

## 7. Between Members' Empowerment and Pseudo-Participation: The Movimento 5 Stelle's Online Participation Platform *Rousseau*

### 1. Introduction

The Movimento 5 Stelle represents one of the most advanced experiences of use of the internet for participatory and organisational purposes in a political party. The internet has always been fundamental to the party's narrative and organisation: we can say that it was through the web that, in the founders' view, an unmediated relationship between citizens and power, but also between leader, elected representatives and members, would be created. The M5S considers its elected representatives to be citizens' "spokespersons" and the internet a substitute for traditional party structures: in the M5S's rhetoric, the party on the ground has the right to "direct" the other two "faces" of the party's organisation, and until 2021 the digital platform *Rousseau* was the place in which members decided on parliamentary and party activities. The platform *Rousseau* thus falls into the direct democracy category of the use of the internet by parties; the tools belonging to this category could potentially empower party members, giving them a say in party decisions and then altering the distribution of the internal decision-making power in their favour.

In this chapter, after having analysed the references to the internet in the party statute and rules, and their evolution over time, I will analyse the functioning of the platform *Rousseau*. Although in early 2021 *Rousseau* stopped being the official participatory and decision-making tool of the party, the experience of this platform is one that is worth examining. *Rousseau* can be considered the core of the M5S's disintermediation strategies, as it gave members the opportunity to decide directly on many relevant issues, replacing to some extent the party's internal organisation. However, it is worth asking whether there was actual empowerment of members through this tool or whether, according to the "pseudo-participation" hypothesis (Pateman 1970. For an application of this concept to cyber-parties see Biancalana and Vittori 2021a), its function was mainly symbolic.

According to this assumption, digital tools wouldn't be used to grant members more power, but to give them the *impression* of influencing the

decision-making processes of the party: they would be used more from a narrative than from a practical point of view. In these situations, no participation in decision-making actually takes place: for decision-makers the concern is to create a *feeling* of participation and directness, while retaining power in their own hands. In other words, in terms of practices, disintermediation from above would prevail over disintermediation from below.

Based on this premise, *Rousseau* will be analysed from two points of view: on the one hand, a description of its affordances (Dahlberg 2011) and functioning; on the other, an assessment of its impact, especially on party organisation. Three dimensions will be examined: the architecture of the platform and its affordances, that is, the features present in the digital tool and the activities that users are encouraged to perform; the transfer of power from the top to the bottom, that is, members' rights and powers and their ability to influence the "rules of the game"; the consequences on party organisation, in particular on the internal distribution of power.

The chapter will be structured as follows. In section 2, I will analyse in detail the role of the internet in the M5S's organisational structure, especially the references to the internet in the party's statute and rules and their evolution over time. In section 3, I will describe the available tools and functions that were present on the platform *Rousseau*, focusing on the kind of participation encouraged by them. In section 4, I will examine a specific function, online votes, through which M5S's members decided directly on some party decisions, such as the selection of candidates and the definition of electoral programmes. For this purpose, I have collected, classified and analysed all the online votes held by the M5S in the time span 2012–2020. Finally, in section 5, I will summarise the main findings of my analysis and assess to what extent *Rousseau* allowed the actual empowerment of the M5S's members.

## *2. The Role of the Internet in the M5S's Narrative and Organisational Structure*

The internet has always been regarded by Grillo and Casaleggio both as an alternative tool for communication and counter-information, as well as a means of political organisation. The M5S's rhetoric on the internet has always set it apart from other parties and has been defined as "cyber-utopian" (Mosca 2020): in the party's rhetoric the internet is pictured as "an inherently transparent, democratic, and accountability-enhancing

technology” (Mosca, Vaccari and Valeriani 2015, 127. See also Biancalana 2014; 2017; Natale and Ballatore 2014). The vision of the internet as an ontologically positive technology, a natural creator of horizontal, transparent, participatory and non-hierarchical processes, is one of the main elements of the democratic vision of the M5S that emerges from the analysis of the leaders' discursive production and which makes it remarkably distinct from traditional parties (Mosca 2020).

In a relatively short time, everything will change. Traditional media will disappear, together with the majority of the hierarchical structures that govern the various aspects of society and economics. Among those are parties, which will be replaced by movements (Grillo, Fo and Casaleggio 2013, 7).

Representative democracy was probably the best model that we could have until a few years ago. But with the use of the internet and the set of tools that can be used through the internet, today participation is probably the best democracy that we can have (Post *Presentazione del #NuovoRousseau: Partecipate! Don't delegate*, 2/7/2017).

Online direct democracy has always been fundamental in shaping the M5S's identity. Although it has been demonstrated that its rhetoric and practices differ, as the rhetoric of horizontality, lack of leadership and spontaneity of the party have been used to mask, facilitate and eventually legitimise centralised and authoritarian practices (Treré and Barassi 2015), and that over time the most radical promises of members' empowerment through digital tools have been curtailed, it is true that the party managed to create an innovative organisation: the M5S represents a web-based organisational model very different from that of traditional parties in terms of membership, structure and forms of participation.

Although over time some intermediate bodies and an almost party-like structure emerged, until the end of 2020 the M5S did not have an official party in central office, as all the main party activities (for instance, enrolment) passed through the party's websites. We can say that Casaleggio Associati—the company owned by one of the founders of the M5S (Gianroberto Casaleggio) and, after his death, by his son Davide—and later Associazione Rousseau can be considered unofficial parties in central office. From the beginning, Casaleggio Associati managed the M5S's websites, members' enrolment and the certification of the local electoral lists, that is, the permission to use the party logo. Casaleggio Associati created the platform *Rousseau* and still have links with it: since April 2016 *Rousseau* has been managed by an association called Associazione Rousseau, whose

president is Davide Casaleggio. Associazione Rousseau is an association detached from the M5S, over which members had no control, that until 2021 had, consistently with the provisions of the 2017 statute, the right to manage all the online decision-making processes of the party.

With regard to the party in public office, since 2012, the M5S has had local and regional councillors, MPs, members of the European Parliament, as well as mayors of various important towns such as Rome, Turin and Livorno elected. According to the rules of the party, elected representatives can complete a maximum of two mandates<sup>56</sup>. So, the people elected with the M5S are essentially citizens that become politicians for a short period of time, since it is, at least at the time of writing, impossible to complete a third mandate under the M5S's symbol. According to the party's narrative, elected representatives are considered spokespersons, who have to bring the requests of citizens, not considered by professional politicians, into the assemblies. At the regional and local levels, until the end of 2020, there weren't official regional and local branches of the party<sup>57</sup>, so that the elected representative "represented" the party both in the assembly and in the territory, as he or she was the only authorised subject to speak in its name, having obtained its certification and the right to use its symbol.

