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Are digital parties more democratic than traditional parties? Evaluating Podemos and Movimento 5 Stelle's online decision-making platforms

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1. Introduction

In recent years, Western Europe has seen the emergence of a number of formations, such as Pirate Parties in Northern and Central Europe, the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement or M5S) in Italy and Podemos in Spain, that have promised to revolutionise how political parties are organised and how they make decisions. These formations have been described in different ways, as cyber-parties (Margetts, 2001, 2006), “anti-elitist cyber-parties” (2013), “network parties” (Klimowicz, 2018), or “digital parties” (Gerbaudo, 2019), to emphasise their reliance on digital technology. While, they often refuse the label “party”, preferring to be called “movements”, they are parties in the basic sense that they are organisations competing for office through elections (Weber, 1978: 284, Schumpeter, 2010: 283, Sartori, 2005). In fact, they may be taken as a sign of revival of political parties in the post-crash era, and as the manifestation of an emerging party type, different from both the “mass party” that dominated the industrial era (Duverger, 1959), and the new post-industrial parties that have been discussed in recent years, such as cartel parties (Katz and Mair, 1994), business firm parties (Hopkin and Paolucci, 1999) and franchise parties (Carty, 2004).

Key to digital parties' identity is the pursuit of digital democracy, commonly understood as an effort to extend and deepen democracy through the use of digital tools (Hacker and Van Dijk, 2000). This quest has been manifested in these parties' creation of online decision-making platforms, often described as “participatory platforms” or “participation portals”, such as LiquidFeedback in the case of the Pirates, the Five Star Movement's Rousseau platform, and Podemos' Participa portal. Participatory platforms are sections of the official parties' websites where registered members can perform a number of actions including participating in discussions; voting in e-consultations; donating money and attending online training sessions. They have sometimes been described as their “digital heart” or “collective intelligence”, to emphasise their importance in internal party life.

We can approach the establishment of participatory platforms as an attempt to transform intra-party democracy (IPD). This refers both to the specific set of processes through which political parties members and their elected officers make decisions about the party strategy (Scarrow and Gegzor, 2010), and to a normative orientation which posits internal democracy as a good to be pursued (Cross and Katz, 2003: 3-5). As William P. Cross and Richard S. Katz highlight, competing variants of IPD exist and they depend on the democratic visions of the parties involved (6-7). In the discourse of digital parties the approach to IPD is often expressed through ideas of disintermediation, openness and directness. For example, Davide Casaleggio the son of M5S “digital guru” Gianroberto Casaleggio, from which he has inherited a position of influence within the party, has claimed that decision-making platforms would allow participants ‘not to settle for delegation but to aspire for full participation’ (2018). A similar discourse is seen in Podemos’ promise of a more ‘open’, ‘unmediated’, and ‘direct’ participation of members in decision-making than is the case with traditional political parties, presented as closed and unresponsive (Podemos, 2017).

To what extent should we lend credence to this promise? Does online decision-making truly make members more included and empowered? Do digital parties provide a credible blueprint for democratising political parties? To address these questions the article examines and evaluates M5S’s and Podemos’ participatory platforms. Though some research has already been conducted on the topic (see Floridia and Vignati, 2014, Mosca, 2015, Deseriis, 2017, Lanzone and Rombi, 2014, Mikola, 2017, Gomez and Ramiro, 2017), we still lack a systematic evaluation of these practices. To address this gap in knowledge, I develop a comparative analysis of the participatory platforms of M5S and Podemos, complemented by select expert interviews with key developers and organisers.

I argue that digital parties’ intra-party democracy is plebiscitarian and centralised, with a low degree of institutionalisation of rules and procedures and of inclusiveness. It can be described as a ‘reactive democracy’ to express its similarity with the shallowness social media ‘reactions’ (for example ‘like’, ‘wow’, ‘haha’ reactions used on Facebook or retweets and likes on Twitter). While digital parties have introduced various participatory innovations, such as forms of collaborative proposition development, the actual room for bottom-up qualitative intervention from members is severely limited. Members’ participation mostly takes the form of ratification, a binary for/against or like/unlike reaction to proposals that have largely been pre-packaged by the leadership. The party leadership, and the staff at its

direct dependency, retain firm control over the process and online consultations have rarely yielded results contrary to the leadership's wishes.

The article begins by reviewing the scholarship on digital democracy and intra-party democracy, with specific attention to the way different streams of intra-party democracy, assembly-based and plebiscitarian map onto concrete digital democracy practices. After a methodological discussion, I turn to the empirical analysis of online decision-making in Podemos and M5S, examining various features of their platforms and demonstrating the dominance of top-down over bottom-up processes. I conclude considering the implications for the theory and practice of digital democracy.

