

1. Disintermediation as a Response to the “Crisis of Parties”?

1. *Introduction*

Political science scholars seem to agree that “the age of party democracy has passed” (Mair 2013, 1). This diagnosis does not primarily concern party resources, the centrality of parties in the processes of representative democracy at the level of national legislatures and executives, since “representative government remains very much a partisan affair” (Scarrows and Webb 2017, 3), or their role as institutionalisation agencies (Pizzimenti 2020), but their legitimacy and their connection with society (Ignazi 2004; 2017). It is a thesis that has been recognised for decades (Katz and Mair 1995) and has become almost common sense (Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017): following some cultural–societal changes, mainly linked to individualisation, parties failed to perform their representative function of forming a link between the citizens and the state.

More generally, some have envisaged a true “revolt” against intermediary bodies in our age (Urbinati 2015): in politics like in other fields, especially following the massive spread of the internet, people seem to want to do without intermediaries. This is also testified to by the increasing success of the term, and of the concept, of disintermediation. According to the definition given by Chadwick (2007), disintermediation means removing intermediaries from a supply chain, a transaction, or, more broadly, any set of social, economic, or political relations. The term was first used in the financial and economic sector, and then became popular with the spread of the internet: through the web, demand and supply can meet directly, making (at least potentially) intermediaries useless: “Internet communication networks reduce the need for those who have some traditional claim to expert knowledge or market dominance” (*ibidem*, 232).

But disintermediation seems not to be limited to commerce and business or to the effects of the internet. More generally, the elimination of intermediaries is an increasingly relevant phenomenon in contemporary societies: the success of Amazon and Twitter is only the tip of the iceberg. For instance, when we think of the changes that have occurred in journalism and communication, it is possible to notice a growing trend in the loss of importance of previously relevant intermediaries. Digital and social media have changed the journalistic profession and the structure of the public

domain (Chadwick 2013). On the one hand, every citizen can become an information producer, thus making journalism potentially redundant (Castells 2009); on the other, specifically in politics, digital and social media can create a direct communicative relationship between leaders and supporters, fostering personalisation processes (Ceccobelli 2017).

The literature so far seems then to have been more concerned with disintermediation as a process caused by recent social and technological transformations, to which actors are subject. My focus will be partially different, as I will consider the responses and adaptations of parties to this changing environment and label them as disintermediation strategies. Looking at disintermediation from this perspective, I will be able to consider the parties' internal dynamics and characteristics, which could shape the parties' strategies in differing ways. However, with regard to the general concept of disintermediation, two questions arise. The first is whether or not this alleged process of elimination of the intermediaries is a genuine one. In this regard, Chadwick (2007, 232) states that:

[...] it is by no means clear that intermediaries are being undermined by new information and communication technologies. The claim needs to be assessed alongside an appreciation of broader institutional concentrations of power. *Old intermediaries* have found their skills highly relevant to the internet age. They have at their disposal forms of knowledge, expertise, and wealth that are not distributed evenly throughout society. In some areas, *new intermediaries* are mushrooming (emphasis added).

On this subject, Chircu and Kauffmann (1999), writing almost twenty years ago about the emergence of new technologies for electronic commerce on the internet, developed the so-called intermediation-disintermediation-reintermediation (IDR) cycle. These scholars analysed the evolution of firm strategies when electronic commerce innovation occurs and discovered that traditional firms have access to a range of strategies that enable them to avoid disintermediation, hence becoming more powerful in the long run. Reintermediation is indeed the process by which a competitor that has been disintermediated is able to re-establish itself as an intermediary¹. If old intermediaries can therefore re-establish their power, and new intermediaries can arise, disintermediation appears to be—more

1 It is interesting to note that the fact that disintermediation always involves a process of reintermediation has been understood and seems very clear since the end of the 1990s in the field of commerce. On the contrary, as we will see, political

than intermediary elimination—intermediation of a different sort. Indeed, intermediary elimination does not automatically mean absence of intermediaries. Disintermediation can hence be considered a transformation or change of intermediaries, or of the forms of intermediation².

The second question regards the specificity of disintermediation in the political field. Speaking of mediation or intermediation in politics equates to speaking of political representation (Pitkin 1967). Scholars (Manin 1995; Saward 2010; Urbinati 2013) have long claimed that we are witnessing a “crisis of representation” that manifests itself in growing dissatisfaction with and mistrust in politics and politicians and in lower turnout rates, but also in the rejection of intermediate entities and in the emergence and strengthening of new forms of non-mediated or unmediated forms of political action. According to Tormey (2015), we are moving from a “vertical” to a “horizontal” mode of politics, and this reflects the kind of society in which representation emerged and in which we are living now. Representative politics as we know it is a practice that emerged under particular historical conditions, in a particular time and place. We can therefore imagine that the practices of representation might change under different conditions.

For a long time, parties have been at the centre of representative democracy (Manin 1995). According to Urbinati (2015, 480–1) “it is impossible to understand representation without understanding the meaning, role and function of the political party”. In contrast, nowadays we are witnessing deep dissatisfaction with the way in which they have been organised in recent decades, embodied both by the electoral rejection of traditional parties and the emergence of protest movements and new parties which have profited from the distrust towards mainstream parties. It seems that some social, political and cultural changes have made parties “unfit” (Ig-

actors have used the term rather uncritically as a rhetorical tool to legitimate their strategies.

