

## 2. A Roadmap to the Study of Disintermediation

### 1. Italy, Disintermediation and Party Change

This study is focused only on one country and one political system: Italy's. This will allow me to take into consideration the country's institutional context, and to carry out an in-depth analysis of the two case studies. Italy is an interesting country for the study of political parties and party change, in general, and of the topic of disintermediation, in particular. On the one hand, in this country parties have always played an important and peculiar role. At first, they facilitated the democratic transition, and their strength heightened their tragic collapse in the nineties. At the same time, anti-political (Mastropaoalo 2000) and anti-party (Lupo 2013) sentiments are deeply rooted in Italian society. On the other hand, the Italian case befits Western democracies' general trend towards the increasing role of leaders and the will of citizens to make their voices heard directly.

Historically, we can say that Italian "democratic consolidation" in the post-war period, which was the passage from an authoritarian to a democratic regime, happened thanks to the actions of parties (Morlino 2003); they served as "anchors" for civil society, for instance through growing membership figures and the links between parties and collateral organisations. The centrality of parties formed the base of the functioning of the so-called First Republic, i.e. the historical and political period between the end of WWII and 1992, and allowed parties to be the main actors in the stabilisation of the democratic regime. At the same time, however, this centrality, the so-called *partitocrazia*, produced some negative effects and created the conditions for the collapse of the party system in the early nineties, because of the excessive accumulation of power and parties' penetration into the socio-economic system of the country (Grilli di Cortona 2007).

According to Morlino and Tarchi (2006), Italy has always been characterised by a chronic and widespread dissatisfaction with the political system, which was present even in the immediate post-war period, but only fully manifested itself in the early nineties because of the convergence of a series of circumstances: namely, the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the processes of de-ideologisation and secularisation. Although mistrust and anti-political attitudes might derive primarily from a public

discourse spread by political actors themselves (Mastropaoletti 2000), this doesn't mean that it has not had consequences on the Italian political system. Against this backdrop, the event that triggered a major change in the Italian party system was *Tangentopoli*. Indeed, at the beginning of the nineties, a series of scandals, dubbed *Tangentopoli*, uncovered a vast network of political corruption and shook the Italian political system. This, together with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, marked the end of the most important Italian political parties and the beginning, despite the absence of constitutional changes, of the so-called Second Republic. Moreover, the move from a proportional to a mixed majority electoral system changed the dynamics of party competition. During the so-called Second Republic, the Italian party system was then characterised by a bipolar competition dynamic. On the one hand, there was the centre-right coalition, led by Silvio Berlusconi; on the other, a centre-left one, which lacked an unchallenged leader.

It was especially in the period after *Tangentopoli* that Italy was defined as a “populist paradise” (Tarchi 2015) and anti-party sentiments among citizens increased dramatically (Lupo 2013). Fostered by the new electoral system and by other societal and technological changes, such as the growing popularity of commercial television, as well as by some Italian peculiarities, such as the role of Berlusconi as a media entrepreneur, the Italian political system became more and more personalised (Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009). Furthermore, if it is true that “personalization has affected political parties in many contemporary democracies”, it is also true that “Italy plays a leading role in this scenario” (Musella 2015, 241–242). At the same time, some scholars (Calise 2010) have pointed out that in this period Italy was characterised by a peculiar form of protest against parties, called *direttismo* (directism). Directism consists in bypassing party intermediation, in order for citizens to be able to directly influence politics. According to Calise, Italy, more than any other European country, became the cradle of directism (see also Sartori 2006), and this was also due to the importance of the referendum in the Italian political system (Barbera and Marrone 2003). In addition to this, the direct election of the executive at the the municipal, provincial and regional levels, which occurred starting from 1993, contributed to giving citizens the impression that their electoral choice was a deciding factor.

Finally, the Italian Partito Democratico was the first European party to organise open primaries for the election of the party leader, and Italy is a country in which primaries for the selection of candidates are widely used (Sandri and Venturino 2020). For a reflection on primaries and directism,

see Melchionda 2005). Finally, the extraordinary results of the M5S at the 2013 and 2018 general elections (Chiapponi 2017; Biancalana and Colloca 2018) testified to the deep crisis in traditional Italian parties, but also the fact that Italian citizens were still keen to participate in elections and to vote for a party that lists the creation of a sort of direct democracy among its promises.

## *2. The Partito Democratico and the Movimento 5 Stelle*

This study will focus on two parties: the Partito Democratico and the Movimento 5 Stelle. The two parties share some similarities but are also very different in many respects. As we will see in the rest of the book, in both cases it seems that the two parties wanted—albeit in two partially different interpretations—to bypass the internal party organisation and to create an unmediated relationship between their leader and followers.

