

## 8. Not Just a Cyber-Party: The Movimento 5 Stelle in Turin

### 1. *Introduction*

Online participation has always been very important for the M5S. Although this partially changed over time, not only is the organisational structure of the party based on the internet, but also registration and, in general, most of the national decision-making processes happened online. Although we have seen that members' power exercised through digital tools is mainly symbolic, and new forms of hierarchy and concentrations of power arose, in the case of the M5S the internet allows and favours disintermediation strategies, that is, the creation of an unmediated relationship between leader and followers. We could expect, then, that in such a party a web-based unmediated relationship between leader and followers would replace traditionally defined party membership, even at the local level. In reality, this is only one side of the coin.

If, on the one hand, it is true that in the M5S the official party membership is only online, and that the official decision-making processes happen exclusively online, on the other hand participation in local physical groups of the M5S appeared to be highly developed (Biorcio 2015; Biorcio and Sampognaro 2019). The local level is important for the M5S in many respects. In the first place, it is precisely at the local level that the M5S had its origins, through the autonomous formation and self-organisation of groups of active citizens, who later took part in local elections. In the second place, the local level is potentially characterised by a greater margin of independence for those groups. Until 2019, when the role of the regional facilitator was created<sup>71</sup>, according to the official discourse, the influence of the centre was limited to the management of the certification of the lists, without which it was impossible to take part in the elections under the M5S's symbol. This is the reason why the M5S is substantially different in every city where it is present.

For this reason, it is important to consider and analyse context. Turin and Piedmont have always been among the most important places for

---

<sup>71</sup> These changes haven't been codified in the party statute. In 2021, the new statute of the party mentioned and acknowledged the existence and role of "territorial groups" for the first time.

the M5S, and the party has been present in the region since the very beginning, both in connection with local mobilisation events and through an early presence in its institutions. For instance, in 2008, the second V-Day, a big gathering of the M5S's supporters, was held in Turin. The local group took part in the provincial elections in 2009, even before the official founding of the M5S. In 2010, two regional councillors were elected in the regional council, the first ones, together with those of the Emilia-Romagna region. In 2011, two city councillors were elected to the city council and finally in 2016 Chiara Appendino, a former city councillor, became mayor of the city. Moreover, in recent years, in Turin and Piedmont, and especially in Valle di Susa, a strong local conflict against the high-speed train line Torino-Lione (TAV) emerged. The M5S has always supported the movement against the construction of the line, and this has had consequences both on the profile of the first activists and on the results of local electoral competitions (Mosca 2015; Biancalana 2020).

The aim of this chapter is to analyse in-depth the history, the structure of the organisation and the forms of participation of the M5S in the city of Turin. Through this case study, the goal is to analyse how activist participation is structured in a party that, at the national level, employs internet-based disintermediation strategies. On the one hand, in such a national organisation, the role of organised membership could appear as pointless. On the other, it is true that parties' strategies can be different at the national and at the local level: I will thus observe how the M5S's members organised themselves and participated in a local context, and if there are differences with respect to the national one. Accordingly, in the first part of the chapter, I will reconstruct the history and evolution of the M5S in the city of Turin<sup>72</sup>. In the second part, I will focus on the structuring of the organisation and the forms of participation of the Turinese M5S, especially during the 2016 local electoral campaign.

---

72 The main focus of the analysis is the city of Turin. Nevertheless, especially in the first part, we will also refer to the Piedmont region for two reasons. In the first place, Turin is the regional capital, where the Movement's regional offices are located; secondly, the election of two regional councillors in the regional council of Piedmont in 2010 had a great impact on both local and national dynamics.

## *2. From the First Meet-Ups to the Election of the Mayor*

Following the opening of Grillo's blog and its call to readers to meet using the platform *Meet-up*, groups of citizens in Turin sensitive to the issues handled by Grillo—called *Amici di Beppe Grillo*—began to gather. In Turin, some of these people were already active in existing social movements (e.g. the No TAV movement<sup>73</sup>, the movement against the privatisation of the public water system, the groups against an incinerator) and parties located on the left side of the political spectrum.

The first groups came from the movements. But it's normal to attract those people who already have a social and political awareness first they are the first to commit (Int. 8).

