

Conclusions

The aim of this work was to understand how parties adapt to a context characterised by the refusal of intermediate bodies, or rather how they adapt to their perception of such a context. The refusal of intermediate bodies is said to be part of a larger process of transformation, for some of a crisis, of representation. In this context, parties, perceived as more and more disconnected from society, devise solutions to get closer to citizens and obtain legitimacy. Among the various fields of enquiry related to party change, this work focused on organisation and, in particular, on what we defined as strategies of disintermediation. Although the study of party organisational change is a highly developed field of research, disintermediation in politics, and specifically in parties—unlike in other areas, such as communication—is a field still partially unexplored.

Disintermediation strategies in party organisations have been described as rhetoric or practices developed by parties in order to stage or deliver an unmediated relationship between leader and followers, which happens through the weakening of a party's intermediate organisation. Therefore, we have identified two dimensions through which to study disintermediation in parties. The first opposes rhetoric and practices: do disintermediation strategies imply a real change in the internal distribution of power or are they constituted only by a discourse or narrative of change? And, in the event in which disintermediation strategies are put into practice, how are they interpreted? The second opposes disintermediation from above and disintermediation from below, i.e. the two directions of the weakening of the intermediate party structure: this can happen either by giving greater power to the leader or by granting it to its members or supporters. Finally, this work questioned the emergence of new forms of intermediation and the possible persistence of the previous ones, considering disintermediation also as a process.

In order to verify whether disintermediation strategies are present in parties, what the prevailing dimensions are and, more generally, how those strategies are interpreted and applied, two Italian parties were studied from three different points of view. There are three arenas considered in this work: the national, the virtual and the local one. The results of this study show that these are three partially different ways of carrying out and interpreting disintermediation, which nevertheless correspond to the

same logic: the will to create a direct link between leader and supporters through the weakening of the intermediate party structure.

While at the national level—despite rhetoric relating to members’ and supporters’ empowerment and direct participation—in both the cases considered this creation of an immediate relationship is only apparent as it has as an outcome, although with different results, an increase in the prerogatives of the leadership and the persistence of old intermediaries, at the local level a common trait of the two cases is the attempt to substitute party-mediated relationships with direct and personal relationships established between common citizens. And, in both cases, digital participatory tools are used more to *give the impression* to members of participating than to grant them effective decision-making power.

My analysis of the two parties’ disintermediation strategies conducted in three different arenas gives us a composite, though not exhaustive, picture of the possible responses and transformations of the parties in the current context. The results of my research are obviously limited to the two cases taken into consideration, which can be considered heuristic case studies aimed at generating hypotheses for future research and at stimulating new theories in the still largely unexplored field of disintermediation in politics.

In this concluding chapter, starting from the results achieved in this work, I will trace some paths for future research, highlight the contribution that my research can make to the conceptualisation of disintermediation, and finally try to understand what the implications and consequences of the phenomena under investigation are on the future of political parties and, more generally, representative democracy. With regard to future research, it would be interesting to test whether the concept of disintermediation can “travel”, taking into consideration different parties in different countries. There are more than a few cases that, at first glance, would fit into the framework presented in this work.

In the first place, the case of Podemos in Spain seems an interesting one to take into consideration. Podemos has been compared to the Movimento 5 Stelle in various respects (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2017; Montesanti and Tarditi 2017; Vittori 2017; Deseriis and Vittori 2019), not only because they are both new parties that emerged in the same years in a context of a deep crisis of representation. With respect to the focus of this work, we can say that in the case of Podemos we also find the attempt to weaken the party’s intermediate organisation and to favour citizens’ direct participation. Moreover, even in this case there is a strong leader (disintermediation from above), and the internet is widely used to empow-

er members and influence the party's internal decision-making process (disintermediation from below) (Pizarro and Labuske 2015; Biancalana and Vittori 2021a). But it is also true that, compared to the M5S, Podemos has an internal organisation more similar to that of traditional parties and that its leadership retains less autonomy (Chironi and Fittipaldi 2017).

The Pirate Parties can be considered another case of parties in which we find weakening, or better the disappearance, of the internal organisation. Pirate Parties have also been likened to the Movimento 5 Stelle because of their use of the internet and their faith in its democratic potential (Deseriis 2020), even though—in contrast to the M5S—Pirates value decentralisation and individual autonomy and entrust individual users with several deliberative capacities. With regard to organisational aspects, in the case of Pirate Parties, in contrast to that of the M5S and Podemos, we find the suspicion towards any form of centralisation and authority, and mostly decentralised forms of engagement (also testified to by the use of the software LiquidFeedback). Here, the only dimension of disintermediation present is the one from below, and it would be interesting to investigate if there is a link between the absence of a leader and the scant electoral successes that these parties achieved, with respect to the M5S and Podemos.

