

## 4. The Broken Promises of Members' Empowerment: Rhetoric and Use of the Internet by the Partito Democratico

### 1. Introduction

The party model of the Partito Democratico is based on the opening of decision-making processes to voters and on the direct legitimisation of the party leadership, through its election through open primaries. Therefore, the promise of an unmediated connection between leader and followers has always been a fundamental characteristic of the party. It is thus interesting to analyse whether or not the internet plays a role in the party's disintermediation strategies.

In this chapter, I will analyse the perception and use of the internet by the PD, and in particular the experience of the so-called online circles (*circoli online*) and the mobile application *Bob*. I will focus in particular on these two tools for two reasons. In the first place, these are proprietary tools of the party. Unlike, for example, in the case of a Facebook page, in this case the party has the power to decide the structure and architecture of the tool, and the features available. For this reason, these tools are a relevant source of information on the party's concept and employment of digital tools. In the second place, these tools can potentially fall within the category that I have defined as direct democracy: they could empower party members, giving them a say in party decisions and then altering the distribution of the internal decision-making power in their favour.

The Partito Democratico, although born in 2007, must not be considered a new party. On the contrary, it is a mainstream party that, unlike the M5S, has had to adapt to a new social, political and technological context. In other words, it is not a "netroot organisation", i.e. one that has been shaped from the very start by digital technology, but a "legacy" one (Karpf 2012). In order to analyse whether and how the internet plays a role in the party's disintermediation strategies, and in particular if it has an impact on party organisation, the direct democracy digital tools of the PD will be observed from two points of view: the description of their use and the assessment of their impact on party organisation. For the analysis of these tools, three dimensions in particular will be observed: the architecture of the tool and its affordances (Dahlberg 2011), its features, and the activities

that users are encouraged to perform; members' rights and powers within the digital tool; and the consequences on party organisation and on the internal distribution of power.

In order to do so, in paragraph 2 I will examine the references to digital tools in the statute of the Partito Democratico and in other party documents, and their evolution over time. In paragraph 3, I will analyse the actual implementation of online circles through the voice of the promoters of two of them, now inactive: the one in Bologna, the first one to be opened and one of the most advanced at the time, and the one in Turin. In paragraph 4, I will analyse the mobile application *Bob*, released in 2017 and now abandoned, observing the architecture of the application. Finally, in the concluding paragraph I will summarise the main findings and try to assess the consequences of the use of these tools on party organisation, in particular regarding members' empowerment.

## *2. The Promises of Empowerment Through Digital Participation*

According to its internal documents, the Partito Democratico seems to have grasped the opportunities given by digital technologies from the very beginning. The 2008 statute provides, in fact, two major organisational innovations, related to new technologies. The first concerns the party's local sections, called *circoli* (circles). In addition to territorial circles, linked to a specific territory, and environmental circles, linked to places of study or work, online circles have also been established. The statute also mentions an "IT system for participation" that is intended to encourage internal debate and allow members to "make proposals". However, the 2008 statute does not provide much information concerning these two tools. According to the statute, the circles constitute the basic organisational units through which the members take part in the party's life (article 14). Online circles "are set up on the internet", and it is possible to join them "regardless of place of residence, work or study". In this type of circle, the aggregation of members is therefore based on a criterion that is not of physical proximity.

If then, on the one hand, the party seems to recognise the importance of the internet, and to promote new forms of engagement, on the other, the impression is that it seeks to normalise and limit the potential innovation of online circles. In fact, in article 14.2 we read that "members of online circles can take part in the party's internal political life and the election of the online circle's governing bodies, but must in any case indicate the territorial or environmental circle where they exercise their other rights"

(14.2). Basically, it is not possible to be a member only of an online circle: another circle is needed in which to exercise one's rights, especially during the congress. This is a matter related to the monitoring of party registrations, which are potentially less surveilled on the internet.

You become a member of the online circle, but you are not automatically a member of the party [...]. [This is] to have a minimal filter on who becomes a member, because Italy is not made up only of "beautiful souls"; there are also the less beautiful souls and so I have to be careful about who enters the party [...]. To avoid infiltrations, because otherwise I build an online circle, I put in 400 members and I go to the congress: it does not work! We have to keep a filter [...]. If [the members of the online circle] want to elect the party leader, they must register with the party (Int. 17).

