

## 5. Staging Directness: Ethnography of a Grassroots Campaign in Turin

### 1. *Introduction*

What happens at the local level, where the party's contact with citizens is closer? Electoral campaigns are the field in which parties are said to have externalised their functions the most. The voluntary work of members and activists is said to have been replaced with that of professional campaigners, and the relationship between party members and citizens with an unmediated leader–electorate connection, carried out through television or social network sites. To answer this question and verify this assumption, this chapter will observe *Noi Siamo Torino* (We Are Turin), an innovative experience of a grassroots campaign carried out during the 2016 Turin mayoral election.

*Noi Siamo Torino* (NST) was an electoral campaign inspired by the US model—specifically, by Barack Obama's electoral campaigns—based on volunteers' field mobilisation and micro-targeting that took place in Turin in 2016 and that was aimed at the re-election of the mayor Piero Fassino, a member of the Partito Democratico (PD), supported by a centre-left coalition. NST was a managerial and professional organisation, external and separate from the PD, whose aim was to recruit volunteers with the task of persuading citizens to vote for the candidate Fassino, not in the name of party identification, but using their experience of lay citizens. The goal of the promoters of the campaign was the creation, through the activity of volunteers, of a direct (that is, not mediated by the party structure) relationship between citizens and candidate that was supposed to encourage, as a result, an increased turnout.

Nonetheless, in the second round Fassino lost the election to the *M5S*'s candidate, Chiara Appendino. However, the case of NST won't be analysed here from the point of view of electoral effectiveness (Cepernich 2017, 105–106); on the contrary, through data collected during the direct observation of the campaign, the NST experience and its meaning will be investigated with the aim of detecting the changes in practices and repertoires of campaigning and party membership, particularly regarding a mainstream party, such as the PD, and their link with disintermediation strategies.

In recent years, we have witnessed the promotion of proximity (Le Bart and Lefebvre 2005) between politicians and citizens: the direct contact between them would constitute a possible solution to the crisis of trust that affects the institutions of representative democracy. The creation, through the field activity of volunteers, of what Nielsen (2012) defines “personalized political communication”—personalised in the sense of no longer mediated by communication technologies, but by real people—can be considered an attempt to create an unmediated relationship between the candidate and the citizens, which is different to the one traditionally carried out by party members.

Based on these premises, this chapter will be organised as follows. In the second section, we will discuss the transformations of electoral campaigns in the three phases outlined in the research literature: pre-modern, modern and post-modern or digital. Although apparently paradoxical, it is precisely in the last phase, characterised by the massive use of digital media, that on-the-ground and grassroots campaigns, in which the fundamental factor is the human one, regain their importance. In a context marked by the alleged transformation and crisis of party membership, canvassing and, in general, campaigning carried out with volunteers on the ground appears both as the reinvention and modernisation of ancient practices, and as a substitute for the classical functions of party membership. Finally, I will briefly discuss some of the most significant foreign experiences of campaigns of this type (especially in the US, but also in France) that are implicit or explicit points of reference for the case we have analysed.

The third section will be dedicated to the interpretation and “translation” of this type of campaign in Italy and in particular in Turin. Against the backdrop of the context of the 2016 Turin mayoral elections, we will analyse the setting, the main actors and the objectives of the NST project. In the fourth section, we will deal with the development of the campaign and with its reception by the actors directly involved: the volunteers and the Partito Democratico, analysed both through direct observation and semi-structured interviews.

## *2. Canvassing: Electoral Campaigns “Back to the Future”*

Studies on the evolution of political communication in general (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999), and of electoral campaigns in particular (Norris 2000), highlighted the succession of different phases. If, on the one hand, these distinctions are more useful in tracing analytical borders than record-

ing real breaks, it is true that some social, political and technological transformations have profoundly changed the way of conducting and communicating politics over the last few decades.

In this respect, it is possible to identify three main phases (Cepernich 2017; Mazzoleni 2012). The first, which goes from the post-war period to the fifties, is marked by the supremacy and the hegemony of parties. In a context in which political alternatives seem “frozen” (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) and in which citizens’ identification with political parties is high, parties are the main actors of political communication and electoral campaigns, also because of the control they can exercise over the media. In this phase, electoral campaigns are managed independently by the party, through direct forms of interaction between candidates and voters (Manin 1995) and propaganda broadcast through partisan media.

The second phase, which can be said to have begun in the sixties, coincides with two trends: the diffusion of television and the loosening of party loyalty. These are two crucial changes that radically transformed political communication and electoral campaigns. The result was the spread of mediatisation processes (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1998): an increasing influence of the so-called media logic (Altheide and Snow 1979) in all fields, including politics, whose institutions, were increasingly dependent and shaped by the media, especially by television, rather than vice versa, as in the previous phase.

