The Digital Party

The Digital Party

Political Organisation and Online Democracy

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Series Preface

Crisis and conflict open up opportunities for liberation. In the early twenty-first century, these moments are marked by struggles enacted over and across the boundaries of the virtual, the digital, the actual and the real. Digital cultures and politics connect people even as they simultaneously place them under surveillance and allow their lives to be mined for advertising. This series aims to intervene in such cultural and political conjunctures. It features critical explorations of the new terrains and practices of resistance, producing critical and informed explorations of the possibilities for revolt and liberation.

Emerging research on digital cultures and politics investigates the effects of the widespread digitisation of increasing numbers of cultural objects, the new channels of communication swirling around us and the changing means of producing, remixing and distributing digital objects. This research tends to oscillate between agendas of hope that make remarkable claims for increased participation, and agendas of fear that assume expanded repression and commodification. To avoid the opposites of hope and fear, the books in this series aggregate around the idea of the barricade. As sources of enclosure as well as defences for liberated space, barricades are erected where struggles are fierce and the stakes are high. They are necessarily partisan divides, different politicisations and deployments of a common surface. In this sense, new media objects, their networked circuits and settings, as well as their material, informational, and biological carriers all act as digital barricades.

Jodi Dean, Joss Hands and Tim Jordan

Introduction

On 18 May 2018, the registered members of the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement) were convoked via email to participate in an important online consultation due to take place from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. A window was created on the main dashboard of the Rousseau participatory portal to vote on the 'government contract', the agreement that had long been negotiated with Lega, the right-wing populist party of Matteo Salvini. There were 44,796 people who participated in the consultation, with 42,274 voting yes and 2,522 voting no: an overwhelming 94 per cent majority in favour of the agreement. Luigi Di Maio celebrated the vote on Il Blog delle Stelle, the official party house organ, as a democratic consecration of the Contract for the Government of Change and the pact with Salvini. A few weeks later, eventually the Five Star Movement and Lega formed a coalition government which was dubbed by the press 'yellow-green', or *carioca*, because of the colours of the two parties (yellow for Five Star and green for Lega).

How was it possible for an 'internet party' that had long been ridiculed by the mainstream media in Italy for its naïve techno-utopianism and dilettantism to enter government less than 10 years after its foundation? What led it to enjoy such a widespread popularity in the Italian electorate? What kind of political organisation and model of democracy does this formation put forward? And is the case of the Five Star Movement an Italian exception or also an indication of what is happening in other countries?

To broach these questions, it is useful to do a flashback to September 2017, eight months before these events, watching a YouTube video showing Luigi Di Maio, the Five Star Movement leader and current Vice Prime Minister, before the crowds of Italia a 5 Stelle (Five Star Italy), the annual national gathering of the Five Star Movement.[1] Just like prior editions, the event takes place in Rimini, a beach resort on the Northern Adriatic coast, which has a tradition of hosting political conventions at the summer's end, when hotels start emptying out as vacationers return to Bologna, Milano or Munich. Di Maio is chatting with his bodyguards as he approaches the entrance of the meeting area.

'Do not close the space at the front. I want to greet the people', he whispers. One of the so-called 'wonder boys'[2] of the Five Star Movement, Di Maio is a 31-year-old from Avellino, near Naples. His father was a local councillor of Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), the old party of hard right. His dark complexion, puppy eyes and perennial smile make him popular with female voters. He is widely considered by the press as not qualified for a leading political role as he did not complete his degree in law, and his CV, prior to becoming a politician, listed only some short stints as Web master and stadium steward for the Naples football team. However, he is hardly a political novice. Like many other leaders of the Five Star Movement, Di Maio has been active for many years in the political movement launched by comedian Beppe Grillo, what amounts to a great badge of honour amongst movement supporters and has had the important role of vice-president of the Chamber of Deputies.