- 2 Analyses such as Chircu and Kauffmann’s remind us of Pierre Bourdieu’s studies on the concept of field (2000). According to Bourdieu, a field is a relatively autonomous microcosm within which struggles take place to define a “dominant view” and power relationships. When new actors enter the field—in the case of commerce, for instance, intermediaries in electronic commerce—the structure of the field is modified: some actors (e.g. old intermediaries) can adapt and try to re-establish their power; others (new intermediaries) can be incorporated into the field and accept its norms, contributing both to the modification of those norms and to their own institutionalisation.

nazi 2020) for postmodern societies. How are parties adapting to these new circumstances? Obviously, it is not a stimulus–response dynamic.

According to Harmel and Janda (1994), parties change in response to internal or external stimuli. Change can be considered the effect of an external stimulus (environmental—the environment being other parties too—or technologic) that joins forces with internal factors (that were autonomously shaking the party's internal power structure, e.g.: leadership change, dominant coalition change). Harmel and Janda's theory relies on Panebianco (1988), who stated that environmental stimuli may act as an important *catalyst* for the process that ultimately results in change, accelerating the transformations to the power structure, whose preconditions were already existent. However, in order to not to fall into a deterministic approach, it is also important to note that parties modify their environment too, and that their leadership is free to decide whether or not adapt to the changes, whatever consequences might result (Deschouwer 1992). The context does not *determine* the choices made by party actors. The critical actors within the parties must *perceive* environmental changes, and their probable effects on the party, in order for the environmental change to cause the party change. “Perception is the intermediate variable that has to be placed between objective facts and the reactions of the party” (*ibidem*, 17).

Recent research on organisational change has specified that the drivers of party change can be located at three different but intertwined levels: the level of the political system, where the general political norms and practices are located, the level of the party system—that is, the interactions and “contagion” between parties—and the level of the political parties, the level at which party members, party officials and party leaders act (Barnea and Rahat 2007; Gauja 2017). However, the aim of this study is not to propose a causal framework for the emergence of disintermediation strategies. As also underlined by Pizzimenti, Calossi and Cicchi (2020), disintermediation is considered in this work a heuristic tool used to jointly frame a number of changes in party organisations; in the following chapters my goal will be to test the heuristic validity of the concept. Nevertheless, bearing in mind that parties, with their actions and discourses, can also modify the environment, for instance influencing citizens' opinions and attitudes, and that their perceptions of environmental changes are just as important as the environmental changes themselves (Gauja 2017), to better contextualise the rise and success of disintermediation rhetoric and practices, in the next section I shall present some social and political trends

common to most Western democracies that can influence party change towards disintermediation.

2. A Quest for Unmediated Relationships

Two connected trends that can affect party politics and influence party change have been outlined by the literature: refusal of hierarchy and mistrust in politics. A trend that scholars have been investigating in recent decades is the decline of deference (Nevitte 1996; 2014), defined as a positive orientation towards authority. Studies have demonstrated that, in the last forty years, orientations towards authority became less deferential in the family, the workplace and the polity, and that orientations towards authority are connected across these different domains. According to these data, we are witnessing a continuing shift away from obedience to authority towards more individual autonomy in shaping family, work and social relations. The decline of deference is part of the broader processes of social modernisation (Inglehart 1990), individualisation (Giddens 1990; Bauman 1999; Elias 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Corcuff, Jon and de Singly 2005) and the shift away from tradition that characterise the so-called second modernity and might have political consequences.

The subtitle of a recent book edited by Russell Dalton and Christian Welzel (2014), *From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens*, summarises well the shift that the two scholars notice in citizens' attitudes and behaviour in dozens of countries around the world. According to these scholars, an allegiant political culture consists of orientations that tie citizens loyally to their society and its institutional order. It is possible to distinguish between three manifestations of such allegiant orientations: institutional confidence, philanthropic faith (trust in others and in democracy, interest in politics) and norm compliance. On the other hand, assertive orientation is a posture that encourages people to be critical and to voice shared concerns. The three elements of the assertive orientation are: individual liberties, equal opportunities and *people's voice*, that is precisely “the belief that people should have a voice in collective decisions on various levels, so that these decisions reflect what most people want”. According to Dalton and Welzel, we are witnessing a transition from allegiant to assertive cultures. People in mature post-industrial democracies have become sceptical towards authority and institutions and are now more willing to assert their own views and to confront elites with demands from below, even

in politics. The growth of suspicious attitudes towards experts during the coronavirus outbreak is a further sign of a shift in that direction.

In fact, mistrust in politics is also a subject that has been deeply investigated (Norris 1999; Hay 2007; Tormey 2015) and in turn has its roots in individualisation, cognitive mobilisation (Inglehart 1977), de-ideologisation and the decline of party identification (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002). Data show that citizens—also due to a public discourse that contributed to fostering anti-politics phenomena (Mastropaoletti 2012)—have become more distrustful of electoral politics, institutions and representatives. As a consequence, voter turnout is decreasing, party membership is dropping (van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012) and so is the level of trust and confidence in political parties in general. For the people that decide to vote, the option of the so-called populist or anti-establishment parties, which openly contest the organisation and ideology of traditional parties, is more and more appreciated. On the other hand, we are witnessing the emergence of new forms of political activism, online and offline, and the creation of deliberative and participatory experiments that try to involve citizens directly within institutions' decision-making processes (Della Porta 2013). To sum up, these studies argue that in recent decades individualisation, communicative abundance, the spread of digital media³, and the decline of collective identities, fostered by the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism (Tormey 2015) have made it hard for citizens to accept authority—in particular, the authority of politicians—, as well as the respect for hierarchy that is at the basis of political organisations such as parties and, in general, the concept of representation.