A greater independence and commercialisation of the media imply a different way of dealing with politics which is more oriented towards forms of spectacularisation, popularisation and fusion with entertainment (van Zoonen 2005; Mazzoleni and Sfardini 2009). Electoral campaigns are increasingly played out on television, and therefore their organisation is increasingly entrusted to professionals that don’t belong to the party. Since a specific expertise is needed to manage this kind of campaigns, the party relies less and less on members for mobilisation and propaganda activities, also because their number has declined (Dalton and Watterberg 2002; van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012). Therefore, with the passage from the first to the second phase, the personal and direct contact between citizens and candidates was loosened (Lefebvre 2016), and the distance between citizens and politicians grew (Manin 1995).

An opposite tendency seems to have emerged in the current phase. The massive diffusion of digital media, especially those relating to the so-called web 2.0, represent a deep paradigm shift compared to the past, and is defined by Castells (2009) as “mass self-communication”. On the one hand, with the internet, citizens have a greater responsibility in the selection

of information; on the other, they can also become producers and distributors of information, bypassing journalistic mediation. Information has therefore become more individualised and personalised, and potentially more horizontal and bidirectional, even if asymmetry and hierarchy have not disappeared on the internet. At the same time, political identities and parties’ organisational structures have been further transformed into post-bureaucratic forms. Light and multi-speed forms of participation and affiliation have emerged (Scarow 2014).

Disintermediation strategies, as we have seen, can be considered parties’ strategic responses to these changes. In this context, over the past fifteen years, starting from the United States, electoral campaigns that enhanced direct contact with the voters, through telephone and personal contact especially, have appeared. It is what Nielsen (2012) defines as “personalized political communication”: premeditated (in the sense of organised) practices that use people as media for political communication. The United States has a vast tradition of canvassing that has never disappeared. But, starting from the nineties, and especially around 2000, we witness a growth in this practice, which we can attribute to the diffusion of the research by two political scientists from Yale, Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green (2000; 2004), and in general to the acknowledgement, in communication research, of the limited effects of mass communication (Nielsen 2012). Gerber and Green, through experimental research, demonstrated the electoral effectiveness<sup>32</sup> of canvassing, especially regarding voters that wouldn’t have otherwise voted (hence the term “mobilisation campaign”, i.e. that does not aim to convince voters already inclined to vote for the other candidate, but to mobilise as much as possible the voters belonging to their own field), because of the social pressure that the campaign would create.

There are two main aspects, related to the use of new technologies, that differentiate this practice from similar ones from the past. On the one hand, new technologies allow more rational, scientific and managerial organisation of activists and volunteers involved in an electoral campaign, for example through applications such as MyBarackObama (Vaccari 2009). The second is the use of data to guide the electoral campaign: the construction of databases, their analysis and segmentation in order to profile

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32 Gerber and Green’s experimental research shows that door-to-door activity is more effective than posters, e-mails and phone calls. In fact, canvassing allows parties to “earn” one vote for every 14 conversations, against one for every 38 telephone calls and one for 100,000 flyers.

voters and contact them (the so-called micro-targeting), both indirectly—for example with text messages or phone calls—and directly, through canvassing. According to Nielsen (2012, 6) “in political campaigns new technologies have not replaced older forms of communication as much as they have revived them”.

Although there are some interesting previous experiences (for example, the Republican election campaign for the US presidential elections in 2004), it is Obama’s 2008 campaign which made this type of mobilisation globally famous and became the reference point for all future experiences of this kind, also because of the candidate’s victory. As noted by Lefebvre (2016), in fact, Obama’s victory helped to legitimise the use of these new practices and to “export” them, even despite the different characteristics of the European and American social and political contexts, and consequently the different structures of their electoral campaigns.

In this respect, an interesting importation of this kind of experience in the European context is the French one, which took place during the 2012 presidential elections<sup>33</sup>. Three young French scholars affiliated to US universities, after having participated in the Obama campaign in 2008, proposed a similar campaign to the French Socialist Party. The three proponents, called *Les Bostoniens*, proposed using the Socialist Party’s members in order to organise a massive national canvassing campaign (Liégey, Muller and Pons 2013; Belkacem and Talpin 2014; Lefebvre 2016), reinventing and innovating in the direction of greater managerialisation, not without resistance, the political communication practices of a Socialist Party affected by the decline in its membership.