The M5S's party on the ground is composed of all the people registered on the party website. To the end of 2020, the declared number of members was around 170,000. Indeed, party enrolment was equated with website registration: the only way to officially<sup>58</sup> join the party and participate in its national activities was online. Every Italian citizen that is not yet enrolled

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56 Since 2019, there has been an exception for municipal councillors: the so-called *mandato zero*. See chapter 6. The derogation from this rule at the national level—currently discussed within the framework of the refoundation of the party by Giuseppe Conte—would mean the complete institutionalisation of this actor.

57 The creation, in 2019, of the position of the regional facilitator, can be considered a first attempt to create a regional structure. However, these changes have not been formalised in the party statute. The new 2021 statute mentions "territorial groups" for the first time.

58 It is true, though, that it is possible for everyone to participate at the local level. Indeed, while participation at the national level is online only, at the local level face-to-face participation is fundamental and highly developed. At the local level, the party works essentially as a "brand-giver". Candidates that want to run for local elections have to request "certification" in order to use the party logo. Besides this, in general, local groups, although they do not represent official branches of the party, organise themselves autonomously. Indeed, due to these characteristics Tronconi (2018) stated that the party structure of the M5S reflected Carty's "franchise model" (2004).

in another party could join the M5S. The registration is free of charge. Control over registrations—that is, control over party membership—is a key responsibility, and Associazione Rousseau was in charge of it.

Before we analyse members' digital rights and the affordances of the party's online participation platform, it is interesting to analyse the references to the internet in the party's statute. The first version of the statute of the M5S, the one significantly called Non-statute, was soaked in what has been defined as "cyber-optimist" rhetoric. According to the Non-statute, the party's "headquarters" were Beppe Grillo's website (article 1), and the internet was considered central for the party's "enrolment, consultation, deliberation, decision and election" (article 4). Moreover, the M5S granted "all internet users" the power to steer it, which is usually retained by a few (article 4).

The M5S is not a political party, nor will it become one in the future. The M5S wants to achieve an efficient and effective exchange of opinions and a democratic debate outside associations and parties and without the mediation of governing or representative bodies, *acknowledging to the totality of the users of the internet the role of government and direction* normally detained by a few (Article 4, Non-statute, 2009, emphasis added).

The point contained in this article is key to understanding the use of the internet by this party: in a techno-populist fashion (Deseriis 2017b; De Blasio and Sorice 2018), the internet is seen as the tool that directly links people and power. This provision seemed to soften in the 2017 statute.

The M5S aims to achieve an efficient exchange of opinions and a democratic debate, *acknowledging to all members*, in accordance with the provisions of this statute and especially through digital tools, *an effective role in the direction and determination of the fundamental choices for the association's political activity* (Article 2a, Statute, 2017, emphasis added).

In the first place, it is no longer "all internet users" but "all members" that have the right to exercise the role of government and direction. In the second place, the more general "role of government and direction" becomes the "determination of the fundamental choices of the association", that

is, the M5S. This can be seen as an indicator of the normalisation of the cyber-optimist rhetoric that characterised the M5S in previous years<sup>59</sup>.

According to the party statute, the members of the M5S have a number of rights (article 3b, 2017 statute), all of which can be exercised online: the right to contribute to the definition of the political direction of the elected representatives; the right to participate in online consultations called in order to determine the fundamental choices for the political action of the M5S; the right to become a candidate at the national, European, regional and local levels; and the right to formulate law proposals that, if approved by members through an online consultation, can be taken into consideration by elected representatives. As regards online consultations, they can be called by the political leader or, in his absence, by the guarantor. According to the 2017 statute (article 4a), they can be used to: elect the political leader, the guarantor, the guarantee committee and the board of advisors; choose candidates and approve the political programme; approve members' law proposals; and impeach the political leader and the guarantor.

So, despite the softening of the cyber-utopian narrative that characterised the M5S in its early years, we see that, according to the 2017 party statute, the M5S's members can deeply influence both parliamentary and party activities through digital tools. In the next section, the architecture and affordances of the online participation platform *Rousseau* will be described.

### 3. Rousseau: Design, Architecture and Affordances

The place in which online consultations and the other online decision-making processes of the M5S took place was *Rousseau*. Significantly named after the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, it has been online in different versions since the end of 2012, and its available features have increased over time. The reasons why the M5S chose to call its platform "Rousseau" must be looked for, clearly enough, in the fact that the author of the *Social*

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59 In the 2021 statute, we witness further normalisation of the cyber-optimistic rhetoric: "The Movimento 5 Stelle promotes, *through internet platforms or other methods, possibly including non-telematic ones*, the involvement of its members in the process of identifying those who will disseminate and implement the Association's ideas, projects and social, cultural and political awareness campaigns" (Article 2d, 2021 statute, emphasis added).

*Contract* is one of the most notorious proponents of what is known today as “direct democracy.” The quality of being “direct” refers, in Rousseau’s Republican theory, to the refusal of a representative form of the Hobbesian sort: the united will of all citizens, the Genevan philosopher claims, cannot be represented, for it is either itself or something else. This explains why he argued that the popular will ought not to be articulated by elected deputies in a representative assembly but directly by all citizens in a popular assembly (Rustighi 2021).

In the views of the M5S, the platform was constructed precisely to enable private citizens to constantly participate in the party’s decision-making processes instead of limiting themselves to just authorising its representatives through elections. Any mediation between the citizens and the government was supposed to be eliminated in this manner. However, theory and practice do not always align. Moreover, the ways in which members’ participation was organised concretely matters. Technology is not neutral: a tool can have certain features that can enable particular uses and outcomes: the term affordances refers precisely to how a technology encourages users to perform certain activities (Dahlberg 2011). Analysing the affordances of *Rousseau* can help us to understand the conception of internal democracy and participation in the M5S.

