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Superparticipants and Equal Voice Within the Czech Pirate Party

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Abstract

This paper deals with superparticipants in online deliberation in the Czech Pirate Party. Based on data from online discussions followed by voting on resolutions, the paper shows who the superparticipants are with regard to position within the party, how they behave and whether their opinions can influence the voting results. The analysis does not indicate the usual problems related to online discussions such as domination by the superparticipants in discussions or extremism. Based on our findings it seems that superparticipants provide messages fitting formally and substantively into the discussions. Moreover, the activity of the superparticipants had only limited effects on the voting results.

Keywords

Czech Pirate Party, online deliberation, superparticipants, digital party

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Introduction

Implementation of online intra-party discussion and decision-making platforms resulted from demands to increase the impact of ordinary party members within parties. A new kind of parties, called digital (Gerbaudo, 2019) or deliberative parties (Gherghina et al., 2020), connected these demands to the goal of a transparent and open decision-making process, declaratively delimiting themselves from traditional parties. The Pirate Parties in Western and Central Europe serve as typical examples of this trend (Gerbaudo, 2019; Hacker and Van Dijk, 2000; Thuermer et al., 2016; Michalčák, 2018).

Among other goals, implementing online intra-party tools should make a party more talk-centric while fulfilling the criteria of deliberation (Ebeling and Wolkenstein, 2018). Each participant has the option to add his or her opinion and enrich the discussion with new information or points of view. However, as was found many times (Albrecht, 2006; Hartz-Karp and Sullivan, 2014; Kies, 2010), almost every online community inherently faces obstacles to satisfying the deliberative criterion of equal participation. A minority of members of online communities creates the majority of the content, while the majority of members contributes a little, or is totally silent. The members of the noisy minority called superparticipants can thus enjoy overwhelming influence on what is discussed, and how (Nielsen, 2006; Kies, 2010; Wright, 2018; Graham and Wright, 2014a). Because the phenomenon of superparticipants has not been studied yet in the digital parties, there is a lack of information about their behavior and impact on intra-party discussions. What's more, because digital parties conduct their intra-party decision-making processes on the Internet, superparticipants can disproportionately impact not only the discussions but also final decisions. If the group of superparticipants overlaps with the group of party officials, their effect can be even bigger while undermining the deliberative goal of equal voice. The study of superparticipants' behavior and influence within digital parties is therefore a very relevant research topic in the study of intra-party deliberation.

This paper analyzes the superparticipants within the Pirate Forum, the online platform of the Czech Pirate Party. Since its establishment in 2009, the Czech Pirates enthusiastically declared their devotion to openness, transparency and intra-party deliberation, and started using the Pirate Forum for their intra-party discussions and decision-making. The more than ten-year-long continuous use of the Forum guarantees its institutionalization among party members. The Czech Pirates thus serve as a good case for the study of online intra-party deliberation and its – probably unintended – long-term effects on the quality of deliberation. Moreover, thanks

to the commitment to openness, all discussions on the Forum are public, which makes the data easily accessible and ready to investigate.

We studied the behavior and impact of superparticipants in a part of the Pirate Forum called the National Forum, which is the highest decision-making body of the party. The discussions here are all concluded with voting by members. Based on the literature concerning superparticipants in online communities, we ask what roles the Pirate superparticipants play in these discussions, and if and how their activity affects the results of these votes. To answer our questions, we coded the behavioral content of messages in 55 National Forum discussions and identified the types of superparticipants' behavior. We also compared the numbers of vote outcomes conforming to the superparticipants' opinions to the votes showing results contrary to superparticipants' preferences. We found that compared to other virtual communities, Pirate superparticipants do not overwhelm the discussions by the numbers of their posts and instead typically play supporting roles, explaining the procedures and enriching the discussions with arguments. We also found that although the vote outcomes reflected the declared opinions of superparticipants more frequently than of other groups of party members, their advantage was very small. The case of the Czech Pirates has an important implication for the study of online intra-party deliberation. The online deliberation by the Pirates does not include the negative effects discussed in other studies of superparticipants. This case shows that high-quality deliberation can be achieved in the decision-making processes of a relatively successful digital party.

The paper is structured as follows. In the theoretical section, we introduce the phenomenon of superparticipants and the problem of discursive inequality they can cause in online discussions. We then discuss what roles superparticipants can play in terms of the content of their messages in a forum, and theorize their possible effects on the results in a partisan environment. After a description of the functioning of the Pirates' National Forum, the analysis focuses on the characteristics of the superparticipants and their roles and effects on intra-party decision-making. The conclusion summarizes and discusses the results.

Online intra-party deliberation and the discursive inequality problem

The idea of deliberation points to the "resurgence of the public space" (Kies, 2010: 19), in which "individuals participating in the democratic process are amenable to changing their minds and their preference as a result of the reflection induced by deliberation" (Dryzek, 2000: 31). Promoters of deliberation emphasize the exchange of ideas and information, discussion

enjoying mutual respect that allows citizens to form opinions and participate in the final decision-making. The catalogue of criteria defining deliberation includes particular behavior (the use of justifications and reflexivity, showing empathy and being sincere), and a set contextual factors, such as the openness of participation and discursive equality (Kies, 2010). Digital parties usually aim to secure the ideal of within-party deliberation by implementing special online platforms where registered members can perform a number of actions such as participating in discussions, voting in e-consultations, donating money, attending online training sessions, etc. (Gerbaudo, 2019).

