

9. Party Change in the National, Virtual and Local Arenas

The aim of this study was to answer three main questions. The first one concerned how parties adapt and change in response to certain 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 hypothesised that disintermediation strategies, defined 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* are parties' answers to such changes.

The second question involved the emergence of new forms of intermediation—either in the form of the rise of new intermediaries or in the form of old intermediaries' attempts to avoid disintermediation—following parties' disintermediation strategies. Starting from the idea that disintermediation implies a *transformation* of intermediaries rather than their removal, I expected to find both new forms of intermediation and the persistence of old ones.

Finally, my aim was to assess whether different parties, and in particular “old” (traditional or mainstream) parties and “new” parties, adapt in different ways. In a context in which mainstream parties are accused of being disconnected from society, I expected them to open up their decision-making processes in order to gain legitimation. In particular, I assumed that they used rhetoric characterised by disintermediation from below and practices marked by disintermediation from above, and that they could try to avoid disintermediation through reintermediation strategies. Starting from different assumptions, also with regard to new parties I expected that, in their rhetoric, they enhanced disintermediation from below, but that, over time, they could increasingly put into practice disintermediation practices from above. In this chapter, I will summarise my findings and outline similarities and differences between the two parties in the three “arenas” considered in this work: the national, the virtual and the local one.

1. The National Arena

The first arena that I considered is the national organisation. In chapter 3, we saw that the Partito Democratico presents a party model based on the promise of opening decision-making processes not only to members but also to voters. In particular, voters can participate in the direct election of the party secretary, which occurs through an open primary. This is an almost unique innovation in Europe. Indeed, Italy is one of the two European countries that use open primaries for the selection of the party leader, the other being Greece, where Pasok uses such a selection method. In terms of elective offices, it is worth remembering that, since 2012, the French Socialist Party has used open primaries for the selection of the candidate for President of the Republic (Lefebvre and Treille 2016). This decision ignited a debate similar, in part, to the Italian one (for a comparison between Italy and France, see De Luca and Venturino 2015; Giannetti and Lefebvre 2015).

On paper, the PD party statute offers voters many ways to influence the internal decision-making of the party, but in practice the opening of decision-making processes is limited to the direct election of the party secretary. We have also seen that, through the mechanism of primaries, the party leader would gain strength both outside (for instance, in terms of personalisation of the leadership) and inside the party, given that the intermediate bodies of the party are composed starting from the voters' vote in the primaries, and that members are marginalised in favour of voters.

Therefore, since the decision-making power of voters is limited to voting in primaries and there are no accountability mechanisms from one election to another, from the analysis of party documents we can conclude that in the case of the PD disintermediation results in an increase in power for the leader who, through primaries, can increase the scope of their power and autonomy *vis-à-vis* the party's organisation (see also Seddone, Sandri and Sozzi 2020). But, although it has unusual and innovative aspects, such as the opening of decision-making processes to voters and the composition of its internal organs starting from the votes of supporters, we have seen that the organisational form of the PD can be equated with that of traditional parties. For instance, we don't witness a decrease in the number of party layers between the highest executive body and the party congress, which, according to Pizzimenti, Calossi and Cicchi (2020), is an indicator of disintermediation.

In the case of the PD, more than the emergence of new forms of intermediation, it is possible to find the permanence of those typical of traditional parties. For instance, the analysis of the PD's organisational history tells us that primaries are managed and controlled by the dominant coalition, which uses them to gain legitimacy outside or to move challenges within the party. It is perhaps for this reason that, in the end, the Partito Democratico failed to deliver on its promise of strong leadership. Except for Renzi's experience, which ended up being absorbed and normalised, we see that—and the resignation of Zingaretti at the beginning of 2021 testifies to this—what the PD lacks is precisely strong leadership.

In the Movimento 5 Stelle, the innovation with respect to traditional party models is even more radical, as the web replaces the classic party structure: the party, at least initially, was composed only of the leader, members and elected representatives—who present themselves as ordinary citizens that become politicians for a limited time span—connected through the internet. In the case of the Movimento 5 Stelle, ordinary members (and not voters) had the opportunity to directly choose their candidates and, potentially, also to direct their activities, through the online participation platform *Rousseau*.

However, we have seen that this is not a genuinely horizontal organisation: the structure in which members can exercise their powers is highly centralised, with the leader maintaining important prerogatives in the organisation. Moreover, over time elected representatives and other personalities took on relevant formal and informal roles in the organisation, and an intermediate structure started to arise. In the case of the M5S, and we will see this clearly in the part dedicated to the virtual arena, we can state that disintermediation strategies led to the emergence of new forms of intermediation, mainly linked to the use of the internet and to the strengthening of the role of personal leadership in the organisation, but also to the unfolding of the institutionalisation process.