2. Online decision-making and intra-party democracy

The online participatory platforms of the M5S and Podemos should be seen a new chapter in the development of digital democracy, to be understood as the attempt “to practise democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions” (Hacker and Van Dijk, 2000: 1). Experimentations in this field began in the 1980s and intensified in the 1990s and 2000s, with the aim of lowering barriers to information, discussion, and deliberation; extending and deepening the channels through which citizens participate in policy-making; and allowing citizens to monitor more closely how public policies are decided and implemented (see for example, Hague and Loader, 1999, Ferdinand, 2000, Coleman, 2005, Alvarez and Hall, 2010).

After an initial wave full of disappointment (Chadwick, 2006: 102) we are now witnessing what may be described as a *second wave of digital democracy* that seems to have more credible prospects. First, the popularisation of social media has acquainted billions of Internet users with interactive features such as commenting, liking, retweeting and upvoting, which resemble informal voting mechanisms (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). Secondly, sophisticated and user-friendly online decision-making platforms, such as Liquid Feedback¹, Loomio² and Consul, have made online decision-making more accessible. Central in this second wave of digital democracy is the internal democracy of organisations rather than deliberations among “general-interest and undifferentiated citizens” (Kreiss, 2015) and decision-making is mostly used *within* parties and other political organisations.

¹ <http://www.liquidfeedback.org/>

² <https://www.loomio.org>

The pioneers of this second wave have no doubt been the Pirate Parties, which since their inception have called for the creation of new forms of political participation adequate to the digital condition. This urge informed the development of LiquidFeedback,³ a decision-making system by the Public Software group in Berlin, which allows users to vote directly on issues or delegate decisions within given policy areas to people they trust. While Pirate Parties seem to have lost some of their initial momentum, in recent years other digital parties have enjoyed significant success.

Founded in 2009 by comedian Beppe Grillo and digital strategist Gianroberto Casaleggio, Italy's Five Star Movement (M5S) is the largest party in Italy and since September 2019 it is in government in alliance with Partito Democratico after a short coalition government with Lega. The M5S has presented itself as a 'party of the web' and has made digital democracy a key element of its identity. It has held online primaries called *parlamentarie* (to select candidates for parliamentary elections) and *comunarie* and *regionarie* (for local elections) alongside internal referendums and discussions on policy on its online decision-making platform named Rousseau, after the Genevian political philosopher. Podemos, a left-populist party founded in Spain just in time for the 2014 European elections has pursued a similar digital democracy agenda. Founded by Pablo Iglesias and other left-wing academics orbiting around the Complutense University in Madrid, Podemos has soon established its own online participation portal called Participa (participate), where different internal discussions, elections and referendums take place (Kioupiolis, and Pérez, 2018).

The introduction of online participatory platforms is at face-value an attempt to revive members' involvement in intra-party democracy (Cross and Katz, 2003, Scarrow, 2005, Loxbo, 2013, Rahat and Shapira, 2017). Faced with a decline in membership and growing distrust from the public (Whiteley, 2011, Van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke, 2012), many political parties in recent years have staked their hope of revival on 'becom[ing] more internally democratic' (Cross and Katz, 2003; 2). This urge is well-represented in the promise of the M5S and Podemos to make political parties more open and participatory as a step towards transforming politics at large.

The M5S has adopted the slogans "*libertà è partecipazione*" (freedom is participation) and "*uno vale uno*" (one is worth one, meaning everybody counts the same) to

³ <http://liquidfeedback.org/>

express its quest for democratic egalitarianism. In the 2013 book *Il grillo canta sempre al tramonto* [The grasshopper always sings at dusk; in Italian, *grillo* means grasshopper] Beppe Grillo, the founder and guarantor of the movement states that the goal was “to introduce direct democracy tools within institutions,” transforming “the relation between voters and elected representatives, in an absolutely transparent and continuous manner” (2013: 191). As argued by Marco Canestrari - a former M5S staff turned dissident and the co-author of M5S exposé *Supernova* (2018) highly critical of the direction taken by the party - Casaleggio’s idea was that “people could organise directly, and representatives would only be agents of the movement” (Interview – 25 October 2017). Roberto Fico, the current speaker of the lower house (Camera dei Deputati), explains that the idea “was making politics as direct as booking tickets on Ryanair, or booking a room on AirBnb” (Interview – 20 June 2017).

Podemos has taken a similar perspective. In its statutes it asserts that it is a “party constituted to contribute democratically to the determination of national policy and to the formation of the political will of the citizens” (Podemos, 2017). Its IT team describes the development of the participatory platform Participa as informed by the aim “to develop free technologies that would allow massive online participation” (Podemos, 2016) This effort was backed by Pablo Iglesias’ claim at the launch of the formation that “Podemos is not a party, but a method to facilitate the protagonism of the citizenry”. Miguel Ardanuy, former participation director at Podemos argues that the aim of the participatory platform was “to construct an open party different from the closed one prevalent in the 20th century” (Interview – 9 November 2017). Eric Labuske, the party’s former information technology coordinator emphasises that “our system is open and anyone can write on that website. That is the main difference with other parties, in which you have to register, pay a fee, and attend a few meetings to be able to vote” (Interview, February 2016).

