Introduction

It is commonplace to start a book on parties by stating that parties are said to have been in crisis for a long time. Many causes have been attributed to this crisis, and various events have been recognised as its manifestations. On the one hand, mainstream parties are said to have lost their links with society and have become part of the state, fostering disaffection and a loss of legitimacy. On the other, non-mediated or unmediated forms of political action, such as online participation or social movements, emerge and become strengthened. From this perspective, a part of the crisis seems to consist in the fact that parties act in an environment characterised by the refusal of intermediate bodies. According to Urbinati (2015), some recent transformations in European democracies testify to a revolt against the way in which political parties and professional journalism, that is, the two intermediary bodies which made representative government work, have been organised in the past decades.

Actually, this can be found in other social fields too: it is a process that is said to have its roots in the social and political changes—such as individualisation and cognitive mobilisation—that make people more confident of their own competence and more and more sceptical towards the authority of expert knowledge, including political knowledge, and it is fostered by technological changes such as the spread of the internet. It seems that, thanks to the web, nowadays people can organise their lives autonomously, without any need for intermediaries: Amazon has changed the way we think of commerce, Twitter has transformed journalism, and so on.

Where this revolt against intermediate entities comes from is, of course, a matter of debate. In any case, this work will use it as a starting point. My aim is to study the strategic responses and adaptations of parties to this supposedly changing environment, particularly the responses and adaptations that concern their organisation. One response is what I call disintermediation. The term, which was first used in the financial and economic sector to refer to the opportunities given by the internet to directly link supply and demand (Chircu and Kauffmann 1999), generally describes the process of removal of intermediaries from a supply chain, a transaction, or any set of social, economic, or political relations (Chadwick 2007). Here,

conversely, I consider disintermediation to be a response strategy put in place by parties to counter some pressures and external stresses.

There are two main trends that the literature on parties' organisational change has highlighted in recent decades. On the one hand, parties offer their members more opportunities for direct participation. On the other, they strengthen their leadership. My hypothesis is that these two trends are connected by the weakening of a party's intermediate structure and the attempt to create an unmediated connection between its leader and followers. Whether disintermediation does indeed provoke new forms of intermediation, or the permanence of previous ones, still needs to be verified. The distinction between disintermediation rhetoric and practices is obviously decisive in this matter: to what extent does disintermediation correspond to a real change both in the organisation and in the distribution of power within the party? To what extent should disintermediation be mostly considered a top-down process, which gives greater power to the leader in decision-making processes, or rather a bottom-up movement, which allows the opening of decision-making processes to members and voters? In light of these questions, I will consider two case studies in this work: the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, from now on PD) and the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement, from now on M5S). These are two very different parties, a mainstream party and a new party, which we can expect to behave in partially different ways. They will be observed from three points of view in connection to each other.

The first one is organisation. Through an analysis of the organisational history of the two parties, I will first observe their organisation at a national level, in order to understand whether and how they make use of disintermediation strategies, and which dimensions (rhetoric or practices; members' empowerment or concentration of power in the hands of the leadership) prevail. The study of the two organisations will be conducted through the analysis of documents and interviews with privileged witnesses, using the indicators developed in intra-party democracy scholarship. Secondly, considering that technological change is said to be one of the most important drivers of the transformations that push people to bypass intermediaries, I shall examine in depth the role of the internet in the disintermediation strategies of the two parties, and in particular the tools that potentially allow members to directly influence the life of the party: the online platform *Rousseau* for the M5S and the *circoli online* (online sections) experience and the mobile app *Bob* for the PD. Finally, I shall focus on what happens at the local level. Against this backdrop, how do parties adapt at this level? To this end, I conducted fieldwork research during the

2016 campaign in the municipality of Turin, observing the mobilisation of volunteers aimed at the re-election of the incumbent mayor of the PD Piero Fassino called Noi Siamo Torino (We Are Turin, from now on NST) and the participation practices of a local group of the M5S.

The work will be organised as follows. In chapter 1, I will focus on disintermediation as a strategic response of parties in times of crisis, outlining its various dimensions and the possible ways to analyse it. Chapter 2 will be dedicated to the research design, discussing the selection of the cases, the methods and the data source used. The following six chapters (3–8) are dedicated to the examination of the two parties chosen for the analysis. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are dedicated to the PD; chapters 6, 7 and 8 to the M5S. For each party, I considered party organisation (chapters 3 and 6), the use of the internet (chapters 4 and 7), and members' and activists' participation during a local electoral campaign in Turin (chapters 5 and 8). In chapter 9, I will summarise the findings of my research, answer the questions that underpin my work and outline similarities and differences between the two parties in the three "arenas" considered: the national, the virtual and the local one. How do two different parties adapt to a context in which citizens appear to reject all kinds of intermediate bodies? Do disintermediation strategies produce new forms of intermediation or a permanence of previous ones? Finally, in the conclusions I will trace some avenues for future research and try to understand the implications and consequences of the phenomena under investigation on the future of political parties and, more generally, of representative democracy.