In conclusion, the fundamental characteristic of this type of campaign is the union of the possibilities offered by new technologies with the search for personal and direct contact with voters, or rather the attempt to organise in a scientific and managerialised way, also through new technologies, direct contact with voters, which was characteristic of the first phase of political communication. It is for this reason that we can define canvassing as a sort of “back to the future” for electoral campaigns, although it would be more accurate to say that this kind of campaign has affinities, but also differences, with the first phase campaigns. An

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33 In the United Kingdom, canvassing is a consolidated practice, also because of the incentives of the uninominal electoral system. Even in this country we have witnessed, especially from 2015 onwards, the profound Americanisation of electoral campaigns, certified by the use of US political consultants that previously worked for Obama by both the Conservatives and Labour.

affinity undoubtedly consists in the valorisation of the direct and personal contact with the electors, whose importance had already been underlined by the studies on the two-step flow of communication and on opinion leaders (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1948). The main differences lie not only in the managerialisation of this contact, but also in the fact that contemporary electoral campaigns take place in a context in which the role of parties, at least in Europe, has profoundly changed. Campaigns based on the mobilisation of volunteers and on canvassing therefore appear on the one hand as the reinvention and modernisation of ancient practices, and as a substitute for the classical function of party membership on the other.

### *3. From the USA to Turin: The Case of NST in the 2016 Electoral Campaign*

The mobilisation campaign that took place in Turin in spring 2016 was the first of this kind organised in a large Italian city. The organisation of NST was autonomous and detached with respect to the PD, but specifically aimed at the re-election of the mayor Fassino. Piero Fassino, the incumbent mayor, is a leading figure of the PD. 67 years old in 2016, he has been active in politics since 1968, holding important positions as an elected representative, party official and member of the government at the local and national level in the PCI, in the DS and finally in the PD, of which he is one of the founders. In 2011, he was elected mayor of Turin in the first round. The main opponent of Fassino and of the centre-left coalition that supported him was Chiara Appendino, the mayoral candidate for the M5S.

The two opponents seemed to represent change and continuity, respectively. While Fassino relied on his strong experience as a public administrator and politician, Appendino, 32 years old at the time, pledged radical discontinuity with respect to the previous administrations: after 23 years of uninterrupted government of the city by a centre-left coalition, Chiara Appendino's victory in the second round testified to a demand for change. This demand was expressed despite the fact that opinion polls showed citizens' overall satisfaction with the previous administration<sup>34</sup>. But satisfaction did not translate into consensus on election day. The electoral geography of the vote, with the peripheral neighbourhoods voting for

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34 In 2015, a poll showed that Fassino enjoyed the approval of about 60 per cent of the citizens. He was the fourth most highly rated mayor in Italy (Governance Poll 2015, Ipr Marketing).

Appendino and the central ones for Fassino, has led to the hypothesis that the peripheries felt excluded from the narration of the change of Turin from a city characterised by the presence of factories to a city of culture and knowledge.

In fact, in her electoral campaign, Appendino insisted on the existence of “two cities”: the city centre and the peripheries, the latter depicted as excluded from the benefits of renewal (Cepernich, Cittadino and Pellegrino 2018). On the contrary, according to Cepernich and Vignati (2016), the electoral campaign for Fassino was constructed on a framework of continuity, based on the results achieved in the previous five years, on the claim of the mayor’s competence, and on the validity of the development model of the city that had been promoted in the previous two decades. Fassino stigmatised Appendino as inexperienced and incompetent, and opposed to large infrastructural investments.

It is in this context that Fassino’s electoral campaign in general, and the NST project in particular, was organised. NST can thus be seen as a strategy carried out by a mainstream party, particularly by a candidate belonging to the so-called establishment and challenged by an outsider, to deliver an unmediated relationship with citizens and to get closer to them. Nevertheless, I must clarify that Noi Siamo Torino was only a part of Fassino’s electoral campaign, certainly a minority part concerning the economic investment by the candidate. Fassino relied largely on the classic electoral campaign tools such as billboards, and on the network of the PD’s circles and party militants that organised stands and other campaign events during the electoral campaign. NST was therefore an organisation autonomous but integrated into Fassino’s electoral campaign.

How was the idea of a US electoral campaign “imported” into the Turin context? The creators and coordinators of the project were Christopher Cepernich, a professor of sociology at the University of Turin and an expert in political communication, and Flavio Arzarello, an expert in political communication and a member of the Innovation Department of the PD. Cepernich and Arzarello proposed the project to the candidate Piero Fassino who, in a context in which the party was suffering from a membership crisis, accepted hoping to obtain additional mobilisation. But the two coordinators were driven by partially different motivations. If, for Cepernich, NST was a scientific project, proposed to a candidate whose party had a territorial structure capable of welcoming it, for Arzarello, who was an active member of the PD, the motivation was also political and dictated by his proximity to the party.

In general, the two creators of the project showed a great fascination for American election campaigns. Cepernich was, in fact, present as an observer in Lecco, a city in which a similar campaign for the re-election of the mayor Virginio Brivio was managed by Mike Moffo, a media strategist in Obama's 2012 electoral campaign. Cepernich and Arzarello met on the occasion of a conference by Moffo organised by Arzarello in 2014. Even in this case, as in the French one, there seems to have been a "contagion"<sup>35</sup> from the United States: the reference to the US experience and to Obama is, in fact, explicit<sup>36</sup>. It is also important to consider that university played an important role in this case, as it also did in the US and in France: Cepernich, in fact, played the dual role of scholar and political consultant.

