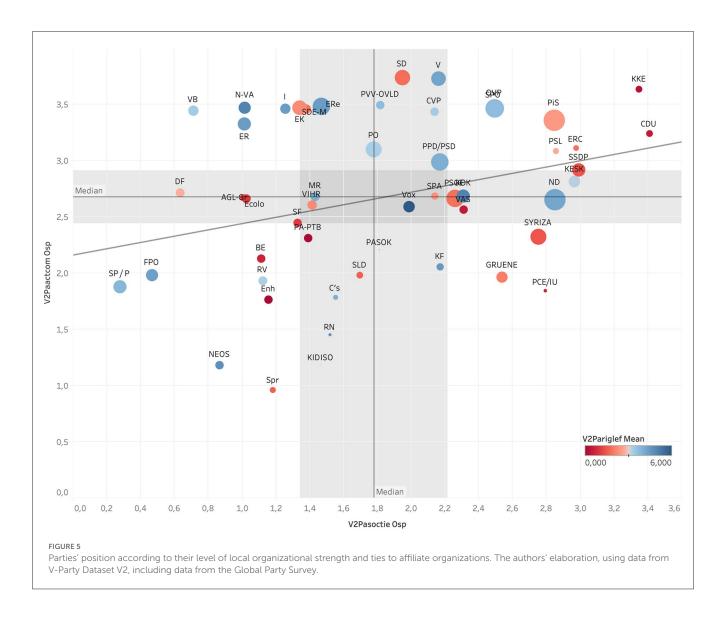
graph), we wanted to explore a possible connection with populism, so we included the populistic rhetoric variable on the X axis. This variable is also measured on a scale from 0 to 10. with 0 representing "Strongly favors pluralist rhetoric" and 10 representing "Strongly favors populist rhetoric."

The graph displays the level of elitism among European parties in relation to their degree of populist rhetoric, while the colors represent the parties' ideological characterization. The coordinates map reveals a wide range of positions for the parties, but there is a notable prevalence of elitist parties. Strikingly, despite its name, the Spanish People's Party (PP/AP) emerges as the most elitist of all, while the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) is positioned closest to favoring decisions made by the people rather than politicians.[6]

The diagonal trend line in Figure 4 indicates a correlation between populist rhetoric and anti-elitism, encompassing parties from various points along the ideological spectrum. Most parties fall into the lower-left quadrant, signifying that they are elitist but not populist. The upper-left quadrant represents the desired zone for openness: parties that are non-populist and less elitist. It is worth noting that populism is often seen as detrimental to democracy (Mudde, 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019), which makes these non-populist, less elitist parties more attractive for fostering participation.

Interestingly, we do not find populist parties that strongly exhibit elitist tendencies, except for the German Christian Social Union (CSU). It is crucial to acknowledge that populist rhetoric is employed not only by extremist parties but also by traditional parties, particularly when they are in opposition (Breyer, 2023). This highlights the importance of closely monitoring and understanding the use of populist discourse across the political spectrum[7].

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6   Please note that in the previous figure, the PVV was the party that most centralised policy decision-making within the leader's hands. However, this does not seem to be in conflict with the fact that this party is committed to a model of participatory (or plebiscitary) democracy at the level of the political system, which suggests the opportunity to study this type of duality in a greater depth.

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7   About the possible impacts of populism on party organization, we recommend Vittori (2020b).

FIGURE 5
Parties' position according to their level of local organizational strength and ties to affiliate organizations. The authors' elaboration, using data from V-Party Dataset V2, including data from the Global Party Survey.

In conclusion, political parties still have a long way to go in promoting meaningful participation. There are certain barriers that need to be addressed, particularly the prevalence of hyper-leadership in decision-making and an elitist approach to democracy. Moreover, some parties advocating for direct democracy are using populistic rhetoric, which makes it challenging to achieve participation in a constructive manner rather than merely as a form of protest.

4.3. Parties and collaboration with grassroots actors

Finally, we consider the concept of collaboration, which applies to party members', citizens', and external/ancillary organizations' involvement in various internal party activities, including implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of said actions. In the past, collaboration was crucial for mass parties, but as modern parties became more professionalized, they increasingly relied on external companies to handle tasks such as party communication, propaganda publications, and organizing campaign events, replacing traditional affiliates and supporters. However, even with this growing specialization, parties have always included some level of collaboration with grassroots and third-party actors in the development of electoral programs, policy positions, and political proposals, guided by the party leader and board (Cross, 2004). Various entities, such as trade unions, businesses, religious groups, youth organizations, NGOs, think tanks, interest groups, and individual citizens, traditionally contribute to the policy development of parties and thus represent a way for parties to collaborate with civil society. This collaboration has expanded in recent years with greater interactivity through digital platforms. Parties have a vested interest in encouraging collaboration with members and external agents as it not only generates engagement but also provides voluntary work and strengthens ties with civil society.