The development of participatory platforms is thus informed by the promise to disintermediate political decision-making and increase direct democracy. But what is actually meant by “disintermediation” and “directness”? How do these notions map onto different visions of intra-party democracy?

3. Deliberative or plebiscitary democracy?

Susan Scarrow proposes a three dimensions to evaluate intra-party democracy: *inclusiveness*, *centralisation* and *institutionalisation* (2005). Inclusiveness ‘tells us about how wide the

circle of party decision-makers is' (12). In certain parties, "all are given the opportunity to decide on important issues"; in others, decisions are very much centralised in the leadership. Yet, as Scarrow qualifies inclusiveness, "more inclusive parties will [also] offer more opportunities for open deliberation prior to the decision stage" (*ibid.*). Centralisation "describes the extent to which decisions are made by a single group or decision body" (13). Institutionalisation, finally, indicates the 'degree to which internal decision procedures are formalized' (*ibid.*).

These criteria should however not be understood in the abstract, but in relation to competing visions of intra-party democracy. In fact, while most parties these days promise to be "more democratic", there is great latitude in their democratic vision (Cross and Katz, 2003: 4-5). For some intra-party democracy should be strongly representational while for others it should be more direct. Furthermore, competing interpretations of direct democracy exist. Some argue that direct democracy should be of the plebiscitary kind and that the people's will is best expressed through referendums and plebiscites. Others propose that it should be assembly-based and "deliberative", laying emphasis on open-ended and participatory discussion (Poguntke et al., 2016).

According to John S. Dryzek, *deliberative democracy* is a participatory type of democracy that values deliberation over preference aggregation. In this framework, "individuals participating in the democratic process are amenable to changing their minds and their preference as a result of the reflection induced by deliberation" (2000: 31). Writing with David Schlosberg, Dryzek asserts: "it would be possible to organize open electronic forums, where citizens could both offer their input and respond to that of others" (2002: 334). As we shall see, this vision of direct democracy has been represented in different features of participatory platforms, as seen in forms of collaborative proposition development, where members are involved in designing policies.

Rather different is *plebiscitary democracy*. Referendums, and similar institutions such as plebiscites, in which the citizenry are asked to express their preference often in the form of a Yes/No vote, have been used in a number of countries, most famously in Switzerland and California, to allow citizens to express their opinion on various propositions (Suksi, 1993, Qvortrup, 2005). Referendums have been associated with strongman politics and authoritarianism since at least the times of Napoleon III (Michels, 1915) and accused of

excessively simplifying policy decisions (Kautsky, 1893). However, historically they have also been used within socialist parties and trade unions (see for example Michels, 1915: 309).

Besides the use of internal referendums, plebiscitarian tendencies also include the adoption of direct leadership and candidate selection. In recent decades a number of parties, including the UK Labour Party (Seyd, 1999) and the Reform Party of Canada (Young and Cross, 2002) have become more plebiscitarian, turning away from internal representative democracy and towards a “one man one vote” (OMOV) model, in which leadership and candidacies are decided directly by members. While plebiscitary democracy shares with deliberative democracy a suspicion towards political mediation, it emphasises preference aggregation over opinion formation and comes close to representative democracy in its acceptance of hierarchies.

The participatory platforms of M5S and Podemos cannot be reduced to any of these visions of intra-party democracy, given that they perform an array of functions that straddle across plebiscitary and assembly-based direct democracy as well as representative democracy. They typically include open discussions (deliberative democracy); votes on party officers and candidates in primaries (representative democracy); and referendums (plebiscitary democracy) on policy dilemmas. The key question revolves around the relative weight of these mechanisms in a given party and its online participation platform, and the interaction between membership and leadership in online decision-making.

Considering these various dimensions, we may identify two ideal types of intra-party democracy that are relevant to the analysis of online decision-making: leadership controlled and plebiscitary forms of (top-down) democracy vs assembly-based and membership controlled (bottom-up) democracy.

- *Bottom-up* or member-controlled democratic practices are more open and grassroots-oriented. They will emphasise the moment of participation and deliberation over the moment of representation, ensuring the maximum degree of openness, inclusiveness, transparency, accountability and responsiveness in voting operations.
- *Top-down* or leader-controlled practices will instead be strongly directed by top party circles, who will set the content, timing and framework of online consultations, leaving members just the option of expressing a preference among a limited set of choices within a limited period of time.