With regard to online circles, the 2008 statute refers to a subsequent regulation. This document specifies some organisational aspects: it is possible to become a member of the party online, but the registration becomes effective when the applicant collects the card in a territorial section. The request to establish an online circle must be signed by at least twenty people, and these people must be the expression of a territory of at least four provinces, in order to avoid overlapping with the territorial circles. Each circle can define its organisational and functional model, providing an assembly and a "coordinator"—instead of a secretary. These provisions are almost unchanged in the 2019 statute (article 17) and in the following regulation, except that now only ten people, without any reference to their territory of origin, can form an online circle, and three people from the same place of residence, study or work can form a *Punto PD*, a novel form of online aggregation established by the new statute.

Therefore, we note that a party which has been defined as "open", and which is based on the opening of decisional processes to its electors, is in fact very careful in the control of its organisational boundaries, when it comes to the online world. Members are in fact responsible for the first screening of the candidates for the party leadership, even if the final choice is entrusted to voters through primaries. On the contrary, promoters see the online circles not as a way to recruit more members in order to merely influence the leader's selection, but to create new forms of political participation.

Our aim really wasn't to create more registration cards. I've never been interested in saying "let's make 5,000 cards in order to take the party and change it". But we wanted to give people who are not part of

this world and who do not feel involved in this world a key to access politics with. In contrast, the party has always adopted the view “we cannot control who enrolls members online and so we are scalable” (Int. 12).

Article 1.10 of the 2008 statute is dedicated to the “IT system for participation”. This is supposed to “foster the internal debate and to rapidly circulate all necessary information” and to allow “voters and members to be informed, to participate in the internal debate and to make proposals through the internet”, as well as to make accessible “all information on its internal life, including financial statements, and on the meetings and resolutions of the party’s governing bodies”. The executives and the elected representatives of the party are required to make their activities public through the IT system for participation”. The IT system for participation was never implemented, and it was repropounded in the 2019 statute under the name of “online deliberative platform”.

In general, with respect to the 2008 one, the 2019 statute increases and deepens the references to digital participation. The eleven years between 2008 and 2019 represented a real revolution for the relationship between citizens, parties, and the online world. If the 2008 statute was ahead of its time—if not in practice, then at least for the declarations it made—it is now almost taken for granted that parties have to deal with the digital world. Moreover, in Italy, the fact that the Movimento 5 Stelle, a party which is based on the internet, gained huge success encouraged other parties to take a position and to adapt even more to the challenges of the online world. For instance, when presenting the new statute and its supposed digital innovations to the press, Zingaretti stated that the PD wanted to “beat the M5S on the web field”. When one reads the statute and the leader’s declaration, it seems that, on the one hand, the web is seen with suspicion by the PD, as a place of simplification, hatred and distortion of reality. On the other, it is perceived as a tool with which to fill the gap between citizens and politics, and as a tool of participation.

We must also learn to be a community on the web, an unavoidable place today, to open channels of encounters and communication with a large number of citizens of all ages, but especially the young. The net today is often the place of exasperated simplification, hatred and deception. It is often populated by those who use it to spread lies and negative values. But the web can also be the place for new and fruitful communication for informed citizens; it can be the tool for

new forms of political and social participation, a way to fill the gap between citizens and politicians (Platform *Prima le persone*, 2019).

The Partito Democratico recognises the potential that digital networks offer for citizens' participation in public life, is aware of the risks posed and opportunities offered by the advent of the digital society and has organised itself to counter any form of falsification and distortion of reality, also through the activity of a national legal office (Article 30, 2019 statute).

The online deliberative platform is described in article 30 of the new statute. In its platform, Zingaretti acknowledges that the tool, already foreseen by the 2008 statute, has remained a dead letter. According to the statute, the new deliberative platform should be a place for “analysis, comparison, information, participation and decision-making, and for the discussion and dialogue phase that precedes and accompanies the decisions taken by the representative and executive bodies of the party”. It should be “open to members and voters”, developing its functions “through the institutional website and the official party application process”. Its functions will include “coordinating PD members and circles, as well as interacting with voters”, members and voters will be able to “advance ideas and contributions and report issues; verify the activity of the party and elected representatives; investigate issues of particular relevance thanks to constant access to studies and analyses; adhere to action and mobilisation campaigns; disseminate party activities”. Future analyses will tell us whether it will ever see the light<sup>28</sup>.