The two parties present both similarities and differences. In terms of the from-above dimension, this prevails in the practices of both parties. In both cases it is the leadership that gains power when the intermediate organisation weakens. From-below disintermediation, i.e. the greater decision-making power promised to the base, is instead predominantly a rhetorical or a symbolic aspect. But, on the other hand, it is true that the two parties arrived at the same result through different paths. We can outline two main differences between the two cases. The first one concerns the intermediaries involved in disintermediation strategies. In the PD, disintermediation results more in the bypassing of *party members*, who

are marginalised in favour of voters, while in the case of the M5S it results more in the weakening of the *middle-level elite*, who initially is practically non-existent and takes shape over time with modalities and forms partially different with respect to those of traditional parties.

The second one relates to the diachronic evolution of the two parties: in the PD, despite the modification of the statute, we can't find formal changes to the party's organisation over time. In a context of accelerating technological change and of a deep crisis of representation, Renzi exploited the opportunities that were already given by the open party model more than previous party leaders, increasing the personalisation of its leadership, creating a direct link with supporters and thus developing disintermediation strategies more than his predecessors. However, his experience has been normalised and absorbed, and the essence of the party model—a party model in which the leader is potentially strengthened from the outside through primaries, which are the main tool of citizens' participation, despite rhetoric on the open party—didn't change with the election of Zingaretti, even though he presented himself as the promoter of a party in which “sovereignty must move towards the base of the pyramid”.

In the M5S, on the other hand—although there is not a substantial decrease in the prerogatives of the leadership—we witness a progressive increase in intermediation, the growth of formal and informal intermediate bodies, which is testified to by the profound changes in party documents and organisation with the development of the institutionalisation process. This increase in intermediate bodies can be seen as a consequence, as stated in Pedersen's model, of the internal complexification brought about by the passing of the different thresholds.

2. The Virtual Arena

The second arena considered in this study is the virtual one. The use of the internet of the two parties was analysed, especially the tools potentially capable of influencing party decisions and the internal distribution of power. Although the use of the internet by the M5S is much more advanced than the PD's, we can say that in both cases there is no real empowerment of the base through digital tools: the new technologies are used by the two parties, according to the pseudo-participation hypothesis (Pateman 1970), to *give the impression* to members or supporters that they can influence the decision-making processes of the party.

The digital tools of the PD are completely detached from the decision-making processes of the party, while the online consultations of the M5S, despite the fact that they touch important areas of decision-making, are piloted from above and take place within an infrastructure that is centralised and managed in a poorly transparent way. Even in this case, the from-above dimension prevails in the practices of both parties. In both cases, digital tools don't lead to the empowerment of the base, but are used mainly with rhetoric or symbolic purposes, leading in the end to a greater concentration of power in the hands of the leadership.

But the two cases present also relevant differences. In the case of the M5S, the role of the internet as a new form of intermediation emerges rather clearly. In chapter 6 and 7 we have seen that the lack of a party structure does not lead to a genuine bottom-up organisation, leading instead to new hierarchies and concentrations of power. In particular, Associazione Rousseau, which managed all the decision-making processes of the M5S through the control of the online participation platform *Rousseau*, acted as a new gatekeeper of the digital age, and acquired increasing power over time, until it was discharged in early 2021.

In contrast, in the case of the PD, digital tools don't represent a new form of intermediation: they are managed within the traditional party frame. The potential innovation brought about by digital tools, of which *Rousseau* is a perfect example, is completely normalised and kept under control in the case of the PD, in the case of *Bob* even more than in that of the previous experience of online circles.

3. The Local Arena

The third arena considered is the local one, in particular members' and activists' participation during an electoral campaign. In chapter 5 we saw how the PD, through the organisation Noi Siamo Torino, staged a direct relationship (or rather, one mediated by volunteers) between citizens. This way of conducting a campaign represents, on the one hand, the reinvention of old practices such as canvassing, and on the other is an attempt to offset the absence of party militants, who have a marginal role in the party model of the PD. On paper, non-partisan volunteers are supposed to replace party militants, creating a direct and unmediated relationship with citizens. Nevertheless, in the analysis of this experiment of externalisation of the campaign, we saw the emergence of managerial organisation of

participation, as well as—partially unexpectedly—the relevance that party militants maintain in this new kind of electoral campaign.

On the other hand, unlike what we might assume, given the importance of the internet in the national organisational structure, at the local level the participation practices of the Movimento 5 Stelle are mainly offline: the internet is used by activists only as a tool of coordination. In chapter 8 we saw that, at a local level, the M5S forms horizontal and autonomous groups, which have some traits of social movements. In the absence of a formalised party structure, activists organise themselves autonomously (but they depend on the centre in order to obtain the authorisation to use the symbol), creating horizontal groups rooted in the territories. However, besides the fact that they act in a very centralised national organisation, even at the local level hierarchies and informal forms of leadership emerge. The absence of formal party structures leads to the strengthening within the organisation of the role of the elected representatives.

At the local level, the analysis aimed to explore the two parties with ethnographic methods, and therefore the dimensions used for the examination of the parties at the national level (disintermediation from below and from above) are limiting. However, we can state that the rhetorical or symbolic dimension of disintermediation can also be found in the case of Noi Siamo Torino. Moreover, we see that a common trait of the two examples of local mobilisation is the attempt to substitute party-mediated relationships with people-mediated ones. They are “staged” in the case of NST and more “genuine” in the case of the M5S, but the increasing relevance of direct and personal relationships established between common citizens can be considered both a sign of parties’ weakness and delegitimation and a new form of intermediation, albeit one typical of the past (Manin 1995).