If we simply look at their dates of birth, both the PD and the M5S seem to be new parties. The first was born in 2007 and the second in 2009. But, in reality, their histories are very different. The PD can be considered a mainstream party (Meguid 2008). A centre-left party, it is the heir of the two most important mass parties of the so-called First Republic (Democrazia Cristiana and Partito Comunista Italiano), as it was founded in 2007 through the merger of two existing parties which, in turn, derived from those parties. Over time, it has moved more and more to the centre of the political spectrum (Natale and Fasano 2017) and, as other European centre-left parties, has gradually lost contact with the popular classes<sup>14</sup>. Its peculiar organisational structure, which has been defined as “open” (Vassallo and Passarelli 2016), presents a very nuanced distinction between party *supporters*, who have many rights, including the opportunity to vote for the party secretary (and not just for candidates) during party primaries, and *members*, who have few additional rights with respect to supporters and, perhaps also for this reason, have sharply decreased in number over time.

The M5S, in contrast, is a genuinely new party, founded in 2009 by the former comedian Beppe Grillo, a well-known showman who has long been engaged in civil and political battles, and an entrepreneur with no

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<sup>14</sup> De Sio, L., *Il ritorno del voto di classe, ma al contrario (ovvero: se il PD è il partito delle élite)*, <https://cise.luiss.it/cise/2018/03/06/il-ritorno-del-voto-di-classe-ma-al-contrario-ovvero-se-il-pd-e-il-partito-delle-elite/>, March 6<sup>th</sup> 2018.

previous political experience, Gianroberto Casaleggio. Contrarily to the PD, the M5S can be considered anti-establishment and is labelled by some (Tarchi 2015; Chiapponi 2017) a populist party. The M5S is the most significant political innovation of the last decade in Italy. It was officially born as a national political subject in October 2009, but its history dates back to 2005 when Grillo created a blog that was to become the core of the organisational structure of the Movement (Ceri and Veltri 2017). The opening of the blog was followed by an invitation to citizens interested in the issues dealt with by Grillo (the defence of the environment and the fight against corruption) to meet using the online platform *Meet-up*. Thus, in various Italian cities, people, often without prior political affiliations, started to meet on the basis of a common interest in these issues and to form the first local groups (Biorcio 2015).

Over the years, the Movement has undergone many important metamorphoses. The 2013 general elections marked an exceptional success for the M5S. In a context characterised by the economic crisis and strong delegitimisation of politics and politicians, a party made up of ordinary citizens who engage in politics for a fixed period of time—a maximum of two terms are allowed by party rules—and who present themselves as the spokespersons of the people against the politicians’ “caste”, obtained 25.5 per cent of the vote at its first national test and the election of 161 MPs, upsetting the Italian political system. This sudden electoral growth triggered some transformations in the party’s organisation and communication. As we will see, the main feature of the M5S’s structure was precisely the absence of a traditional party structure, which had been replaced by the internet. This has partially changed over time. After five years in opposition, at the 2018 general elections the M5S became the first national party with 32.8 per cent of the vote and entered the national government, forming a coalition government with Matteo Salvini’s Lega, experiencing the constraints of national government for the first time and breaking some taboos (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2019). After the end of the coalition with the Lega, from September 2019 to the end of 2020 the M5S governed the country with the Partito Democratico.

Despite this alliance, the two parties always had an ambiguous relationship. At first, it can be stated that the base of the nascent M5S and its electorate were oriented towards the left of the political spectrum. To begin with, the core issues of the M5S were those dear to the left, such as environmentalism and the fight against corruption (Vignati 2015a). Initially, voters mainly came from anti-establishment parties and from areas in which local social movements were stronger (Colloca and Marangoni

2013). Indeed, there were some attempts by Grillo to support the leftist coalition: at the 2006 general elections he pushed his supporters to vote for Prodi, the leftist candidate, against Berlusconi. Interestingly, in 2009 Grillo tried to participate in the primaries of the Partito Democratico, but the party rejected his application. Piero Fassino, then an MP, famously said: “If Grillo wants to do politics, he has to found a party and compete in elections. We will see how many votes he will get”. Over time, the PD has increasingly been considered an enemy by the M5S. The PD is seen by the Movement as part of the establishment and, with the M5S entering into electoral competition, since according to the party rules the M5S could not form alliances with other parties at that time, also as an electoral adversary. After the 2013 elections—in which the M5S obtained 25.5 per cent and the PD 25.4 per cent of the vote (Chamber of Deputies)—Bersani, then head of the leftist coalition Italia Bene Comune and secretary of the PD, tried to form a coalition government with the M5S, but representatives of the party, backed by Grillo, refused the offer. The M5S then spent the legislature (2013–2018) in opposition, and the relationship with the PD, especially when Renzi became party secretary in December 2013, became more and more conflictual. In 2014, for the second time, the M5S refused to form a government with the PD, led by Renzi. The first meeting with Bersani and the second one with Renzi were famously streamed, according to the M5S’s principles of transparency.