The members of the NST staff (about 15–20 people) were also university students. They were students of public and political communication at the University of Turin, interested in experiencing an electoral campaign. They were very young, all under the age of 30. Their relationship with the electoral campaign was of a formative and professional nature. This is considered valuable experience in the field of political consultancy, to be "added to one's CV", regardless of the candidate's political colour ("if they had called me in Milan to campaign for Berlusconi, I would have gone"—one of the staffers told me).

On paper, the staff's task, under the direction of Cepernich and Arzarello, was to organise and coordinate the mobilisation of volunteers. Indeed, in the minds of the creators, NST was to stand on two legs. As we can read in the slides of the project, presented in PD circles, on the one hand, the goal was the mobilisation of volunteers, with the task of "reactivating the nodes of relationship in the territory", "reactivating participation and increasing turnout" and "promoting the desired voting behaviour" through direct and interpersonal communication with voters. On the other hand, volunteers would have to collect data on voters "for the communication and the strategy of the campaign".

Before I analyse these two goals in detail, the use of the term "volunteers" deserves further attention. In Italy, unlike in other countries such as

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35 As regards the use of the word "contagion", Robert (2007, 16) invites us not to think about the importation of managerial practices in politics in terms of simple diffusion, in which the new practices do not face resistance or undergo transformations. In his opinion, it is more appropriate to investigate the strategic appropriation of these practices by actors and the reasons for their interest in them.

36 See Giambartolomei, A. *Fassino vuole fare Obama: studenti arruolati a Torino*, in "Il Fatto Quotidiano", June 1<sup>st</sup> 2016.



the United States, the term volunteer refers to the semantic field of social volunteering. By defining the volunteers as such, it seems that the goal is to untie the volunteers from Fassino from the political dimension, to which they would belong by nature, and to link them to civic activism.

The relationship between volunteering and politics in Italy has been marked by different phases (Biorcio, Caruso and Vitale 2016). Since the fifties, the research by Almond and Verba (1963) showed that in Italy the figures for membership in associations were lower than in other European countries, a fact that helped to explain, according to these scholars, Italy's "particularistic" civic culture. In reality, the peculiarity of the Italian case lay in associations' strong ties with mass parties, in particular with the PCI and the DC. With the decrease in party identification, and with the birth of the new social movements between the end of the sixties and the eighties, and especially after the collapse of the so-called First Republic, we witness the growing autonomy of associations from parties. Given the "crisis of parties", and in a social context characterised by the weakening of the welfare state, it seems in this phase that volunteer associations ended up replacing, albeit in a different way, some of the tasks previously performed by parties and institutions, such as advocacy and service provision (Biorcio, Caruso and Vitale 2016).

From Toqueville onwards, participation in associations has always been considered a "school of democracy", capable of socialising citizens to democratic practices, and increasing participation and citizens' trust in institutions. But although even political activism can be considered a voluntary activity, the two types of participation differ substantially. While social participation is situated within civil society, and its aim is to protect rights and common goods and to support disadvantaged individuals outside the actions of parties (Moro 2013), party membership and activism belong to the political field, and we can say that their aim is to influence the "authoritative allocation of values in a society" (Easton 1965) through the election of candidates to public offices. Moreover, while active citizenship tends to be self-organised, participation in parties takes place within hierarchical structures organised from above (Michels 1911).

We can say then that NST tried to import some elements of social volunteering, or more generally of active citizenship, into the political field. It is therefore possible to frame this campaign within the concept of depoliticisation, in the sense of a transition of electoral campaign practices, caused by anti-politics and mistrust in parties, from the political to the personal-social dimension (Flinders and Woods 2014; Woods and Flinders 2014). As far as NST volunteers are concerned, coherently with this frame,

in the presentation of the project they were depicted as separated and disconnected from the Partito Democratico. The goal of volunteers should be to interact with and listen to citizens, demonstrating—through their presence on the ground—the closeness of the candidate to the citizens. Nevertheless, although one of the aims of the campaign was to mobilise lay citizens, not necessarily active in politics and the party, the promoters also sought to structure and organise their mobilisation with the collaboration of the local sections of the Partito Democratico (*circoli*).

Volunteers could in fact register through a dedicated website, and were coordinated and managed by NST, but the local sections of the Partito Democratico were also supposed to play a part in the campaign. Thanks to their territorial rooting, the local sections were meant to represent a sort of “logistic base” for NST volunteers and contribute to the campaign with activists who knew the neighbourhood and could therefore help volunteers. During the presentations of the project in the local sections, organisers told party members that NST would have done “what parties have always done”, but with a strategy and in a systematic way. However, in reality, the organisers’ idea was that the party and volunteer campaigns were two electoral campaigns with different objectives and targets. At the meetings that took place in the early phase of the campaign, in various local sections of the party, the organisers presented a clear “division of labour” between the two types of actors involved in the campaign: NST volunteers, unlike PD members, should have established a relationship with people based on their personal and subjective experience of the city, and not on the basis of an electoral programme or party identity.