Factors that need to be considered to assess which of these two options prevails include:

- the influence members have over decision-making and whether it includes open-text contributions or just ratification of proposals
- the control average members have over the formulation of questions and proposals
- the extent to which the membership can determine the calling and timing of consultations
- the frequency and success of rank-and-file rebellions in which ordinary members express views that are at odds with the leadership

In the course of the analysis we shall explore these different elements for a comprehensive understanding of digital democracy within these parties.

4. Methodology

This article is based on a case study analysis (Yin, 2011) of participatory platforms of Podemos in Spain and M5S in Italy. As argued by Robert K. Yin case study methods suit evaluation research (1994), since it involves the use of multiple sources and the comparing and contrasting of different cases. The two cases have been selected out of an array of digital parties on account of considerations of interest and convenience (Gibbert and Ruigrok, 2010): a) their popularity, having obtained a two-digit share of votes in recent elections, and having enrolled members in the six figures; b) the great impact on national politics, given they are now either in government (as is the case of M5S in Italy with the Conte I and Conte II governments) or part of the government majority (as is the case with Podemos that between June 2018 and April 2019 supported externally a PSOE minority government). Each case study rests upon two data sources: a) archival research and b) expert interviews. Archival data comprises the analysis of these platforms' architecture; the results of online consultations; various official documents including party statutes and internal regulations; and select news articles reporting on the consultations. For each case study, I have also conducted three expert interviews with people involved in the development and management of political participation platforms, to gain an in-depth understanding of the motives behind the development of participatory platforms.

5. The working of participatory platforms

The 5 Star Movement and Podemos' introduction of online participatory platforms has attracted widespread attention both within these movements and in the news media. However, the discussion of the internal working of these platforms and their ultimate impact on party life has so far been limited in its empirical scope and conceptualisation. To overcome these limits, I shall develop a systematic discussion of these two parties' platforms: the 5 Star Movement's Rousseau and Podemos' Participa.

The 5 Star Movement platform named Rousseau, was officially launched in 2016, on the back of previous platforms known under other names, such as "Sistema Operativo 5 Stelle" (5 Star Operating System), which were established since 2012. The platform hosts various features including a voting area; a discussion area and an e-learning section. It currently counts 100,000 registered members, after a high of 150,000 members as shown in Figure 1. The decline in members' numbers followed a hacker attack in 2017 that resulted in the leakage of members' personal details. The Italian Personal Data Protection Authority forced the 5 Star Movement to ask its members to sign a new data protection policy, if they wished to continue as members. This resulted in a significant drop in membership.

Podemos' Participa platform was officially launched in 2014. It is divided into two parts. Plaza Podemos⁴, the party's discussion forum, was initially hosted on Reddit leading to descriptions of Podemos as the Reddit party (Blitzer, 2014). In its updated 2016 version called Plaza Podemos 2.0, it is now uses Consul, a discussion software developed by the mayoralty of Madrid with threaded discussion and ranking features similar to those available on Reddit.. The second component is the voting service Nvotes, supplied by the company Agora Voting. As of November 2018, Podemos counts almost 500,000 registered online members on the platform, after experiencing a rapid increase during the first years of the party's life as shown in Figure 2.

These two platforms have attracted the participation of tens of thousands of party members, as seen in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, and have been used in a number of important consultations, such as the election of officers, primary elections and referendums on party strategy. However, as displayed in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, participation in online consultations has

⁴ <https://plaza.podemos.info>

progressively stalled, raising questions about the actual long-term effectiveness of digital democracy as means of intra-party democracy.

[insert Figure 1.]

Figure 1: Membership and participation in M5S⁵

[insert Figure 2.]

Figure 2: Membership and participation in Podemos

To explore in detail the working of these platforms and understand the reasons for the problems they have experienced, and in particular the plateauing of membership and participation, it is necessary to explore in detail various features these online systems host and how they reflect competing visions of digital democracy. I will begin with: 1) deliberative discussion and open policy development; will continue with 2) elections of officers and primaries; and end with 3) internal referendums.

5.1 Discussion and deliberation

Podemos' and M5S's participatory platforms host a number of features dedicated to discussion, in which participants can contribute qualitatively to decision-making, by submitting open-text posts or comments.

The Five Star Movement's Rousseau platform enlists various areas enabling members to discuss legislation: Lex Parlamento, Lex Regione, Lex Europa and Lex Iscritti. The first three features can only be initiated by "elected spokespersons", namely Italian and European

⁵ The figures displayed in this diagram have been obtained from the M5S official reports published on its house organs (blogdellestelle.it, bepegriillo.it). It is worth to highlight that these figures are mostly unverified by third parties, except for few circumstances in which the party has relied on an external verification service to validate consultation results. In some circumstances data released by the M5S is incomplete. For example, from 2017 there have been few updates on the number of registered members. When membership data was missing I used the latest available data. The figure of 255,339 members for 2012 appears particularly high, compared to later figures. The explanation given by the M5S is that this figure came before the process of verification, which filtered out many user accounts which did not meet the verification criteria.