So, if at first the M5S in Turin attracted people belonging to existing social movements (Mosca 2015) not interested in taking part in elections and seizing power, this component (the “movement-like” one) seems to decline with the passing of the years and the growth of the organisation. According to interviewees, in 2016 for most activists the M5S was their first political experience and “very few people have previous political experiences” (Int. 1). Initially, the activities of the group consisted in making citizens aware of some issues, mainly related to the environment, and proposing alternatives to the institutions. However, at the local level and at the national one, the attempt to exert “external pressure”, i.e. bringing the M5S's stances into the assemblies without entering them directly, seemed to fail.

---

73 There is a strong proximity between the M5S in Turin and Piedmont and the No TAV movement, both from a programmatic point of view and regarding the biographies of the activists and electoral successes (Mosca 2015). At the 2013 general elections, the first seven municipalities in which the M5S obtained its best results were located in Piedmont. The first one is Venaus, a small town in the Val di Susa. This result can be attributed to the proximity of the M5S to the No TAV movement. It should also be noted that during all the public events of Turin's M5S (for example, the celebrations for the victory of Chiara Appendino in June 2016 and the closing of the electoral campaign for the “no” to the constitutional referendum, December 2016), numerous No TAV flags were waved, together with the flags of the Movement. After the passing of the threshold of government at the national level, the M5S abandoned some of its historical battles, including the No TAV one. Indeed, having been the first party to “represent” the No TAV movement in Parliament, it ended up as the party whose government gave the final go-ahead to the project in 2019 (Biancalana 2020).

At that time, as *Amici di Beppe Grillo* we made the request of an alternative plan to manage waste in the province of Turin to the provincial council. Obviously, our plan was rejected, the provincial council didn't even listen to it. Meanwhile, everyone followed their own issues: someone dealt with the Tav, someone with public water, someone with the incinerator... (Int. 9).

Between 2008 and 2009, a significant rift occurred in the group. At that time, Grillo and Casaleggio gave local groups the opportunity to compete in local elections with "certified" civic lists (*Liste civiche a 5 stelle*). In order to obtain "certification", that is, the permission to use the Movement's symbol, it was necessary to prove one possessed some requisites—for example, having no convictions and not being registered with other parties. The certified local lists could therefore compete with a unitary symbol and benefit from the visibility of Grillo's blog, but other than that they could organise themselves autonomously and horizontally. This opportunity created a conflict within the group between those who wanted to compete in elections and those interested only in "civic activism".

We realised that the movement *Amici di Beppe Grillo* was turning from a movement that brought proposals to other political parties into a political movement that competes in elections, so the first civic lists are born and in Turin the group splits into two parts: a part that wants to remain "movement-like" (*movimentista*), and a part that wants to compete in elections instead [...] [so, two different entities are created:] a "movement-like" reality that faded away [...] and the part that was more involved in the creation of the list (Int. 9).

In the end, the "faction" that wanted to compete in elections prevailed: the goals of the organisation were clearly defined, even though the ties with local social movements and mobilisation groups were not severed.

It was spring 2008. Actually, the M5S in Turin was already divided into two or three groups. The group I entered was the one that wanted to create a civic list for the local elections, ten people more or less. There was another group, maybe more numerous, that wanted to engage in civic activism only, even because they were part of other parties, at that time there were a lot of people from leftist parties. Then, obviously, those that weren't interested in competing in elections left the group two or three years later (Int. 7).

The first elections the group took part in were the provincial ones in spring 2009. The candidate mayor, chosen by other activists, was Vittorio

Bertola, and the list got 7,423 votes: a modest result that testified to the early presence of a nucleus of activists and supporters. Following the principles of the Movement (“everyone counts as one”), the electoral campaign was carried out without any form of personalisation.

Bertola was disputed when he was the candidate for the provincial elections because “La Stampa” conducted a three-column interview, the only one in the entire electoral campaign about our list, and then put a stamp-sized photo of him in the article, and the critics went “That is personalisation, because you have the photo in the newspaper; this is a form of leadership, you had to put on the symbol of the M5S and say that you are only one among many, and one counts as one” (Int. 7).

This first phase testifies to the early presence of the M5S in Piedmont and Turin: as early as in 2008 there was a nucleus of activists that were to form the core of the M5S in the years to come. Initially, the M5S attracted people from social movements not necessarily interested in competing in elections. The decision, taken at a national level, to allow local groups to compete in elections created a rift in the group, and only those interested in electoral politics remained. This therefore led to significant consequences regarding the definition of the group’s aims, which were clearly defined (“change politics, from the inside”, Int. 5). The “movement-like” component therefore left the group, even if this didn’t mean a clear break with the world of social movements.