But the electoral campaign was based not only on the mobilisation of volunteers and on their direct interaction with citizens. The other parallel and specular side of the campaign was the systematic collection by volunteers of voters’ data, which were used in order to direct the electoral campaign. In fact, conversing with the citizens shouldn’t be intended as an end in itself. The aim was to fill in a form that, in addition to a voter’s personal data, contained two pieces of information that will serve to profile the voter and to send him or her targeted communication (micro-targeting): the priorities for Turin and the voting orientation. The collection of data by volunteers could take place in three different ways: first, through the volunteers’ private relationships (e.g. relatives, acquaintances); secondly, through the presence in the neighbourhoods’ public places; and finally, through canvassing. In the last two cases, the volunteers were equipped with a red bag and a red bib emblazoned with the writing “Piero Fassino

candidate mayor of Turin” and were instructed to conduct a “completely natural” conversation based on the following script:

Good morning/good evening, my name is Chiara, I am a volunteer with Noi Siamo Torino for the electoral campaign of Piero Fassino. I would like to talk to you briefly about our city. Are you available?

If so:

In June there will be the elections for the mayor of Turin. Have you already decided who to vote for? (If you notice enthusiasm, ask if the person is willing to dedicate a part of his or her time to help as a volunteer). In your opinion, what is the most urgent problem that the next mayor of Turin will have to solve? Do you agree to give us your contact details to establish regular contacts and receive detailed information about our activities and our programme?

If not (quickly understand why):

If he or she is adamant about voting for another candidate, quickly close the conversation and move on. If he or she fears revealing his or her opinions, be reassuring and underline the VOLUNTARY aspect of your work.

Finally, a further aim of the campaign, in addition to mobilising volunteers and collecting data for micro-targeting, was to “integrate storytelling into field mobilisation”. Through social networks and media coverage, the narration of the mobilisation of NST was intended to become a part of Fassino’s electoral campaign.

#### *4. The Volunteers, the Party and the Unfolding of the Campaign*

“Hello, we are volunteers for Piero Fassino; can we ask you some questions about the city?”. This was the typical beginning of interaction between NST volunteers and a citizen of Turin. We have seen how, behind this simple question, there was a wider strategy and project, which can be linked, more generally, with the transformations of electoral campaigns and party membership. However, an organisation’s strategy, which appears to be highly rationalised, is often different from the actual practices implemented by militants and volunteers (Belkacem and Talpin 2014). This is why it is worth analysing the actual realisation of the campaign.

In order to structure the mobilisation in a capillary way throughout the city, eight small groups were created in correspondence to the eight administrative districts of Turin. Each group was managed by two staff members (called “captains”), who had the task of coordinating the operations of the volunteers, preparing the field operations according to their own and the volunteers’ availability. The operations mainly consisted of two types of “outings” (*uscite*): those in public places (e.g. markets) and door-to-door canvassing. The PD’s local sections were supposed to serve as a logistic base. A higher level of coordination was represented by the two campaign managers (Cepernich and Arzarello) and by another person in charge of the organisation. She had the task of contacting people who register as volunteers through the website and send them to the captains. All the outings were inserted in a Google calendar, and the staff was coordinated through a WhatsApp chat group. Once a week, the staff met at the headquarters of the electoral committee to discuss the progress of the campaign. It is at this central level that it was possible to monitor the progress of the micro-targeting data collection. The data were processed using software (Target 51) that allowed NST to profile voters and to send them targeted communication.

As regards volunteers, it is not possible to say exactly how many of them actually took part in the campaign, as the purpose of NST was precisely to mobilise a network of both formal and informal supporters. In a leaflet distributed during a meeting between Fassino and the volunteers, also aimed at recruiting new volunteers, we can read that volunteers can have different forms of commitment and involvement, ranging from taking part in the ground operations (“Come with us on the ground”) to lighter forms of participation, such as speaking about NST to friends or following NST on social networks. As mentioned, the idea of involving personal networks is greatly emphasised (“introduce us to friends”). Therefore, in a broader sense we can also consider anyone who solicited a vote for Fassino with phone calls a volunteer. Here, however, we will only consider the most active volunteers, those who took part in the activities on the ground.

Thanks to the collaboration of the staff, we asked each captain to indicate the number of volunteers who had taken part in at least one outing on the ground. The number of volunteers turned out to be 27. We then asked the captains to indicate to us the volunteers who had taken part at least three times, and the number turned out to be 12. Of these, we interviewed

10 volunteers (a summary table of the interviewees can be found in the Appendix)<sup>37</sup>.