However, even when a party honestly aims to implement such deliberative practices, there is an inherent problem of discursive inequality that we can expect more or less influences the results of deliberation. The so-called equal voice criterion calls for equal opportunity for participants to introduce and question any assertion, express attitudes, desires or needs (Kies, 2010: 42). The criterion is challenged if not all participants have the same power in the discussion. The equal voice criterion has gained attention in studies of online discussions that find that a very small percentage of participants usually dominate conversations by posting a disproportionate amount of content. These participants are called *posters*, *senders*, or *superparticipants*. The rest of the participants can be divided into a small number of those contributing from time to time, while the biggest part of the online community is composed of lurkers who only read or observe the content, but do not contribute at all. The phenomenon is called the 90/9/1 principle or 1% law (Nielsen, 2006). The real rates of contributions between these three groups vary. However, the tendency to discursive inequality is a characteristic of most online communities (the content created by superparticipants starts around 70%; Morell, 2010; Budhathoki, 2010; Haklay, 2006; Graham and Wright, 2014a, 2017).

From the perspective of meeting the deliberative criteria within an online community, the superparticipants directly cause inequality of voice by their superposting. As Kies (2010: 43) states, “if only a small amount of participants contribute in a large proportion, they then dominate this debate.” Following this, if the discussion is dominated by a few, “then deliberation has not engaged the views of the community widely” (Koop and Jansen, 2009). Additionally, when the discussion is connected to the result of a vote about the discussed issue and taking a decision (as in the case of the Pirates’ Forum), the superparticipants can be strongly motivated to even manipulatively change the minds of the other members in the direction they prefer, which goes against the idea of deliberation. The extent to which the superparticipants can

disturb the deliberation process within the party, however, depends on their goals and roles within the discussions.

Goals, roles, and impact of party superparticipants

Although there is a lack of studies on superparticipants in intra-party deliberation, it is known from studies of various online communities that superparticipants are not interested in simply expressing themselves, but in getting the largest audience for their messages (Mustafaraj et al., 2011) and developing a persuasive power over other people who are interested in the topic and recognize them as authorities (Cha et al., 2010). Compared to the silent majority, their motivations to participate in discussions significantly differ. In a party environment, superparticipants are motivated by political career benefits and efficacy (Phang et al., 2015). They also tend to believe that they really are influential, and more likely to persuade other members (Weeks et al., 2015).

The literature presents a twofold picture of superparticipants' behavior: the pessimistic and the optimistic. Because of their outlying activity, superparticipants are described as atypical within the online community and bearing opinions that are non-representative for the members of the community. Their non-representative attitudes are sometimes even linked to opinions on the margins of social and political acceptability, such as racism, sexism, etc., leading the content into extremist positions (Ricci and Servaes, 2018). Linked to their – possibly extreme – opinions, the activity of superparticipants may include abrasive behavior towards other participants to defend their point of view. Such activity can result in discouragement of new members from participation, further strengthening the conditions of unequal voice within the discussions (Haklay, 2016).

On the other hand, superparticipants play different roles, and some of them are rather positive, especially in relation to new and inexperienced members. Some studies show that they rather “act as the ‘old hands’, giving advice and providing other participants with an overview of the debate” (Albrecht, 2006: 72), and enrich the debate by storytelling, advice giving, acknowledgments, and debating (Graham and Wright, 2014a).

These two pictures of superparticipants' behavior lead to opposite expectations about their impact on deliberation processes in online communities: disturbing deliberation on the one hand, and supporting the deliberation, on the other. The partisan environment with voting by members at the end of discussions may lead us to expect friendly behavior because such an

approach could help superparticipants create circles of supporters, gain position within the party and make their claims acceptable.

The fact that there can be a real impact from the discussions due to the voting that follows increases their salience compared to simple discussion platforms. The persuasive power of superparticipants, who invest in their reputation by their superparticipation, can impact the life of the party. The influence of superparticipants on the audience is usually hard to measure even in non-party contexts. Huffaker (2010) found in a study of Google groups that the number of posts and replies, and tenure of an individual within a forum have positive effects on the activity of other forum members, such as replying to messages or the number of responses that spark the further dialogue, or the number of further shared words. Studies on different types of online communication, such as on Twitter, however, show that not all superparticipants are necessarily superechoed. Bracciale et al. (2020), who studied political communication on Italian Twitter, showed that the already-existing elites can be more influential than superposters who have not otherwise established their position within the community. Although this was not an intra-party environment, it suggests that the already-existing elites within an online party community can have an important impact on discussions. When the party elite and the group of superparticipants overlap, the effect on the opinions of the members can be much bigger.

The existence of two competing views on the role of superparticipants creates varying expectations about their impact on equal voice. In the pessimistic view anticipates abusive domination of discussion and lack of equal voice in the process. The optimistic view sees the potential for superparticipants to foster equal voice within discussions. Regarding intra-party decision-making, superparticipants can be more persuasive than other participants because they invest in their reputation, especially if they overlap with the party elite. Persuasive power is not a problem per se, but if voting outcomes only reflect the opinions of superparticipants and not other members, there is no space of other voices to be heard, which makes the whole deliberation process meaningless.