Finally, En Marche! (Evans 2017; Dolez, Fretel and Lefebvre 2019) could be another relevant case to analyse, as this is a new party created by a (mainstream) leader, Emmanuel Macron, in which there is no intermediate structure, but only local electoral committees directly linked with the leader (En Marche! is, according to Lefebvre “un club de mobilisation électorale”, cfr. Lefebvre 2018, 29). Finally, it would also be interesting to continue investigating the Italian case, taking into consideration the parties that—mainly on the right of the political spectrum—put the figure of the leader before the organisation.

It was not the aim of this study to generate a theory of disintermediation. However, it is true that my research has contributed to the conceptualisation and operationalisation of this concept, which was lacking in the field of politics. In this respect, recently Pizzimenti, Calossi and Cicchi (2020) further developed the concept of disintermediation applied to party organisations. According to these scholars, the concept is a heuristic tool capable of identifying parsimoniously a number of organisational changes, thus addressing “crucial aspects of the actual functioning of political parties, by enriching a common descriptive vocabulary of party change” (*ibidem*). The concept of “internal disintermediation” would entail cutting off the intermediate articulations of the party and the traditional organs of po-

litical mediation, while making the relationships between party leadership and party members/supporters more immediate.

More in detail, patterns of disintermediation are associated with an organisational profile in which the party leader is provided with extended prerogatives; party executive organs are dominated by the representatives of the party in public office, while the complexity of party structural articulation decreases; and the procedures to join the party are simplified, while the number of members sharply declines in parallel to the dismissal of collateral organisations. According to their empirical research based on a set of indicators⁸⁶, most of the parties considered in the countries analysed (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom) have adopted more disintermediated organisational profiles, and new parties tend to be more disintermediated than the old ones.

This concept thus captures a relevant trend in contemporary politics. In this respect, the results of this research show that it is possible to grasp not only contradictory vertical and horizontal trends, but also the emergence of new forms of intermediation. Indeed, in this work, I considered disintermediation in two different but complementary ways. The first one is disintermediation as a *strategy*, which we have defined as rhetoric or practices developed by parties in order to stage or deliver an unmediated relationship between leader and followers, which happens through the weakening of the party's intermediate organisation, and of which we identified two dimensions, from below and from above. The second one is disintermediation as a *process*. Seen in this way, the concept of disintermediation also takes into account the diachronic dimension and can be linked to the "IDR cycle" developed by Chircu and Kauffman.

If it is conceived in this way, it could be possible to define disintermediation as a process that, starting from a situation in which intermediate bodies (such as the middle-level elite or party members) operate in a party (I), leads to disintermediation—that is, a weakening of the party's intermediate organisation (D) and, from there, possibly, to new forms of intermediation (R). However, it is not necessarily a unidirectional process.

86 The indicators are: a) the opening of boundaries of party organisations (for instance, opening the organisation to "friends" and/or "sympathisers"); b) the dismissal of the party's collateral organisations; c) the decrease in the number of party layers between the highest executive body and the party congress; d) a greater presence of representatives of the party in public office in the party's executive organs; e) the expansion of the rights and functions of the party leader.

We can picture it as standing over a continuous line, on which *it is possible to travel in two directions*, that is—like in the case of the parable of the Movimento 5 Stelle or, to some extent, the transition between Renzi and Zingaretti—also from disintermediation to intermediation. So, we can define disintermediation processes as *the transformations of the party's intermediate organisation: its weakening, the creation of new or the recreation of traditional forms of intermediation*.

To conclude, we can ask ourselves: what are the implications and the consequences on parties and, more generally, on the future of representative democracy of the phenomena under investigation? In a recent article focused on the causes and consequences of the increasing democratisation and inclusiveness of mainstream parties, Ignazi (2020, 5) claimed that the creation of “un-intermediated relations between leaders and followers”, favoured by the opening of the decision-making process to individual members:

has had an unexpected, but unsurprising, outcome: the rise of right-wing populist parties which play the plebiscitary card unscrupulously. The naive hyper-democratic drive towards members' and citizens' empowerment in the party decision-making process has unwittingly promoted leaders and parties that legitimize their voice playing on a direct appeal to the undifferentiated, homogeneous, people, with a call which recasts the holistic imprint of politics (Rosenblum 2008). The attempt to counteract dissatisfaction and mistrust towards parties by opening them up and relying on the “resource leadership” has proved unsuccessful and counterproductive. Membership shrinks and demobilizes, leaders go their own way and confidence plummets—and antidemocratic forces gain momentum. Democracy itself is under threat from a populist surge, because developments in intra-party dynamics have an effect on the external environment too.