MPs and local councillors of the movement, who are charged with engaging regular members in discussions around various law proposals tabled by various elected assemblies. For 60 days after the posting of the proposal, members can provide comments and suggest objections, integrations, and modification, which may then be integrated in the final text. Since May 2016, M5S has introduced a further feature called “Lex Iscritti” (Lex Members), which according to Davide Casaleggio constitutes a “a bottom-up system where citizens can directly propose laws that will be taken to Parliament” (Casaleggio, 2017). Proposals have to abide by a number of criteria including: not being in contrast with the programme of the 5 Star movement; being in line with the party’s statutes and the Italian Constitution; having a realistic budget estimate. Proposals are voted in periodic sessions. If approved, they are turned into bills presented by party representatives.

Besides making new law proposals, members can also comment on existing ones. Comments are ranked, and ranking is supposed to be taken into account in the proposal’s final draft . But there is no clear binding procedure to establish how members’ proposals and comments are used. In the introduction page of Lex Parlamento it is explained that the “elected spokesperson”, the MP who is coordinating a law proposal, does not have an obligation to use modification proposals and that “the general system must remain faithful to the idea of the proponent” (Movimento 5 Stelle, 2017). M5S supporters have repeatedly complained about opaque selection and editing of proposals. The platform’s low degree of usability and rudimentary user interface poses further obstacles to meaningful participation. In this context, as suggested by Floridia and Vignati (2014), it is hard to speak of an actual deliberation given that there is no open-ended horizontal platform for discussion. Furthermore, there is a lack of transparency in the way in which members contribution are edited and adopted officially. For example, after the 2018 elections, it was revealed that the party programme, whose main policies had been voted and approved online, had been significantly edited to water down the most radical positions (*Il Foglio*, 17 April 2018).

Third, the volume of participation in discussions has been quite low. The proposal for a *Reddito di cittadinanza* (citizenship income, which in the current version is basically a form of guaranteed minimum income for those in poverty) was one of the most commented on with a total of 4,190 interventions. Most proposals however had a far lower number of comments, with an average of few hundred comments and there often seemed to be little dialogue among them. Thus, while M5S has introduced interesting forms of collaborative legislation, what Marco Deseriis has described as a “direct parliamentarism” (2017), these

mechanisms are used as a means for the party to “crowd-source” ideas from supporters than an effective and binding deliberative mechanism.

Compared to Rousseau, Plaza Podemos (Podemos square), the party’s official forum⁶ uses a more sophisticated threaded discussion architecture. Plaza Podemos This system was used to gather proposals for the party’s electoral manifesto in anticipation of the 2015 and 2016 national elections. All proposals backed by at least 100 votes had to be considered by the party’s central organ, the Citizen Council (*Consejo Ciudadano*), and the proposals that were eventually selected were submitted to a membership vote. However, only 15,264 people participated in this deliberative process: just 4 per cent of the existing 380,000 party members Podemos had at the time.

The most promising initiative in terms of facilitating bottom-up participation is the mechanism of *Iniciativas Ciudadanas Podemos* (Podemos Citizen Initiatives). This allows members to make proposals that become binding if they muster enough support. ICPs need to receive support from 0.2 per cent of party members to move up to the homepage of the participation portal (participa.podemos.info), which is meant to afford them more visibility. If they receive a 2 per cent support, an email is sent to all members announcing that the proposal is being discussed, at which point the proposal has 3 months to obtain the backing of 10 per cent of the members or 20 per cent of local circles. If this threshold is reached, the proposal undergoes a phase of development of one month, involving a dedicated working group, and the initiative is eventually put to the referendum of all members. If it wins, it becomes binding for the party. However, more than 4 years since its introduction, no ICP has ever been approved. According to Yago Bermejo, who was part of the Labodemo group that contributed to setting up Podemos decision-making platform, “The threshold was set too high [...] because of the leadership’s fear of losing control over the decision-making process” (Interview – 12 January 2017).

To summarise, both in Podemos and the M5S deliberative mechanisms have significant limitations. First, participation to these has mostly remained the preserve of a small number of members, and has been marred by issues of usability and transparency. Secondly, the leadership has retained a large degree of control over the editing and selection of members’ input, limiting the possibility for effective grassroots intervention on decision-making. This points, in Scarrow’s terms, to a low institutionalisation of decision-making procedures, which can be used by the leadership to gain the upper hand over the membership.