Czech Pirates and their deliberative practices

The Czech Pirate Party was established in 2009, following a wave of new pirate parties being established in Western Europe. Unlike the Pirates in Western Europe, the Czech Pirates were able to break through into all levels of politics: local, regional, national, and European. In the 2017 election they won 10.8% of the vote and 22 mandates in the Czech Chamber of Deputies, the lower chamber of Parliament. The party has three MEPs after obtaining 13.95% of the vote in the

2019 EP elections, won representation in all regional assemblies in 2020 elections, in 60 municipalities in 2018 elections, and currently holds the office of mayor of the capital city, Prague.

Since its beginning, the Pirates have expressed a desire to create a new kind of political party with open and transparent processes and intraparty deliberation. Party members typically express their unwillingness to imitate the processes of mainstream parties, and are suspicious of the behavior associated with traditional party elites. They have followed the German and Swedish examples (Thuermer et al., 2016) and created an online platform called Pirate Forum. The Pirate Forum serves as a space for discussions among members and party sympathizers, and for voting by members. Because of the commitment of the Pirates to deliberation and transparency, all the contents of the Pirate Forum are publicly accessible.

The Pirate Forum is divided into several parts: there are the discussion rooms for each local and regional party branch where issues are discussed, as well as the space for discussions of individual party organs (such as the republic committee, the party leadership – republic presidency, arbitration and conciliation commissions, and party departments), and member initiatives.¹ Finally there is a room for discussions within the so-called National Forum, the highest party body. Among the competences of the National Forum are elections to and withdrawals from the party leadership and part of the republic committee (some of its members are elected by regional organizations). The National Forum can also establish and remove other commissions and departments, and elect commission members and the chairs of departments. The Forum also has authority over party statutes, the annual report of the party chairman, the financial report and other actions regulating intra-party relations, and to debate and approve manifestos and ideological documents. Moreover, at the request of a fifth of the total number of party members, the National Forum can examine and cancel any decision of any other party organ. Finally, the Forum assigns tasks to the republic leadership or to the republic committee. Due to the huge number of discussions in the many different spaces of the Pirate Forum, we decided to investigate the behavior of superparticipants only within the National Forum, which has the greatest importance for the decision-making of the whole party.

The discussions in the Pirate Forum are, together with the final vote tallies, parts of so-called proceedings. Each member and registered sympathizer of the Pirate Party has the right to

¹ The only non-public discussion platform within the Pirate Forum is the “Under-deck”, available only to party members.

participate in a proceeding in the National Forum. A group of members² has the right to submit a proposal for a proceeding. Registered sympathizers can participate in all debates, but they do not have voting rights.

There are several ways in which a proceeding can be activated in the Forum. A proceeding can be held at the request of the republic leadership or the republic committee. A proceeding can also start on the initiative of members. Forum proceedings are chaired by a moderator, usually one of the party's deputy chairs or a member of the administrative department.³ The moderator has the right to warn participants when they violate the rules and even exclude them from the proceeding. Moreover, he or she may remove off topic messages from the discussions and even modify the messages of participants.

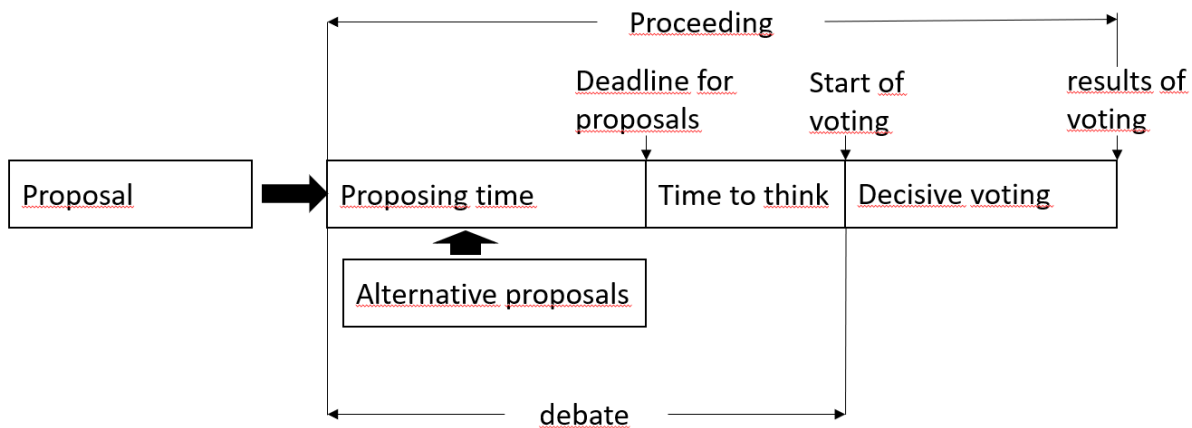
A proceeding is structured in the following way (see Figure 1 for an illustration). First, the proceeding is opened by the moderator who introduces the schedule. The moderator explains the reason for the start of the proceeding (a request from members, the leadership or the committee), sets a date for the final vote, and appoints other officials for the proceeding (e.g. the voting commission, trustees, recorder).

After opening the debate, there is first space for a proposer to introduce the proposal. Then, the debate opens to other participants. The debate consists of two parts, proposing time and time to think. In first two weeks of the debate it is possible to make alternative proposals and amend proposals. The proposer has the right to a final word before the debate is closed. During the time to think, it is possible only to raise procedural points (e.g. prolonging of the terms, grammatical corrections, etc.). The minimum length time for proposing is two weeks, and the time to think takes two days. Both terms can be extended in case of important proposals.