In summer 2020, there were twelve main tools embedded in *Rousseau*. In the first place, members could search for other members (*Cerca altri iscritti*) and for spokespersons (*Cerca i portavoce*). Members and elected representatives could create a public profile and complete it with their CV and their “merits”, that is to say, their experiences of participation and professional or education abilities. Merits could be used, on the occasion of online consultations, to screen candidates for public offices and for internal positions (on the “merit system”, see Biancalana and Vittori 2021b). Another important tool, which I will analyse in detail in the next section, is *Vota* (Vote). On certain occasions, M5S’s members were asked to have a say on some topics, ranging from the selection of candidates to the definition of electoral programmes, through online votes.

*Lex* was a part of *Rousseau* in which members could comment on the law proposals of M5S’s elected representatives. *Lex* was launched in late 2013 and had a regional, national and European section, for regional, national and European law proposals respectively. Elected representatives that wanted to present a law in their assembly had to post it on *Lex* beforehand, together with a brief explanation and a video. Then, for a fixed period of time activists could comment on the law; afterwards, the elected representative had to integrate the comments into the law and present a

written report in which he or she explained the added modifications and also why some comments hadn't been accepted. The elected representative was in charge of the whole procedure and was able to decide whether or not to accept comments. Moreover, comments are not "structured" (that is, in *Lex* there is not a discussion among members, but only untied comments temporally ordered), and in most cases the comments are incoherent with respect to the topic.

It has been noted (Deseriis 2017a) that the relationship created on *Lex* was an "asymmetrical relationship" between representatives and members, and that this function is designed to avoid the possibility of horizontal interaction among users, allowing only interactions between individuals and MPs. Studies on the evolution of participation using *Lex* (Mosca 2020) show that participation in the debate on law proposals decreased markedly over time: the average number of comments per law amounted to 446 in 2014, 184 in 2015, 144 in 2016, and 63 in 2017. Moreover, only 39 per cent of the law proposals received at least one answer by the MP in charge of it, and only in 15 per cent of the cases did they provide information on the outcome of the discussion (in 22 cases the proposals were modified, in 14 there was no change at all, in 13 the result is unclear).

Starting from May 2016, members could also propose a law with the function *Lex iscritti* (Lex Members). With the slogan *Con Lex le leggi le fai tu!*, that is, "With Lex you make your own laws!", this tool was advertised as a sort of DIY law-making. In reality, there was a set of steps that the law proposal had to undergo before being actually proposed. First, the proposed law had to fit certain requirements and it was evaluated by the "Rousseau staff". The drafts that passed this first evaluation<sup>60</sup> could be later voted on by members in occasional online consultations. The two most voted for draft laws in each consultation were assigned to an elected representative, who would then post the law on *Lex* and consequently bring it to parliament. Deseriis (2017a) defined *Lex* as a form of "direct parliamentarism", that is, as an extension of parliamentary processes to the web, in which the MPs retain the freedom to determine "which bills should be introduced into Parliament, which should be given priority, and how they should be initially drafted".

*E-Learning* was a section dedicated to online courses for elected representatives and lay citizens, for instance on the internal workings of Parliament

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60 Deseriis (2017a) reports that during the first four rounds of voting, 555 MPs received a total of 3,280 proposals, but only 523 of them, roughly 15 per cent of the total, were considered eligible to be voted for by members.



or on European issues. The M5S's elected representatives were, in the vast majority of cases, common citizens without political experience: in the absence of a party structure, this section was intended to serve as a tool of political socialisation. In the same way, in the tool named *Sharing* it was possible for elected representatives to share the activities in the councils or in Parliament, so that other councillors, MPs or citizens could know about them and take inspiration from the best proposals.

*Rousseau* also allowed citizens to create and find events or local mobilisations organised by elected representatives, other activists or the party. The function *Crea o partecipa a eventi* (Create or Participate in Events) consisted of three sub-sections: *Activism*, *Eventi dei portavoce* (Spokesperson's Events) and *Campagne elettorali* (Electoral Campaigns). In *Activism* it was possible for members to create a local version of some mobilisation campaigns proposed by the party. This function is interesting because it can be considered an evolution of the *Meet-up* experience. The platform *Meet-up* was used in the first period by M5S activists to organise themselves at the local level<sup>61</sup>, together with, in some cases, independent experiments such as Airesis, an open-source digital platform created spontaneously by some M5S activists in order to favour participatory but also deliberative experiences (Ceri and Veltri 2017, 176).

Through *Meet-up*, members had the opportunity to organise meeting and events, which nevertheless got out of the centre's control. In a process of increasing centralisation, these independent and open-source tools have been marginalised over time, and only participation through the official "operating system" was encouraged and recognised, even though—as we will see in the case of Turin—local groups also continued to organise themselves through informal channels. *Eventi dei portavoce*, on the contrary, was a section in which the official events, created by elected representatives

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61 It is interesting to note that *Meet-up* in Italy is "monopolised" by the M5S. In 2014, *Meet-up* in Italy had 250,000 members (Italy was the second most represented European country after the UK), but 170,000 of these users were registered to groups that refer to Grillo (see Costa, F. *Il problema italiano di Meetup*, <https://www.ilpost.it/2014/10/16/problema-italiano-meetup/>, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014). It is worth noting that in July 2015 a post appeared on Grillo's blog (*Meet-ups alone aren't the M5S*) stating that members of the *Meet-ups* weren't entitled to speak on behalf of the M5S. Only those that obtained the permission to use the party logo, that is, its certification, were able to do so. Moreover, since most groups changed the *Meet-up* name from "Friends of Beppe Grillo" to "Movimento 5 Stelle" the post urged *Meet-up* members not to use the party name. Even in the *Call to Action* section, it is underlined that the events collected on that page are not official M5S's initiatives. The official ones can be found in the section *Activism*.

of the M5S, were listed. In the section called *Campagne elettorale*, materials for organising and promoting the M5S's events and initiatives were made available to members.

Finally, *Open candidature* was the tool through which members could become candidates for public offices or apply for party positions, such as facilitators. *Segnala un iscritto* (Report a Member), was a section through which members were encouraged to report rule violations committed by other members to the party. In *Scudo della rete* (Net Shield), there was a list of lawyers that could help M5S elected representatives and activists for felonies related to the freedom of expression on the internet. Finally, like on most party websites, there was the facility to donate to the party.