To start, it is necessary to highlight why their number is very low, in general and in relation to the population of Turin, which is around 900,000. This, against the broad visibility of the project, advertised through all the channels of Fassino's election campaign, indicates the low appeal of such an initiative in the Turinese context and, as an unexpected consequence, led to staff members having to commit themselves to the field activities much more than they initially thought, becoming volunteers instead of volunteer coordinators. This created a partially distorted representation of the campaign. The fact that the young staff members were the most present, on the ground and on social media, led to the fact that NST was identified as "the youth campaign for Fassino". In fact, although nothing was done to make people believe the contrary, it is not openly stated that the staff members were interested in the campaign for almost exclusively educational and professional reasons.

From the point of view of their age and profession, we note that eight out of the ten volunteers belong to two categories: students (4) and retirees (4). The other two, middle-aged men, were already active in associations or trade unions. The volunteers were predominantly men (8/10). In terms of the political identity of the volunteers, seven out of the ten were currently members of the Partito Democratico (the eldest were also members of the PCI or the parties that followed) and regularly participated in the activities of a PD local section. One volunteer was a member in the past, but disagreeing with some of the party's choices, he has not renewed his membership. However, he still voted at the primaries; another is not a member but considered himself close to the party. We also asked the volunteers whether they were active in the field of social volunteering too: six volunteers were, while three said that for them their "volunteering" activity was political ("I am already a volunteer in the party", Int. 2). In this sense, the position of volunteer n. 10, a long-time party member, is interesting as he suggests that party membership is understood by party members themselves as a "voluntary" activity (as unpaid and aimed at a goal such as emancipation) and that, for them, the political activity is

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37 This part of the research was carried out in collaboration with a member of the staff, Jacopo Pellicciari, who was writing his master's dissertation on NST. Together with Pellicciari, I conducted the ten semi-structured interviews, which were also used in his work.

perceived as more important than the social one (“We were more volunteers”).

Therefore, despite the attempt to import some elements of volunteering and more generally of active citizenship into the political field, we note that the people interested in this project had, in the vast majority of cases, a very strong political and party background. We can thus compare volunteers’ representations of the campaign with their other experiences of political activism. We find both similarities and differences to their participation practices as members of the PD. In the first place, volunteers noticed and appreciated the presence of young people in the project. This can be read in relation to PD membership that is increasingly composed of old people. Moreover, one of the PD’s problems is dropping membership and weak participation in the local sections, which leads as a consequence to weak rooting in their territory, which is very different from the past. What emerges from the interviews, especially with regard to older militants, is in fact a contrast between the experience of NST, characterised by the presence of volunteers on the ground, and the experience of the party in recent years and its detachment from its territory. On the other hand, NST represents a sort of continuity with “what we did”. For instance, PCI members used to deliver the newspaper *L’Unità* (an organ of the PCI) door-to-door and had a strong rooting in the neighbourhoods.

If this [NST] continues, it will become like what we did: every Sunday we sold *L’Unità* door-to-door. In the neighbourhood they knew you because they always saw you. There was constant activity. That is what is missing now, in fact, because many local sections are always closed (Int. 10).

As regards PD members that decided not to participate in NST, with whom I had the opportunity to speak during the presentation of the project in the local sections, we can find two main reactions. In general, it seems that what was said by the organisers was accepted by members. According to them, NST volunteers “do what we have always done”, but with two differences: they do it in a more structured way and are young. The positive reactions to the project show how volunteers, in anti-political times, can benefit from the fact of “not being marked” (not being labelled as belonging to the political field and not being identifiable as PD). The negative reactions can be summarised in the suspicion that the volunteers

were “paid”<sup>38</sup>: staff members were people unrelated to local sections, and it was difficult for members to understand why they are committed to Fassino and not to the PD. Generally, the presence of NST was perceived as the consequence of the absence of party members on the ground.

This [NST] was a good example of the state in which the party’s local sections are. I find it extremely positive, but if the *circoli* worked, the militants of the local sections would be the volunteers for Piero Fassino! There would be no need to adopt another structure dedicated to the electoral campaign; there would be militants for each *circolo*. It is positive that they found them, but in the end, you see, young people were found for the activity, limited to the election of the mayor. So, it means that involving people in something concrete and specific still works, because those are truly volunteers; they are not paid, they are volunteers [...]. [This situation] is the result of an absence. The absence of those who were once called party militants. Now we call them volunteers, but they are militants (Int. 10, PD).