In special cases, the proceeding may take the form of a referendum. In such a case, it is not possible to raise alternative proposals. The final word is reserved for the strongest opponent of the proposal. The same procedure is also used in the case of a special review, which decides about nullifying a decision of another party body.

² The size of a group is defined as the square root of the number of present members multiplied by two (§ 5 of Rules of proceeding)

³ The members of the administrative department moderated proceedings until 2017.

Figure 1: The structure of the Proceeding within the Pirate Forum.

The proceeding ultimately results in a resolution, when the Forum authorizes some act, assigns a task to a party body, or withdraws a member from an elected body. Or, a second possible result is a selection, whereby the Forum elects new members of a group, a party body, or a candidate list. The outcome of a vote for a resolution or selection is usually decided with a simple majority.⁴ When a proposal is rejected or does not obtain the necessary support, the resolution or selection is not approved.

The design and main functions of the Pirate Forum have not changed since 2009, and this is sometimes criticized within the party. Some members point to the fact that the Forum weakened in its deliberative functions as time passed. As Michalčák (2018) shows, the members realized the problem of unequal voice within the Forum and attributed it to insufficient feedback on the discussed proposals. They also explained that the technical underdevelopment of the Forum led discussions to fragment into groups on Facebook, which changed the Forum's intended function as a whole-party deliberative platform into "rather a tool for voting, publishing important documents and so on. It has turned into a tool for formal processes, but not for meaningful communication" (Michalčák, 2018: 21). As well, the Pirates realize that as the party grows in number, new members are less likely to be involved in the Forum (Vodová and Voda, 2019). The question of unequal participation was pointed out by some members of the party elite, but the specific question of superparticipants and their role is only rarely touched on by Forum participants.

⁴ If the proposal is marked as important, it is necessary to obtain a 3/5 majority to pass the proposal.

Data collection

We analyze the discussions on the National Forum that were followed by voting, from its inception in 2009 to July 2020. All discussions are publicly available and it is possible to copy the text, including the information about name and time, from the webpage. Obviously, in the first discussions, all members stood at the same starting line and it is thus not possible to detect who was a superparticipant. Therefore, of 309 proceedings in total, those from the first two years (78 discussions) were used only to identify who turned out to be a superparticipant.

To detect superparticipants, all messages on the forum, except those written by moderators, were used. We follow Graham and Wright (2014a), who classify as superparticipants those members who publish 2% of posts on forums with less than 100,000 posts. However, we also wanted to capture the fact that the discussions are not static and that previous behavior probably impacts the perceptions of other members. Some members were highly active only in one or two proceedings that were salient for them in a given year. When they stopped contributing to those particular proceedings they later almost disappeared. Therefore, we decided to take an additional step in identifying superparticipants. For each year, we counted the proportion of all messages by individual members written in that current year and all prior years. For example, for 2013 all messages from 2009 to 2013 were used; for 2020, all messages from 2009 to 2020 were used. Those participants with more than 2% of messages in the given period were counted as superparticipants for the given year. Participants who were highly active in only one or two proceedings were thus identified as superparticipants (if they reached the 2% of all messages counted in the period) only in the year of their highest activity.

The final sample of proceedings for analysis was selected in the following way: of the 231 proceedings in 2012-2020, we excluded those that were not followed by voting, very short proceedings with less than ten messages, and those discussing elections to party bodies or withdrawals of members from these bodies. The reason for excluding these proceedings lies in their very different structure and nature. Such discussions contain nomination messages, endorsement of these nominations, and discussions about candidates; thus, the debates are usually very fragmented and difficult to analyze.

Finally, we also excluded proceedings that debated more than two substantial outcomes. Therefore, we analyzed only situations when members could 1) vote for or against the proposal,

or 2) for proposal A or proposal B or against both.⁵ Other possibilities were omitted because in such cases it was often hard to distinguish which proposal is supported by individual participants' posts.

Coding of variables

All messages in the 55 proceedings were manually coded to obtain the information about the behavior of superparticipants and their effects on the discussions. All the messages were coded by one of the paper's authors. The second author coded all the variables in one proceeding, and the reliability of coding was measured. In case of insufficient reliability results (which happened in two variables), the differences were explained and the additional coding was provided on another proceeding, the results of final coding are reported. The values of the Krippendorff alpha are mentioned in the description of the coding of the variables. All categories are not exclusive except off-topic.

Interaction with other participants was assigned the value of 1 if the message contained direct citation of a message written by another participant, contained the name of another participant involved in the discussion, or when someone non-present was tagged. The Krippendorff alpha for nominal data measured on 62 posts was 0,802 (0,605; 0,961).

The variable adding new information/development of discussion contains all messages related to the discussed issue and containing information related to the matter of the proposal, or to previously raised arguments. Therefore, there are many ways a message can fall into this category. The Krippendorff alpha for nominal data measured on 70 posts was 0,818 (0,635; 0,963).

Procedural aspect was coded a value of 1 when the message contained formal requirements, an alternative proposal, or a procedural proposal (for example, to postpone the deadline, to change the chair, a proposal to end the proceeding, etc.) or when the message was written by the chair and related to the organization of the proceeding. The Krippendorff alpha for nominal data measured on 70 posts was 0,829 (0,658; 0,966).