### 3. *The Pioneering Experience of Online Circles*

Except for the experience of the application *Bob*, no platform has been developed by the Partito Democratico in the time span considered in this work. When asked about online circles, the PD's party executives state that they “essentially carry out work of political elaboration; they elaborate documents, proposals... Many have a blog in which they exchange ideas; people take part in them... It is a promotional role particularly on the internet, and then on Facebook or on other social media” (Int 17). Accord-

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28 The *Agorà democratiche* project launched by Enrico Letta at the beginning of 2021 includes the creation of a digital platform, whose analysis falls beyond the scope of this work.

ing to this definition, it would be difficult to grasp the difference between an online circle—which, according to our typology, should fall into the category of direct democracy, since the circles are “the basic organisational units through which the members take part in the life of the party”—and a Facebook page or a Facebook group, which, in contrast, would fall into the category of communication or coordination.

Indeed, it is not entirely clear, from party documents, what the role of online circles is in the party model. Looking at practical experiences, we see that the first online circle was born in 2012. In 2012, online circles were able to have a pioneering function; since then, digital communication has changed profoundly, and nowadays every circle or group has the chance to have a “parallel life” online. Although “if a territorial circle has a website, it doesn't automatically become an online circle” (Int. 12), technological changes made the organisational innovation represented by online circles partially outdated<sup>29</sup>.

To understand the motivations for the creation and the functioning of online circles, the experiences of Bologna<sup>30</sup> and Turin—two online circles created in 2012 and 2014, respectively, and which are currently inactive—can be analysed. For both, the reason for creating an online circle was twofold. In the first place, the aim was to attract and involve people for whom participating in the life of a party was difficult because of the constraints of work and family. Instead, the online circle was intended to be “a place where it is not the time of people's lives that adapts to politics but the opposite. It is politics that adapts its times to people's lives” (Int. 12). In the second place, there was an attempt to give new value to participation in the party, to make members count and to discuss contents in a context in which participation in the primaries is open to all voters and few additional rights are given to members, who thus cannot significantly influence the decision-making processes of the party.

The online circle is then, in the promoters' conception, something more than a communication tool: it is a tool for participation and deliberation,

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29 To March 2018, only three circles were active: Circolo online PD Campania – DemOnLine; Circolo online PD – Libertà è Partecipazione; and Circolo online PD – CittàMondo. According to a document written by those three circles (*A new way of doing politics: the online circles of the Partito Democratico*), online circles have assumed three configurations over time: territorial, for example corresponding to a region; circle of discussion, within which debates and documents of synthesis are created; and thematic, in which a specific political theme is debated.

30 The online circle of Bologna was founded in 2012 and had an *ad hoc* derogation to act as a real territorial circle.

which can allow decisions to be made and then the life of the party to be influenced by giving members more participation opportunities. For instance, in the case of Bologna, it was possible to vote online, and “the governing bodies at the provincial level were informed of the results” (Int. 12). But in the absence of a clear regulation, and a lack of interest from the national party, a problem of this kind of participation tool was precisely that of finding a channel through which to pursue proposals, to connect with the party’s decision-making process.

Perhaps the point of weakness was precisely what is called the “participatory contract”: I take part, we discuss and debate, but it is necessary to actually understand what the outcome is and where it ends... [...]. We had imagined that [the outcome] could be some initiatives to be presented in the city council, due to the fact that I’m on the city council, or even to identify local MPs at the national level who could somehow take charge of them (Int. 6).

To sum up, in its statute the PD provides for some innovative digital tools and, at the level of declarations, pays attention to the online world. However, in reality, the national level didn’t invest much in online circles, leaving the initiative to individual members and not giving any technological support to promoters. The reason seems to be that online circles are perceived as a threat to the organisational boundaries, as a way to “scale” the party. This clashes with the image of an open party that opens its decision-making processes not only to members but also to voters. Moreover, regarding the transfer of power to members, we have seen that it is difficult for online circles’ promoters to develop an actual “participatory contract”, that is, to link participation with clear outputs and decisions. For these reasons, the impact of online circles on party organisation appears to be very limited.