On the one hand, the NST campaign was organised by a managerial structure external to the party, which can therefore be seen as a new form of intermediation. On the other, the main players of the campaign were not “real” volunteers, but party militants; therefore we can see the permanence of the old forms of intermediation. As regards the case of the M5S, we have seen that the local party is grounded in the territories with a constant presence on the streets. This together with the strong identification with the party symbol are characteristics that, unexpectedly, recall some features of mass parties, even though in chapter 8 we saw that the M5S differs from traditional parties in various, relevant ways. For instance, local groups are not officially recognised as local branches by the national party in central office: official participation at the national level is

individual and takes place through the online platform. Moreover, unlike traditional parties, there is no local party structure at this level either: activist self-organisation replaces it. To sum up, at the local level, in both cases, we see a combination of disintermediation and old and new forms of intermediation.

4. Mainstream and New Parties in Comparison

The two parties considered in this study are very different: one is a party that can be defined as mainstream; the other is a new and anti-establishment party. Their responses to the changed context are in turn different, but we can state that in both, although through partially different paths, we find the will to weaken the intermediate party structure and to create a direct link between leader and supporters, which—despite rhetoric pertaining to members' and supporters' empowerment and direct participation—has resulted in an increase in the power of the leadership or the persistence of old forms of intermediation. Open primaries and online participation platforms are two different tools used by the two parties in a similar fashion to achieve this result.

In the case of the PD, open primaries are presented as a way to increase citizens' direct participation, but, in reality, they are used to keep tight control over elite recruitment and to increase the scope of the party leader's power and its autonomy *vis-à-vis* party organisation. According to Sandri, Seddone and Sozzi (2020), they function “as a trojan horse fostering party organisational weakening”, and represent an innovative tool used to carry out traditional political activities through the centralisation of power in the hands of the leader. In a similar vein, behind the façade of disintermediation we also find the persistence of the leadership in the case of the M5S.

Dealing with digital parties, a category in which the M5S would also fall, Gerbaudo (2019) defined the way in which—in these kinds of actors—opening the party's lower levels through online participation is accompanied by an increasing concentration of power in the hands of the party leader as “distributed centralisation”. In digital parties there is a contradiction between a narrative of radical disintermediation and leaderlessness, and a reality in which leadership and hierarchy are very far disappearing. As it is in the software of the platform and in the process of management that takes place in its back end, power relations simply become more concealed (Gerbaudo 2019, 184).

These dynamics seem to take place following the same general logic, regardless of the type of party. On the one hand, we expected mainstream parties to open up their decision-making processes in order to gain legitimation, but since they are conservative organisations, we expected them not to change, or give away their power, simply for the sake of change. On the other hand, the goal of new parties is often to empower members' participation. However, even in this case we expected them to tend, over time, towards institutionalisation and centralisation. Thus, as expected, in both cases we can say that the different devices promoted to foster members' empowerment in reality hide plebiscitarian dynamics and the centralisation of power in the hands of the leadership.

Contrary to rhetoric characterised by disintermediation from below, when it comes to practices, it is disintermediation from above that prevails: it is the leadership that becomes strengthened when the intermediate organisation—be it party members or the middle-level elite—weakens. Even though in the last few years parties have tried to convince us of the opposite, favoured by social and political trends such as the decline of deference and mistrust in politics, party members and supporters have not acquired much power. Disintermediation strategies, when a greater decision-making power is promised to the base, are primarily of a rhetorical or symbolic type.

But disintermediation strategies, especially if they are of a symbolic or rhetorical type, do not leave a vacuum. Studies conducted in the field of commerce show how old intermediaries can re-establish their power in the face of disintermediation, and how new intermediaries can appear; so, we have considered disintermediation as a process that involves both the persistence of old forms of intermediation and the emergence of new ones. On this topic, results are not univocal, as old and new forms of intermediation coexist in the two parties.

On the one hand, it is true that the PD, although presenting major innovations in its party model, remained connected with old party forms more than the M5S. But, on the other hand, at the local level the M5S, which at the national level provided a radical innovation in its party organisation with respect to traditional parties, presents participation practices that are more “old-fashioned” than the PD, the heir of the two most important mass parties of the so-called First Republic. In the case of the M5S, at the national level disintermediation strategies led to the emergence of new forms of intermediation, mainly linked to the use of the internet. However, over time we also witness a strengthening of the role of elected representatives in the organisation at the national and at the local level,

and structuring of the organisation in a “party like” shape. The demand for collective leadership as an outcome of the *Stati generali* at the end of 2020 testifies to a clear need for intermediation expressed by party members, and it is worth noting that in its new statute, the PD uses the word “congress”, which was absent before. Finally, while at the local level the campaign carried out by NST can be considered a new form of intermediation based on people-mediated relationships carried out by volunteers, in terms of the use of the internet at the national level, the PD fails to break away from traditional party forms.