Messages were coded as off-topic if not connected to original proposal or alternative proposals. For example, in a discussion about a possible coalition with the Green Party and the Christian Democratic Party in one Senate district, one participant asked the coalition candidate

⁵ In most cases, there are other possibilities for voting against the proposal – to end the proceeding without adopting a resolution or to postpone the decision to a regular proceeding (held annually with the physical presence of the members). We included the proceedings that used these options in the voting.

about his opinion on nuclear energy. On this point, the question was on-topic as it was probably important for the participant in deciding whether to support the candidate or not. However, after that, other participants started to discuss various aspects of nuclear energy without any link to the opinion of the candidate or to the content of the coalition agreement. These messages were thus coded as off-topic. The Krippendorff alpha for nominal data measured on 70 posts was 0,737 (0,342; 1).

Moreover, we coded whether a message contained insults or very offensive language. On this point, it is important to say that the moderator has the right to delete abusive messages; thus, the coded insults are those left undeleted or they are rather soft or implicit. (For example: “Please, I please you politely, fuck you. I’m glad this old fart has finally understood to whom the note about the old farts was addressed to.”). The Krippendorff alpha for nominal data measured on 50 posts was 0,940 (0,821; 1).

The most important category for our further analysis is the explicit agreement or disagreement with the proposal. The coding was based on claims about preference related to the matter of the proceeding. To be coded, the message needed to include clear information about the voting preference related to the proposal; it was not enough for the participant to express dislike of the proposal or to ask critical questions. The message has to have included some notion of agreement/disagreement and also the aim of the agreement, for example: “I publicly express my support for the review and abolition of the decision of the party leadership.” The Krippendorff alpha for nominal data measured on 70 posts was 0,794 (0,382; 1).

To answer our first question dealing with the behavior of superparticipants, we applied frequency analysis to the variables. To answer the second research question dealing with the impact of superparticipants on the final votes of the party members, we used the variable of explicit agreement or disagreement with the proposal.

Superparticipants

In the early years, there were only a few dozen members, and the number of Forum participants reflected this. However, by 2014 the number of members had increased (150 members) whereas the number of Forum participants began to decrease (to 82 in 2015). The numbers were relatively unchanged until 2017. With the influx of new members after the successful election in 2017, the percentage of Forum participants among members decreased. There were 827 participants at the beginning of 2019, but only 276 of them posted at least one message on the Forum (see

Figure 2). The low level of activity of the majority of the members was addressed in several discussions.

The number of messages posted in the National Forum reflects the initial growth of the party and the electoral cycle. The highest activity in terms of number of discussions was reached in 2013 when the party first took part in national elections. The level of activity was also high in 2014 when the European election was held. Numerous discussions were related to the elections. After the decrease in the following years, activity rose in 2017 (with the national election) and in 2019 (the European election). Regarding the group of superparticipants, we observed a decrease from 15 people in 2012 to 10 in 2019 (and 8 in 2020). There was also a decreasing share of superparticipants for all messages written in a given year. Whereas in 2011, the superparticipants produced half of all messages in the National Forum, their share decreased to two-fifths between 2013 and 2015, and to only about 20% in recent years, which is likely caused by the departure of some long-term superparticipants (see Figure 3).

The group of superparticipants was very small, and compared to other online environments it also created a relatively small proportion of content in the National Forum. Its dominance decreased with the increase in party membership. This shows that the online platform of the Pirates has not been dominated by the superparticipants and also did not dissuade new members from participation.

Figure 2: Development of the party membership base, participation and superparticipation in the National Forum

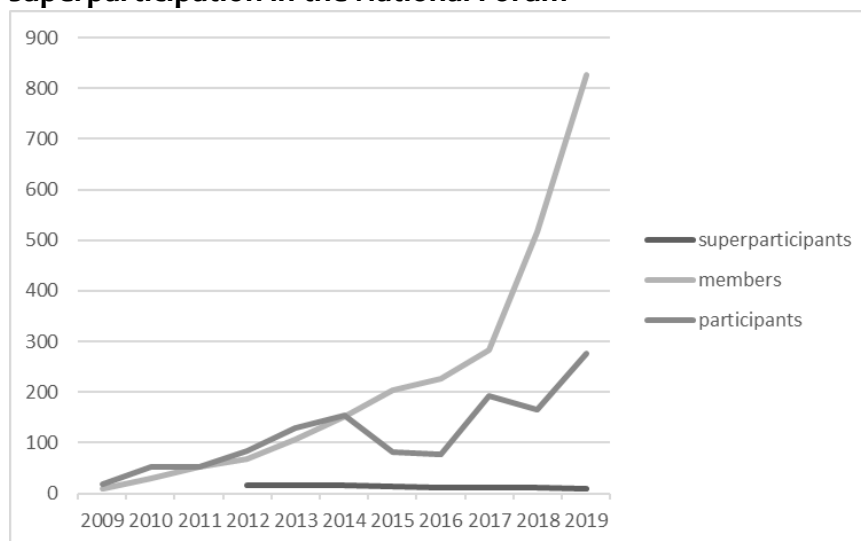
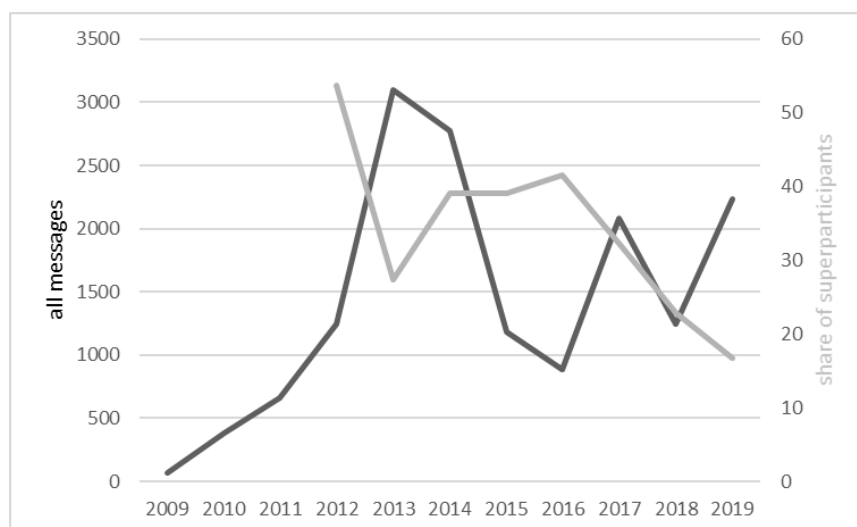