However, a recent study by Foa and Mounk (2017) seems to contradict this line of reasoning, showing that more and more American citizens are open to non-democratic types of regimes. In particular, the percentage of respondents who replied that it would be “good” or “very good” to have a “strong leader” who doesn’t have to “bother with parliament and elections” is rising. Among all age cohorts, the share of citizens who believed that it would be better to have a “strong leader” who does not have to “bother with parliament and elections” rose over time: in 1995, about 24

3 Both the decline of deference and mistrust in politics can be related to the changes that have occurred in media systems. On the one hand, communicative abundance makes information easy to retrieve, so the need for expert knowledge is considered less important, as is the authority of experts. On the other, the opportunities given by the web 2.0 can give citizens the impression that their voice as common citizens is important and will potentially be heard.

per cent of respondents held this view; by 2011, that figure had increased to 32 per cent. Meanwhile, the proportion of citizens who approved of “having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country” grew from 36 to 49 per cent⁴.

The decline of deference and support for non-democratic types of regimes seem two trends in contradiction, but it is possible to argue that they follow the same logic: the bypassing of intermediary entities and the creation of unmediated relationships between citizens and power. These unmediated relationships may be constituted by forms of direct, bottom-up requests to the elites (the “people should have a voice”) or through the decisions of a strong leader that directly embodies “what most people want”. In both cases, there seems to be a will to bypass intermediate entities and the processes and procedures of representative politics intended in the last century.

[...] we are witnessing, on the one hand, the re-emergence of charismatic leaders [...] and, on the other, a process going in quite the opposite direction as it claims to promote the diffusion of politics in view of reaffirming ordinary citizens’ voice against the established political elites (Urbinati 2015, 477).

As a consequence of these broad social and political changes, we can hypothesise that political actors such as parties are trying to adapt to this new context. Nevertheless, we know that in order to analyse party change it is also necessary to pay attention to the internal factors that could shape party strategies. For instance, traditional and new parties could adapt differently to the same external conditions. Disintermediation strategies can be thus considered the parties’ reaction to those broad social and political changes and to their perception of them, mediated by intra-party mechanisms and inter-party competition.

3. Parties’ Disintermediation Strategies

In order to analyse parties’ disintermediation strategies, it is first necessary to specify that parties are not unitary entities: on the contrary, they are multifaceted (Katz and Mair 1993) and multilevel (Deschouwer 2006; Detterbeck 2012) institutions that perform many different actions. They

4 Responses to Foa and Mounk’s article can be found at <https://journalofdemocracy.org/online-exchange-democratic-deconsolidation/>.

structure the electoral competition, recruit political personnel, aggregate demands and interests, create public policies, organise members' participation and mobilisation (Bartolini and Mair 2001). However, parties are first of all organisations: if we focus on this aspect, we can ask how do parties respond to the changing environment by modifying their internal organisation.

3.1 Disintermediation in Party Organisations

The topic of party organisational change has been debated by political sociologists and political scientists since the dawn of their disciplines (Duverger 1951). In particular, in the last fifty years, various works have investigated the evolution of party models (for a critique, see Webb, Poguntke and Scarrow 2017). These works assume that the mass party, founded on party membership and typical of the industrial era, whose characteristics have often been considered "mythological" (Lefebvre 2013; Scarrow 2014), is vanishing, and they use it as an explicit or implicit term of comparison for the other party types that emerged over time. These studies take into consideration several dimensions of party change; here, I'm interested particularly in organisational changes⁵. From Kirchheimer's catch all-party (1966), to Panebianco's electoral-professional party (1988), and finally to Katz and Mair's cartel party (1995), this stream of literature outlines a series of trends.

The starting point, as we have already pointed out, is the gradual detachment of parties from society and their move towards the state "to compensate for the deficits that emerged with their delinking with society" (Ignazi 2020, 10). This, in turn, can be linked to one the greatest transformations in party organisations in recent decades, which is the decline of party membership (van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012). The move of parties towards the state can be considered a cause of the decline of party membership, because citizens came to perceive them as self-referential, affluent and resourceful actors, interested only in maintaining their privileges. But the move towards the state is also a consequence of the drop in the figures of

5 As regards the catch-all party, in reality only two out of five characteristics of this party model are related to party organisation (the lesser importance of party membership and the increased importance of party leadership). Even the cartel party model is not based primarily on organisational characteristics: individualisation of the membership and centralisation are only corollaries.

members: parties had to somehow replace the resources (e.g. money and workforce) that previously came from members, who were less and less stably linked to a party due to processes such as de-ideologisation.

Anyhow, the decline of party membership considerably changed the shape of party organisations. The loss of parties' legitimacy and the decline of their membership can be considered the drivers that led parties to open up their decision-making processes to members. The fact that the so-called party on the ground is declining in number and becoming apparently more powerful at the same time can indeed be seen as “paradoxical” (Scarrows 2014). In reality, it can be considered as an attempt by parties to revitalise themselves and to regain legitimacy by giving individual members a say in internal party decisions. Indeed, party members, and in some cases also supporters, have become more and more involved in the selection of a party leader (Pilet and Cross 2014), candidate selections (Hazan and Rahat 2010) and, in some cases, also in policy decisions (Gauja 2015) through direct votes. It is the well-known trend of an increase in intra-party democracy (Cross and Katz 2013) that has affected parties in the last few years. The declared aim of these reforms is to give relevance to party membership, to recover the relationship with citizens and, more generally, to democratise parties.