At the general elections of 2018, the M5S obtained 32.8 per cent and the PD 18.8 per cent of the vote. After long negotiations, the M5S put aside its reservations on alliances and formed a government with Salvini’s Lega, the so-called “yellow–green” government<sup>15</sup>, led by Giuseppe Conte, a former law professor close to the M5S (Biancalana and Colloca 2018). After one year, in summer 2019, the Conte government fell over the TAV issue, in an attempt by Salvini to provoke early elections (Biancalana 2020) and to capitalise on his popularity after the particularly good results of the 2019 European elections (Biancalana and Colloca 2019). In September 2019, the fear of early elections and of the creation of a government led by Salvini, together with economic concerns, such as the approval of the 2020 budget legislation to avoid a rise in VAT, spurred the two former enemies to form a new coalition government, the second Conte government, dubbed “yellow–red”<sup>16</sup>. The creation of the coalition government with the PD, as had happened with the Lega, was approved on the M5S’s part by an

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<sup>15</sup> Yellow and green are the colours of the M5S and the Lega, respectively.

<sup>16</sup> In this case, red symbolises the PD.

online consultation on the online platform *Rousseau*. The government was supported by the M5S, PD, Liberi e Uguali and Matteo Renzi's new party: Italia Viva, a party with low public support but indispensable if the coalition was to have a majority.

The coalition between the PD and M5S was an unusual alliance between two parties that used to be competitors, in which the fear of early elections was the main stabilising factor. The unease of the two parties with this alliance is testified to by the fact that, in most cases, at the local and regional levels the alliance has not been repeated. Finally, at the time of writing (early 2021), Italian politics has managed to surprise us once again. The country is currently governed by a coalition including almost all parties and led by the economist Mario Draghi. The developments of this strange government will surely be the subject of future publications.

### *3. Turin: Deindustrialisation, Local Politics and Local Conflicts*

The research dedicated to the local level was conducted through fieldwork in the city of Turin. Turin is a large city (900,000 residents) located in the north-west of Italy and is the capital of the Piedmont region. For decades, Turin has been identified in the collective imagination, like other European and American metropolises (Pizzolato 2013), as a “factory city” or a “Fordist city” (Bagnasco 1990). In fact, the presence of FIAT, a company founded in 1899, strongly influenced the development of the city. The presence of a large manufacturing industry, in particular the automotive one, had, in the years of Fordism, an impact on the economic development of Turin, on its demography—with the great flow of immigration of workers from the south and north-east of the country, and the resulting urban expansion—as well as in social and political fields.

The magnitude of the power held by the large manufacturing industry was paralleled by the lack of autonomy in the political field with respect to economic actors and processes. During the years of Fordism, factories were central to the politics of the city, in particular that of the left. For instance, the Partito Comunista Italiano was characterised by a marked attention to the problems of the working class (Hellman 1988); unions and big companies acted not only as interlocutors, but also as actors in local politics. However, since the 1970s, and especially in the 1980s, just like other similar cities in other parts of the world, Turin has undergone a process of deindustrialisation linked to the transition of models of economic development towards what has been called “flexible specialisation”. FIAT began a

process of relocation, fragmenting the urban working class and favouring changes to the physical and social identity of the city. Consequently, from the beginning of the 1990s, Turin tried to focus on development models based on culture and knowledge. But, while de-industrialisation changed the social and political identity of the city, the transition to the new model of development happened only in part, despite the narrative carried out by the governing elite (Berta 2016).

But it was not only the process of deindustrialisation which, by changing the identity of the working class and therefore of the parties which aspired to represent it, affected the politics of the city. Indeed, national factors were also at play here. We can highlight two: on the one hand, *Tangentopoli* and the collapse of the traditional parties at the beginning of the 1990s; on the other hand, the reform of the electoral system at the local level, with the direct election of the mayor (law 81/1993). As we have seen, the *Mani Pulite* investigation, which entered public discourse under the name of *Tangentopoli*, revealed a vast system of political corruption which led to the dissolution of the main parties that had dominated the Italian political scene and to the growth of anti-political and anti-party sentiments already present in the country (Morlino and Tarchi 2006; Lupo 2013). In addition, the reform of the local authorities' electoral systems sanctioned the direct election of the mayor by the citizens. Mayors gained visibility and, sometimes, they became national figures. For these reasons, civil society gained in importance during the local elections of 1993. It's what has been called the "spring of mayors"; moreover, mayors were no longer just professional politicians and were recruited in areas such as business and culture.