The real turning point for the M5S in the region were the regional elections of 2010. In that year, just one year after the official foundation of the party, the M5S ran for elections for the first time in five regions, gaining four elected councillors in two regions: Emilia-Romagna and Piedmont. In Piedmont, the Movement got 3.6 per cent of the votes (17,217 votes in Turin and 90,086 votes in Piedmont) and had two councillors elected<sup>74</sup>. On the one hand, as regards organisation, in the absence of a formalised structure, we observe that the regional councillors became a reference point both at the national and at the local level. But this

---

<sup>74</sup> The presence of the M5S on the ballot probably influenced the electoral competition in the region. A large transfer of votes from the left-wing parties to the M5S was recorded in Valle di Susa, the region more affected by the high-speed line. The little margin of victory of the centre-right coalition (fewer than 10,000 votes) has led scholars to hypothesise that the M5S altered the outcome of those elections (Bobba and Seddone 2010).

didn't imply neglect of the M5S's original principles of horizontality. At that time, the M5S, at this territorial level, was open and horizontal, and candidates were chosen by other activists and requested activists' help to carry out their administrative activities. On the other hand, the election of two representatives is also important for the history of the group because the M5S started dealing with "real", "institutional" politics, as opposed to the previous "movement-like" politics. The funds given by the regional council allowed the creation of an office with some employees; some of them also became MPs in 2013.

At the regional elections, two regional councillors were elected, and they hired four or five aides to work with them, who were activists too. A first office was created and it was the occasion to begin to work more, to be more active also from an institutional and political viewpoint, and not only from a "movement" [*movimentista*] point of view, like it was with the participation in the movement for the referendum on public water, in the No TAV group, the No Incinerator group and all the other groups that we used to meet at the demonstrations... And we began to conduct activities, real politics, even of the institutional kind. We had a little office and then we could produce flyers, have a logistic base (Int. 8).

One year later, in 2011, at the elections for the mayor of the city of Turin, the M5S got 5 per cent of the votes (22,403 votes). In 2011, the M5S was then a stable political actor in the region (Bobba and Cilluffo 2015). The candidate mayor, chosen by the activists, was again Vittorio Bertola. And again, the electoral campaign was carried out without any form of personalisation.

When Bertola was candidate mayor, his name wasn't on the flyers; we put it in in the last two or three weeks because people asked us, "You're with Fassino?" [the candidate mayor of the centre-left, then elected]; they believed that we were part of some coalition. Now you've seen the electoral campaign of Chiara Appendino, with the big billboards with her face on them! (Int. 7).

In 2011, Vittorio Bertola and Chiara Appendino were elected to the city council. Moreover, one M5S district councillor was elected in each of the ten district councils of Turin. This is important because it allowed the strengthening of the organisation and the diffusion of the Movement in all the neighbourhoods of the city.

The group grows, in 2011 we manage to put, and that's a very important thing, a person, I believe this is fundamental for the M5S, a councillor in each district council and each one of these councillors agglomerates... begins to organise activities with stands [*banchetti*], which are our preferred means of meeting and discussion with citizens, and so every Saturday or Sunday we organise these stands, but every time there is something to do: the referendum on public water, a campaign for some other reason, the No TAV battle... (Int. 8).

So, we can say that after 2010 the group began to structure itself and to engage in “institutional” politics, without losing its characteristics of horizontality and contact with the territory and the social movements. In a horizontal organisation such as the M5S, which does not have a traditional and structured party organisation, an important role, albeit an informal one, was that of the elected representatives, especially those at the higher levels than the local one. As mentioned, elected representatives are the only ones who have the right to use the party symbol<sup>75</sup> and, although they placed themselves in an equal relationship with activists, they became coordinators and points of reference both for the local level and for the national level, creating forms of informal leadership.