Figure 3: Development of activity in the National Forum

The group of the most active participants is relatively heterogeneous regarding their party position. Surprisingly, the party leaders are not very active. The 2% share of messages in the National Forum was reached only by Ivan Bartoš in 2012. However, the first party leader, Kamil Horký, left the party in 2012 without any participation in the Forum, Lukáš Černožorský, the party leader between 2014 and 2016, was relatively silent, too. From their messages on the Forum, it seems that both Bartoš and Černožorský were reserved about the centrality of the Forum. Bartoš noticed that people can also discuss in person and he did not need to feel fixed to the Forum. One of the goals in Černožorský's manifesto was to find some supplement to the current Forum.

Some superparticipants (especially Vojtěch Pikal, Mikuláš Ferjenčík, Jakub Michálek and Marcel Kolaja) have been members of the party leadership (particularly the deputy chairs). Their activity probably helped 17 proposals from the party leadership to be discussed within the National Forum, and the deputy chairs served as the proposers. Especially Jakub Michálek engaged in the majority of these proceedings, where he extensively explained and defended the leadership proposals. He was a proposer in 13 proceedings, and in 11 of them he proposed the leadership proposals. This behavior is, however, not typical for all members of the party leadership. For example, the party leader Bartoš, when serving as a proposer, usually only submitted the leadership's statement and did not engage more in the discussion. So, it seems that outlying activity is rather a feature of individual members and is not a strategy of the party leadership.

The rest of the group of superparticipants was composed of members of wider party elite, i.e. those with positions on the republic committees or the leaders of party departments (such as Petr Vileta and Martin Kučera). Also among the superparticipants were people who never reached any higher party position, as well as ex-members who left the party or who were dismissed (e.g. Libor Špaček, Lukáš Nový and Martin Shánil). In the following analysis, we do not distinguish between the broader elite and ordinary members, but only between elite superparticipants (including the leader, Bartoš, and four deputy chairmen) and ordinary superparticipants (the rest of the group).

The members of the party leadership are likely to express their opinions more often in proceedings that are more important for the leadership. To test this, we investigated the differences in the activity of superparticipants in the proceedings that originated from a member's initiative and those proposed by the party organs (party leadership, committees, heads of departments). The results (Table 2) show that the elite superparticipants were more involved in discussions activated by party leadership or party organs. According to relative counts (messages per proceeding), the activity of this group was almost two times higher in these proceedings than in proceedings based on members' initiatives.

Table 1: Pirate Party superparticipants in the National Forum and development of their contributions over time

	Proposer		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
	MI	PL									
Petr.Vileta	2	2	5.5 RC,FD	4.8 RC,FD	4.5 FD	4.6 FD	4.5 FD	4.5	4.6	4.6	4.7
Martin.Kucera	4			2.5	3.9 AD	3.5 AD	4.0 AD	4.5 AD	4.7 AD	4.5 AD	4.6 PL
Vojtech.Pikal	0	0	3.2 AD	3.5 AD	3.2 AO,PL	3.4 PL	3.6 PL	4.2 PL	4.4	4.5	4.5 PL
Lukas.Novy	0	0			3.0 TD	3.7 TD	4.5	5.3	4.8	4.1	3.9
							Excluded from the party				
Mikulas.Ferjencik	1	1	5.6 PL	3.0 PL	3.1 PL,MD	2.9 MD	2.8 MD	2.4 MD	2.3 MD	2.3 MD	2.8 MD
Jakub.Michalek	2	11	6.0 AD,RP	4.6 PL	3.8	3.5 RF	3.5 RF,PL	3.2 PL	3.0 PL	2.7 PL	2.5 PL
Martin.Shanil	1	0		3.3	3.9	4.0	3.8	3.3	3.0	2.6	2.4
							Left the party				
Roman.Kucera	2	0	3.3	2.5	3.0	3.1	3.1	2.7	2.6	2.3	2.1
Martin Broz	0	0	6.3 PL	5.8	4.0	3.5	3.2	2.6	2.4		
				Left the party							
Libor.Spacek	2	0		2.9	2.8	3.3	3.0	2.5	2.3		
Vaclav.Malek	1	0		3.3	3.3	2.9	2.6	2.2	2.0		
				Left the party							
Michal Wagner	0	0		4.9	3.2	2.8	2.6	2.1			
				Left the party							
Adam.Skorepa	0	0			2.0	2.0					
Marcel.Kolaja	0	0	4.1 PL	2.2 PL	2.1 PL						
Josef.Ulehla	0	0		2.0	2.0						
Robert.Adamek	0	0	3.3	2.2							
Jiri.Kaderavek	0	0	4.0	2.1							

Notes: Listed are only those who have been superparticipants for at least two years.