To sum up, it can be said that in Turin's transition from a Fordist city to a new model of development, local politics played an increasingly important role. In 1993, within the city's Chamber of Commerce, a group of notables from the fields of economics and finance formed a group called Alleanza per Torino (Alliance for Turin), which aimed to influence the choice of the mayor, in order to promote a new model of territorial development. This proposal came from the world of industry and finance, and it was supported by intellectuals, professionals, entrepreneurs, representatives of Catholic and liberal associations, and former politicians of the PCI. The candidate mayor who was proposed and who also obtained the support of the moderate left (Partito Democratico della Sinistra, a party born from the ashes of the PCI) was Valentino Castellani, a professor at the Polytechnic of Turin (Belligni and Ravazzi 2012). Although not totally alien to local politics, Castellani can be seen as one of the representatives of

the rise of Italian civil society. Castellani's victory in 1993 marked a period of discontinuity for Turin, due to the advent of a political class alien to the world of the parties which had previously dominated the politics of the city. This rupture led to the establishment of a regime that was to last several years: the same ruling coalition elected, after Castellani, who was mayor from 1993 to 2001, the mayors Sergio Chiamparino (2001–2011) and Piero Fassino<sup>17</sup> (2011–2016), who, unlike Castellani, are professional politicians.

We can say, then, that from 1993 to 2016 the city was ruled by a group with three main characteristics (Belligni and Ravazzi 2012). The first is that it was a small group, not open to external solicitations, not sociologically representative of the inhabitants of the city, and which shared a kind of ideological unity induced by social affinities. The second characteristic is related to the method of recruiting the municipal elite. In the new cycle of government, party membership mattered less than belonging to the same professional, family, or religious network. Finally, the third characteristic is that it was a group closed to the idea of citizen participation in political choices. In this sense, the relationship of the ruling elite with the citizens has been defined as "paternalistic", a circumstance favoured by the crisis in local parties and by the lack of functioning of participatory tools, such as district councils, thus making it difficult to connect the administration with the population. For these reasons, the ruling elite has been critically referred to as the *Sistema Torino* (Turin System) by political opponents, and especially by the local M5S.

Due to significant local environmental conflicts, Turin and Piedmont have always been of great importance for the M5S (Biancalana 2019). The M5S has been present in the region since the very beginning, both in connection with local mobilisations and with an early presence in the institutions. In 2008, the second V-Day—a big gathering of the M5S's supporters—took place in Turin. The first local groups linked to Beppe Grillo took part in provincial elections in 2009, even before the official founding of the M5S. In 2010, two regional councillors were elected to the regional council—the first ones, together with those from the Emilia-Romagna region. In 2011, the Movement obtained about 5 per cent of the votes and the election of two city councillors, and finally, in 2016, Chiara

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<sup>17</sup> Fassino is an important figure on the Italian left. A minister on several occasions, he was national secretary of the Democratici di Sinistra (the party which followed the PDS in the evolution of the parties born from the PCI) between 2001 and 2007.

Appendino, a former city councillor, became mayor of the city, marking one of the most important electoral victories of the M5S. Moreover, in recent years, in Turin and Piedmont (especially in Val di Susa) a strong local conflict against the high-speed train line Torino–Lione (TAV, Treno ad alta velocità) arose, and consequently a social movement emerged (the No TAV movement). The M5S has always supported the No TAV movement, and this had consequences both on the profile of the first activists and on the results of local electoral competitions (Mosca 2015; Biancalana 2020).

#### *4. The National Party Organisation*

The two parties under investigation will be observed from three points of view. These three main topics will also constitute the three separate chapters dedicated to each party. They are: national party organisation, the use of the internet for direct democracy purposes and a local electoral campaign.

The aim of chapters 3 and 6 is to analyse the national organisation of the Partito Democratico and of the Movimento 5 Stelle, respectively. In order to complete this task, together with a general examination of the parties' internal structures, I will investigate the three IPD areas outlined by von dem Berge and colleagues (2013), namely the internal distribution of power with respect to the selection of the leadership, the selection of candidates and the determination of policies. The aim of chapters 3 and 6 is thus to investigate the two parties' organisations in order to assess whether they employ disintermediation strategies, how they implement and interpret them, and which dimensions amongst those outlined prevails. The analysis includes both the examination of party documents, such as party statutes and rules, and in-depth interviews with privileged witnesses, such as members of party personnel able to give valuable information on their party's internal organisation. As highlighted by Katz and Mair (1992), party statutes are relevant sources, but they tell only one, minimal, side of the story of the internal distribution of power within that party: the official one. Actual power relations could be partially different. Moreover, we said that, in order to understand party change, it is necessary to comprehend how critical actors *perceive* the stimuli that lead to change. So, interviews are useful both in order to have a different account of the state of power relations within a party, which is different to that shown in the official documents, and in order to comprehend how critical actors perceive change and the reasons for some strategic decisions. In this regard,