It is especially in the run-up to the 2016 mayoral electoral campaign that we witness the creation and strengthening of informal leadership configurations. Indeed, in June 2016, after having been chosen by other activists as candidate mayor in an offline meeting in which she was the only candidate, Chiara Appendino beat Piero Fassino, the incumbent mayor and leading member of the Partito Democratico, and became mayor of Turin (Biancalana 2019). In a situation in which there is not a formalised party in central office, or official local and regional branches of the party, the elected representatives (who are selected directly by other activists) have a relevant role, not only in terms of their political activity but also, for example, in the management of disputes and, more generally, in terms of the control of the organisation. With regard to the organisation of the 2016 electoral campaign, interviewees recall that in the absence of a party structure that manages it, the candidate mayor and her trusted people had an important role both in organisational and in policy decisions.

---

<sup>75</sup> Until 2021, local groups didn't represent official branches of the party and had no place in the party model. In 2021, the new statute of the party mentions and acknowledges the existence and role of “territorial groups” for the first time.

During the first meeting after Chiara Appendino was chosen as candidate mayor, she told the assembly, “The people that will collaborate with me are X and Y, we’re taking decisions because there is no time to involve everyone; it’s too complicated, so we’re deciding”. Someone told her, “But what’s the meaning of this, we have to share, all together!” and she goes, “No, I’m the candidate mayor and these are my choices” (Int. 7).

The workgroup on transportation decided, years ago, to be against the second line of the subway [...]. They wrote so in the draft of the electoral programme and they sent it to Appendino. Then they came to the public presentation of the electoral programme and they discovered from the slides that the M5S is in favour of the second line of the subway! They asked, “What happened?” and Appendino told them that “politically, we can’t be against the second line of the subway because the people want it and so we have to be in favour for reasons of political communication, and then we will see”. And they said, “But what about us, do we count?” (Int. 7).

Furthermore, as far as the communicative aspects of the electoral campaign are concerned, we notice an important shift towards personalisation, as Appendino’s 2016 electoral campaign was strongly related to her name (*L’alternativa è Chiara*, “The Alternative is Clear” is the electoral campaign’s slogan) and to her face, which was pictured in posters.

Beppe Grillo has always said “No to big faces” [on posters], and in fact the 2010 campaign had been conducted entirely without faces, but even in the 2011 one, there was no person on the posters. This has gradually changed; in fact, now Chiara Appendino is conducting an image campaign, her face is everywhere (Int. 1).

Finally, after the electoral campaign and the election of Appendino as mayor, we witness a shift from the importance of activists’ participation to accountability. The activists’ assembly, which as we will see in the next section was the decision-making body of the local M5S, became “of accountability” because “the decisions are taken by the city council now” (Int. 9). And while for some “it would be unimaginable if the activists’ assembly gave directions to the city council assembly”, for others this posed a problem with respect to the M5S’s principles.

Under this new management, activists suddenly disappear. From the day after the elections, yes, some meeting was held, but Chiara Appendino takes all the political decisions, at most with the council, at

most with the city councillors, but the city councillors don't listen to the activists and so all the others say, "We worked for five years, we devised propositions, ideas, etc., we wanted to fulfil them and now we can't even speak internally" (Int. 7).

Indeed, from interviews and later accounts (Biancalana 2019) it emerges that, after the Movement crossed the threshold of city government, elected representatives became increasingly detached from activists. During Appendino's mandate, activists had greater opportunities to influence the M5S at lower levels than at the level of the city, that is, in the city's districts, where the M5S was in opposition and "there are five councillors and 20 activists". (Int. 9)

### *3. Organisation and Participation in Turin's M5S (2011–2016)*

Between 2011 and 2016 the M5S thus structured and organised itself, entering institutions without losing its characteristics of horizontality and openness, or contact with citizens and the territories. The M5S does not display a structure similar to that of traditional parties. Its only official relationship with the centre is the certification of the lists, that is, the authorisation to the use of the symbol, given to the candidates who meet certain requirements<sup>76</sup>. So, local groups organise themselves autonomously<sup>77</sup>, and elected representatives (chosen by local activists) act independently on issues related to their territorial level. However, since local groups are not considered official branches of the party, they have no influence on the national level, as participation in the national decision-making processes is individual and took place through the online participation platform *Rousseau*.

With regard to the M5S in Turin, in the period 2011–2016 there were two levels of organisation: the city level and the district level. At the city

---

<sup>76</sup> The figure of the regional facilitator, created in 2019, was conceived to create a tighter link between the centre and the territories. Nevertheless, these changes have not been codified in official party documents.