⁶ <http://www.plaza.podemos.info>

5.2 Online primaries and election of officers

One of the most important functions of participatory platforms is the selection of party candidates and party officers. This is obviously a process with a long history in political parties (Katz, 2001: 277), but which digital technology makes significantly less costly, allowing for more frequent consultations. Within Podemos and M5S, the adoption of these online internal elections tools highlights on the one hand, that - far from disappearing - representative mechanism continue to play an important role; and on the other hand, that these processes tend to acquire plebiscitary features, paralleling a trend seen across European political parties in the last decades (Katz and Mair, 1995, Scarrow, 1996, Cross and Blais, 2012).

Since its inception, M5S has made frequent use of internal online elections. The first occasion was in December 2012 before the 2013 national elections. Registered members were invited to select from 1,400 candidates and each could express three votes. 31,667 people participated, meaning ratio members/candidates was 22.7 with members able to express up to 3 preferences. Some candidates were elected in the primaries with less than 100 votes in the primaries and news media criticised the system for lack of representativeness. Online primaries were used again before the 2018 national elections, though only for one third of competing seats, with the others handpicked by the national leadership in consultation with local groups. Online primaries have also been held at local level. For example, in 2015 Virginia Raggi was nominated as Rome mayoral candidate with 1,764 votes, 45.5 per cent of the total. Still, Grillo retained ultimate say over these consultations. In one occasion, the primaries for the mayoral elections in Genoa in April 2017, he arbitrarily disavowed the winner Marika Cassimatis.

Online primaries were also used to choose the *capo politico* (political chief), i.e. candidate to head the national government for M5S. Luigi Di Maio, backed by movement founder Beppe Grillo, won hands down with 82.6 per cent of the 37,442 votes expressed, leaving the group of weak competitors far behind. This led to criticisms describing the election as a farce. Having a very limited central organisational structure, also compared with Podemos which has a more traditional multi-tier intermediate structure, the Five Star Movement has used online ballots for internal positions only in few occasions, such as the aforementioned selection of the movement leader and the confirmative referendum in

November 2014 which ratified the creation of a directorate (*Direttorio*) composed by Alessandro Di Battista, Luigi Di Maio, Roberto Fico, Carla Ruocco and Carlo Sibilia, at the top of the party. The directorate was approved by 91.7 per cent of members participating in the vote (equivalent to 34,050 people).

Podemos has used its participation portal for various internal elections and party primaries. In November 2014, few months after the first party conference in Vistalegre in Madrid, members were called to elect various party bodies, including the 62 members of the Citizen Council (the party's central committee), the general secretary, as well as the party's control committee (*Comisión de Garantías*) counting 10 members. About 90,000 people, 80.71 per cent of 112,000 registered participants, voted for the organisational document proposed by Pablo Iglesias, and 88.6 per cent (95,311 people) backed him as general secretary.

The members of the Citizen Council and the control committee were elected with a system that was described as in Spanish as *lista plancha* (closed list). Members could indicate preferences (i.e. select individual candidates) among different lists. But this required a much higher effort from their part than selecting a single list, thus favouring pre-packaged candidate lists. This caused controversy as it was seen as a centralistic and anti-pluralistic move. The team *Claro que Podemos*, led by Iglesias, went on to fill the totality of the 62 members of the Citizen Council and of the control committee. In subsequent years, the closed list system was also used in national, regional, and local primaries. The system was abandoned in April 2016, at the initiative of organizational secretary Pablo Echenique, who had protested against the *plancha* system already in 2014 (Riveiro, 2016).

Thus, the representative features of online participatory platforms seem at first sight to allow for a rather high degree of inclusiveness allowing members to stand for office and to determine internal officers and party candidates. However, this inclusiveness is denied in practice by a high degree of centralisation in the process as seen most clearly in the case of Podemos' closed list system. Institutionalisation of election procedures is also quite low due to the lack of clear statutory regulations for the election of officers and candidates, and it is comparatively higher in Podemos given the way the party has progressively developed comprehensive rules in its statute on election procedures.

4.3 Online referendums

The top-down character of digital parties' internal democracy is most clearly seen in internal party referendums, what have perhaps become the most widely publicised form of online democracy in these parties. Since its foundation, Podemos has held 9 referendums and over 40 referendum consultations have been called by M5S (Mosca, 2018). Almost invariably, these consultations have yielded the results expected by the party's top brass, with landslide votes in favour of the option favoured by the leadership and few instances of rank-and-file rebellion.

[insert Figure 3.]

Figure 3. Results of the most important internal referendums of M5S

In the case of the M5S, online referendums have often been used to confirm the expulsion of party representatives accused of breaking party rules (see Figure 3). Since 2012, 60 people have been expelled from the party, including 18 MPs and 19 Senators. One early case was the expulsion of sitting MPs Lorenzo Battista, Fabrizio Bocchino, Francesco Campanella and Luis Alberto Orellana in February 2014. Out of 43,368 registered users who cast their online ballot, 29,883 voted in favour of and 13,485 against the purge.