However, besides the desired effects, this trend towards the opening of decision-making processes might have other outcomes. The first one is the individualisation of participation within parties: the direct appeal to members would in fact promote an unmediated and atomised kind of participation. The second one is the marginalisation of the so-called middle-level elite: it has been demonstrated that empowering members causes the bypassing and weakening of the intermediate levels of party organisation. Finally, the third one is an increase in the power of the leadership. Indeed, some scholars have argued that the trend towards the internal democratisation of parties can be understood as a deliberate strategy by the party leadership to have more control over the organisation (Mair 1994, 16–17). In this respect, Mair hypothesises that:

[...] parties are actually making a careful and conscious distinction between different elements within the party on the ground, in the sense that the process of intra-party democratization is being extended to the members as individuals rather than to what might be called the *organized* party on the ground. In other words, it is not the party congress or the middle-level elite, or the activists, who are being empowered, but rather the “ordinary” members, who are at once more docile and more likely to endorse the policies (and candidates) pro-

posed by the party leadership and by the party in public office [...]. Ordinary members, often at home, and via postal ballots, are increasingly being consulted by the party leadership, and are increasingly involved in legitimizing the choices of the party in public office [...]. In a related vein, it might also be argued that the process of intra-party democratization is often meaningless and/or illusory.

More generally, the attempt to reverse the oligarchic tendencies of parties (Michels 1911) runs counter to the internal dynamics of party organisations. Party types that have emerged with the transformation of societies have not been able to overturn Michels' "sociological law" (Carty 2013), because the devolution of power to individual members foster a plebiscitary approach to politics and create an unmediated relationship between leader and followers which substantially benefits the former. This increased relevance of party leaders is favoured not only by the changes in party organisations but also by long-term trends towards leadership personalisation (Blondel and Thiébault 2010) and the presidentialisation of politics (Poguntke and Webb 2005). As part of the growing relevance of individual political actors at the expense of parties and collective identities (Karvonen 2010), leaders are increasingly resourceful within executives and parties, and in electoral processes (Calise 2010). Transformations in the structure of political communication, starting from the growing role of television in politics, have had a crucial role in these processes: electronic media allow the transmission of an unmediated message from the leader to the electorate, without the need of an intermediate organisation or the groundwork of party members.

To sum up, what emerges in this stream of literature, against the backdrop of the detachment of parties from civil society, are two separate but interrelated trends: on the one hand, the empowerment of individual party members; on the other, a concentration of power in the hands of party leaderships. The concept of disintermediation can be used to summarise the two trends that have occurred in recent decades, as it holds together the two directions of the weakening of the party's intermediate organisation, which are often considered separately. Indeed, what unites these two trends is the attempt to bypass the party's intermediary structure and to create an unmediated relationship between leader and followers.

In an increasing number of situations, as we will see with the analysis of the two cases examined in this work, we witness the simultaneous presence of elements of horizontality (direct participation from below) and verticality (concentration of power in the hands of the leader): the concept of disintermediation can then be helpful in understanding these

apparently contradictory phenomena. Moreover, disintermediation does not simply mean the lack or the elimination of intermediaries. On the contrary, it appears as a *transformation* of the forms of intermediation. So, the use of this concept allows us to describe not only the trends towards the creation of an unmediated relationship between leader and followers, but also the presence of new forms of intermediation or the persistence of previous ones. The idea of the existence of an IDR cycle can also be useful in the case of party organisations: the analysis of parties' disintermediation strategies should also encompass the evaluation of the emergence of new forms of intermediation and the persistence of traditional forms of intermediation, that is, a reflection on disintermediation as a process which takes place over time. Finally, the alleged “illusory” nature of members' empowerment highlighted by Mair urges us to stress the difference between disintermediation rhetoric and practices and to evaluate the actual distribution of the decision-making power within a party.

3.2 Disintermediation Rhetoric and Practices

We have observed how in a general context characterised by some social and political trends, parties have changed their organisations by developing unmediated relationships between leaders and supporters: this is the essence of the concept of disintermediation. At this point, an important distinction that has to be made is the one between rhetoric and practices of disintermediation. A request for an unmediated relationship, or the acknowledgement of that request by parties, does not automatically mean that actual unmediated relationships are established. It is then important, in the first place, to distinguish between rhetoric and practices (Kittilson and Scarrow 2003), or between the symbolic and substantive aspect of disintermediation (on substantive and symbolic party change see Harmel 2002; Gauja 2017). Parties' disintermediation strategies can be only rhetorical or symbolic, not involving any actual change in the distribution of their internal decision-making power, but only the creation of a discourse or a narrative on it.

Symbolic change is that which is largely formal and ceremonial, without creating any corresponding alteration in political practice. Change may be symbolic because it codifies an existing practice, or because it primarily seeks to change attitudes rather than enforce a particular type of behaviour (Gauja 2017, 1).

However, this doesn't mean that the narrative is not important. Writing about party reforms that are "intentional and publicized changes that are made to a party's structures and practices in order to improve them", Gauja (2017) acknowledged that the symbolism of change can be just as important as the substance—including whether or not the reform initiative actually succeeds in changing established party practice. The discourse surrounding party reform can be even more important than its actual implementation, having an impact on both citizens' perceptions and parties themselves.

We know that in recent years the term and the concept of disintermediation entered the public debate. As we have seen, it has been used by scholars as an analytical or heuristic tool, but it has also been used by political actors as a strategy to legitimise their actions. If, on the one hand, parties adapt to social and political changes, it is also true, on the other hand, that they can also strategically use those changes in their rhetoric and with their practices in a way that is convenient for them, influencing, in turn, citizens' opinions and attitudes. This can make the study of disintermediation slippery ground and urges us to carefully consider the rhetorical or symbolic side of party strategies. This problem has already been recognised, for instance, in the case of the category of populism and, more generally, in the complex relationship between the political scientist, the object of his or her research and the categories used for analysis; a relationship that also involves the political, scientific and cultural context in which research is carried out.

