

Politics - Digital technology is fundamentally changing politics. Discuss.

Digital technology – defined as “the utilisation of digital tools, systems, and processes for creating, storing, processing, and communicating information”¹. – is changing politics. But is it changing the fundamental principles of politics or solely the issues that politics is concerned with? It is certain that it changes the pace of the world, the human brain, how elections function, how economies & societies operate, and that it increases globalisation. But is the core, the substance of political processes, changing as well?

Digital Technology has changed the definition of politics to encompass wider responsibilities – both geographically and substantially. Digital Technology makes the world more interconnected, which leads to more complex systems that need to be governed. “[Politics is] the activities of the government, members of law-making organisations, or people who try to influence the way a *country* is governed”². But what if it is not only a country anymore? Globalisation, which has increased and keeps on increasing through the implications of Digital Technology, plays a significant role in politics: it “re-creates the world in the image of a global village” (McLuhan³). Digital Technology allows for countries to work more interconnectedly (as communication methods are available) and trade to be even more global (through the use of global softwares and the internet). Hence, multinational trade has increased by over 70% since the 1960s⁴, which has led to an increase in the number of international organisations needed, such as the

¹ Lee Pullen, Darren. “A critical Examination of the Recent Evolution of B2B Sales”. IGI Global – Scientific Publishing. <https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/digital-technology/7723>

² “Politics”. Cambridge Dictionary. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/politics>

³ Marshall McLuhan

⁴ Ortiz-Ospina, Esteban. “How did international trade and globalization change over time? What is the structure today? And what is its impact?”. *Our World In Data*, 04.2024, <https://ourworldindata.org/trade-and-globalization>

OECD which was founded in 1961⁵. Due to this rising interconnectedness, it is likely to become necessary to create a global governance system in the future. Globalisation ultimately has led to an increase in the complexity of politics, and therefore has changed it in this aspect.

The pace of the world has significantly increased through the use of Digital Technology, because writing, researching, communicating has gotten faster. The human brain has responded with a reduction in length of attention spans: due to allowing the brain to take fewer rests and the possibility to multitask, as well as to always be entertained causes attention problems⁶. Today's brain expects very fast action - very fast decisions – as this is what it is used to. This expectation of decisions 'needing' to happen fast puts pressure on politicians to judge faster. This change in decision-making behaviour of politicians has occurred because they feel the need to act quickly to be accepted by the common public. Science suggests that it is necessary to take time when making decisions so that the brain can think as logically as possible⁷, consider pros and cons, and so decide as rationally as possible. Barack Obama⁸ once said “only because [of] an enormous amount of public pressure ... we were able to make ... these decisions”, which highlights the strong influence of the public opinion on politics and political decision-making. The highly influential external pressure of deciding faster often creates lower quality decisions (for example, not considering the impacts on all social groups, or the negative externalities) which has impacted and keeps on impacting politics negatively.

⁵ “Our History”. *OECD*, <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/history.html#:~:text=The%20Convention%20transforming%20the%20OECD,force%20on%2030%20September%201961>.

⁶ Small, Gary. “Brain health consequences of digital technology use”. *National Library of Medicine*, 22.06.2024, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7366948/>

⁷ Nicholson, Christie. “Making a Decision? Take Your Time”. *Scientific American*, 17.04.2010, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/podcast/episode/making-a-decision-take-your-time-10-04-17/>

⁸ Barack Obama

The public does not only exert power via their opinion, but also via their voting behaviour. A behaviour that Digital Technology is altering and influencing. Technology changes the way the human brain thinks, which impacts decision making, as well as behaviours and morals. Through online communication channels and digital media, a higher amount of information is available, meaning that there is more 'evidence' for certain opinions or statements that the brain frames. Children grow up with the expectation that what is read on search engines (ie Google) is ultimately correct⁹, and the spreading of certain (potentially mis-) information is enhanced by algorithms. So it is not necessarily the correct information that is shared, but rather the one most looked at. Digitalisation has also changed the processes involved with how the brain creates frames on certain topics¹⁰: nowadays they are created much quicker (partially due to more information available and making decisions faster). These changes within the brain mean that voting behaviour is changing simultaneously. The information that reaches certain voters forms their judgement on whom to vote – but this information can be false or manipulated. Many powerful individuals understand how to “use technology to disrupt traditional politics” (Douglas Rushkoff) which means that they shape and alter opinions through simple influences on algorithms, making it easier to manipulate as well as to reach a wider audience with this. These 'programmed' opinions – for example through the spreading of false information 1/4 of the US population believing that Kamela Harris is not a US citizen¹¹ - could change the outcomes of elections, and so ultimately who is in power in politics.

Nonetheless, there are some who argue that the core of politics is not changing. Although Digital Technology is being used increasingly more by governments and other agents of society, the political

⁹ Leetaru, Kalev. “Why Do We Believe What We Read On The Internet?”. *Forbes*, 18.04.2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kalevleetaru/2019/04/18/why-do-we-believe-what-we-read-on-the-internet/>

¹⁰ Lakoff, George. “The Political Mind: A Cognitive Scientist's Guide to Your Brain and Its Politics”. *Penguin*, 02.06.2009.