Finally, regarding party officials, they seemed to appreciate NST, especially from a narrative point of view, that is, for the storytelling in the campaign. Against a party that lacks young people and rooting in the territories, NST is perceived as a project to be exploited in order to improve the image of the candidate and the party<sup>39</sup>. Storytelling, as previously mentioned, has a strategic importance for NST. NST has a Facebook page where images of volunteers during the outings were posted daily. Staff members were, in fact, always eager to take photographs during these excursions. Therefore, seen in opposition to NST, which created the perception of a group present in the territories, the party is seen as closed, both physically and figuratively. Indeed, through the outings, NST promoted the perception of closeness and the proximity of politics and the mayoral candidate to the citizens.

With regard to the outings, they can be classified into two categories: those in public places and door-to-door canvassing. On these occasions, volunteers were supposed to talk with and listen to citizens, proposing

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38 This is a fundamental difference to the United States, where the presence of paid volunteers is completely normal.

39 Note that in the flyer for the run-off, it is possible to see a picture of Fassino surrounded by staff members and that on the occasion of a rally with Matteo Renzi at the Teatro Alfieri in the first rows of the theatre there was a sign stating, “reserved for young people and volunteers”.

their personal motivations for voting for Fassino and indirectly showing the candidate's closeness to the voters, and finally to collect data for micro-targeting<sup>40</sup>. In short, volunteers became “means of communication” (Nielsen 2012), intermediaries between Fassino and his electorate.

In the face of a highly rationalised strategy, it is interesting to analyse what happened, concretely, during the outings, and how the volunteers interpreted the role they had been assigned. A starting point is the general climate of negativity and of anti-politics among citizens. Faced with this climate of opinion, the strategy of volunteers was to shift the focus from the figure of Fassino (perceived, as we have seen, as part of the establishment, of the “system”) to issues related to the city. “Do not immediately say that you are here for Fassino”, is the advice given. In short, what appears to have taken place is an attempt to depoliticise the local campaign. “It’s like selling a product, but here you sell a political idea,” says a volunteer. The consequence of this approach, however—also given the absence of booths and gazebos, typical of a party electoral campaign, and the presence of bibs without party symbols—is that the volunteers were mistaken for ActionAid or Greenpeace volunteers, who ask for donations on the street and therefore tend to be ignored by passers-by.

Secondly, there is a discrepancy between the declared objectives of the project and their concrete realisation. For some staff members, the goal seemed to be essentially to collect data rather than to interact with citizens. If, according to the coordinators, the module is the tool with which to create a relationship and not the goal of the interaction, for some staff members the goal seemed to be simply to fill out the form. This clearly emerges in an exchange between a volunteer and a staff member:

The volunteer (a man in his mid-60s) asks the staff member what the goal is, whether to “collect data” or to “sow”. The staff member answers without hesitation that the goal is to collect data. The volunteer tries to understand what these data are for: he is a little doubtful but interested. The staff member is interested in the data, and it is clear his goal is to collect as much data as possible, and in fact he runs swiftly from one interaction to another. Instead, the volunteer starts talking to people calmly. People reject him less because he is an older man, and he seems nice and quiet. He does what volunteers should do on paper: he asks people to talk about the city and listens to them. In fact, I notice that that on some occasions this works: some

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40 The organisers declared that they had collected 11,507 forms.



people who initially do not want to talk eventually give their data. Although he does not talk about his personal experiences, he seems interested in what people are saying and listens to them. However, it does not always work: some people don't want to talk. "It's like selling a product, but here you sell a political idea," he tells me. The volunteer seems especially pleased to see a young man who engages in politics. As soon as the outing ends, the staff member tries to get rid of the red bag, because he is going to the grocery store to do his shopping. In the end, he turns it inside out, so that it is impossible to see the writing (Fieldwork note, 5/4/2016).

The element of rejection and mistrust was also present during the canvassing. On these occasions the volunteers were supposed to go from house to house to remind voters about the elections and to solicit a vote for Fassino (the so-called GOTV—Get Out The Vote). Especially when it was done in the absence of people belonging to the neighbourhood, or party members or candidates, there was a strong reluctance to opening doors to strangers. In the absence of the party's previous presence in the neighbourhoods, the experiment seemed destined to fail.

I'm going to canvass with two staff members. We have to walk the entire street, contacting all the people who vote in an electoral section. We have, in fact, a list of all voters residing in that street who vote in a certain section (the walk-list). One of the staff members tells me that he contacted the members of the Partito Democratico who live in that road to go in their building with them, but no one is available. We are in a street in a residential neighbourhood. When I arrive at the meeting point, I find one of the two staff members sitting on the bench, the Fassino bag upside down, as the other one did. We start. We ring the bell and say, "Hi, we are volunteers for Piero Fassino; can we ask you some questions about the city?" Most people do not respond (also because it's 4 p.m. on a working day). Whoever answers, with rare exceptions, says no. A very strong suspicion withholds them from opening the door. When we find a building door open, we enter and knock on all the doors. We manage to hand out three flyers, including one to a couple from the Partito Democratico. The lady is part of the local section and wants to know who we are. She is part of the local section and does not know us (but why wasn't she contacted?). The two staff members are tired and have no enthusiasm. In fact, it takes enthusiasm and conviction (or a salary) to spend hours ringing doorbells. After about an hour, when we are halfway down the

list, the two cannot take it anymore. One of the two jokingly proposes ringing the bells all together (Fieldwork note, 13/5/2016).