Political scientists are faced with "labels" and "tags" conveyed by their own colleagues, but also by actors themselves (representatives of the party, opponents, various commentators, etc.). Labels (markers, classifications) which claim to be "scientific" *de facto* adopt a terminology, a language which refers to and makes sense in universes which go far beyond the scientific sphere [...]. For this reason, the work of definition, and first of all labelling, should include a critical reflection on the categories used, in particular on their conditions of production and reception. These categories contribute to ensuring that a particular party, at any given time, can be defined in one way rather than another. The act of labelling and of scientific definition thus participates, voluntarily or not, in the construction of the public image of the party, in making it "exist", promoting for example its "centrality" or its political "marginality" (Mazzoleni 2007, 18, my translation).

As regards the two Italian parties considered in this work, we can say that the term and the concept of disintermediation are present in both their rhetoric and their practices. As regards the M5S, we can say that disintermediation, intended as the creation of a direct link between citizens and power, is the very core of its political message and its idea of democracy. We can see it in this quotation from a post published on Beppe Grillo's blog in 2013:

The M5S wants to achieve direct democracy, disintermediation between state and citizens, the elimination of parties, initiatives without quorum: the citizen in power (Post *Il M5S non è di destra né di sinistra*, 11/1/13).

In an interview quoted in Gerbaudo (2021), Roberto Fico, the current speaker of the lower house, states that the original idea behind the M5S “was making politics as direct as booking tickets on Ryanair or booking a room on AirBnb”. This idea, as we will see, is mirrored in the M5S's internal organisation, as well as in its use of the internet. We can say that the aim of this newly established party is to overcome representative democracy through forms of internet-mediated participation. But the term disintermediation has been used by representatives of the PD too. An article written by Lorenzo Guerini, chief of the party's national organisation during Renzi's first mandate as party secretary, is revealingly titled *The Political Party in the Era of Disintermediation*. Guerini (2014) states that “[mainstream] parties have not managed to change themselves, adapting to social changes” and asks which party model can fit the new demands in the era of disintermediation. According to him, party primaries, “can be understood as a democratic interpretation of disintermediation”⁶. Through primaries the citizen-elector can identify “his preferred programmatic proposal, embodied by a democratically legitimated leadership”. Furthermore, the term disintermediation was widely used by Matteo Renzi, party leader of the PD between 2013 and 2018, as well as by scholars and journalists in order to describe Renzi's attitude towards communication and trade unions (Cuono 2015).

⁶ It is interesting to note that Guerini adds the adjective democratic to the term disintermediation. It seems that he perceives disintermediation as a rather negative trend, which the PD is making positive with party primaries. In contrast, we can note that, for the M5S, the concept of disintermediation is a completely positive one and seen as the very goal of the party.

3.3 Disintermediation from Below and from Above

Parties' disintermediation practices in party organisations can be observed through the examination of the distribution of the party's internal decision-making power. We can expect that an increase in the decision-making power of its leadership and of its individual members would weaken the party's intermediate organisation as a consequence. We can thus distinguish between two different sub-dimensions of disintermediation, which correspond to the two separate trends identified in the literature on parties' organisational change, and question whether there is one that prevails in their rhetoric or practices, and which one it is: from below (i.e. inclusiveness, thus increasing decision-making power for members and supporters); and from above (i.e. the increasing autonomy of the party leadership)⁷.

Inclusiveness is the core of the concept of intra-party democracy (von dem Berge and Poguntke 2017). Intra-party democracy (IPD) is a broad term used to describe a wide range of methods to include party members in intra-party deliberations and decision-making (Scarrows 2005). So, in order to analyse inclusiveness (and exclusiveness) in party organisations, we can rely on the dimensions and indicators developed in this field of research. According to Scarrows (2005, 6), inclusiveness regards "how wide the circle of party decision makers is". In exclusive parties, the main decisions are made by a small number of party actors, that is, the party leadership. In contrast, in inclusive parties, a large number of party members make decisions on the central issues of the party. Von dem Berge and Poguntke (2017, 140) define inclusiveness in the following terms:

- (i) the higher the number of party members involved in intra-party decision-making (relative to party size), (ii) the more open the election and composition of party organs (e.g., absence of ex officio seats), and

⁷ Pizzimenti, Calossi and Cicchi (2020) further developed the concept of disintermediation applied to party organisations ("internal" disintermediation). They propose using four indicators to analyse disintermediation in party organisations, namely: the opening of boundaries of party organisations (for instance, also opening the organisation to "friends" and/or "sympathizers"); the dismissal of the party's collateral organisations, the decrease in the number of party layers between the highest executive body and the party congress, and a greater presence of representatives of the party in public office in the party's executive organs; the expansion of the rights and functions of the party leader.

(iii) the more the party leader shares power with other, more inclusive party organs or actors, the more inclusive [...] a party is.

Scholars have recognised three main areas to investigate IPD (von dem Berge et al. 2013). The first is the decision-making power of members in formulating and implementing policies. The second one is the decision-making power of members in deciding on party personnel. Here, two intra-party processes are relevant: leadership selection and candidate selection. The third regards the formal distribution of power within the organisation. Consequently, in this work, together with a general analysis of party structure (number, role and characteristics of the party's intermediate bodies), three main aspects will be taken into consideration in order to analyse disintermediation practices⁸: the selection of the leader and his/her role within the organisation; the selection of candidates; the determination of policies. Moreover, one last aspect to consider is the role of party membership, a dimension in part already included in the three areas outlined above (e.g. whether or not members have the power to select leaders, candidates, policies), but that it is also worth to analyse separately.