Online referendums have also been used for deciding over dilemma issues. After the 2014 European elections a referendum was called to decide whether to join the eurosceptic group of Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD) in the European Parliament. The vast majority of voting members, 78.1 per cent (23,121), decided in favour. In January 2017, Grillo called a new consultation, now proposing that the party shift to the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), the yellow group of EU liberals. 78.5 per cent (31,914) voted in favour, but the move was never implemented because liberal MEPs, in spite of ALDE leader Guy Verhofstadt's initial *ouverture* to M5S, eventually refused to accept its MEPs within its ranks.

In the M5S there have only been to date two cases of rank-and-file rebellion in online referendums. The first was the consultation on the repeal of the crime of illegal migration; the second on whether to hold a meeting with Matteo Renzi, when he was charged with the formation of a new government. In both circumstances the membership voted against the position explicitly favoured by Grillo and Casaleggio, who in both occasions reacted angrily

to these results in blog posts published on Grillo's blog, with a 63 per cent majority in the first case, and a slight 50.5 per cent majority in the second.

[insert Figure 4.]

Figure 4. Podemos: results of internal referendums

Podemos has also resorted to online referendums to consult the membership on important strategic questions (Figure 4). One case was the consultation held in April 2016 over a coalition government with the Socialist Party and Ciudadanos. 88.23% out of 150,000 participants voted against. In the following month, members were consulted over allying with leftist formation Izquierda Unida in the ensuing elections, with 98% of members voting in favour. The party used the participatory platform also to approve various political documents before the Second Congress held in February 2017. 99,162 party members, 22.7% of the total of 436,452 members participated in the consultation. 41.57% of members voted for the proposal of Pablo Iglesias and 39.12% for the one proposed by the political secretary Iñigo Errejón in one of the few close consultations within Podemos.

An internal referendum was called in May 2017 on tabling a no confidence motion against Mariano Rajoy's conservative government, in response to a corruption probe investigating the prime minister's party (the Christian Democrat Partido Popular, PP). While a near-total majority of 97.4% (85,310 people) voted in favour, only 20% of 487,160 registered members participated in the poll. In early 2018, a further consultation was held on a new no confidence motion proposed by the Socialist Party, and this returned an even higher score (98.94%) in favour of the no confidence vote which ended up unseating Rajoy from the post of prime minister, to be replaced by Pedro Sánchez, the Socialist Party's secretary.

In May 2018 Podemos held a recall referendum on Pablo Iglesias, the party secretary, and his partner Irene Montero, the party's speaker in the Congress after the media furore about their mortgage on a 600,000-euro villa for their expanding family in Galapagar, in the well-to-do outskirts of Madrid. Some saw this move as contradicting earlier statements by the two leaders against aloof and enriched politicians. The consultation saw 188,176 people voting, the highest participation ever. Over two thirds (68%) of Podemos' voting members confirmed Iglesias and Montero in their leadership positions. For critics, this online

referendum exhibited the worst centralistic and plebiscitary tendencies of digital democracy, and only served two embattled leaders to silence criticism and restore their own legitimacy. The level of institutionalisation and inclusiveness of online referendums is low. Both in Podemos and the 5 Star Movement there is a lack of clear rules about how online referendums can be called, and limited inclusiveness of members in convoking them and shaping referendum questions. Members are mostly only able to “react” to proposals that have been already formulated by the leadership. Hence, we can speak of a “reactive democracy” because of its similarity to the shallow interactivity of many social media conversations rather than to the ideal view of a deliberative democracy often invoked by digital democracy advocates.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that in both M5S and Podemos there is a clear discrepancy between the lofty promise and the prosaic reality of digital democracy: it is therefore doubtful whether these parties are more democratic than traditional political parties. While participatory platforms were presented as a way to disintermediate party politics and directly involve ordinary member in political decisions, their practice has been strongly plebiscitary and top-down. The participation of members has been severely limited in qualitative terms, often amounting to little more than a “reactive democracy” in which users are called to rubber-stamp decisions already taken at the top and crowd-source policy ideas, but with no binding mandate.

Going back to Scarrow’s (2005) criteria to evaluate intra-party democracy (inclusiveness, centralisation, and institutionalisation), discussed at the beginning of the article, it can be said that digital parties have a medium degree of inclusiveness, a strong degree of centralisation, and low forms of institutionalisation.

First, in terms of *inclusiveness*, digital parties may seem at first sight to be quite inclusive, since, as previously stated, they enable members to intervene directly in various decisions that are not available in traditional parties. However, as proposed by Scarrow effective grassroots deliberation is decisive to ensure effective inclusiveness in decision-making (2005: 12). These parties have introduced some promising innovations in terms of collaborative policy development, but these have remained fairly limited in scope. More deliberative processes have attracted small volumes of participation, compared with online elections and referendums, raising questions about their legitimacy and representativity.