<sup>77</sup> The level of autonomy varies from case to case. Turin seems a case in which control from the centre is lower. For instance, in Turin the candidate mayor and the city councillors didn't have to sign a *Code of Conduct* that obliges them to pay 150,000 euros in case of "image damage" to the Movement (like in the case of Rome); the candidate mayor and the councillors were chosen in offline meetings, over which the "centre" has no control.

level, we can find the activists' assembly and the workgroups. The activists' assembly gathered all the "activists" in the city and was the decision-making body of the local M5S. At the local level, in contrast to the national one, there isn't an online enrolment procedure. As we have seen, it is only possible to become an official member of the M5S online. According to the 2017 statute (article 3b), "members" have the right to: contribute to the definition of the political direction of the elected representatives; take part in online consultations; become a candidate; and make legislative proposals.

The local M5S didn't know the identities of the "official members" of the party, that is, those registered online, so at this level those who take part in the M5S's face-to-face activities were considered "activists", and then had the right to take decisions at the local level. In Turin, activists were counted and coordinated through a closed and secret Facebook group that, in March 2016, had approximately 300 members.

We have a closed (hidden) Facebook group of activists from Turin; we drafted a regulation and if you want to take part in our activities—we always start from the territory—and you want to participate in the M5S, you have to write to us. "In which district do you live?" [...] "Well, you're in district X, so contact this person who is the district councillor" and you start to take part in district X. So, if a person is really interested, he/she will contact the district councillor, who will tell him/her: "We have a stand this Saturday; we have to do this and that," even simple stuff like going and getting the materials, being there and so on. Or "we need you to take part in this committee in the district council". You come, you do it, after two or three times of showing up, you can be part of the closed Facebook group, you can come to our city meetings, you can vote and so on (Int. 1).

This marks a huge difference between participation at the national and at the local level. If at the national level *members'* participation is online only, at the local level *activists'* face-to-face participation is considered fundamental and allows members to take part in the local decision-making processes.

For us, activism is something very tangible, very material; I am sure that there are more people registered with the M5S than activists (Int. 1).

Due to the limited number of people participating at the local level and their digital literacy ("We are not digital champions," says an activist, Int. 1), the preferred means of interaction and participation was the offline

one. Against the cyber-optimistic rhetoric of Grillo and Casaleggio, it seems that there is, at the local level, a very realistic vision of digital democracy.

When you are in the Municipality, or in Parliament, it is impossible to consult the internet for everything. At some point, you will have to make decisions and you have to be accountable for them; that's absolutely legitimate, there needn't be separation between the base, the territory and elected representatives. However, we cannot even think of asking for opinions on everything. Actually, this issue, we got over it (Int. 1).

Nevertheless, in the absence of other forms of organisation, digital tools were widely used by the groups as coordination tools. In addition to the closed and secret Facebook group, which acts as a replacement for the members' register, and to the various mailing lists and Facebook pages of each district group, WhatsApp chats were highly developed and, in some cases, they constituted a sort of permanent assembly: a continuous form of participation, parallel to the face-to-face one<sup>78</sup>.

Among the rights given to activists, there was the selection of local candidates. In Turin, at the city and district levels, this has always been done with offline consultations. All activists could vote and be voted for. To become a candidate, it was necessary to be an "activist", that is to say, to participate in the face-to-face activities and to be officially enrolled in the M5S. This is the only occasion, at this level, on which it was necessary to be an official member of the M5S. In fact, the two forms of belonging, that is, membership and activism, overlapped only with regard to the candidates' selection process<sup>79</sup>. To use the words of an activist, as regards the candidates' selection process: "without registration it is like not being an activist".

---

78 For example, at the end of an open meeting, it was necessary to decide on some issues, such as the date of the next meeting or where to organise a stand. Activists, instead of discussing the topic in the assembly, decided to "talk about it in chat", thus excluding those who were not part of that WhatsApp group chat. On another occasion, during a meeting of the district council and faced with a thorny decision, the councillors wrote in the chat to get directions and advice from other activists.

79 Although becoming an activist requires a greater effort than joining the M5S online, we can say that the boundaries of the organisation are quite open. In contrast, to become a candidate, a concrete and continuous commitment to the organisation, witnessed by other activists, is required.

The candidate has two levels of requests. The national request: you have to be registered for the blog, you mustn't have a criminal record and so on [...]. On the other hand, you have to be an activist, a person that did something [...]. your group must agree, they know you and vote for you. You have to come forward when candidacies open; we draft a list of people that want to become a candidate and then we vote (Int. 3).