Figure 5 presents data on parties' positions regarding their connections with affiliate/ancillary organizations (X axis) and local organizational strength (Y axis). Both elements

are crucial for creating permeable parties that allow for people's involvement, rather than being closed-off groups of politicians. Ties to affiliate organizations are rated on a scale from 0 ("The party does not maintain ties to any prominent social organization") to 4 ("The party controls prominent social organizations"). Meanwhile, local organizational strength is measured on a scale from 0 ("negligible permanent presence") to 4 ("widespread permanent presence") based on the question "To what degree are party activists and personnel permanently active in local communities?" (V-Party Dataset V2 items).

The graph shows a notable difference between these two elements. The median for ties to affiliate organizations is under 2 ("moderate ties"), whereas for local organizational strength it approximates to 3 ("significant permanent presence"), indicating that European parties are more receptive to community involvement at the local level than to contributions from external organizations. The Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and the Christian Social Union (CSU) receive the highest combined scores in both aspects, while the Finnish Finns Party (SP/P), Polish Spring (Spr, part of New Left since June 2021), Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), and NEOS receive the lowest scores.

In this graph, ideology is represented in terms of economic issues, ranging from 0 ("Far-left") to 6 ("Far-right"), as the liberal–conservative dimension is not available for this data combination. While the trend line indicates a positive relationship between X and Y, ideology does not seem to have a significant impact on these aspects.

In Europe, numerous parties demonstrate a strong and continuous presence of activists and active staff at the local level. This capability allows them to effectively promote collaboration with citizens in various activities, such as creating local and regional manifestos, conducting campaigns, and crowdfunding initiatives. However, these parties lack strong ties to significant social organizations, which could limit their openness since they are not fully benefiting from the contributions of civil society.

5. Conclusions

The governance of the European Union and that of most of its member states has shown great progress in terms of open government in recent years, a reality accelerated by the pandemic but hardly reversible (OECD., 2020; EIB, 2022). Ruling parties have been at the forefront of embracing digital technologies and mechanisms of transparency, participation, and collaboration. These tools have proven to be effective in improving government efficiency and citizen engagement. However, ruling parties are also capable of blocking such initiatives when they conflict with their own interests. Preliminary data indicate that countries that do not implement Open Government (OG) policies under the OGP supervision generally have lower-quality democracies. This underscores the importance and relevance of the OG model as a preventive measure against authoritarianism (OGP, 2019).

In parallel to institutions, political parties have undergone a significant process of digitization in recent years, as documented in the existing literature (Barberà et al., 2021; Borucki, 2022). However, parties can go beyond mere digitalization and adopt the principles of OG in their internal operations. The concept of "open parties" is valuable and calls for further conceptual and methodological development based on both their level of digitalization and their active performance in terms of transparency, participation, and collaboration.

While parties' campaign manifestos and legislative proposals may provide insight into their commitment to OG, a more direct evaluation of their level of organizational digitalization, as conducted by Sandri et al. (2021), combined with expert survey opinions from databases such as V-Party, CHES, and GPS could provide more appropriate scores and rankings. Additional indicators, such as sociodemographic inclusion, territorial and financial decentralization, and voting and deliberation frequency, should also be included in future databases to offer a comprehensive assessment.

Currently, the available data indicate that many parties have a strong local organizational presence but still need to improve their anticorruption commitment and establish stronger ties to affiliate organizations. However, the main obstacle faced by most parties is their own elitism, which hinders meaningful participation of members and activists in decision-making processes. Additionally, the use of populistic rhetoric by many anti-elitist parties is concerning. Overall, the path to openness for parties still requires considerable progress.

In the future, we plan to further develop our analysis by assessing in more detail whether there is a connection between digitalization and openness regarding political parties. For the moment, this crucial point is implied in the study. Based on our exploratory analyses, this connection appears to exist but is not yet properly explained. At the moment, due to lack of data availability, this issue might not be possible to measure, but this constitutes a crucial and promising future avenue for open government research.

Data availability statement

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found here: V-Dem, V-Party, Chapel Hill Expert Survey and Global Party Survey.

Ethics statement

No human studies are presented in the manuscript. No potentially identifiable images or data are presented in this study.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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