Secondly, the ushering in of participatory platforms has led to a strong *centralisation* of decision-making. Within digital parties, major decisions are centralised at two ends: in the online assembly of all members; and in the leadership, which controls the calling and timing of consultations involving the membership. This centralisation weakens local organisational units - such as sections, branches, cells - which were previously responsible for recruiting members and keeping members' lists and can limit democratic pluralism. Furthermore, centralisation has limited the space for dissension. Online ballots have almost invariably yielded super-majorities (>80%) results, looking more like rubberstamp elections than genuine choices among competing options. It is significant that in Podemos not a single referendum has gone against the desiderata of the leadership, while M5S there have only been just two instances of regular members disavowing the leadership. Thus, besides having a shallow "reactive" nature, online plebiscitarian democracy also seems to leave little room for critical participation.

According to Davide Bono, a local representative of M5S who has been involved in the management of Rousseau, this trend can be ascribed to the fact that "the movement has a strong collective identity" and participants strongly agree on key issues (Interview – 18 March 2018). However, it is also a result of the influence exerted by the leadership, which can exert influence through a variety of means such as the timing of consultations, often announced by surprise, leaving members only a short time to decide; the formulation of questions, which, as already noticed by Robert Michels, can be used to influence the people's vote (Michels, 1915: 309-10) and media campaigns waged by the party leadership prior to online referendums. Similar problems have plagued online primaries. The leadership has often tried to steer these consultations, by imposing a closed list system, as in the case of Podemos, or retaining the *extrema ratio* power of disavowing the final results, as in the case of the M5S 2017 primaries to choose the Genoa mayoral candidate.

Third, across these parties we see a low *institutionalisation* of intra-party democracy. There is a lack of clear principles and transparent procedures for the management of online consultations. In terms of policy development, for example, the party staff has a great degree of arbitrariness in selecting and editing comments made on existing proposals. While Podemos has instituted a binding mechanism (ICPs) for members' proposals, the high threshold have resulted in its inapplicability. A key issue is the dependency of the party staff responsible for managing consultations on the party leadership. The Rousseau foundation, which is responsible for managing the platform, is housed in the same office as Casaleggio

Associati, the digital marketing firm that played a crucial role in creating the movement, and continues to have an inordinate amount of influence over party affairs.

Given these shortcomings, it should come as no surprise that participation in online consultations has dropped significantly as already seen in Figure 1 and 2. In the case of M5S for example, turnout in online votes averaged 33% between 2013 and 2014, but it had dropped to 14% in 2017 (Mosca, 2018). While Podemos has not experienced such a dramatic decrease in rank-and-file mobilization, participation has lagged behind the growth in party membership (Marcos, 2018). Party leaders should seriously take heed of this trend given that, as argued by Antonio Gramsci, members sometimes display their discontent not by voicing it explicitly but rather “by dispersing or remaining passive before certain initiatives” (1971: 151). It is obvious that if party members feel their contribution does not count for much and their intervention is purely reactive they will stop participating both online and offline. Responding to this tendency, Podemos has introduced an “active census” which includes only members who participated in the last 12 months, as measure to calculate the quorum when required. But this measure only serves to make consultation stats look better, rather than to really include members in discussions, and offering a more active involvement in decision-making.

In order to pay remedy to this situation, digital parties should consider implementing a number of countermeasures. First, additional weight needs to be given to bottom-up initiatives, in particular deliberative processes with a binding mandate. This would ensure a more active and meaningful participation of members and a better *inclusiveness* in internal party life. Second, the management of decision-making platforms and processes should be entrusted to a committee of guarantors independent from the party leadership, thus lessening the degree of *centralisation* in decision-making. This would guard against the risk of manipulation of online voting and would help restore the credibility to digital democracy. Third, digital parties need to be more transparent about the fact that participatory platforms do not dispense with other instances of power within the party: the party leadership and other types of organisational mediation continue to play their role and it is disingenuous to hide this fact. More generally, a less naïve approach needs to accompany discussions about digital technology and its potential for the democratisation of political parties, acknowledging the permanence of power structures and conceding that digital technology, far from eliminating them, can serve to reinforce and conceal them.

6. Appendix

Expert Interviews

Podemos

Miguel Arduñuy (Participation Coordinator of Podemos)

Yago Bermejo (Labodemo, MediaLab Prado)

Eric Labuske (Information Technology Coordinator of Podemos)

M5S

Marco Canestrari (former staff at Casaleggio e Associati)

Davide Bono (M5S councillor)

Roberto Fico (M5S MP)

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