¹¹ Leake, Matthew. “Are fears about online misinformation in the US election overblown? The evidence suggests they might be”. *Reuters Institute, University of Oxford*, 24.10.2024, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/are-fears-about-online-misinformation-us-election-overblown-evidence-suggests-they-might-be>

processes and intuitions have stayed consistent (at least so far). This is due to the fact that changing the division of power between institutions is made impossible by many constitutions as a security feature, and checks and balances are put in place to preserve the rule of law. The consistency could also be justified with the reason that many of the current practitioners of politics believe in Old Enlightenment ideas due to the education and society that they grew up in¹². The role of Parliament, the House of Commons/Lords, the Senate and House of Representatives, Supreme Courts is staying the same. This is a fact, yet it might be institutions that need to change in the future to adapt to a more current-times-connected system, that as a result will be able to act more effectively in the contexts of current societies.

Furthermore, it could be argued that the power exerted by a politician – and the impact of it – has changed. Through the availability of media, politicians are sometimes pressured to appeal to a mass audience¹³ - just like the media – which leads to less effective individuals in government, as they might not have a strong personal, clear opinion on certain issues and aim to be liked by the people. Populism means a lack in clear leadership, which is necessary in politics (especially within the currently very challenging contexts). Although the fixed institutions of governmental bodies are not necessarily changing (yet), the people who enter them might have different approaches.

Some argue that the voting system has also not been influenced by Digital Technology. In most countries – such as Germany, UK, and the USA – votes are still counted mainly by election workers (humans). However, increasingly more countries have switched to e-voting as a new voting system. Estonia since 2005¹⁴, for example, uses a complete online system for all its elections: votes are cast via the internet.

¹² Lakoff, George. “The Political Mind: A Cognitive Scientist's Guide to Your Brain and Its Politics”. Introduction. *Penguin*, 02.06.2009.

¹³ De Weck, Roger. “Kreisky-Forum Talk: Das Prinzip Trotzdem – Warum wir den Journalismus vor den Medien Retten Müssen”, 28.10.2024, Kreisky Forum, Vienna.

¹⁴ “Countries with e-voting projects”. *The Electoral Knowledge Network, ACE*, https://aceproject.org/ace-en/focus/e-voting/countries/mobile_browsing/onePag

More voters can access elections and governments can receive results quicker and more efficient¹⁵. Voter turnout is also somewhat higher, which means that more citizens – and different types of citizens – participate, which makes democratic systems even more representative. For example, in the most recent elections in Estonia, the voter turnout was 63.7%¹⁶ while it was a lower 59.4% in the UK¹⁷. Although there is not a significant difference in the voter turnout, the young – those who will live with the implications of the future politician's decisions – are more likely to vote because it happens through their natural medium¹⁸. If more citizens vote, the result, and therefore ultimately the politics of a country, will change. Still, technology has so far only influenced the voting tools, rather than the core of the voting system (majority rules, delegates, representatives, ...) in itself.

At the same time, institutions and systems might need to change in the future to adapt to more modern contexts. Digital Technologies could easily support more elements of direct democracy and enhanced citizen participation (such as the currently already in-use platform Decidim).

Digital Technology's implications change the way economies and societies function, which impacts the political aims, as well as the problems addressed by politicians. It impacts the main issues that are of importance to politics; it impacts the political aims. The political aims, as well as the problems addressed by politicians, change: factors that are and will be vital in shaping the future of politics – and therefore the future of the world.

¹⁵ Masterson, Victoria. "What is e-voting? Who's using it and is it safe?". *World Economic Forum*, 04.14.2024, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/04/what-is-electronic-voting/>

¹⁶ "The Estonian Parliament". *IPU Parline*, 06.2023, <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/EE/EE-LC01/election/EE-LC01-E20230305/>

¹⁷ Sturge, Georgina. "2024 General Election: Turnout". *UK Parliament*, 05.09.2024, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/general-election-2024-turnout/>

¹⁸ Ledgerwood, Emmeline. "Election turnout: Why do some people not vote?". *UK Parliament*, 10.04.2024, <https://post.parliament.uk/election-turnout-why-do-some-people-not-vote/>

Digital Technology also changes the actions of politicians: it changes how power is practiced. Many politicians spread their opinions and point of views via Digital Technology – such as the internet or social media – which can impact many people to act or/and think differently. A striking example was the US Capitol Attack in 2021, where former presidential candidate Donald Trump had used Twitter to spread the – largely false claims – that the election result was a fraud, which led to a violent storming¹⁹. He used the new technologies available to mobilise over a thousand. This example shows how politicians can exert power in this new way.

How politicians campaign has also changed. Whereas physical rallies and speeches were used previously, nowadays it is necessary for a politician to be on social media platform and use this medium to reach a wider audience, in order to be able to win elections. For example, in the very recent elections in Romania a far-right politician estimated with about 5% of votes in polls who had only advertised through TikTok (with ‘manipulated’ algorithms) landed first with 23% of the votes²⁰. Digital Technology has those dangers, but if it is used with the right intent, it can lead to a positive aid in how political power is exerted and chosen.

In conclusion, the impacts of Digital Technology change politics. It changes the definition, pace, voting behaviour, content of agendas, who gains power, how power is exerted, and ultimately how politics is practiced. Although it is not – at least not currently – changing political systems directly, it is changing what politics is about in its fundamentals. The implementations of politics change, but the core is not changing (yet). Digital technology is directly and indirectly fundamentally changing politics: the core of politics is maintained while Digital Technology has (so far) changed the major contexts in which the political systems operate.

¹⁹ “January 6 U.S. Capitol attack”. *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/January-6-U-S-Capitol-attack>

²⁰ “Rumänien: Rechtspopulist überrascht bei Wahl”. *Österreichischer Rundfunk – ORF*, 25.11.2024, <https://orf.at/stories/3376979/>