The tools contained in *Rousseau* covered a vast array of functions. Online votes, as we will see in the next section, represented the direct link between members and the other two faces of the party's organisation. With *Lex* party members, as well as elected representatives and party leaders, could easily control the activities of their representatives, and potentially take part in the drafting of laws, while with *Lex iscritti*, members could make their own law proposals. *E-Learning* and *Sharing* were tools specifically conceived for representatives. The M5S's elected representatives are people without previous political experience: these tools were able to help them carry out their activities within assemblies. Finally, the tools included in the section *Crea o partecipa a eventi* were aimed at organising online and offline mobilisation events. *Rousseau* thus represents a very innovative experience of internal participation for a political party. Not only could members register online, but they could also comment on and propose laws, take online courses, monitor the activity of representatives and become aware of party mobilisation events, as well as have a say on some relevant issues, such as the selection of candidates and the determination of the party's policies.

However, from my analysis of the platform's affordances, we can note that members' participation through *Rousseau* is characterised by three main features: it is asymmetrical, individual and centralised. It is asymmetrical because it is designed to avoid the possibility of horizontal interaction among users, allowing only communications between individuals and MPs, like in the case of the function *Lex*. It is also this way because there is an imbalance of power in favour of the political leader, who has the power to call an online consultation, and in favour of the "staff" that managed the platform, who oversaw screening *Lex* members' proposals. Moreover, it is an individual kind of participation because the platform is designed for citizens to decide, vote and participate at the individual

level: the absence of tools for discussion is an indicator of the atomised nature of this kind of participation. Finally, we can define *Rousseau* as centralised because, as we have seen in the case of the *Meet-up* experience, the leadership tried (and managed to) centralise all the party's various digital tools and online functions in one virtual place, which was strictly controlled from above.

#### 4. *The Quantity and Quality of Participation Through Online Votes*

One of the most relevant tools on *Rousseau* is *Vota*, through which M5S's members could have a say on some party decisions, such as the selection of candidates and the definition of electoral programmes. For the purposes of this analysis, all the online votes held from December 2012 to December 2020 have been collected, creating a complete database. Although the section *Vota* was only accessible by members, online votes were publicised on the party's website and, in most cases, turnout was also reported. Usually, online consultations were advertised on the party's website and announced at short notice with an e-mail sent to members, and last between eight and twenty-four hours.

With regard to the quantity of participation, 209 online consultations were held in the time span 2012–2020 (108 at the national level, 78 at the regional level and 23 at the local level)<sup>62</sup>. Overall, we see that the number of online consultations increased over time, reaching a peak in the year preceding the party's participation in government (2017), during which members participated in the drafting of the electoral programme (Figure 7.1). Due to the fact that, as we will see, online votes were also used to select candidates, the number of votes, especially at the regional level, also depended on the electoral competitions planned for each year.

As regards participation rate, if we compare the evolution of the M5S's membership with the evolution of the turnout of national online consultations, we see that, while members grew in number over time, the number of people that took part in online consultations remained more or less steady, with a decrease in the last period (Figure 7.2). So, online participa-

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62 The tally refers to voting sessions. In some cases (e.g. definition of the electoral programme), the M5S opened a single voting session in which more than one question was asked to members. In these cases, I counted the ballot as one. In the case of local and regional consultations, usually only the members that live in the city or region were allowed to vote.

tion did not seem to grow with the growth in party members. As we will see in the rest of the chapter, this is an interesting datum, and we can hypothesise that the fall in online participation is linked to members' dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the participatory process (see also Mosca 2020).

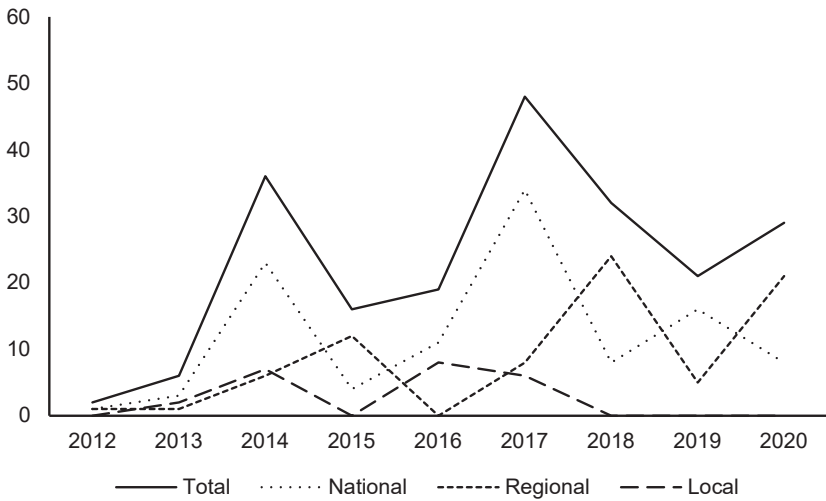
What are online consultations concretely used for? As the rules of the M5S have been incrementally defined over time, due to the need to regulate contingent issues or to adapt to specific normative requirements (Mosca 2020), in the past online votes have also been used for different purposes with respect to the rules on consultations written in the statute (the election and recall of political personnel; selection of candidates; approval of the political programme and of members' law proposals).

At the local level, in the vast majority of cases online consultations have been used to select candidates (mayors and/or the city councillors). Since 2018, no local online consultation has been held, as the process is managed through the tool *Open candidature*. However, even in the past, in most cases there were no online consultations to select candidates at the local level. Online consultations at this level have been used in two cases: if there were conflicts in a local group and therefore there were two different lists that wanted to run under the M5S's symbol and for big cities (e.g. Rome and Naples in 2016), where it was impossible or very difficult to leave the whole process to a local group<sup>63</sup>. In the first case, the vote was on the entire list; in the second, members could select single candidates. Where a local group was able to fill a list, no online consultation was needed; paperwork was sent to Casaleggio Associati's offices, where it was checked, and if all the documents were in order, the so-called certification was granted.