As far as the two cases considered in this work are concerned, it is obviously impossible to tell whether the opening of the decision-making processes operated by the PD has led to the rise of the M5S: there are too many variables to consider, and to isolate a single causal dynamic would be simplistic. What it is possible to say, however, is that that it is true that both the PD and the M5S thrived, as we have seen, in a context of a deep crisis of confidence in parties that has its roots in the passage from the First to the Second Republic and that it is highly likely that the two parties influenced themselves. For instance, Beppe Grillo opened the M5S's website in 2005, the same year as the first primaries of the PD,

regarded as its “founding myth”; the M5S was founded in 2009, two years after the foundation of the PD and the first primaries for the election of the party leader. So, we can see that the idea of involving voters/members in the internal decisions of parties was already circulating in the Italian political system—it is to be noted that at the 2006 elections Beppe Grillo backed Prodi, and in 2009 he tried to participate in the primaries of the PD, but his application was rejected. In the same way, the innovative use of the internet by the M5S had an impact on the PD, which, as we saw in chapter 4, explicitly developed *Bob* to counter the challenge of *Rousseau*. Also, the use of the so-called *Parlamentarie* by the PD on the occasion of the 2013 general elections can be seen as a further opening in the process of candidate selection, fostered by the use of a similar method by the M5S.

But it is also true that, in the long run, the balance of power between the two parties was reversed, as at the last general elections the PD obtained its worst result ever, and the M5S its best (Valbruzzi and Vignati 2018). Can this be seen as the success of a party that “plays the plebiscitary card unscrupulously” over a party that tries to “counteract dissatisfaction and mistrust towards parties by opening them up and relying on the resource leadership”? It would be an exaggeration to affirm that the fact that the two parties governed together for one year represented the union of two interpretations of disintermediation, but—as we have seen in this work—in this respect the two parties show some interesting similarities: rhetoric relating to members’ and supporters’ empowerment that ends up in increasing the autonomy of the leadership; the use of participatory tools in a plebiscitary way; the persistence or recreation of an intermediate structure.

More generally, we can ask ourselves whether disintermediation strategies, conceived in order to give parties more legitimacy in a context of refusal of intermediate bodies, do in reality weaken them, thus contributing to the circulation of rhetoric about the uselessness of the parties, and also having an effect on the “external environment”, that is, democracy. Both mainstream parties and new parties seem entangled in this problem. Disintermediation appears then as a double-edged sword, both because, in the end, contributing to the delegitimisation of the intermediate bodies at the intra-party level, it fosters parties’ de-legitimation as transmission belts at the systemic level, but also because fully keeping the promises implied by the rhetoric on disintermediation (especially disintermediation from below) is, in the end, impossible.

So, once again, whoever says organisation says oligarchy? In 2013, Carty wrote that party types that have emerged with the transformation of soci-

eties have not been able to overturn Michels' "sociological law", and my research appears to confirm once again the validity of that statement. And if, on the one hand, we could say that yet another confirmation of what was said by Michels more than one hundred years ago is pointless, on the other I believe that it is interesting to have proved it in the current context, in an environment that, more than in the past, enhances the absence of mediation and hierarchies and the apparently horizontal nature of political relationships.

But what Michels also stated is that if democracy is an ideal model that cannot become reality, the very fact that we are trying to reach it is relevant and can have positive outcomes. It is the metaphor, written in the conclusions of *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, of the farmer that is ploughing a field looking for treasure that is not there and that will not be found, but in doing so he improves the quality of the soil. In Michels' perspective, the farmer was the labour movement and the field democracy, but history tells us that there will always be newcomers, parties and political actors calling for *more* democracy, empowerment or disintermediation from below, and that this could be seen not only as a negative circumstance.

Indeed, according to Canovan, one of the greatest challenges facing contemporary democracies is that of the discrepancy between the democratic ideal and the reality of political practice (Canovan 1999). We can say, then, that disintermediation is one of the answers to this perception of disequilibrium, a response that concerns the desire for a democracy in which, literally, the power is truly "of the people" and exercised directly by them, without parties, or through organisational forms that favour unmediated relations between citizens and power. Disintermediation, therefore, can be conceived as a different way of imagining and practising representation within democracies.

It is an issue that has been raised recently (Mastropaolo 2018). If, on the one hand, representation has become much more unstable than it was when it was structured by parties, it is inappropriate to consider this a "crisis of representation". According to Mastropaolo, we are rather faced with a new adaptation in the use of an ancient institution. If anything, some "entrepreneurs" and some representative "companies" are in crisis, while other entrepreneurs and other companies, such as the so-called populist parties, have a lot of success. Disintermediation can thus be considered rhetoric through which parties promise to citizens—who feel they have been betrayed by those who represented them—a radical alternative to the forms of conventional political representation.