The relationship with the elected representatives was equal and horizontal. Indeed, the second layer of the organisation at the city level were the workgroups. The workgroups were groups of activists gathered according to areas of interest that helped and supported the elected representative in his or her administrative activity and were in charge of writing the electoral programme. Furthermore, as I said, in each district there was an M5S district group. It is at this level that the relationship with citizens was stronger. The groups at this level carried out mainly three activities: weekly stands, meetings and support for the elected representative. Stands (*banchetti*) were the trademark of the M5S. Stands were organised on a weekly basis, both during electoral campaigns<sup>80</sup> and during other periods, and embodied the link of the M5S with citizens and its presence in the territory. District group meetings could be open to citizens or restricted to activists and were one of the ways to recruit new activists.

If you come to our meetings, I won't ask you if you have already registered. So, in reality the meetings are always open to everyone, and we do not have a "register" of the people who reside in the city and are officially members of the M5S. There are some people who have maybe taken part for months and then they tell us; maybe it happened when we drew up the lists for the elections; and to become a candidate, it is necessary to be registered: "But I'm not registered yet" (Int 4).

Even at the district level, the activity of supporting the elected representatives was perceived as very important. In the eyes of the M5S, an elected representative is seen only as a spokesperson, a lay citizen sent into institutions to bring citizens' demands to them.

---

<sup>80</sup> In the period 2010–2016, the M5S took part in five elections: the 2010 regional elections, 2011 local elections, 2013 general elections, and the 2014 regional and European elections. In 2014 the M5S got 93,806 votes in Turin. The candidate president was again Davide Bono, and the M5S had eight regional councillors elected.

What I always say is that I am alone, but the branches, the roots around me are all the people around me, so I cannot be in the whole district at the same time, but all the activists live here, and then they can report, collect and write documents (Int. 4).

Finally, stands represented the fundamental activity of the district groups. They were held every week, whether or not during an election campaign, and represented the way in which the Movement kept contact with citizens, as well as a way to recruit new activists. Through the booths, in fact, it was possible to listen to citizens' demands and to communicate the activities carried out by the M5S at the various territorial levels. This activity was considered to be the most important by activists, a real trademark to be proud of ("Where are the others?" activists note during non-electoral periods when they are the only ones in the street).

#### *4. Activists' Mobilisation During the 2016 Electoral Campaign*

In June 2016, in the second round of the local elections, Chiara Appendino beat Piero Fassino, the incumbent mayor and leading member of the Partito Democratico, by a margin of 9 percentage points (54.6 per cent vs. 45.4 per cent<sup>81</sup>). Appendino's victory interrupted a long government cycle: in the previous twenty-five years, centre-left governments had guided the transition of Turin from an industrial and Fordist city (Bagnasco 1990) to a new model of development based on culture, tourism and knowledge. Landmarks in this respect are the 2006 Winter Olympic Games, promoted by mayor Chiamparino. In the public narrative, the 2006 Winter Olympics symbolised this change in the city, while for the oppositions (and, in particular, for the M5S) the Games represented the cause of the city's huge debt, and then one of the reasons for the inequalities that affected the city. As noted by Berta (2016), perhaps in 2016 a part of the city that, like other Italian cities, had been hit by the economic crisis and is characterised by a high rate of youth unemployment, failed to recognise itself in this narrative of change and decided to vote for renewal.

Indeed, the two main opponents, Fassino and Appendino, plastically symbolised continuity and change, respectively. While Fassino relied

---

<sup>81</sup> In the first round, Fassino got 41.8 per cent of the votes and Appendino 30.9 per cent. From the first to the second round, Fassino gained only 8,000 votes, while Appendino gained more than 84,000. Analysis of electoral flows (Cepernich and Vignati 2016) showed that most of these votes came from the centre-right.

on his experience as a public administrator and politician, Appendino pledged radical discontinuity with respect to the previous administrations. Moreover, Appendino focused on the inequalities that affected the city, and in particular on the existence of "two cities"<sup>82</sup>: the centre, the main character of the narrative of change and the setting of the cultural events that symbolised it, and the disadvantaged peripheries, characterised by poverty and negligence (Cepernich and Vignati 2016). Her slogan "The Alternative Is Clear" (*L'alternativa è Chiara*) summarised her promises. And, at first sight, the electoral results seemed to confirm this centre–periphery cleavage, with the central neighbourhoods voting for Fassino and the peripheral ones, once fortresses of the left, for Appendino<sup>83</sup>.