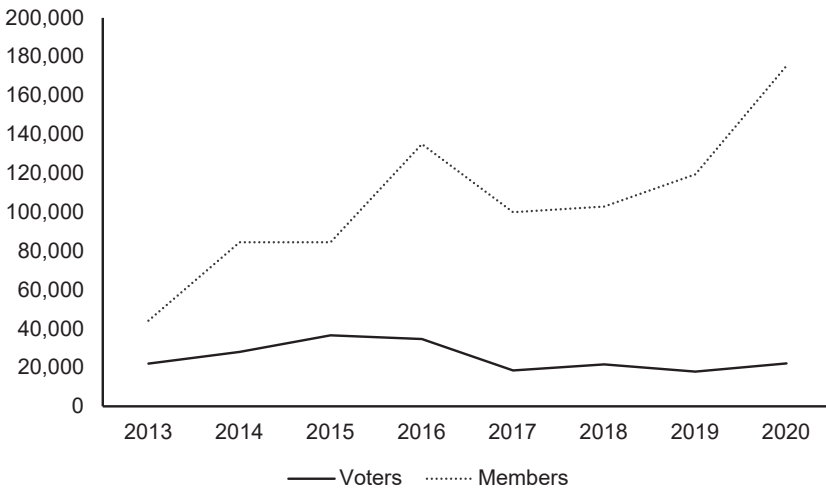
Even at the regional level, in the vast majority of cases, online consultations have been used to select regional councillors and regional candidate presidents. The regional level is interesting because it shows the institutionalisation of the method of online consultations to choose regional candidates. Since there are no official regional branches of the party, but only the elected representatives, it was difficult for members to meet and decide on candidates, like in the cities.

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63 One case that it is worth mentioning is that of Genoa. In 2017, Grillo cancelled the result of the online consultation regarding the choice of the mayor, because he did not trust the winning candidate. It is also worth noting that in some cases certification wasn't given to any list, without explanations, thus preventing local groups from participating in the elections.



*Figure 7.1. Evolution of the number of online consultations over time by territorial level*



*Figure 7.2. Evolution of the M5S's membership figures and average turnout in national online consultations*

Note: The mean for the year 2013 also includes the only consultation held in December 2012.

Nevertheless, until 2012, when there were fewer members and the organisation was easier, no regional online consultations were organised for the seven regional elections held in that period. In 2013, two out of seven regions held an online consultation to choose candidates, whereas in 2014 and 2015 all regions did it. Moreover, unlike in 2014, in 2015, all the procedure, starting from the proposal of the candidate, was online. Like in local consultations, Casaleggio Associati (and later Associazione Rousseau) was in charge of the whole process. So, at the local and regional level, we can see that online votes are mainly used in order to select candidates. As regards the national level, we can divide online consultations into ten categories (Table 7.1).

Even at the national level, the most important type of online consultation can be considered that regarding the selection of candidates. The first online vote ever was held in December 2012, in order to select candidates for the 2013 general elections (the so-called *Parlamentarie*), then a similar procedure was repeated in 2014 to select candidates for the European Parliament and on the occasion of the 2018 general elections and 2019 European elections. Essentially, these were online closed primaries: candidates for Parliament and the European Parliament were chosen by members in a completely online process. Both in 2012 and in 2014, there were limitations both to becoming a candidate (only members that had already tried to be elected with the M5S but weren't could run as MPs in 2012; in contrast, only seniority was required in 2014) and to voting—a requirement was to have been a member for a given period of time. In 2018 and 2019, as opposed to 2012 and 2014, *all* members could vote and be voted for. But in the case of the 2018 elections, the political leader of the M5S had a sort of “veto power” on candidacies and could directly decide on the candidates in the single-member constituencies (37 per cent of the seats according to the current electoral law); in the case of the 2019 European elections, he had the power to choose the first candidate on the electoral list in each constituency. In all cases, the rules of the competition were decided on by the leadership and released in a top-down way, and the process was managed first by Casaleggio Associati and later by Associazione Rousseau.

*Table 7.1. National online consultations by category (2012–2020)*

<i>Category</i>	<i>Example of online consultation</i>
<i>Selection of candidates</i>	National and European levels (2012, 2013, 2018, 2019); plus, in one case, selection of the candidate PM (for the 2018 elections). In one case, members also voted on the reversal of the result of local primaries (2017).
<i>Selection/recall of the leader</i>	Never. Di Maio was only voted for as a candidate PM (2017), and not as a party leader. In one case he called for a recall vote (2019).
<i>Definition of electoral programme</i>	For the 2018 national elections and the 2019 European elections
<i>Political strategy</i>	EP group (2014 and 2017) Meeting with Renzi (2014) Coalition government's approval (2018 and 2019) Electoral alliances at the regional and local level (2019 and 2020) Whether or not to participate in regional elections (2019)
<i>Election/recall of party personnel</i>	<i>Direttorio</i> (2014) Appeal committee (2014) Board of advisors (2016) Future Team and Facilitators (2019 and 2020) Treasurer (2020)
<i>Definition of party documents and organisation</i>	Party logo (2015) Party statute (2016) New organisation (2019) <i>Stati generali</i> (2020)
<i>Expulsions</i>	Between 2013 and 2015
<i>Members' law proposals</i>	<i>Lex iscritti</i> votes
<i>Votes that influence the activity of MPs</i>	Various issues
<i>Allocation of party funds</i>	How to allocate funds resulting from MPs' salary cuts

It is worth reiterating that in the M5S, at least until 2021, there has never been a consultation to decide on the party's leadership<sup>64</sup>. Beppe Grillo, as

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64 In August 2021, after the presentation of a new statute, Giuseppe Conte was elected as president of the M5S. The question: "Are you in favor of the election of Prof. Giuseppe Conte as President of the Movimento 5 Stelle?" was asked to members through an online vote on SkyVote (a voting platform managed by a private company that, differently from Associazione Rousseau, is completely detached from the M5S). Conte was elected as president of the party with a 92.8 per cent approval rate.

the founder of the party, has never been selected, and currently holds the position of guarantor indefinitely. In contrast, Luigi Di Maio was elected as the party's candidate MP for the 2018 general elections in September 2017. In this case, all elected representatives of the M5S were able to propose their candidacy. Nevertheless, the only prominent figure of the M5S that decided to run was Luigi Di Maio: he was, in fact, considered the M5S's "natural candidate", and 30,937 out of 37,442 participants voted for him. Following the 2017 statutory changes, Di Maio became political leader without a formal election: in the 2017 statute, which was never voted on or ratified by members, the positions that were supposed to be elective were already set. After the disappointing result of the 2019 European elections, Di Maio called for a recall vote. The result was a plebiscite: out of 56,127 voters, 44,849 voted "yes" to the question: "Do you *confirm* Di Maio as political leader?" (emphasis added).

In terms of electoral programmes, it is worth noting that on the occasion of the 2018 general elections the M5S organised online consultations on electoral programmes for the first time, despite rhetoric on the "programme written by citizens" that was already present in the 2013 general elections. In that case, no consultation on the electoral program occurred: the programme was released in a top-down way, assembling the themes and topics addressed by the blog in past years.