interviews with privileged witnesses will allow us to grasp the discursive surroundings and narrative on party organisational change. In both cases, I analysed the evolution of each organisation from its foundation to the end of 2020. This allowed me to analyse the organisation not only in a static way but to observe the changes that occurred over time. This is particularly important for the M5S, a new party for which the evolution of the organisation equates with its institutionalisation, but also for the PD, in which leadership changes have shaped the party in different ways over time—although there haven't been substantial changes in the structure of the party.

The analysis of the M5S's organisational history will be carried out using Pedersen's “lifespan model” (1982), as adapted by Rihoux (2001). The lifespan model is a tool that has often been used to analyse the evolution of new parties, allowing researchers to examine the different phases of party development in terms of their links with the parties' organisational evolution. According to Pedersen, during their evolution, political parties pass through a number of phases or “thresholds”. Not all thresholds are necessary for a political party to exist, and not all thresholds have the same weight, but there is a given sequence in the parties' evolution, and crossing some thresholds is considered to be particularly critical for the parties' development, since the new functions that the parties face will instigate important organisational changes. Adapting Pedersen's model, Rihoux identifies five thresholds: declaration (the decision to participate in national elections); authorisation (the acquisition of the formal requirements to be allowed to compete in national elections); representation (entering the parliament); institutionalisation (the first national electoral confirmation); and government participation (entering the government). We can expect that, with the passing of these different thresholds, the internal structure of the M5S would become more complex, possibly developing new forms of intermediation. In contrast, as the PD's formal organisation has remained substantially unchanged over time, in the case of the Partito Democratico we can identify four phases: a genetic phase—the phase that precedes the party's foundation—and four phases that coincide with the four party leaders that succeeded each other in the time span 2007–2020.

## *5. The Use of the Internet*

The use of the internet is a fundamental topic to be analysed when dealing with parties' disintermediation strategies. Consequently, two separate

chapters here are dedicated to the analysis of the use of the web by the two parties. In reality, insights into the role and use of the internet by the two parties are also located in other sections of this work. For instance, in the chapters dedicated to members' and activists' participation, we can observe how the web changed the practices of participation of these actors. Moreover, in chapter 6 we will see that the internet has always been very important for the organisation of the M5S, both in terms of rhetoric and structuring the party's organisation. Even in chapter 3 we will see how the broad technological and societal changes brought by the spread of the internet have shaped the PD's organisation, in particular in the period when Matteo Renzi was the party leader.

Besides that, two separate chapters (chapters 4 and 7) are dedicated to the two parties' use of the internet. In these chapters, I will analyse the tools that can be included in the category of direct democracy, i.e. digital tools that could change the internal distribution of the parties' decision-making power in favour of their members. In particular, I will consider the online platform *Rousseau* for the M5S, analysing the online votes held in the time span 2012–2020, and the *circoli online* (online circles) experience and the mobile app *Bob* for the PD. The questions that chapters 4 and 7 endeavour to answer are related to the parties' use of the internet as a disintermediation tool potentially able to empower members, but also to strengthen existing or to create new hierarchies. The aim is then to assess whether or not these tools changed the power distribution within the parties and their impact on their organisation.

## *6. Members' and Activists' Participation*

The parties' disintermediation strategies consist in the creation of an unmediated connection between leader and followers, through the weakening of the party's intermediate organisation. In order to assess the consequences of this strategy at the local level, and the differences with respect to the national one, I focused specifically on members' and activists' participation practices, especially during a local electoral campaign. Against the backdrop of a collection of literature on parties that identifies the fall of party membership as the main sign of party decline—or better, the decline of the “mass” type of party—focusing on members' and activists' participation could seem pointless. In contrast, we know that party members continue to have an important role, mainly as organisational resources and a source of legitimacy (van Haute and Gauja 2015), and the picture

of party decline is much more nuanced than it appears at first glance (Scarrows 2014). Indeed, van Haute and Gauja (2015, 6) acknowledged that “aggregate figures can't really provide an understanding of the changes that are occurring in membership, nor how people experience it”. Furthermore, research on party membership at the individual level has typically focused on who joins parties, why, and what opinions they hold rather than on the activities they have undertaken.