PL – party leadership, RC – republic committee, RF – referee commission, AD – administrative department, MD – media department, FD – financial department, TD – technical department

A similar pattern is observed for ordinary members who were two times more active in debates resulting from members' initiatives. Contrarily, the ordinary superparticipants were equally active regardless of who initiated the proposal. To summarize: the group of superparticipants only partially overlaps with the party elite. However, the most active superparticipants are not from the party elite. The superparticipation by those within the party elite seems to be a result of individual behavior, not the intended strategy of the leadership.

Table 2: Activity of different groups of members according to the kind of proceeding

Activity (messages) in the National Forum	Resulting from member initiative		Proposed by a party organ (leadership, committee, department)	
	N	N/Forum	N	N/Forum
Members	1595	46.9	495	23.6
Ordinary superparticipants	610	17.9	320	15.2
Elite superparticipants	146	4.3	156	7.4

Behavior of superparticipants

Looking at the features of the activity of superparticipants in Table 3, we inductively identified three different communication styles based on a combination of frequency of certain features in their messages. These styles substantively resemble the types defined by Graham and Wright (2014b). The first is that of *procedural helper*, defined as individuals who frequently provide procedural information in combination with low number of insults and off-topics. Two members, Jakub Michálek and Vojtěch Pikal, represent this kind of behavior.⁶ Although they were not assigned formally to the moderator role, they mostly provided other participants with information about how the intra-party procedure functioned or how a proposal should be corrected to be in line with formal requirements. In the case of Vojtěch Pikal, this behavior may be explained by the fact that he often moderated the proceedings, so sometimes he played this role even if he was not appointed to it formally. The second procedural helper, Jakub Michálek,

⁶ Martin Shánil and Libor Špaček used many procedural messages because they widely discussed the appropriateness of the procedures after their proposals were not approved by the party. They therefore do not belong to the category of procedural helpers.

established his position in the early years of the party as a person who knows a lot about the intra-party rules. This likely followed from the fact that he is a lawyer by profession, which gave him a strong reputation in procedures. On the other hand, this feature of Michálek (and probably also the fact that he is a deputy chairman) sometimes led to accusations that he manipulated Forum members. For example, one member turned to the rest of the Forum with remorse: “Why do you [Forum] members vote like a bunch of sheep that Shepherd Jakoubek [Michálek] drives where he wants?”

The second style can be labeled as “discussants.” Two superparticipants, Petr Vileta and Martin Kučera, best fit into this group, which was characterized by a high proportion of messages reacting to other participants and messages enriching the discussions with related arguments or new information. They played a positive role within the forum. They helped participants orient themselves in the discussion, and maintained and enriched the discussion with new points of view and arguments.

The third group consisted of “trolls” whose messages often included insults and off-topics. Lukáš Nový and Martin Brož fit to this category. Moreover, Lukáš Nový also used procedural proposals simply to obstruct proceedings he didn’t support. For example, in a proceeding dealing with distribution of money from the members’ fees between the central and regional organizations, he proposed 196 amending proposals to obstruct the proceeding. In a proceeding concerned with the payment for the election webpage, he proposed to move the proceeding to the control commission, then to the referee commission, and then to end the proceeding without a resolution. The Pirate Party leadership and members in the discussions realized the problem of trolls and bullying within the party as a possible deterrent to gaining new members and women. As a reaction to trolls, Nový was dismissed from the party, while Brož left the party before the process of his dismissal started.

To sum up, the superparticipants are mostly concerned with substantial or procedural matters related to a proceeding. Although there are examples of superparticipants resembling the pessimistic picture in relation to deliberative process (the trolls), the overall picture supports a rather optimistic view. Cases of abusive behavior are exceptions and the party is able to mitigate them. The effort to cultivate discussion led to the elimination of users who regularly expressed themselves offensively.

Table 3: Percentage of messages falling into the different categories of behavior

Name	N	New			Off-	
		Procedural	info	Insults	Interaction	topic
Petr.Vileta	259	17.8	60.2	1.9	79.2	20.8
Vojtech.Pikal	192	49.5	44.3	0.5	42.7	7.3
Lukas.Novy	179	55.9	24.6	7.3	45.3	17.3
Jakub.Michalek	151	51.0	57.6	1.3	33.8	1.3
Martin.Kucera	142	38.7	54.9	0.7	69.0	7.0
Libor.Spacek	93	71.0	40.9	2.2	48.4	6.5
Roman.Kucera	80	25.0	43.8	0.0	37.5	11.3
Mikulas.Ferjencik	69	34.8	63.8	0.0	47.8	1.4
Martin.Shanil	64	60.9	32.8	0.0	54.7	12.5
Vaclav.Malek	64	29.7	26.6	0.0	51.6	26.6
Martin Broz	49	2.0	14.3	12.2	22.4	36.7
Marcel.Kolaja	29	13.8	62.1	0.0	51.7	0.0
Ivan.Bartos	24	29.2	75.0	0.0	58.3	4.2