The topic of transformation of party membership is crucial for the study of party organisations. On the one hand, traditionally intended members' participation is said to have been replaced with an unmediated relationship between leaders and individual supporters. On the other hand, recent research (Scarrows 2014) accounts for a more nuanced picture, as parties can open new channels of partisan engagement and communication that can complement or substitute traditional party membership. At the same time, other scholars tell us that party members still have important functions within their party: on the one hand they are an important organisational resource (for instance, in electoral campaigns or in selecting candidates), but they are also an important source of legitimacy for parties (van Haute and Gauja 2015). Analysis of the role of party membership is also relevant since, drawing on previous research, we know that disintermediation strategies could involve both the weakening of the middle-level elite and the decline of the role of party members within parties' organisational structures.

To conclude, when importing or developing a new concept, it is appropriate to explain why existing concepts are not fit to describe or explain

⁸ I must specify that my goal is not to analyse these aspects quantitatively, but to use these dimensions as a guide for the qualitative analysis of the two party organisations.

the phenomenon under investigation. In my case, the essential reference is the aforementioned Katz and Mair's cartel party thesis. The cartel party thesis served as a starting point for the development of my framework, but since the focus of my research is partially different, I detached my work from it in various respects. In the cartel party thesis, organisational changes are seen as the by-product of the increasing proximity of parties to the state. The focus, then, is on party-state relationships and on inter-party collusion, aspects that in my research are kept in the background. The premises are thus similar; in a context characterised by a declining level of participation and by individualisation, state resources are used to maintain parties' positions within the political system, IPD is used as a tool of control by the party elite, and the autonomy of the leadership increases in the end. But, on the other hand, my framework is detached from the cartel party thesis in three main respects.

The first one, as I said, is the different focus (inter-party in the case of the cartel party thesis vs. intra-party in this research study). Organisational changes, and in particular the unmediated relationships established within the party, are my main focus. Starting from this different focus, in my framework I enriched and made more complex some ideas present in Katz and Mair's piece of research. In the first place, I analytically divided the two sub-dimensions (inclusiveness and autonomy of the party leadership) that, often considered separately, are kept together within my definition of disintermediation. In the second place, I distinguished between practices and rhetoric, valuing the symbolic dimension of party change. In the third place, as we have seen, the concept of disintermediation presented in this study, as opposed to existing concepts, allows us to also take into consideration the process of the emergence of new forms of intermediation. Finally, I found the concept of disintermediation useful with respect to the existing concepts because it represents the decline in politics of phenomena that, as we have seen, are present in other fields too. By using this concept, I do not intend to deny the specificity of political phenomena; on the contrary, my aim is to show their distinctiveness against the backdrop of broad social processes.

3.4 The Role of the Internet

Disintermediation is not limited to the internet, but it is true that the web plays an important role in these processes, so it is interesting to consider the relationship between the internet and parties specifically: how

do parties use the internet and what is its impact on them? This is relevant because not only can the web transform the way in which parties communicate and organise themselves (Barberà et al. 2021), but also because new technologies could have a broader impact on the relationship between the represented and the representatives in contemporary democracies (De Blasio 2014). The internet allows faster exchange of information, potentially without geographical boundaries. Moreover, especially following the advent of the so-called web 2.0, friendlier interfaces have made bidirectional communication suitable for all. Each user has the opportunity to become not only a receiver but also an information producer, and this has consequences on different fields, including the political one. On the one hand, institutions, parties and social movements have adapted to this new environment; on the other, citizens now act in a public sphere in which new technologies play an increasing role.

With regard to parties⁹, the pioneering study by Gibson, Nixon and Ward (2003) identified three main areas in which to investigate the use and the impact of the internet on parties: party competition and online campaigning; internal democracy; and the role of parties in contemporary democracies. This classification has the trait of not limiting the web's impact on parties only to communication: parties can use the internet not only to communicate with citizens and supporters and to receive feedback from them, bypassing journalism and creating a direct link with public opinion, but the web may also be an organisational infrastructure for activism (as it allows communication in real time, without sharing physical space) and potentially a tool for deliberating and deciding, thus innovating decision-making processes. Digital technologies can thus redefine parties' structures and practices from various and different points of view, with repercussions on the mechanisms of political representation.

In order to investigate the role of the internet in parties' disintermediation strategies, it is necessary to specify and distinguish between the possible uses of the web by parties and their impacts, building a classification of parties' uses of the internet. In order to create it, we can ask ourselves two questions: Who is the recipient of the party's digital communication? What function or goal does it perform? As far as the first question is concerned, we can distinguish between an external recipient (citizens, the media, etc.) and an internal one (party members, activists, party personnel, etc.). As regards the second one, we can identify three different goals of

⁹ I must specify that here I'm dealing only with the use of the internet by parties, and not by leaders or candidates.

parties' digital communication: communication, action, direct democracy. Crossing these two dimensions, we can build a classification of the possible uses of the internet by parties and of their digital communication tools (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 *Uses of the internet by parties*

Recipient/Function	Communication	Action	Direct democracy
External: citizens and the media	Communication and information (top-down) Collection of feedback (bottom-up)		
Internal: party members, activists, cadres		Organisation (vertical) Coordination (horizontal)	Discussion Consultation Decision (initiatives or referenda)

In the case of an external recipient, the internet can be used by parties to communicate with citizens (top-down dimension) or to receive feedback from them (bottom-up dimension). The tools that can be included in this category are the party website or its social network accounts, through which the party can inform citizens (also directly, with direct messages such as e-mails), but also collect feedback from them (e.g. through comments or parts of the website dedicated to feedback). The external use of the internet mainly has a communicative function, intended as a transfer of information and sharing of interpretations between actors.