In contrast, when approaching the 2018 general elections, the M5S carried out a series of online consultations in order to define the electoral programme of the party on different topics, such as energy, work, public transportation, defence, tourism, school, health, banks and the environment. Each topic was broken up into different sub-themes; for each one, a post with an in-depth analysis was published on the blog. After the presentation of the topic had been completed, members had the opportunity to vote on each single sub-theme, on predetermined and closed options: the M5S's declared that the electoral programme would have been constructed according to the results of these consultations<sup>65</sup>. Questions included:

Choose the three priorities for a new model of economic development (members could select predetermined choices).

Do you think that the constraints on *our economic sovereignty* contained in the European treaties must be radically renegotiated, and that if

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65 An enquiry by the newspaper *Il Foglio* showed that after the elections the text of the electoral programme changed with respect to the first drafts, which were devised starting from members' answers in online votes.



negotiations lead to downward compromises, they must be rejected *for the good of the Italian people?* (Yes/No answer, emphasis added).

In the first case, members did not have the opportunity to add a new priority; in the second example, the question is framed in a way that makes the outcome obvious. In the same vein, in the case of the European elections of 2019, members had the opportunity to choose the “priority actions” that the future European MPs would carry out in Europe from a predetermined electoral programme.

With regard to political strategy, several votes fit into this category: whether or not to meet Matteo Renzi (February 2014); which European group to associate with (June 2014 and January 2017); approval of the coalition government (twice, in 2018 and 2019); the vote on an electoral alliance in Umbria (September 2019) and on local alliances with traditional parties (August 2020); and whether or not to participate in some regional elections in Emilia Romagna and Calabria (November 2019).

In the first case, Matteo Renzi, leader of the Partito Democratico and appointed by the President of the Republic to form a new government, proposed a meeting to the M5S. The thorny decision of whether to accept this request was left to the members, and Grillo and Casaleggio wrote that they didn't agree to meet Renzi; in contrast, members voted in favour of it. Grillo then agreed to go to the meeting but didn't take it seriously: because of Grillo's attitude, the meeting lasted a few minutes and there was no real discussion, so that the result was the same as not accepting the meeting.

In the second case, the result was practically predetermined. Indeed, the choice was between EFL, ECR and non-attached members, while some members and MEPs wanted to enter the Green group. This option wasn't pursued, and it is known that Grillo wanted an alliance with UKIP's leader Nigel Farage (EFL). In January 2017, with a new, unexpected online consultation, Grillo asked members to leave the current European group and to adhere to the ALDE group, a group that is very different compared to the M5S. The vast majority of members accepted the change, but after the failure of the negotiations the M5S remained in the EFDD group.

As regards alliances, the decision to approve the formation of the two national coalition governments in which the M5S participated (first with the Lega and then with the Partito Democratico) was also left to members<sup>66</sup>. Here it is interesting to compare the two questions presented to

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<sup>66</sup> An online vote was organised also in the case of the participation of the M5S to the national unity government led by Draghi, in February 2021. The question

members on the occasion of the two consultations, which were held in June 2018 and September 2019. The first one refers to the alliance with the Lega. The name of the party, which was unpopular among a vast segment of the M5S's electorate, was not mentioned. Instead, the pretentious name given to the alliance ("government of change") was highlighted.

Do you approve of the "government of change"?

Do you agree that the M5S will start a government, together with the Partito Democratico, chaired by Giuseppe Conte?

In contrast, in the case of the alliance with the Partito Democratico, the name of the allied party was presented in the question, even though it is widely known that M5S electors have no sympathy for it. These different formulations reflect internal clashes within the party and the will of different factions to influence members' votes, that are essentially used as a tool of legitimation. In the first case, 94 per cent of members approved the alliance, while in the second case "only" 80 per cent did.

Finally, members were asked to vote on an electoral alliance at the local level (in the Umbria region in September 2019) to form local alliances with traditional parties (August 2020) and to decide, in November 2019, whether or not to participate in two regional elections, in order to prepare the party's congress and because of the weakness of the Movement and the fear of an electoral loss. In both cases, the leadership called for a consultation to legitimate their choices (for instance, the consultation on the alliance read "*Do you agree with the proposal made by the political leader...?*"), but in the second one, members decided to vote against the will of the leadership. Consequently, the M5S participated in regional elections in the two regions, suffering a heavy defeat.

Another category is the election of party personnel, and this happened several times: the election of the so-called *direttorio*, the election of the appeal committee and of the board of advisors, and the selection of national and regional facilitators and of the party treasurer. The first vote took place in November 2014. Grillo proposed 5 MPs in order to "help him" in managing the party, and members were asked to accept or not to accept

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read as follows: "Do you agree that the M5S supports a technical-political government: that will provide for a super-Ministry of Ecological Transition and that will defend the main results achieved by the Movement, together with the other political forces indicated by the appointed president Mario Draghi?". 59.3 per cent of voters approved the decision. The observations made with respect to the other two consultations are valid also with respect to this one.

the 5-person closed list. Eventually, about 90 per cent of members voted in favour of it. The second consultation happened in December: members were asked to choose two out of three members of the appeal committee from a five-person list prepared by the leader, while one member was chosen directly by the leader. Finally, in November 2016, an online consultation was held to elect the board of advisors. Even in this case, there was a list composed of three people, to be approved or not approved. In 2018 and 2019, other votes to select single members of the board (for instance, after resignations) were held. In those cases, the leader proposed a closed list of names from which members could select the missing member.

In 2019 the M5S began an internal reorganisation, albeit one not codified in the party's statute, in which the positions of regional and national facilitators were created. A facilitator is a sort of coordinator of the party, and a transmission belt between the centre and the territories. Indeed, facilitators can operate at the regional or national level. While regional facilitators have the task of favouring the linkage between the centre and the territories, national level facilitators are responsible for the organisational aspects of the party (organisational facilitators) and for the articulation of policies (thematic facilitators). Facilitators were, of course, chosen in online votes.