For this part of my research, I conducted fieldwork in Turin. Fieldwork research, that is, an in-depth investigation of a few cases conducted through direct or participant observation and thick description (Cefai et al. 2012) cannot lead to generalisations but can offer innovative insights into how members' and activists' participation unfold and change. Ethnography allows an understanding of “what is political participation, in the classic sense of the term, by reporting it as it happens and not as it is portrayed in interview accounts or in survey questionnaires” (*ibidem*, 10). Accordingly, the study was conducted in a particular place and in a particular moment. The place was the city of Turin and the moment was the 2016 electoral campaign for the election of the mayor. Electoral campaigns are indeed a relevant moment, if not the most relevant moment, in which to analyse participation within parties and can tell us a lot about parties' inner workings. Most research on electoral campaigns seems to be dedicated to the effects of electoral campaigns on voters. In contrast, in line with Agrikoliansky, Heurtaux and Le Grignou (2011), the aim of this work is to study the electoral campaign *au concret* (concretely), as a *fait politique total*. Studying electoral campaigns as “total political facts” means analysing them as being revealing of the logic and practices of politics. Indeed, electoral campaigns analysed “concretely” allow us to see and understand processes that are usually hidden.

More specifically, we can say that electoral campaigns are the field in which parties are said to have “externalised” their functions the most. The voluntary work of members and activists is said to have been replaced with that of professionalised campaigners, and the relationship between party members and citizens with an unmediated leader–supporters relationship enacted through television or social media. An in-depth analysis of an electoral campaign at the local level would allow us to verify these assumptions, at least with respect to the cases under investigation. “One of the challenges of the ethnographic perspective is to capture precisely what is happening at the local level, the complexity and richness of participation situations as they occur and participants' experience, with its innovations, its ambiguities and its paradoxes” (Cefai et al. 2012, 9).

The 2016 electoral campaign in Turin saw two main competing fields: on the one hand, the M5S as a challenger and outsider party; on the other, the incumbent mayor Piero Fassino, member of the PD (then in the national government) and supported by a centre-left coalition. If the M5S represented the need for radical discontinuity, the figure of Fassino, an important personality on the Italian left and in the PD, symbolised in contrast a form of continuity, perceived as the guarantee of safeguarding the interests of groups that had participated in the management of the city for thirty years (Berta 2016). Chiara Appendino's victory, the candidate of the M5S, who explicitly presented herself as an alternative to this system of power (the slogan of her campaign was *L'alternativa è Chiara*, The Alternative is Clear), testified to the choice of the city for change<sup>18</sup>.

With regard to the Partito Democratico, my focus won't be precisely on the party's local campaign. I shall instead analyse an innovative practice, that is, the employment of "volunteers" for the electoral campaign. *Noi Siamo Torino* (We Are Turin, NST) is the name of the organisation that managed this part of the PD's local electoral campaign: it is a managerial and professionalised organisation, external and separate from the party, that aims to recruit volunteers in order to persuade citizens to vote for the mayoral candidate, not in the name of party identification but by enhancing their experience as lay citizens. In chapter 5, I shall offer an in-depth analysis of this experience and of its relationships with the Partito Democratico. As regards the Movimento 5 Stelle, I will focus on examining how a local M5S group functions. Indeed, the analysis won't be focused only on the electoral campaign, but also on the organisation of this actor at the local level, which is partially different to the national one.

The national context is usually considered the primary institutional context that shapes party politics. However, in line with Deschouwer (2006, see also Detterbeck 2012), it is important to question and problematise the different institutional contexts (national, regional and local) in which political parties play their role. The context—made up of formal institutions, electoral systems and cycles, and societal heterogeneity—must be considered one of the crucial variables related to the strategic and organisational choices of political parties. Parties that, like the M5S, operate

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18 In the first round, Fassino won 41.8 per cent and Appendino 30.9 per cent of the vote. In the second round, Fassino 45.4 per cent and Appendino 54.6 per cent. For an interpretation of electoral results that consider the territorial dimension of the vote and the divide between the centre and the periphery, see Cepernich, Cittadino and Pellegrino (2018).

in a multi-level system, have to face problems of vertical and horizontal integration: they have to coordinate both their action on different levels (national and local, for instance) and the homogeneity of the various local or regional organisations. The intertwining of these different levels affects parties' strategies, organisation and also members' participation.

For instance, while for the M5S the most important form of participation at the national level takes place online, face-to-face participation is considered fundamental at the local level. This fact goes against the image of the M5S as a "cyber" (Margetts 2006) or "digital" (Gerbaudo 2019) party. Also in this case, the image is more nuanced. And for this reason too, it is interesting to conduct an in-depth analysis of this player at the local level, a level often overlooked by scholars (for the analysis of the M5S at the local level, see Biorcio 2015; Biorcio and Sampugnaro 2019). The method of participant observation, and, more in general, qualitative research seems particularly fitting for an analysis of the M5S at the local level, not only because it allows us to take the context into account, but also because the absence of official structures at the local or regional level makes it difficult to analyse, at least with the analytical tools commonly used for the study of party organisations, such as the examination of statutes and other documents. Being unable to rely on such documents, a researcher can rely only on the reports of interviewees and on participant observation, i.e. on a point of view that is internal to the organisation.