The internal use of the internet can have two main goals. The first is aimed at action, which is the achievement of a purpose. The web can help groups to coordinate their action (horizontal dimension) and/or organise participation and mobilisation (vertical dimensions). The difference between coordination and organisation is relevant here. The use of the internet for organisation purposes is a top-down one, with a centre from which the communication flow starts. In contrast, the use of the internet for coordination purposes is horizontal, as it allows groups to coordinate themselves in the absence of a single centre or leader. Examples of coordination could be chats, mailing lists or groups through which party members (e.g. the party's local groups or sub-groups) can organise local

meetings or other initiatives¹⁰. On the other hand, examples of use of the web for organisation purposes could be tools such as dashboards, used by parties to mobilise members and supporters during electoral campaigns. The difference between coordination and organisation is that in the first case there is not an official hierarchy, while in the second case it is the party that organises the online mobilisation from above.

I have defined the second internal use of the internet by parties as “direct democracy”, and it involves intra-party democracy. Indeed, the web does not only allow the organisation of social action without the sharing of the same physical space. From the very beginning, it was thought that the internet could foster direct democracy experiences, especially in the so-called cyber-optimistic vision of the relationship between the web and democracy. One major critique of direct democracy in modern societies is that it is impossible to realise, due to the impossibility of managing deliberations and votes involving a large number of people. Theoretically, the internet could solve this problem, and that is true not only at the political system level, but also within parties. With direct democracy tools, such as participatory platforms, parties could indeed empower members, giving them a say in party decisions and then potentially altering the distribution of the internal decision-making power in their favour.

However, this varies according to the actual power that parties are willing to grant to their members. Using the typology by De Cindio and Stortone (2013), we can outline three different types of use of the internet for this purpose, depending on the actual transfer of power to the base and on the commitment of the party to take into consideration members’ stances. These three types are: discussion, consultation and decision. Discussion means that the party neither commits to collecting members’ ideas nor to taking them into consideration. Tools falling into this category could be discussion forums: spaces in which there is an exchange of ideas among members, completely unlinked to the party’s decision-making process. In the case of consultation, the party commits to collecting and considering members’ ideas, but in a non-binding manner. Finally, decision means that the party commits itself to pursuing the decisions taken by the members online¹¹. Tools falling into this category could be participation platforms in which it is possible to organise binding consultations.

10 This can call to mind the use of the internet by social movements (Castells 2012).

11 Here, we can also distinguish between initiatives (members have the power to request a consultation) and referenda (consultations come from below).

The impact of the use of the internet on parties is therefore different depending on the recipient and the goal. Communication is not the main focus of this work. With regard to action, we can say that the internet can have an impact on members' and activists' participation practices, allowing both the autonomous and horizontal coordination of groups and top-down organisation of individual activism, and on the party's structure. With regard to direct democracy, the main impact is on party organisation, as digital tools can potentially change the distribution of the decision-making power within the party, for instance in the case of participatory platforms¹². Not to mention that the very fact of creating an online tool—regardless of its effectiveness—can have an impact on the image of the party in the public sphere, and then on citizens' and members' perceptions of the party.

However, if parties can empower their members with digital tools, online participation can be highly individualised. In addition, it is important to pay attention to the architecture of participatory platforms, as they can hide new concentrations of power: technology is not neutral, and the ownership of the online participation tools and the identity of the subject who holds the authority to set the rules of participation are two key issues to be investigated¹³. The risk is empowering the centre instead of the base, as online decision-making processes could result only in the ratification of choices taken elsewhere.

In this regard, together with Pedersen and Saglie (2005, 362), we can ask ourselves: "What would happen to party organisations if traditional party activities were replaced by electronic participation?". These two scholars envisage three scenarios. In the first one, the new ICTs undermine the power of the party leadership in favour of the empowerment of party membership. In the second one, the individual participation fostered by ICTs weakens the deliberative aspect of party organisations and thus give the leaders, and in general the party elites, more power. In the third, the impact of ICTs on power, democracy, and participation is "limited". This does not mean that the new media are unimportant, but that, for instance,

12 Some authors (Gerbaudo 2019) have claimed that parties that rely on this kind of tools in their internal decision-making processes can be considered a new party type, the so-called digital party. For a critique, see: Passarelli, G., *Il partito digitale: un'ipotesi per parlare di politica, ma senza prove*, <https://www.che-fare.com/partito-digitale-gerbaudo-senza-prove/>, October 2nd, 2020.

13 At a broader level, we can also consider companies such as Google and Facebook new intermediaries, as they are acting more and more as gatekeepers. This is particularly true for parties that don't rely on proprietary software.

increased access to them does not necessarily create greater interest in political participation.

Drawing on the work of Pateman and Verba, we can imagine a fourth scenario according to which ICTs perform mainly a *symbolic function*: a point that resonates with the rhetoric dimension of disintermediation. According to this hypothesis, digital tools are not used to give members more power, but to give them the *impression* they can influence the decision-making processes of the party. It's what Pateman (1970, 69; see also Verba 1961) called pseudo-participation. Pseudo-participation is a situation in which no participation in decision-making actually takes place: for decision-makers, the concern is to create a *feeling* of participation and openness, while retaining power in their own hands. Pateman, dealing with participation in industries, defines it as a situation in which participation is limited to an endorsement of a decision made elsewhere; for instance, a situation in which the supervisor, instead of merely telling the employees of a decision, allows them to question him about it and to discuss it—yet without changing the desired outcome.