#### *4. Participation or Just Propaganda? The Mobile Application Bob*

Also because of the evolution in digital technologies and the spread of social network sites, online circles tended to close over time. In parallel, especially starting with Renzi’s secretariat, the party has paid greater attention to online communication: one of the features of Renzi’s leadership style was precisely the direct communication with supporters, also through social networks. The online application *Bob*, released in 2017, seemed to represent a new interest in direct democracy tools by the PD. *Bob* was

introduced for the first time by Renzi in March 2017, during the presentation of his candidature for the spring 2017 primaries. The application was defined by the party leader as an “IT platform”: the explicit reference was the M5S’s platform *Rousseau*. It seemed that, with *Bob*, the Partito Democratico wanted to take up the digital challenge with the M5S.

Our counter-offence on the internet is about to begin. Against the lies of those who led people to believe that politics makes fake news go viral, thus gaining in advertising. The *Bob* project is ready (Renzi’s newsletter, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017).

The application was released in May 2017. It was an application exclusively for smartphones and did not have a linked website. In the description of the application, we can read that *Bob* is “a unique, inclusive, collaborative digital ecosystem and offers those who want it the chance to be a protagonist”. The application had six sections: *Volontari* (Volunteers); *Democratica+*, *Conosci* (Know); *Partecipa* (Participate); *Sostieni* (Support); *Video*.

The *Volontari* section contained materials for the electoral campaign for the general elections of March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Through this section it was possible to register as a volunteer and download materials for the press and social media<sup>31</sup>. The *Democratica+* section presented some information material, especially videos. It consisted of two sub-sections: *Ore nove* (Nine o’ Clock) and *Terrazza PD* (PD Terrace). Also, the following section, *Conosci*, was dedicated to information and made up of various sub-sections: *Democratica*, in which there was a link to the online newspaper of the party, *News in evidenza* (News in the Foreground), in which there was brief news about the party, *Team*, in which we could have found the list of the members of the national secretariat, with biographies, and *Territorio* (Territory). In this last section, a list of the physical and online addresses of the regional offices of the party and those of the metropolitan federations was presented.

Since the application was advertised as a platform for participation and decision-making, the most interesting section is the fourth: *Partecipa*. *Partecipa* consisted of five sub-sections: *Le idee di oggi* (Today’s Ideas); *Sondaggi* (Surveys); *Condividi* (Sharing); *Magliette gialle* (Yellow T-Shirts); *Eventi*

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31 A volunteer campaign for the 2018 general elections was advertised on the party’s website and social network accounts. It seemed that the PD could replicate an experience such as that of NST at the national level, but a campaign based on volunteers was never organised.



(Events). It was possible to access this section with a Facebook or Google account. To enter this section, it was also necessary to respond positively to the question: “Do you accept the *Charter of Values* and intend to vote PD?”. This was not, therefore, a section reserved for the members of the party. Like other offline decision-making processes, this section was open to all those who declared they they were voters of the PD.

Let us analyse in detail the architecture and affordances of this section. The sub-section *Le idee di oggi*, contained the news of some results achieved by the party in government with a very brief description. The user could respond to this item with a like (thumb up) or dislike (thumb down). It thus represented a simple expression of agreement or disagreement with the policies carried out by the party in government. In *Sondaggi*, there was a survey on some laws currently under discussion in the Chamber of Deputies. After a brief description of the law in question, five questions were presented to the user, who had three possibility to answer: agree, inclined to agree, and disagree. Even in this case, it is not clear who the recipient of this feedback is, and how this will be interpreted and eventually used. In *Condividi*, there was some news to be shared on Facebook; in *Magliette gialle* some news on the party’s volunteering activities and on the themes of civic engagement were listed, but not information on how to take part in this mobilisation; in *Eventi*, a list of some national events, without the opportunity for the user to propose new ones, was presented.

The fifth section, *Sostieni*, consisted in a link to the donations page of the party website. In the last one, *Video*, some video-interviews with the PD’s representatives were available. In addition to the six sections mentioned, there was another button through which it was possible to reach a section called *Proponi* (Propose). In this section, it was possible to send a proposal (an event; an idea; a survey) to the application’s editorial staff.