To sum up, chapters 5 and 8 are dedicated respectively to the organisation that managed a part of Fassino's electoral campaign and to a local M5S group. As a consequence of disintermediation strategies, the classic role of party membership could be substituted by an unmediated relationship between leader and individual supporters. The aim of the chapters is an in-depth analysis of participation practices of party members at the local level in order to assess if this assumption is true, and of the observation of parties' responses and adaptations at this level.

## *7. Data and Methods*

As it encompasses different topics and subjects, this study relies on various types of data. Besides the analysis of party documents (statutes, rules, regulations, codes that will be mentioned in the text), the data used include: 42 interviews, the results of a fieldwork analysis, and an examination of the parties' participatory platforms.

The interviews conducted can be classified into two categories. The first type of interviews is those with the so-called “privileged witnesses”, that is, members of party personnel or other key informants who were well informed of the internal dynamics of the party and able to give me information on the internal distribution of the decision-making power within the organisation, through which it was also possible to uncover the discursive surroundings of the two parties’ organisations<sup>19</sup>. The interviews of this kind were focused mainly on three aspects: party organisation; the role of members and activists within the party; and communication (in particular the use and role of the internet). In order to understand the motivations behind the creation and the functioning of online circles, the founders of the circles of Bologna<sup>20</sup> and Turin have also been interviewed. The complete list of interviewees can be found in the Appendix.

The second type of interviews is that with party members and activists. These interviews were conducted in parallel with the activity of participant observation in Turin. After a short self-presentation, the interviewees were questioned on their perception of their role within the organisation and of the internal dynamics of the local and national organisations. Moreover, questions were asked regarding the activities carried out within the party and their participation practices. For NST, in a partially different vein, the interviews had the purpose of investigating the social and political identity of the volunteers, their motivation for joining the party and their perception of the electoral campaign. As regards privileged witnesses, the criterion for choosing the interviewees wasn’t the representativeness of the sample but the relevance of the information that each interviewee could give; as regards members and activists, however, I tried to maximise the diversity of opinions and biographies (age, faction, how long they had been enrolled, etc.).

The second type of data are the results of a fieldwork study conducted in Turin between March and December 2016. In that period, and in particular between March and June, that is, the electoral campaign period, I took part in the activities of three different groups: a local section (*circolo*) of

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19 I interviewed the PD’s and M5S’ privileged witnesses, but I decided not to interview privileged witnesses for NST. In that case, my close and prolonged contact with the organisers before and after the electoral campaign gave me all the information that I needed. Moreover, I had the opportunity to speak informally with the organisers during the writing of this work.

20 The online circle of Bologna was the first one to be opened and one of the most important ones in Italy.

the Partito Democratico<sup>21</sup>, a district group of the M5S, and NST. During the electoral campaign I took part in meetings, rallies, flyer hand-outs, but also closed or open meetings, and I continued to meet with the PD and M5S groups even a few months after the end of the electoral campaign. My activity of observation was openly declared, meaning that I declared my identity as a researcher to the groups.

As for the PD, I entered the local section introduced by an MP well known to the members of the local section. The MP introduced me to an old member, and I began to take part in the activities of the section with his “protection”. This man was highly respected by the group, and my participation posed no problem to them; on the contrary, everyone seemed to be happy to have me around. From the beginning, I clearly stated that my interest in the party was only a scientific one. Nevertheless, I had the impression that the PD members thought that I was a sympathiser of the party, and everyone was accommodating and kind with me. The interviewees were totally open, and members shared their concerns with me, the things that they believed wrong or unfair in the party (at the national and local level), as well as their personal sympathies and aversions within the local section and so on. The impression that I had was that they wanted and needed to be heard, and that they perceived my presence as a way in which they could express their concerns regarding the party.

As for the M5S, I came to the local section introduced by an interviewee, who was in charge of the electoral campaign of Chiara Appendino. There are 8 district groups in Turin—one for each district of the city—and he decided to “send” me to one of these. Following his advice, I contacted the district elected representative (that, as we will see in chapter 8, is a sort of local coordinator); she told me the date of the first meeting and I started to participate. In contrast to the case of the PD, here my presence was never totally accepted, at least by some members. In general, although I tried to look innocuous, my presence was almost always seen as a threat, perhaps for fear that I would spill their “secrets” to the public. In general, with respect to the majority of activists, the climate was of one of suspicion. There, I felt that they thought that I was not a sympathiser of the M5S. While some members considered me an activist, because I took part with continuity in the activities of the group, others avoided talking to me and also talking to others when I was present. My access to mailing lists and chats, as well as to important meetings, was denied. This attitude

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21 Data regarding the local section of the PD has been used only marginally in this work.

seems rather paradoxical for a party that makes transparency one of its trademarks, and can be considered, together with the rest, a result of the analysis. Likewise, interviews with activists were difficult to obtain and, despite the promise of anonymity, pretty standard; therefore, in order to hear some different voices, I had to talk to former members, who had moved away from the M5S.