But, although she was the "outsider candidate", we must say that Appendino was not a complete outsider. The former city councillor chosen by other activists as candidate mayor had a background partially different to that of most M5S activists, or rather different from the stereotype of the M5S activist. Aged 31 years at the time of the election, having graduated in economics from a prestigious university in Milan, she is a young woman from the upper middle class of Turin. Her father is close to the industrial *milieu* and her husband is a local entrepreneur. Moreover, Appendino surrounded herself with collaborators who were not foreign to local politics. To sum up, her profile doesn't seem to be grounded in a "movement-like" background.

How did activists' mobilisation unfold during the electoral campaign? The M5S is an organisation born in a top-down way, in which the leaders

---

82 In a video posted on Facebook during the electoral campaign, Appendino stated that "I live in a city divided in two: one is that of the queues in front of the museums, the other is that of the queues in front of the soup kitchens". Besides this, the electoral programme written by the workgroups' activists included several different themes. As the M5S has always paid attention to matters related to the environment and sustainable development, the first is the environment. As regards city planning, the M5S committed itself to stopping the consumption of soil, and in particular the construction of new shopping centres, to improve the separate waste collection, to ensure the rights of animals and to defend public water. The second relates to the organisation of the municipality; here, the M5S committed itself to reorganising and cutting the costs of municipal administration, but also to improving the transparency of administration and empowering citizens' participation.

83 In reality, it has been shown that the picture is more nuanced, as in reality peripheries are multiple and diversified and the support for the outsider candidate gradually increased in the passage from the centre to the peripheries (Cepernich, Cittadino and Pellegrino 2018).

hold considerable decision-making power, and in which the rules and the most important decisions are not shared. We can thus expect that members' participation on the ground is not very developed and is controlled from above. However, we have also seen that, at the local level, groups potentially organise themselves autonomously and that, at least in the case of Turin, are not strictly influenced by the centre. Despite the presence of a "restricted group", guided by the candidate mayor, that has the task of managing the campaign, reports of the campaign tell that, at a lower level, activists' mobilisation was spontaneous and that the organisation benefited from their constant presence in the streets and in the neighbourhoods, which we have seen is a sort of trademark of the M5S.

I participated in a meeting that was called to "organise the participation" of the people who have made themselves available to help Chiara Appendino in the campaign. The room is not very large and when I arrive it is overcrowded. The meeting seems spontaneous and unorganised. This is, I think, one of the contradictions of the M5S: at the local level it is really "bottom-up", and yet it was created and is organised "from above". It is a sort of franchise of the auto-organisation. When activists start to talk, at the beginning of the meeting, they say that five years ago they, those who now speak, were "on the other side", and that everyone in the M5S is a volunteer. They say that it is necessary to talk to people, starting with acquaintances, but in reality, there is no discontinuity with what they do in other periods, because they are on the streets in other periods too. An activist carries a yellow bag with some stickers of the M5S and of Chiara Appendino attached to it. Speaking of the sticker, he says that before, five years ago, when wearing the sticker there was the risk of being insulted, but now, on the contrary, people approach and congratulate them when they see it. To carry the M5S sticker is a matter of pride (Fieldwork note, 9/4/2016).

The M5S is used to being present in the neighbourhoods, for instance with weekly stands. Stands were organised on a weekly basis, and there is not a huge difference between the electoral and non-electoral period, except for the higher activists' participation. Participation is characterised by enthusiasm on the part of M5S's activists in conducting campaign activities.

I am at a stand. The atmosphere is pleasant. I can see that they know each other, that they are happy to stay at the stand; they do it with passion, they do not consider it as burden. They tell me that they

have been doing this for three years, every week (Fieldwork note, 23/4/2016).

At the city level, the electoral campaign also consisted of big rallies with national MPs, but at the district level, district groups organised small events autonomously. On these occasions, wearing the symbol of the M5S was considered a source of pride for activists.