As Di Maio crosses the main gate of Rimini's fair – topped by a cartoon portraying the party's founder and guarantor, Beppe Grillo, taking off on a spaceship – he is greeted by a friendly crowd. He generously shakes hands, gives hugs and kisses on cheeks and engages in small talk with supporters. People call him by his first name, Luigi, or by the endearing nickname Gigi, and treat him as if he was someone familiar to them. Some remind him of previous encounters they have had, much in the same way people often do on Facebook on the occasion of birthdays and such life events, to which Di Maio graciously assents. Others film him on their phones and ask him to take a selfie together, which he patiently agrees to with a smile that is reminiscent of Italian reality show celebrities. Proceeding towards the main stage, where he is due to deliver a speech, Di Maio passes by a big, inflatable, mouse-shaped stand called Villaggio Rousseau. This is where information and workshops about Rousseau, the movement's online decision-making platform, can be found.

Rousseau – an innovation Five Star activists are very proud of – constitutes the movement's 'digital heart', an online platform where registered members can discuss and vote about various political issues concerning the internal and external activities of the organisation. It is the system used to choose the movement's candidate for the general election, due to be announced this evening. Besides Di Maio, seven other people are running in the primaries, but they do not stand a chance of being elected. This is because they are nonentities – the movement's

detractors have already dubbed them as 'Snow White's seven dwarfs' – while viable rivals, such as charismatic Alessandro Di Battista and Roberto Fico, have been persuaded not to stand.

Di Maio eventually reaches the main stage, and the proclamation of the winner, live-streamed on Facebook, begins. The master of ceremony is Beppe Grillo, the comedian party founder, who recently announced he would leave the stewardship of the movement to the chosen premier candidate due also to act as the future movement leader, while retaining the role of movement guarantor. Using his consummate theatrical flair and irony, Beppe Grillo tries to concoct some suspense, making the event resemble a scene from a talent show when the winners are announced. He starts from the bottom of the list, with Domenico Ispirato, age 53, 'a site manager with a passion for cooking',[3] who received just 102 votes, and moves up to the second-best, Elena Fattori, whose 3,596 votes are dwarfed by Di Maio's score of 30,936, 82 per cent of the total votes expressed electronically, though with a modest participation of only 27 per cent of the 140,000 registered party members. As soon as the winner is proclaimed, confetti in the three colours of the Italian flag is blown into the air. Grillo hugs Di Maio, and together they unfold the white party flag, which features a red circle containing the word *MoVimento* with a dripping-red capitalised 'V' borrowed from the cult movie *V for Vendetta*[4] and the signature five yellow stars. The party's internet address, www.movimento5stelle.it, is well visible below the logo.

Backed by the movement MPs flying the Italian tricolour, Di Maio goes on to deliver his victory speech. He argues that this is a moment when the Five Star Movement can finally rise to power and change Italy for the better. 'Participatory democracy is our DNA', he asserts, emphasising the party's well-known commitment to digital democracy. 'We enter the institutions not to seize them for ourselves, but to give the keys back to you', he continues, and then concludes the speech by saying, 'Long live Italy! Long live the Five Star Movement! Long live the free people!'

The rise of the digital party

This sketch of Five Star Movement's annual gathering, Italia a 5 Stelle (Five Star Italy) provides some insights about the emergence of a new party type, which I describe in this book by using the term *digital party*.

The digital party is the new organisational template seen across a number of new political formations that have been created in recent years, from the Pirate Parties that have emerged in many Northern European countries, to left-wing populist formations such as Podemos in Spain and France Insoumise in France, down to new campaign organisations such as Momentum, driving the surge in popularity of Corbyn's Labour Party in the United Kingdom. Despite their manifest differences, these various formations display evident commonalities in the way in which they promise to a deliver a new politics supported by digital technology; a kind of politics that – as featured by different elements of this opening scene – professes to be more democratic, more open to ordinary people, more immediate and direct, more authentic and transparent.

These parties present themselves as the solution to the democratic deficit that has turned political institutions into the preserve of technocrats and self-serving politicians. They respond to a generalised distrust towards traditional political parties caused by the effects of the Great Recession, by promising to deliver a democracy matching contemporary social and technological conditions. To this end, such organisations have heavily invested in the development of online decision-making tools meant to provide a more direct way for citizens to participate in political decisions, from the Five Star Movement's Rousseau platform that we have just introduced, to Podemos's Consul participation system and the Pirate Parties LiquidFeedback democracy app. