How political parties and voters are adapting to the digital era

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Outline of my presentation

- The world of yesterday: European politics in the TV era

- The world as it is now: European politics in the digital era

- How political parties are adapting to digital: new trends

- Some conclusions and questions

1: European elections in the TV era

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- Since the 1960s, the political breakthrough of TV transformed traditional the mass party model into a catch-all organization

- However, this portrait evolved along the 1980s and the 1990s:

  - Decline of partisanship, breakdown of group identity and of traditional political cleavages

  - Increased mediatization of electoral campaigns, with more resources and professional assistance

  - Decline of party membership

  - Decline of electoral turnout, combined with higher electoral volatility

1: European elections in the TV era

- Since then, a common motto and a **failed prediction: the end of the political party, the time of political parties was over**

- Nevertheless…

- …political parties still matter for elections as they provide a meaningful policy linkage: **changes in the electorate lead to change in government, and this in turn leads to changes in policy**

- … there is transformation/adaptation rather than decline of political parties: voters keep following their closer parties, **but their connection is less socially structured than in previous decades**

- **But if political parties are going to survive, if their linkage function between voters and there state, how are they adapting to the new times?**

2: European elections in the digital era

2: European elections in the digital era

- The pass from the TV era to the digital era came up with a second failed prediction: democracy could die due to the lack of support and interest by citizens.

- However, instead of depoliticization -as predicted- data show that today we have **more public attention, with an increase and media coverage on national and even European politics**.

- In this context, politics has become more insecure, more uncertain for politicians, particularly for career politicians.

- Politics is becoming more demanding. Why?

2.1: New actors in the scene

- New political parties have aroused since the 2000s.

- Most of them challenge the political establishment or the current political state of affaires

- Two explanations/hypotheses:

  1. Anti-establishment vote for **economic reasons**

     - The *losers of globalization hypothesis*: those citizens who have not benefited from new economic opportunities are leaving their parties

     - New inequalities that are not represented by traditional parties

  2. Electoral realignement for **political reasons**

     - Perception of insecurity and dissatisfaction among many voters produced by new uncertainties

     - The *party collusion hypothesis*: cartelization of the party system have reduce the policy differences among traditional parties

2.1: New actors in the scene

- The emergence of new parties have brought three consequences for electoral politics:

    1. The adaptation of traditional parties to new forms, rules, ideas and practices that they disdained before

    2. It also re-structure the political spaces: the left-right divide is under redefinition.

        - New political forces usually combine **opposition to austerity** (economic divide) and **to 'old politics'** (political divide), combined -in some countries- with nativist claims (against immigration, etc).

    3. A new window for opportunities: the **rise of political 'outsiders'**

        - Celebrity politics is gaining relevance among party leaders and candidates, coming from journalism, social activism, sports, sciences, and the private sector

        - Electoral effect is unclear, as much as it ability to maintain the policy linkage
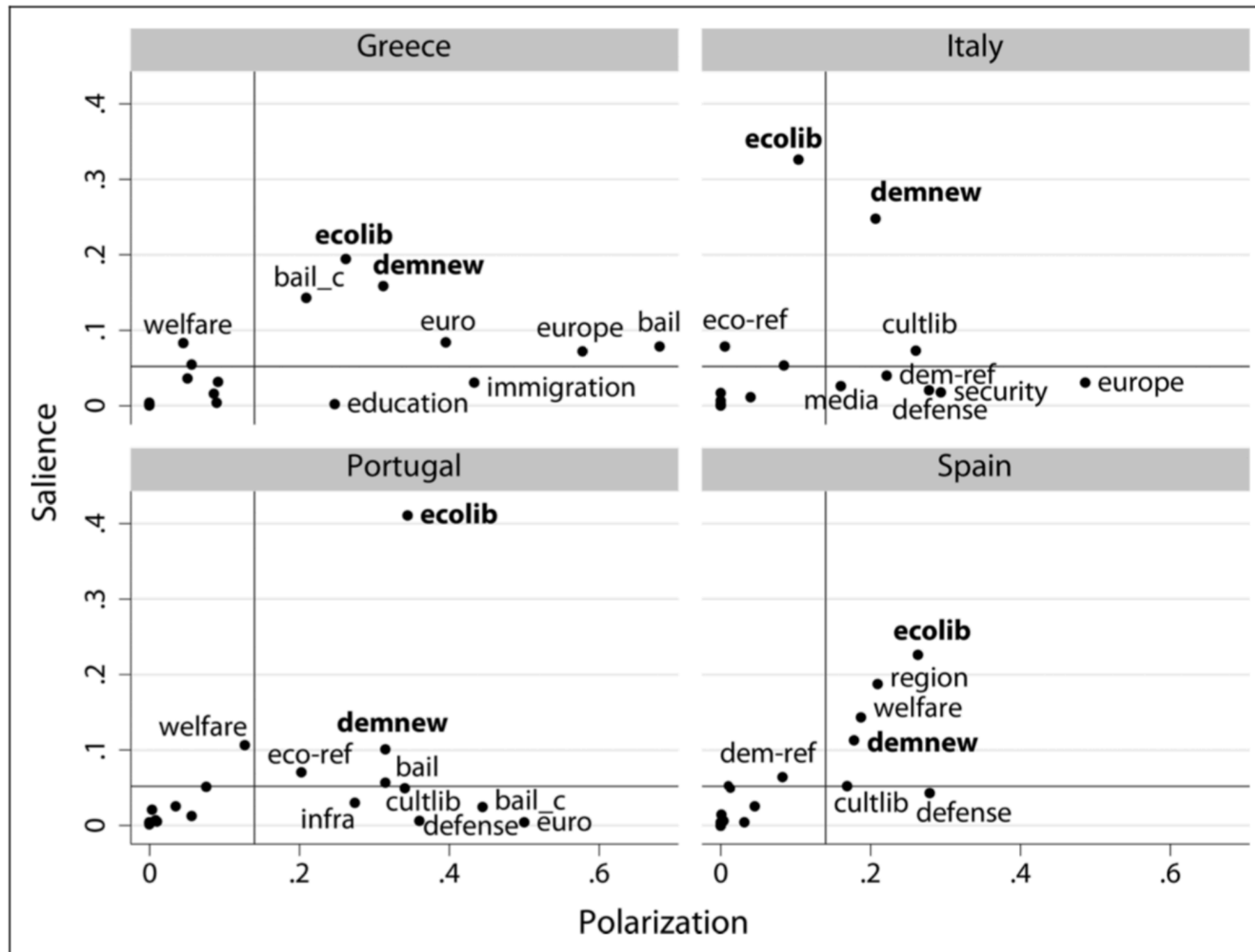
2.1: New actors in the scene

Figure 1. Issue salience and polarization by specific issue categories.

Source: Hutter, Kriesi & Vidal 2017

2.2: Intra-Party democracy

- Political parties faced **increasing demands of internal democracy** rules and practices:

    - Party leader and candidate selection (party primaries)

    - Electoral platforms

    - Policy initiatives and development

    - More space for ideological deliberation

- The establishment of new intra-party democracy rules seems electorally attractive after defeats, government exits, and leadership crisis

- However 1… when there is positive effect, it vanishes when IPD becomes the usual rule

- However: 2… what if party membership decline was not motivated by the lack of IPD alone, but by external factors connected with social and technological transformations?
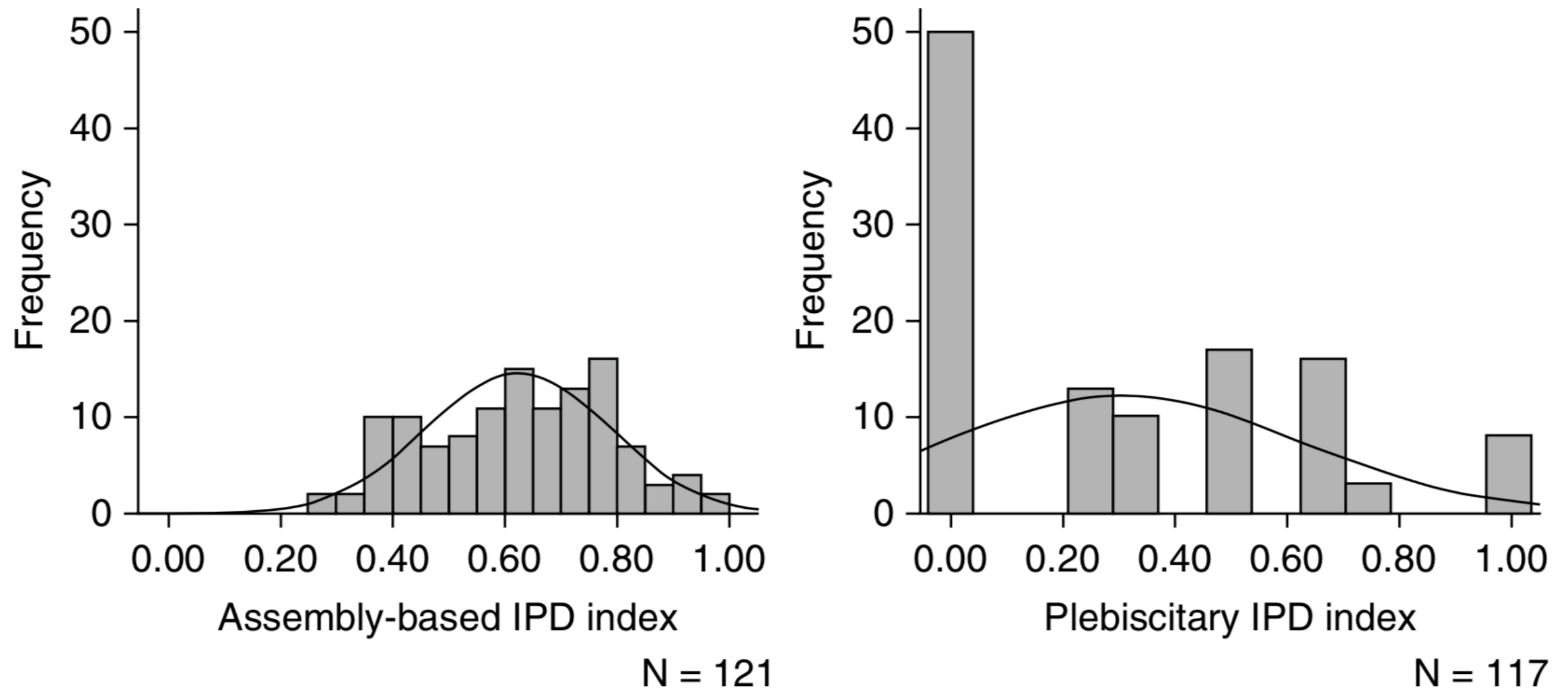
2.2: Intra-Party democracy

FIGURE 6.3 Frequency distributions of AIPD and PIPD indices

Source: von dem Berge & Poguntke in Scarrow, Webb & Poguntke (2017)

2.3: The personalization of politics

- Electoral campaigns have become **more personalized** over time

- Increasing importance of **leaders/candidates' personalities to the detriment of parties and platforms** for the voters' choice; but empirical evidence of this impact is controversial…

  - …this trend is conditioned to other factors

  - … it fluctuates substantially among countries: for some of them, politics has always been highly personalized since their democratization

  - …more personalism does not guarantee more attention by voters

  - … still unknown how digital may shape personalist campaigns beyond being on social networks

- **Decline of the importance of partisanship** for elections, but -again- this is unclear: party attachment still important as voters' follow party cues

- This personalization has also extended to other areas of the political process: **strengthening of prime ministers and party leaders**
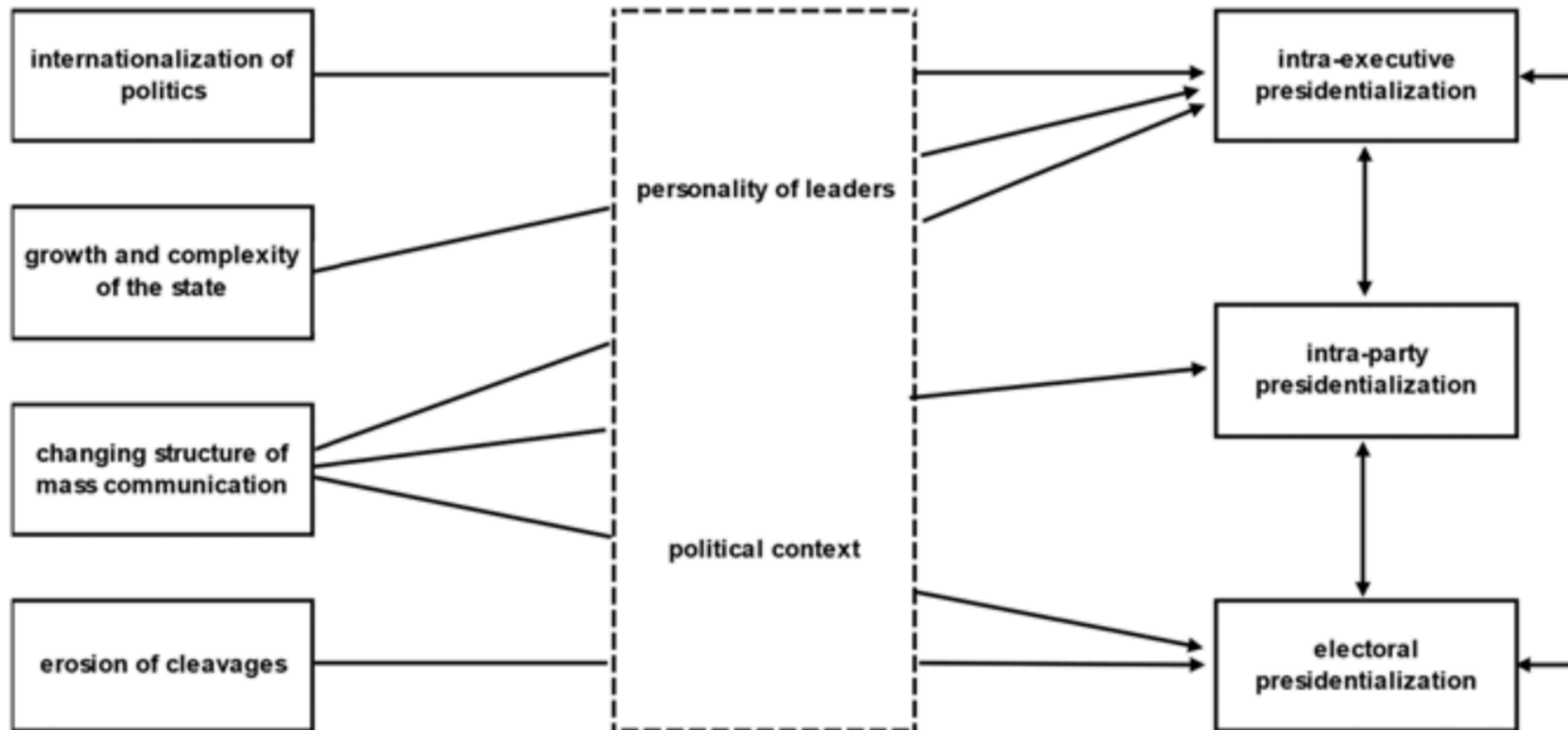
2.3: The personalization of politics

Figure 10.2   The Major Causal Flows Involved in Explaining the Presidentialization of Politics. *Source*: 'The Presidentialization of Politics in Democratic Societies: A Framework for Analysis' by Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb from *Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, edited by Poguntke, Thomas and Webb (2005). By permission of Oxford University Press.
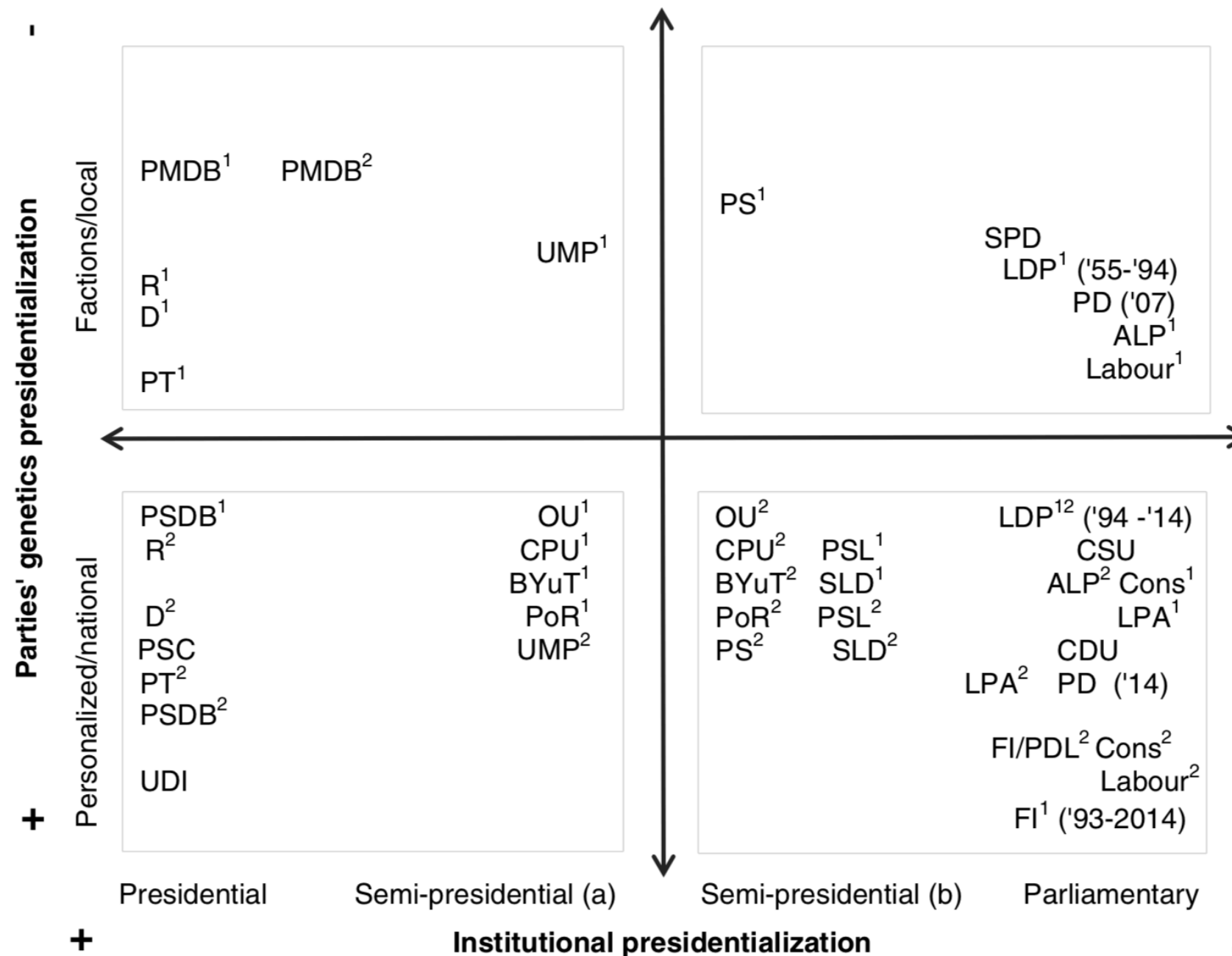
2.3: The personalization of politics

Figure 13.2 The dynamics of party presidentialization in 26 parties

Note: (a) and (b) in Semi-Presidential systems refer to the role attributed to the President: A: president-parliamentary; B: premier-presidential

Source: Passarelli (2015)

3: New trends in digital politics

3: New trends in digital politics

- Beyond these features already defining the new linkage between parties, voters and the state, some trends of current politics suggest that the transformation is not over.

- Rather the contrary, as the fast evolution of new technologies are redefining the conditions where political parties compete and represent their voters

- Three trends on how new ICTs are reshaping the landscape:

    - Polarized politics: is polarizations becoming the new normal?

    - Digital parties: the application of 'platform business' to politics

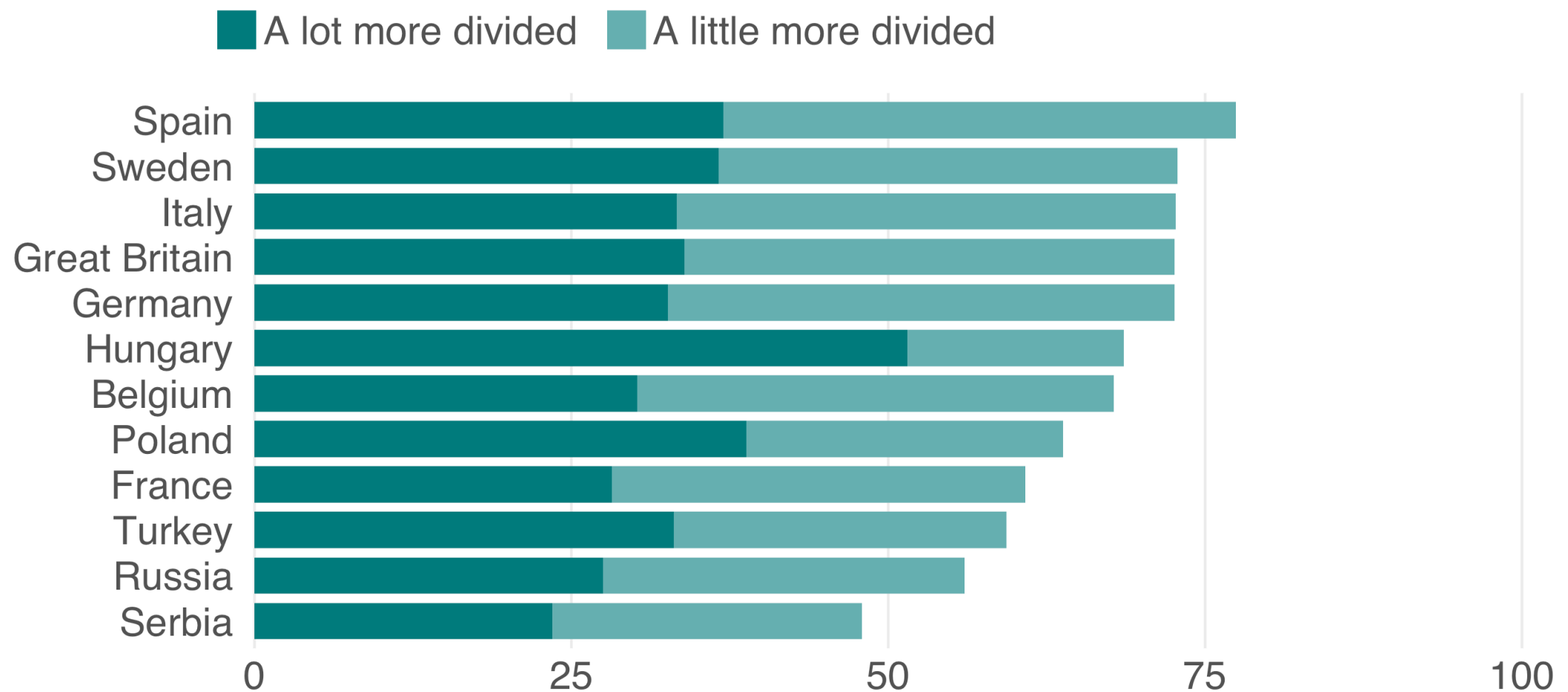   - Prototype politics: technology-intense campaigns based on mass data

3.1: Polarized politics

- Polarization understood as the ideological distance between the main parties, as perceived by voters

- **Polarization might became the new normal in electoral politics** as news actors need it to survive in a more volatile landscape

- Two explanations for the increase in polarization:

  - Demand-side: parties will fuel polarization because it improves linkage with voters…

    - …new ICTs+new parties+personalization=populistic rhetoric and style gain electoral efficacy

  - Supply-side: voters have always been internally polarized, but contextual factors helped parties to keep them united around mainstream policies; these factors have disappear

- **Polarization helps to overcome market failures of representation** by reducing distances between voters and representatives (with the cost of deepening the great divides within the society)

3.1: Polarized politics

How Europe has changed

Percentage who say their country is more divided than 10 years ago

■ A lot more divided　■ A little more divided

Spain
Sweden
Italy
Great Britain
Germany
Hungary
Belgium
Poland
France
Turkey
Russia
Serbia

0　　25　　50　　75　　100

Source: Ipsos MORI

B B C

Source: www.bbc.com 23-04-2018
https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43760959

3.2: Digital parties

- Some of the most outstanding new parties have adopted a radically innovative approach, by **implementing the 'platform logics' (**used by the FAANGs: Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Google, Netflix, etc) to party organizations

    - M5S, Podemos, France Insoumise, Pirate parties…

- Main features:

    - 'Platformization': the party machine is substituted by software (Rousseau, Plaza Podemos, Python, Django…)

    - Desintermediation: vanishing of middle-level elites and intermediate bodies within parties, to the benefit of a more direct central office-grassroots relationship

    - Hyperleadership: strengthening of the charismatic dimension of new party leaders

    - Superbase: a new model of multi-speed membership party on the way

   - Plebiscitarianism 2.0: digital democracy at its most!

3.2: Digital parties

- However, despite having achieve in some cases executive responsabilities, genuine digital parties look today still too fragile

- Digital features make them unstable organizations with some obstacles still to overcome:

  - proceduralism, excessive concern for process over content

  - ideological eclecticism, in the attempt to overcome the left/right divide

  - autoreferencialism, as they confront the democratic problem with changes to their own internal structure

  - short-term political action, limited by the leadership-grassroots dilemma

3.3: Prototype politics

- The use of social networks and mass data is challenging the traditional approach to electoral campaign employed in the TV era and even in the first days of internet politics

- Technology-intense design means 'digital, data and analytics', with high amount of resources invested

  - It is not simply an internet-based campaign or leaders with social networks account

  - It places political innovation in the core of political strategy

  - It operates in a a highly dynamic context, very reactive to fast changes in new ICTs: using new tech in 2005 and 2015 might entail very different means

- In this context, a successful campaign in terms of innovation becomes a sort of **prototype** for the rest of parties, as considered with

  - 2004 Dean campaign (primaries)

  - 2008 Obama campaign

3.3: Prototype politics: sources of change
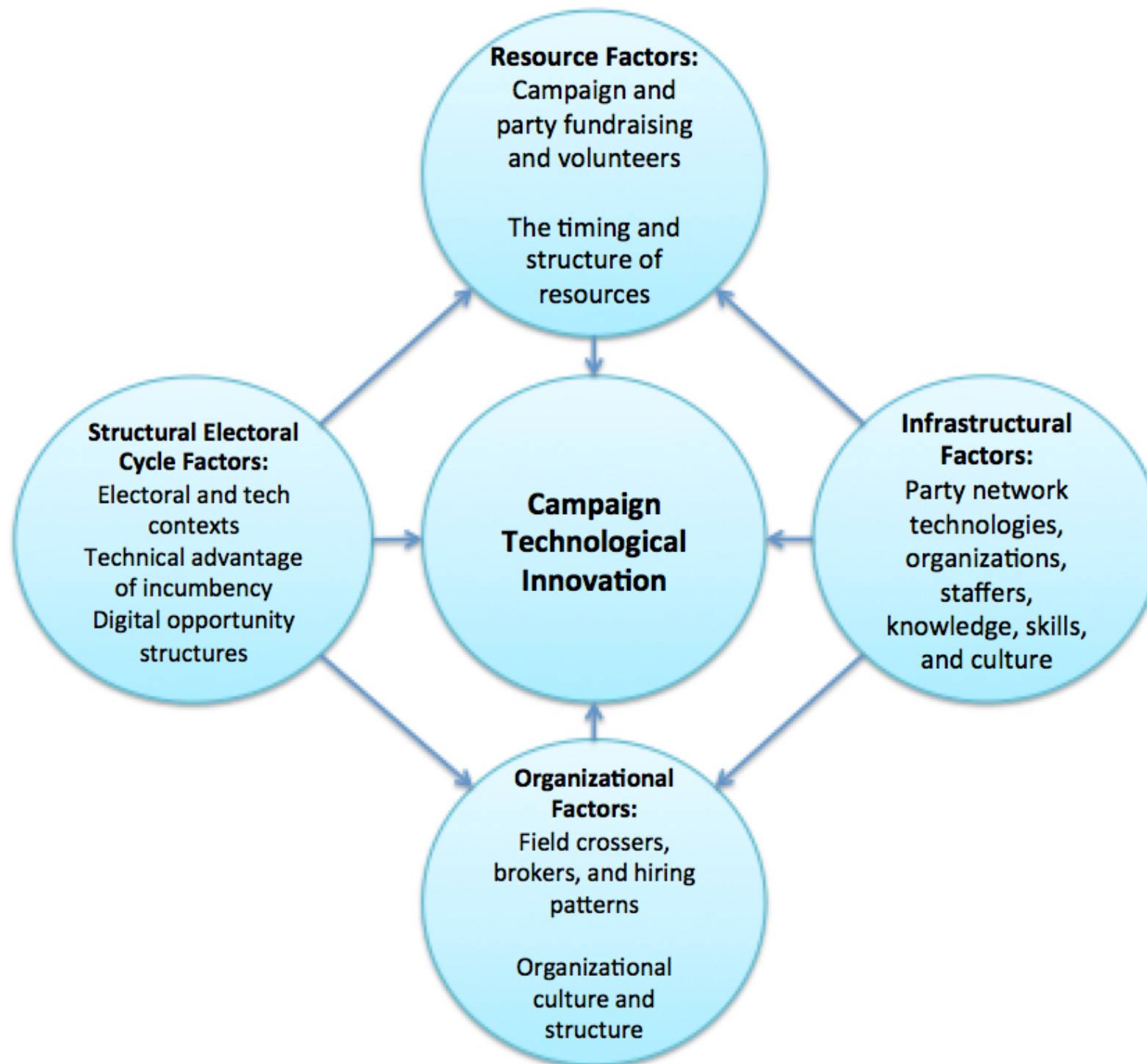
Source: Kreiss (2016)

3.3: Prototype politics

- **It questions the idea of 'permanent campaign'.** Instead, parties need to invest significant resources to build an infrastructure that will need to be updated largely afterwards

- **It questions the idea of 'professional-run campaign'** in the sense of stable personnel expert in political communication. Instead, it needs high circulation of outsiders only experienced in the private sector (in high-tech enterprises)

- The use of this methods aims to get out likely voters, **but it also assumes less propensity to attract less attached voters**, deepening the political divide

4: Some conclusions

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- New ICT are transforming party politics by fostering **political desintermediation**, which might actually a sort of re-intermediation

- More chances for outsiders and new challengers…but less likelihood for political survival

- As Moises Naím stated some years ago: **power is "easier to get, harder to use, and easier to lose"**

- The main cost so far seems to be the **increasing cost of governing**: less incentives for cabinet coalitions, unstable parliaments and short-term policies

4: Some questions

- Political parties will become more and more vaulted as a database-collectors and agents of sustaining, in the short-term, such technology-intensive campaign…
    - … how can we afford resources enough in order to allow performing this function in a multiparty polarized system without eroding equal opportunities for challengers?

- Political parties are transferring an amount of power from previous intermediate actors to grassroots, in spite of the reduction of the base size…
    - … how can keep the balance between a smaller party super base and a larger less-mobilized supporter area ?

- Parties are employing the digital tools to better connect with their voters (in elections), but neglect to keep their connection as government agents with their citizens (after the eelections)…
    - … how can the Digital help the parties to reinvigorate their executive role, in order to strengthen the enforcement of their platforms once in the public institutions?

5: Further (selected and recent) readings

Campbell, J. E. (2016). *Polarized: making sense of a divided America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Costa Lobo, Marina & John Curtice (2017): *Personality Politics? The Role of Leader Evaluations in Democratic Elections*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Rahat, G., & Kenig, O. (2019). *From Party Politics to Personalized Politics? Party Change and Political*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Scarrow, S. E., Webb, P. D., & Poguntke, T. (Eds.). (2017). *Organizing Political Parties. Representation, Participation, and Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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