There is a lot of enthusiasm among them, and I see M5S logos everywhere: candidates have t-shirts emblazoned with the symbol of the M5S and their name on it (as if they were a team) and stickers; they stick stickers everywhere. I also notice a flag on a stroller, and a lighter and a smartphone cover with the logo of the campaign (*L'alternativa è Chiara*) on it. Supporters bring pins or t-shirts... They are very happy to bring the M5S's symbol (or Chiara's), so much as to cover anything with it (Fieldwork note, 15/5/2016).

To sum up, whether in electoral campaigns or not, the image of the local M5S as a “cyber-party” appears to be inaccurate. In the absence of a formalised party structure, the internet was used for coordination purposes, and offline participation and activists’ mobilisation were relevant. Moreover, the strong identification with the party could seem unexpected for an organisation with such a short history and no roots with the past. However, it seems that the M5S managed to recreate some characteristics of mass parties, despite being born to contrast with traditional party organisations.

## 5. Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to analyse how the M5S organised itself at the local level and how activists’ participation unfolded in a party that, at the national level, employs internet-based disintermediation strategies. Indeed, at the national level the most relevant strategy of disintermediation involves the use of the internet to substitute for the party’s organisation: through *Rousseau*, members could decide directly on political and party issues, even though the IT infrastructure, as well as the national organisation of the party, are strictly controlled from above.

In such a national organisation, the role of organised membership on the ground could appear pointless. However, in the case and in the period considered, the M5S was very grounded in the territory, and offline participation was strongly developed. Here, the M5S was not just a cyber-party.

At this level, the cyber-optimist rhetoric that characterises the national level was absent: the internet was used only as a coordination tool; for instance, in the absence of a formalised party structure, it replaced some functions, such as the members' register. In contrast, face-to-face participation and commitment to the organisation were perceived by activists as very important. This is also confirmed by other research: as regards participation practices, it has been noted that "the consensus-oriented deliberative practices that drive activism at a local level seem almost at odds with the direct democracy model based on preference aggregation engendered by Rousseau" (Deseriis 2020, 1782).

In the period considered, the M5S was indeed grounded in the territories with a constant presence in the streets. This together with the strong identification with the party symbol are characteristics that, unexpectedly, recall some features of mass parties. Writing about "digital parties", a category that would also include the M5S, Gerbaudo wrote that the digital party "comes close to the mass party in its ambition of reconstructing a culture of mass political participation by adapting it to the individualized experience of the digital society" (Gerbaudo 2019, 178). But a relevant difference between the M5S and mass parties is that local groups, however fundamental at the local level, were not—at least until 2021—officially recognised by the national one<sup>84</sup>, and that participation at the national level is individual and takes place through online consultations. Moreover, in contrast to traditional or mass parties, there is not a local party structure at this level either: activist self-organisation replaces it.

At the local level, the M5S thus responded to the "crisis of parties" creating an open and horizontal organisation, in which there is no official party structure. We have seen that activists organized themselves autonomously and besides the relevant question of the certification of the list, without which it is impossible to participate in elections, created bottom-up local groups and elected representatives. At least initially, the M5S was an informal and grassroots organisation, in which there were no formal hierarchies and everyone was considered equally, thus recalling some traits of social movements. If then, at first, the dimension that seemed to prevail in the case analysed is the empowerment of activists, we see that, especially with the passing of the government threshold, informal leadership emerged.

---

84 In the 2021 statute, territorial groups are officially recognised for the first time (article 6). It is also worth mentioning article 25c, according to which "Local groups and territorial formations self-constituted over time or, in any case, already in effect are dissolved, starting from the approval of this statute".

This trend has been confirmed by later research: with a dynamic quite similar to that of the national level, and coherently with expectations on the institutionalisation of new parties, during her mandate the mayor gained power and became more independent with respect to councillors, who, in turn, failed to act as transmission belts with activists, who consequently failed to intervene in decision-making at the city level (Biancalana 2019). Thus, although no official party structure was created, just like at the national level elected representatives played an increasingly important role in the organisation to the detriment of activists. A question that is worth asking, and that will be subject of future research, is whether activists' demobilization played a role, among other factors, in the electoral defeat of the Turinese M5S at the 2021 municipal elections<sup>85</sup>.

---

85 At the 2021 municipal elections, held in October, the local M5S obtained 9.1 per cent of the votes. The party's candidate mayor was Valentina Sganga. The centre-left coalition, led by Stefano Lorusso (PD), won the elections in the second round against the centre-right one.