As far as NST is concerned, I took part in the activities of the group for four months, from the beginning of March to the end of June 2016. During this period, I attended the weekly staff meetings and I took part in the activities of the volunteers on the ground, mainly, but not exclusively, in a particular district, a semi-peripheral and mainly residential one. I also took part in some public events of the electoral campaign in which the group was involved. I had full access to field operations, thanks to the organiser, Dr. Christopher Cepernich. I had complete access to the field, to staff meetings, and to the WhatsApp chat of the group. The purpose of my presence in the field was declared and was always up to date. Moreover, the similar background that I shared with the staffers facilitated the task. My relationship with them was friendly, and everyone was keen to share their impressions on the campaign with me.

I didn't conduct interviews with the electoral campaign staff, as the interactions with them took place mainly "on the ground", while they were doing their job. However, I interviewed the greater part of the campaign volunteers. Constantly taking part in the campaign activities and interacting in a context of great trust with the participants gave me a privileged point of view of NST's internal functioning mechanisms. As regards the type of activities I took part in, during the electoral campaign I participated in all the electoral campaign activities (rallies, flyer hand-outs...), and in meetings. After the electoral campaign, I took part in some meetings of the PD and in weekly stands and district council meetings with the M5S. The number of times I took part is listed in the Appendix. The aim of my participant observation was mainly to observe member and activist participation as it unfolded. While doing that, I also tried to focus on the organisation and communication practices of the groups.

Both the M5S and the PD have sections/groups in each district of the city. Until 2015 there were 10 districts in Turin, and in 2016 they became 8. The city has about 900,000 inhabitants, and each district has 80,000 to 140,000 inhabitants. It is clear, then, that each district, and thus each group, has its peculiarities. This is particularly true for the PD, because local sections (*circoli*) are often a continuation of the old Italian Communist Party sections (*sezioni*), and each section is rooted in

the very different history of the neighbourhoods of the city. But this also holds true for the M5S: each district has its problems and peculiarities; in each district the M5S partially attracted different people; finally, in a new organisation, without a structure, the quality of the people belonging to the group counts enormously. I could have interviewed one person for each district—the local section secretary for the PD, or the district elected representative for the M5S—but I decided to concentrate my efforts in order to carry out an in-depth analysis instead.

Like all choices, this came at a cost. In this case, the costs are related to the peculiarity of each district, which I will briefly describe here. The section of the PD that I studied is located in a central neighbourhood of Turin. The neighbourhood is characterised both by being an immigrant neighbourhood (the presence of immigrants, mainly from sub-Saharan Africa is high) and being one of the centres of the city's nightlife. The section was said to be one of the most active and leftist, but a change of the section secretary and the departure of some old militants following the election of Renzi as party leader created a sort of deadlock for the group. At the time of my observation, there were about 100 members, but about 25 were the most active. The local group of the M5S, in contrast, was in a peripheral district known for having been the site of a large car factory. The group didn't have official headquarters but rented a meeting room from time to time. About 25 activists made up the group, but about 15 of them, predominantly men of different ages and social background, were the most active ones. In the case of the M5S, for reasons that we will see in the following chapters, it is impossible to know the exact number of official members of the M5S in the area.

Finally, the last type of data used in my research is the analysis of the parties' participatory platforms and, more generally, of the online tools that can be classified in the category of direct democracy. These are the participatory platform *Rousseau* for the M5S and the *circoli online* (online sections) and the mobile app *Bob* for the PD. Most *circoli online* are no longer available online for consultation, so I had to rely on interviews for their examination. In contrast, at the time of my analysis the app *Bob* was still online and therefore I managed to examine its architecture (sections, available functionalities, affordances, etc.). I also tried to interview the person that various sources indicated to me was the only one in charge of the mobile app *Bob*, but after our first positive contact the person in question disappeared and so I had no opportunity to interview him. With regard to *Rousseau*, besides having conducted a general analysis of the architecture of the platform, I collected all the results of the online votes held from

2012 to 2020, creating a complete database. All the votes were classified by territorial level, turnout, as well as content and available options. Online votes are analysed in chapter 7, together with a broad assessment of the sections and functionalities present on the platform.