In the case of the organisational facilitators, the choice left to the members was only to accept or refuse a closed list of six people decided on by the leader. In contrast, in the case of the thematic ones, members had the opportunity to propose themselves and to form a group, composed of other members (the opportunity to create a profile on *Rousseau* and to search for other members on the platform was created precisely on this occasion). Different groups and projects were subsequently voted on online. In the case of regional facilitators, members had the opportunity to propose themselves and vote, but in the end it was the leader that had the power to choose the facilitators from the three most voted for by members. Needless to say, the leadership was able to screen candidacies, and thus exclude candidates, at any time. Finally, in December 2020, the political leader proposed a name for the role of party treasurer, and members had the opportunity to accept or reject it. Eventually, it was accepted by a narrow margin (52.6 per cent).

As regards the definition of party documents, four votes have been held, including the change of the party symbol (November 2015), the change of the party statute and rules (2016), the votes on the new organisation of the Movement (July 2019), and the votes concluding the *Stati generali* (December 2020). In September 2016, a vote on the change of the party

statute and rules was held. Indeed, it was the first time ever in which the M5S's members actually voted on party rules. Members were asked to approve or not approve a new version of the party statute; moreover, two versions of the party rules to choose from were proposed to them. We can see that it wasn't a bottom-up process, as the changes were decided on top-down: members had only to ratify them. And indeed, the vast majority (about 90 per cent in the case of the statute, 70 per cent in the case of the party rules) ratified the decision. Also, it was the first time that a consultation lasted for more than a few hours, as was usually the case: it lasted a whole month, in order to get as many members as possible to vote and to obtain legitimacy.

In July 2019, members had the opportunity to vote on the "new organisation" of the M5S. Five questions, ranging from the opportunity for municipal councillors to run for an additional mandate to the regional and national reorganisation that was to lead to the creation of the Future Team were proposed to members, to either accept or reject<sup>67</sup>. All five questions were accepted in the end, with different percentages of approval.

Finally, in October and November 2020, the members had the opportunity to discuss the organisation of the party, its principles and its political agenda in the first party congress, the so-called *Stati generali*, for the first time. Through a series of regional and national online meetings<sup>68</sup>, a document was written, and eventually 23 proposals were prepared by the political leader on the basis of that document. The 23 points—which included the request for the principle of collegiality to inform all the decision-making and governing organs of the party and the strengthening of the intermediate and territorial structure—were consequently approved by members with a vote on *Rousseau* and added to the statute. The statute was changed in February 2021 with an online vote on six points.

Additionally, between 2013 and 2015 online votes were used by the M5S for the expulsions of members, especially elected representatives. Since 2012, five expulsion votes have been held, involving nine MPs. In all these cases, members confirmed the expulsion that was proposed by the leader. Expulsion, besides signifying the withdrawal of the Movement's

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67 In the preceding months a specific area of Rousseau called *Area di ascolto* (Listening Area) was created to collect input from members regarding the new organisation. However, there was not a codified procedure through which this input could affect the leadership's decisions.

68 The process, also due to the coronavirus pandemic, happened completely online. An online vote also concerned the choice of the 30 delegates that participated in the national meeting of the *Stati generali*.

certification and the permission to use its logo and implying the obligation to leave the parliamentary group, equates to the deletion of a member's account and consequently to the impossibility of them accessing *Rousseau*, voting in online consultations and becoming a candidate. Following the publication of the new statute (2017), it is now the board of advisors that decides on expulsions, without the need of an online vote. Several votes related to *Lex iscritti* (Lex Members). Occasionally, members' law proposals proposed through Lex Members were voted on by other members: the two most voted for proposals were brought in parliament to become M5S bills. To date, no law proposal has been presented in parliament. Finally, some votes also related to the allocation of party funds, derived by the cutting of M5S MPs' salaries.

Online votes have also been used in the past to directly influence the behaviour of M5S MPs in the assemblies. In recent years, this type of consultation has been used less and less. One explanation for this could be that control over the party in public office by the party on the ground has been more and more exercised through *Lex*. On the other hand, especially with the passing of the threshold of government, we have seen that the M5S is normalising and moving away from its original and radical ideas on digital direct democracy.

As regards this kind of votes, in two cases (2013 and 2015), members had the opportunity to select the M5S's candidate for the presidency of the Republic, who MPs had to vote for in parliament. Nine votes (held in 2014) related to the electoral law: an official M5S electoral law was constructed through nine consecutive votes. Nine questions were posed to members, starting from general questions (proportional or majoritarian system) to specific ones (electoral threshold, preference voting). It is relevant to say that all questions were "closed": that is, members could vote either for one or for the other solution, without proposing one themselves. Another consultation on the electoral law happened in June 2017. In this case, the question was also framed in a way that made the result predictable:

Are you in favour of the approval of a German electoral system which is respectful of the Constitution, possibly with the introduction of constitutionally legitimate governability corrections?

The other consultations related to specific issues, such as: the abrogation of the crime of clandestine immigration, metropolitan cities, the selection of the supreme council of the judiciary's judges, civil unions, the selection of a member of the constitutional court, the anticorruption law, living

will and euthanasia, the selection of the members of the board of RAI (Italian public television), and the parliamentary vote on the incrimination of Salvini.

In January 2014 members were asked to decide whether or not MPs should vote on the abrogation of the crime of clandestine immigration. In fact, in October 2013 two MPs had proposed the abrogation, which was eventually voted on in a parliamentary committee. The leaders then wrote on the blog that the issue “wasn’t in the electoral programme” and that nobody was consulted. But the problem, as outlined by them on the party’s website, was more in the substance of the proposal than in the method used. Basically, they were openly against the abrogation of the clandestine immigration crime. In January, when the law had to be voted on in the Senate, an online consultation was held, and members voted in favour of abrogation, and thus against the leaders. Consequently, MPs voted in accordance with the online vote. This consultation is relevant since we can see that while practically it is the leader and not members that decides whether or not to hold a consultation, in this case the results were respected, even against the leader’s will.

In October 2014, members were asked to vote on civil unions (vote in a parliamentary committee), and the vast majority voted in favour of them. In February 2016, the law had to be voted on in parliament, but Grillo and Casaleggio left the MPs free to vote, because the law now included the so-called stepchild adoption, which wasn’t included in the past consultation. They chose not to repeat the online vote because “ethical issues” were at stake. This consultation is relevant because it shows clearly that the relevant choice of whether or not hold a consultation is taken by the leaders.

