



OPEN ACCESS

EDITED AND REVIEWED BY
Leslie Paul Thiele,
University of Florida, United States

*CORRESPONDENCE
Jasmin Fitzpatrick
✉ fitzpatrick@politik.uni-mainz.de

RECEIVED 28 February 2025
ACCEPTED 03 March 2025
PUBLISHED 18 March 2025

CITATION
Fitzpatrick J and Villaplana FR (2025) Editorial:
Leadership, politics and society in the digital
age. *Front. Polit. Sci.* 7:1585155.
doi: 10.3389/fpos.2025.1585155

COPYRIGHT
© 2025 Fitzpatrick and Villaplana. This is an
open-access article distributed under the
terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution
License \(CC BY\)](#). The use, distribution or
reproduction in other forums is permitted,
provided the original author(s) and the
copyright owner(s) are credited and that the
original publication in this journal is cited, in
accordance with accepted academic practice.
No use, distribution or reproduction is
permitted which does not comply with these
terms.

Editorial: Leadership, politics and society in the digital age

Jasmin Fitzpatrick^{1*} and F. Ramón Villaplana²

¹Department of Political Science, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Mainz, Germany,

²Department of Political Science, Anthropology and Public Finance, University of Murcia, Murcia, Spain

KEYWORDS

leadership, political parties, digital sphere, social media, intra-party democracy, artificial intelligence

Editorial on the Research Topic

Leadership, politics and society in the digital age

The digital age has fundamentally reshaped leadership, introducing new dynamics in communication, engagement, and governance. Digital platforms not only enable leaders to manage teams more efficiently but also facilitate direct, real-time interactions with the public in social realities of increasing complexity. This shift has redefined relationship-building, with leaders adept at leveraging social media often perceived as more accessible and trustworthy. Beyond individual relationships, the digital age has profoundly impacted society and politics at the systemic level. Whereas traditional media once dominated information dissemination, the internet now provides diverse perspectives, fostering both informed and misinformed publics. Digital platforms serve as powerful tools for organizing protests, rallies, and political events, amplifying grassroots movements and reshaping political competition. Effective leadership nowadays demands digital fluency: harnessing online tools to cultivate genuine engagement, foster two-way communication, and mobilize support. As electoral dynamics become increasingly intertwined with digital platforms, strategic online presence and digital literacy are critical for having a leading role in contemporary politics.

This Research Topic includes five *Original Research* articles, and two *Conceptual Analysis* articles and aims to advance scholarship on leadership in the digital age, exploring its implications for governance, political participation, and societal change.

Starting with a general assessment of what digital leadership actually means, [Villaplana and Fitzpatrick](#) provide an overview of changing leadership concept in connection with the great transformations in the media environment. Based on different concepts rooted in political sociology, the authors develop a model of leadership reflecting skills and features of typical leaders of the radio, the TV, and the Internet eras. They define the digital leader “as a person that navigates the digital sphere with great expertise and sophistication, being able to generate beneficial outcome in terms of their function and goals” (p. 4).

Focussing on Digital Leadership during crises, [Riedl et al.](#) analyse Twitter discussions on COVID-19 before the election using two datasets. Their analysis reveals two polarized echo chambers: a “safety-first” group supporting strict measures, and a “freedom-first” group opposing them. While politicians largely avoided the topic to side-step electoral risks, key figures like Jens Spahn (CDU/CSU) and Karl Lauterbach (SPD) were inevitably drawn into the debate due to their roles in health policy and crisis management.

Rivera et al. examine how citizens' use of social networks for political information influences their emotional responses to Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez. In this regard, the contribution examines citizens' reaction to a digital leader. Findings reveal that those who consume political content on social media express more anger and fear toward Sánchez than those who do not. While fear can drive individuals to seek alternative information, doing so on social networks tends to amplify anger. These results suggest that digital platforms play a key role in shaping political emotions, particularly intensifying negative responses like anger.

Two studies compare candidates' communicative behavior during campaigns: providing evidence from Andalusia, Ruiloba-Núñez and Goenaga Ruiz de Zuazu analyse electoral communication on social media from a gender perspective by based on X (formerly Twitter) posts from candidates in the last two Andalusian elections. Their findings reveal limited use of inclusive language and minimal focus on women. Concerning digital leadership, the authors point out that gender influences a more inclusive communication style and a stronger emphasis on policies affecting women within campaign discourse.

Expanding the analysis of communication to a different Spanish region, Castilla y León, in comparison to Andalusia, Pérez-Castaños et al. perform a content analysis of regional candidates' accounts on X which reveals differences between traditional and new parties, though a gradual alignment in their electoral strategies suggests a convergence in their approach to digital political communication. "Old dogs" are still able to learn new tricks, according to the authors.

Focusing on an intra-party perspective, Sánchez Medero takes a closer look at selection mechanisms of political leaders. She investigates whether digital tools are widely used in these processes and their actual influence on party democracy. A taxonomy of selection models was developed using indicator-based analysis from previous research. The article explores the extent to which online mechanisms shape internal democracy and identifies which parties most actively adopt digital selection methods, challenging assumptions about the prevalence and effectiveness of online procedures.

Finally, Tretter looks at the implications posed by AI-systems to political processes, anticipating possible scenarios in the near future. Political decision-making is fraught with uncertainty in modern societies. AI has emerged as a tool that can help leaders analyze complex situations, identify key variables, and generate viable solutions. However, its use in political management raises challenges, including algorithmic biases, false illusions of certainty, overreliance on AI-driven recommendations, and concerns about human (lack of) control. The author advocates for ethical reasoning, aiming to foster responsible AI integration in politics.

Overall, this Research Topic contributes to the literature on political leadership (Rahat and Kenig, 2018), the mediatization of politics (Gilardi et al., 2021), technology and democracy (Forestal, 2022), and the digitalization of political parties (Barberà et al., 2021; Gauja et al., 2025).

Author contributions

JF: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. FV: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

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.

Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

References

- Barberà, O., Sandri, G., Correa, P., and Rodríguez-Teruel, J. (eds.). (2021). *Digital Parties*. Cham: Springer International. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-78668-7
- Forestal, J. (2022). *Designing for Democracy: How to Build Community in Digital Environments*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/oso/9780197568750.001.0001
- Gauja, A., Kosiara-Pedersen, K., and Weissenbach, K. (2025). Party membership and affiliation: realizing party linkage and community in the twenty-first century. *Party Polit.* 31, 207–216. doi: 10.1177/13540688241306730
- Gilardi, F., Gessler, T., Kubli, M., and Müller, S. (2021). Social media and political agenda setting. *Polit. Commun.* 39, 39–60. doi: 10.1080/10584609.2021.1910390
- Rahat, G., and Kenig, O. (2018). *From Party Politics to Personalized Politics? Party Change and Political Personalization in Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.