In order to understand the role of the internet in the disintermediation strategies of the two parties, for the analysis of parties' direct democracy tools, which will be the main subject of the part of this work dedicated to the parties' use of the web, I shall focus on three dimensions: the architecture of the platform and its affordances (Dahlberg 2011), that is, the features present in the digital tool and the activities users are encouraged to perform; the transfer of power from the top to the bottom, and specifically members' rights and powers within the digital tool and their ability to influence the “rules of the game”; and the consequences on party organisation, in particular on the internal distribution of power.

4. New and Mainstream Parties' Disintermediation Strategies

Against this backdrop, the aim of this study is to answer three main questions. The first one concerns how parties adapt and change in response to social and political changes, and in particular to a context characterised by the perception of a refusal of intermediate bodies, especially with regard to their internal organisation. I hypothesise that disintermediation strategies are the parties' answers to such changes; following what has been said in the previous pages, I can define disintermediation strategies as *rhetoric or practices developed by parties in order to stage or deliver an unmediated*

relationship between leader and followers, which happens with the weakening of the party's intermediate organisation.

The second question regards whether parties' disintermediation strategies produce new forms of intermediation. Is the process of intermediary removal a genuine one? As I have stressed in the previous pages, the literature on disintermediation is scarce, but the existent contributions underline that both *new intermediaries can arise and that old intermediaries can avoid disintermediation*. In the first case, Chadwick (2007) refers to the birth and strengthening of the new intermediaries in the internet age; in the second one, Chircu and Kauffman (1999) identify the IDR cycle and argue that traditional firms can avoid disintermediation and become more powerful in the long run through reintermediation. So, starting from the idea that disintermediation would imply a *transformation* of intermediaries rather than their removal, in analysing disintermediation strategies I expect to find new forms of intermediation and/or the persistence of old ones.

The third issue is to understand whether different parties adapt in different ways. Parties change in response to external stimuli, but internal factors count too. For this reason, different parties respond to the same stimuli in a different way. In particular, we can distinguish between "old" (traditional or mainstream) parties and "new" parties. But, what is a new party?

Newness is not easy to define (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2016). According to Bartolini and Mair (1990), a party is new when it does not derive from the structure of an existing party. This is a criterion that takes into consideration the party's structure, but new parties are also innovative in other ways. Deschouwer (2008), for instance, points out that there are three different dimensions of newness to consider: the age of the party, its ideology and the type of party organisation. Indeed, we know that starting from the 1970s, party and electoral competition has increasingly been structured by a diversity of policy issues, rather than on long established societal cleavages. The emergence of new political issues has been followed by the rise of new parties, both on the left—ecologist, libertarian parties—and on the right—radical right parties. The emergence of these new parties can be seen as a reaction to traditional parties that were part of the establishment. It is a reaction that concerns not only mainstream parties' policies and ideologies but, especially in the case of the parties that can be placed on the left of the political spectrum, also their organisation. Also, in recent years some Western European countries, especially those hit hardest by the 2008 recession (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2016), experienced an

increase in new parties which question the ability of existing parties to cope with the effects of the crisis.

It is not the aim of this work to provide a clear definition of what a new or a mainstream party is. For the purpose of our analysis, we can say that new parties are political actors that do not derive from existing parties and that oppose them both with respect to their policies and organisation. Existing parties to which new parties oppose themselves can be defined as mainstream. According to Meguid (2008), these are actors that are located on the left-right political dimension, that have the electoral dominance of that bloc, and that are widely considered governmental actors.

How do these two types of parties adapt and change? As far as mainstream parties are concerned, we know that they are conservative organisations, which will not change simply for the sake of change (Panebianco 1982). Parties are not willing to simply give up part of their power, so we can expect these parties to open up their decision-making processes in order to gain legitimisation, in a context in which they are accused of being disconnected from society (Ignazi 2020): we can then assume that they will use rhetoric characterised by disintermediation from below and practices marked by disintermediation from above. Moreover, like in the case of traditional firms (Chircu and Kauffman 1999), we can expect them to try to re-establish themselves as intermediaries (reintermediation).

In contrast, starting from the 1970s, new parties (such as in the case of Green parties, or the so-called New Left parties and more recently in the case of movement parties, Kitschelt 2006; Della Porta et al. 2017) oppose mainstream parties and challenge them both regarding their policies and organisation. These new parties are frequently “intraparty democracy maximizers” (Harmel and Janda 1994), and their goal is to empower members’ participation. However, even these new parties tend towards institutionalisation and centralisation (Poguntke 2002; Frankland, Lucardie and Rihoux 2008), and to implement some organisational changes, following the new functions that they will have to enact with their internal complexification (Pedersen 1982). Thus, we can expect that, as far as their rhetoric is concerned, they will enhance disintermediation from below, but that, over time, they will increasingly employ disintermediation practices from above and develop new forms of intermediation.

In order to answer these questions, I will examine how two Italian parties (a mainstream party, the Partito Democratico, and a new party, the Movimento 5 Stelle) have adapted to the changing context. In the next chapters, after having presented the design of my research, I will ask whether the two parties employ disintermediation strategies at the

national level, how they are interpreting them and which dimensions among those outlined (rhetoric or practices; members’ empowerment or autonomy of the leadership) prevail in each party. Furthermore, I will investigate the role of the internet in the disintermediation strategies of the two parties and what consequences it has on the party’s organisation. Against this backdrop, I will observe what happens at the local level, especially with regard to members’ and activists’ participation during electoral campaigns. Finally, I will summarise my findings and outline similarities and differences between the two parties in the three “arenas” considered (the national, the virtual and the local one).