The fact that the staff member didn't find anyone available for canvassing shows scarce cooperation with the party. In addition, we see how the lack of involvement in the campaign by the staff members led to an absence of enthusiasm and to consider the time dedicated to the campaign as working time (see the trick of turning the bag inside out once the outing is over). Another problem was the difficulty of collecting data from people who tend to be suspicious probably because of their fear of fraud or illicit use of their data. Faced with these difficulties, some volunteers said that they would stop collecting data, thus violating the rules provided by the staff ("I personally collected two email accounts and a phone number, then I stopped asking", Int. 6). Faced with these difficulties and the low number of volunteers mobilised, as the weeks passed by, and especially during the run-off, NST tended to become only a form of leafleting:

The staff member told me that today there would be two candidates and two volunteers; instead there are only the two candidates. They are two very young women who were elected in the district in the first round. They are happy and relaxed, and they do not even hand out the flyers to all the people they meet. The activity has been reduced to handing out flyers. The staff member says that it is like this now, that people do not stop anymore, and they are tired. In fact, we walk and many people, especially older people, do not really want to talk to us. And they [the candidates] do not do anything to make them change their minds (Fieldwork note, 15/6/2016).

## 5. Conclusions

Electoral campaigns are one of the areas in which parties are said to have "externalised" their functions the most. The voluntary work of members and activists is said to have been replaced by the work of professional campaigners, and the relationship between party members and citizens with an unmediated leader–electorate connection, carried out through television or social network sites. The aim of this chapter was to analyse in-depth a local electoral campaign, in order to observe both if these assumptions hold true and the responses and the adaptations of a mainstream party at the local level.

Electoral campaigns are indeed a relevant moment which analyse political parties and can tell us a lot about their inner workings. Over last few years, electoral campaigns based on direct and personal contact between parties and citizens have emerged. These campaigns, characterised by managerialisation and the use of new technologies, appear both as the reinvention and modernisation of ancient practices, and as a substitute for the classical function of party membership. In this chapter, I observed an electoral campaign based on the mobilisation of volunteers in the city of Turin that was aimed at the re-election of the PD's mayor, Piero Fassino. On paper, the project seems to represent the overcoming of the party's role on the ground using an unmediated relationship between citizens arranged by an organisation separate from the party, but the in-depth analysis of the functioning of the campaign shows that the picture is more nuanced. My results show that we witness both the persistence of traditional forms of intermediation and the emergence of new ones.

As regards the first aspect, the vast majority of volunteers that joined NST, apart from young staffers interested in the campaign for professional reasons, were in reality members of the PD. This result, on the one hand, can be interpreted as a persistence of the role of party members, even in this new kind of electoral campaign. However, through volunteers/members' representations of NST, it is possible to highlight the main weaknesses and shortcomings of the party: the PD lacks the presence of young people, rooting in the territories, and the perception of closeness and proximity with citizens. An electoral campaign such as NST is constructed precisely in order to counterbalance these weaknesses and to replace traditionally intended party membership.

With regard to the second aspect, and in accordance with Nielsen (2012), my results show that these forms of communication between citizens do not constitute a genuinely unmediated relationship, given that the whole interaction is orchestrated and carried out by "wider campaign assemblages", working on behalf of a candidate who is not physically present at the door. In addition, the interactions carried out by NST were not of a spontaneous kind; on the contrary, they were strongly managerial. The NST campaign, even if it tried to represent itself as spontaneous, was carried out by a highly professionalised structure different from that of the party. The electoral campaign was carried out with managerial logic that is *a priori* foreign to the political field (Robert 2007), and so we can say that it constitutes a new managerial form of intermediation.

Finally, the low number of volunteers, the lack of rooting in the territories, also due to difficult collaboration with the PD, together with

Fassino's defeat, could lead us to think that NST had no effect. However, the data presented by Cepernich (2017, 106) indicate that, in the electoral sections where campaign mobilisation was higher, there was an increase in voter turnout of 8 percentage points, compared to the average of the city of Turin. We don't know whether and in which way this fact is related to NST's campaign. Nevertheless, in conclusion it seems appropriate to focus on the narrative dimension of this type of experience and on its impacts. Against the backdrop of a strong anti-political climate, and of local politics perceived as closed and detached from citizens, through canvassing its mediatised storytelling, the candidate attempted to show himself as symbolically close to people and staged an unmediated relationship between the candidate and citizens, whose effects can be observed mainly from a rhetorical point of view (Belkacem and Talpin 2014).