The influence of superparticipants on party decision-making

A two-step analysis was conducted for the examination of the influence of superparticipants on the results of final party votes. Firstly, we counted the difference between the number of people explicitly for each proposal and the number of people explicitly against it, for different kinds of participants (members, elite superparticipants, and “ordinary” superparticipants). Then, we cross-tabulated the results with the vote tallies of the proceedings (whether the proposal passed or not). Table 4 shows that there was a difference not only between the members and ordinary superparticipants, but also between the members and elite superparticipants. When we compared the ratios of the numbers for results that were in line with the opinion of each group, and when they were not, the highest number was related to the group of ordinary superparticipants, and the lowest for members. However, the difference between the members and the elite superparticipants was not substantial. It is also important to notice that in most debates, the superparticipants did not reveal their preferences, or there were equal numbers of superparticipants who approved and disapproved of the proposal (in about 40 of 55 discussions). However, generally, it seems that the superparticipants’ opinions were reflected in the results of the votes slightly more frequently than the opinions of members.

Table 4: Cross tabulation between the opinions of groups of members and results of proceedings

		Against	No opinion	For	Ratio
Elite superparticipants	not passed	5	2	0	2.5
	passed	4	37	5	
Ordinary					
superparticipants	not passed	3	3	0	3.3
	passed	3	37	7	
Members	not passed	2	3	1	2.1
	passed	6	28	13	

There can be several reasons why the ratio was higher for ordinary superparticipants than the elite superparticipants. Firstly, this may result from the fact that that leadership sometimes held different preferences than members, since they are more affected by the decision, whereas superparticipants not holding party positions can echo the opinions of members. A good example may be the proceeding about the distribution of party finances from membership fees to the party centre and party regions, proposed by the head of the financial department. More superparticipants in the party leadership were against the measure, whereas the participating members tended to support it (as well as the superparticipants outside the party leadership), and the proposal was finally passed. Contrarily, within the proceeding discussion about the Treaty about Freedom of the Internet, only two people declared their opinions: an elite superparticipant supported the proposal, and one member (Lukáš Nový) was declaratively against it. In the end, the proposal passed, which points to the possibly varying reputations enjoyed by participants resulting from their personal communication styles.

It thus seems that superparticipants had some impact on the voting results. However, the effects were obviously not deterministic and the deliberative process could lead to results in line with the preferences of superparticipants as well the opposite. Moreover, superparticipants did not constitute a group with homogenous preferences, and their activity in this sense therefore did not undermine the ideals of deliberation.

Conclusion

This paper's goal was to investigate the structure, behavior and possible impact of superparticipants within the Czech Pirate Party. Depending on the roles they play, superparticipants can be seen as hindering equal voice, or having a positive effect on the other superparticipants to establish a dominant persuasive power – which is more probable when the party elite and superparticipants overlap – which would threaten the deliberative process. This case study of the Czech Pirate Party found that the group of superparticipants was not homogenous regarding their position within the party hierarchy. Some superparticipants belonged to the party elite, some to a broader elite and some were ordinary members. The group was, however, homogenous regarding length of experience – no new member became a superparticipant after 2013. The activity of superparticipants was not embedded in the party hierarchy and instead reflected individual motivations. We did not identify any coherent strategic activity by elite superparticipants, even though members of the party were sometimes suspicious of it. Finally, the amount of content created by the superparticipants was not as dominating as with other online communities, and even decreased over time.

Regarding the behavior of superparticipants, the three groups representing different communication styles showed a rather positive picture. The superparticipants were able to provide help with the procedures, and provided interactions and reactions within the Forum. On the other hand, the party enabled the relatively long-term establishment of trolls behaving offensively and violating rules of polite discussion. However, the trolling superparticipants eventually left or were removed from the party.

Regarding the effects of superparticipants on final party votes, we identified an effect especially characteristic of the ordinary superparticipants. Their opinions were more frequently mirrored in the party vote. This contradicts our expectation based on literature that the overlapping of the party elite with superparticipants should dominate the results of party votes.

Because this is the first analysis of superparticipants in the digital life of political parties, our research contributes to understanding intra-party deliberation in the following way. The Czech Pirates were found to be able to deal with superparticipants such that they were not eliminated, but did not dominate the discussions. We found that superparticipants in intra-party deliberation can play a positive role, challenging the theory of their abusive behavior. More important is that superparticipants – contrary to our suspicion – even when overlapping with the party elite, do not drastically impact the results of intra-party votes, while the ordinary members-superparticipants can be more influential. This suggests that the existence of superparticipants

in digital parties is not necessarily an obstacle to the fulfillment of the deliberation promises at least some digital parties make.

Our results also raise new questions for further research. Firstly, we do not know what aspects of party organization or procedure of discussion lead to the observed situation in which superparticipants do not obstruct deliberation. Secondly, our conclusions are mainly taken from aggregate data about participants and individual motivations are not covered by our analysis. The qualitative analysis of superparticipants would add valuable information about the mechanisms used by participants to gain (or not to gain) power and how their individual behavior is related to the sustainability of deliberative process. Finally, we presented a simple analysis assessing possible effects on voting. However, a more process-oriented analysis could reveal how the activity of superparticipants is related to our results, because in our analysis we do not know whether the superparticipants affect the results when they do not express their opinions.

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