What are members’ rights and powers? In the first place, we note that *Bob*, like most of the party’s decision-making processes, was open to both members and voters. From the analysis of the application’s affordances, we can see that the only actions that the user could undertake within *Bob* were: to respond with a like (thumb up) or dislike (thumb down) to some results achieved by the party in government; to agree or disagree on certain predetermined questions regarding a law discussed in the Chamber of Deputies; read news and share it on social media; connect to the party website; and contact the application editorial staff. Therefore, we can state that *Bob* had mainly a communicative top-down function. The application, particularly in the section allegedly dedicated to participation, did not

allow users either to decide, debate or create links among themselves and between themselves and the party.

Despite the rhetoric that surrounded it, *Bob* doesn't fall into the direct democracy category. The sections *Le idee di oggi* and *Sondaggi* could be considered part of the sub-category consultation (that is, when the party commits to collecting and considering members' ideas, in a non-binding manner), but there isn't a "participatory contract": the user doesn't know whether and how his or her contribution will be interpreted and taken into consideration. Moreover, we have seen that the contribution that the user can provide is definitely poor: it is limited to an agreement or disagreement with some very simple questions, and it is completely unlinked to the party's decision-making process. The only way in which the user can interact, apart from expressing agreement or disagreement is to send a proposal to the application's editorial staff. To sum up, we can say that there isn't any transfer of power in *Bob*, and consequently no impact on the distribution of the party's internal decision-making power.

## 5. Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to analyse the role of the internet in the PD's disintermediation strategies, and in particular whether and how the use of direct democracy digital tools has an impact on its organisation. To this end, I have analysed the perception and use of the internet of the Partito Democratico, its evolution and impact on the organisation, in particular regarding two digital tools: online circles and *Bob*. In terms of the evolution of the party's use of the internet, we can say that in a first phase there was an interest in direct democracy tools, which is testified to by the innovations included in the 2008 party statute. The party gave people the opportunity to create online circles, and some local representatives of the party took advantage of this. Nevertheless, apart from this, the PD did not seem interested in the development of such tools, mainly because of its fear of being infiltrated and the loss of control over the organisation.

In a second phase, corresponding to Renzi's secretariat, despite rhetoric on the importance of online participation, we witness a shift to mainly communicative digital tools. Indeed, despite it being presented as a "participatory platform", the second digital tool analysed (*Bob*) is neither a direct democracy nor an organisational tool: it is just a top-down communication tool. To define it as a participatory platform is only a rhetorical attempt to show the party's interest in digital innovation, and to create

the perception that members can count and participate online. In reality, the participation that took place via *Bob* was completely detached from the party's actual decision-making processes. In the case of online circles, in contrast, there was an attempt to give more power to members through online participation, but this attempt was limited to the local level.

In sum, the tools examined do not allow a transfer of power from the centre to the base (or vice versa), and so we can say that they do not exert an impact on the party's organisation and on the internal distribution of the decision-making power: the role of the internet in the PD's disintermediation strategies seems then to be only of a rhetorical nature. This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that *Bob* was soon abandoned, and that in 2019 similar rhetoric and similar tools were repropounded in spite of the fact that no participatory platform had been created by the PD.

It is worth noting that in early 2021 Enrico Letta, the new party secretary, started a process called *Agorà democratiche*. This initiative, according to its presentation on the party's website, is "aimed at expanding and innovating the spaces and forms of democratic participation and at developing, in the most shared and broad way possible, an ambitious programme for the centre-left". The *Agorà* are divided into two phases. On the one hand, there will be some events, both in person and online, in which proposals are made and shared by participants. On the other hand, a new digital platform will be the place in which the proposals will be discussed and through which priority actions will be identified. The platform will be open to all citizens and will require the signing of the party's *Charter of Values* and the payment of a minimum amount of 1 euro. It remains to be seen whether this initiative will be placed in the wake of the preceding ones. So far, the party has resisted the most radical innovations potentially created by digital tools, using them only to create the image of a party whose decision-making processes are open to members and supporters, and in which members can participate online.