Finally, in February 2019, M5S MPs had to vote on Salvini’s right to benefit from parliamentary immunity in a case regarding the disembarkation of some immigrants in an Italian harbour. The thorny decision of whether to concede defeat in the M5S’s fundamental battle against politicians’ privileges, or to help the government’s ally, because following Salvini’s incrimination the coalition government might fall, was left to members. Nevertheless, we can note that the formulation of the question (the reference to the “state interest”) and the fact that a “yes” vote would counterintuitively mean denying the authorisation to proceed against Salvini made the question lean unambiguously towards “yes”, which was eventually voted for by 59 per cent of the participants in the vote.

Did the delay in disembarking the *Diciotti* ship, to redistribute migrants to various European countries, happened to protect a state interest? (Yes: deny authorisation to proceed).

To sum up, online consultations for “directing” MPs have rarely been used. It seems that online consultations were used (or not used) to solve internal conflicts and to legitimise and ratify choices: to “pass the buck” to members. It is significant, then, that online consultations have been (or not been) held on divisive issues, clearly identified as left-wing or right-wing, such as immigration and civil rights.

## 5. Conclusions

A cyber-utopian narrative has always been fundamental in shaping the M5S's rhetoric and practice: according to the founders, it is through the internet, and in particular through the party's websites and platform, that an unmediated relationship between the leader, elected representatives and members can be created. Therefore, in the M5S, at least at the national level, online participation replaced traditional forms of intra-party participation<sup>69</sup>. The most relevant example of the power held by the M5S's members is the candidate selection process: candidates at the local, regional and national levels are decided on by members, in most cases through online votes. Other than that, online consultations have been used to define the party's policies, strategies and internal organisation, as well as to select party personnel.

If it is true that this represents one of the most advanced experiences regarding the use of the internet by a political party, there are also some weaknesses that can be outlined. The first is related to accountability and transparency issues. *Rousseau* was created by the private company Casaleggio Associati, and it was managed through Associazione Rousseau by the son of one of the two founders, Davide Casaleggio; Associazione Rousseau is an association detached from the M5S that had, in line with the provisions of the 2017 statute, the right to manage all the online

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<sup>69</sup> Except for the annual meeting *Italia a 5 stelle*, which cannot be considered a congress, in the M5S, there aren't national or regional congresses or other official occasions at or on which it is possible to take part in the life of the party at the national level. An exception could have been the *Stati generali*, the party congress that was scheduled for spring 2020 but that was held online in autumn because of the pandemic.

decision-making processes of the party, but members had no control over it, also because *Rousseau* doesn't employ open-source software (Deseriis 2017a). The end of the collaboration between Associazione Rousseau and Movimento 5 Stelle, in early 2021, can be considered both a further step towards the party's institutionalisation and a dismissal of the most radical promises of online direct democracy.

The second is related to the definition of the "rules of the game", which are always released in a top-down way and are not negotiable by members. This applies not only, for instance, to the rules for becoming a candidate and to the right to vote in consultations, but also to who decides to hold a consultation, its timing, and what the available options are. It is the leader who holds the power to call for a consultation, and it is not possible for members to request an initiative. Moreover, the way in which a consultation question is framed and the choices available to vote on are also relevant issues: all the M5S's consultations were held on predetermined options, and members could not add or propose new options.

Finally, in *Rousseau* there was no space within which members were able to discuss. On the M5S's platform, participation was intended as a means to decide, not to discuss or deliberate. The only place in which they could write comments was *Lex*, but the comments were untied and there was no real discussion among members, as the comments were addressed to the elected representative. To sum up, the M5S's individual members were given a lot of opportunities to have a say on the internal life of the organisation, but the M5S's party on the ground was an "atomised" one, which took shape during online consultations, always called for from above<sup>70</sup>.

Nevertheless, the M5S represents one of the most advanced experiences regarding the use of the internet by a political party, especially considering its electoral successes. Other experiences comparable to that of the M5S are the Spanish party Podemos and its online participation platform *Participa.podemos* (Pizarro and Labuske 2015) and Pirate Parties. Comparative studies of these parties' use of the internet (Deseriis 2020; Biancalana and Vittori 2021a) show similarities and differences between the three cases. For instance, in Podemos online participation does not substitute for offline participation, as in this party traditional congresses, albeit held with

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70 This is partially different at the local level, where face-to-face participation is more important. This is also indicated in our data from the fact that most online consultations happen at the national level, and that at the local and regional level they are used mostly to select candidates.



the help of digital tools, are still held. More generally, the organisational structure of Podemos is more party-like with respect to the M5S, and this is also mirrored in the management of the platform, which is run in a more transparent way through a team linked to the party and composed of party personnel. However, also in this case the platform serves only as a space of consultation, and the issues to be discussed are defined in advance by the party leadership. The case of the Pirate Parties, and especially the German one, seems to be more promising in terms of horizontality and members' empowerment. In this case, digital tools, and in particular the software LiquidFeedback, could potentially allow complex decision-making processes. However, internal conflicts and the lack of leadership have made the actual impact of online deliberation limited in this case too.

What was, then, the impact of *Rousseau* on the M5S's organisation? On the one hand M5S's members had relevant decision-making powers within the platform, and could directly decide, without formal intermediation, on many relevant issues. On the other, new forms of hierarchy and concentrations of power arose: the absence of an official party structure led, in the end, to a greater concentration of power in the hands of the leaders, or to anyone who holds the keys to the operating system. Members *formally* had a lot of power, but in the end the predominance of the leadership was never questioned. Due to the fact that the "rules of the game" were not shared and that members had neither control over the management of the platform, nor the power to call initiatives, and that the questions and available options were often framed to make members ratify decisions taken elsewhere, the outcomes of the consultations rarely contested the leadership. For these reasons, despite the deep innovation brought about by these tools with respect to the decision-making processes of traditional parties, we can say that members' power was mainly symbolic.

Members' participation resulted, in the end, in an *impression* of participating, which can have its most significant effects, for instance, in members' identification with the party or in its positioning *vis-à-vis* other parties in the public sphere, rather than in concrete decision-making processes (Biancalana and Vittori 2021a). This can be also considered one of the reasons behind the, on average, constantly low participation rate in online consultations. The role of the internet and of the platform *Rousseau* in the party's disintermediation strategies was thus mainly linked to a rhetoric or a narrative on overcoming traditional party structures and on citizens' empowerment. When it comes to practices, it seems that new and less accountable forms of intermediation were created. In particular, the role

of Casaleggio Associati and Associazione Rousseau can be seen as a new powerful and unaccountable form of intermediation.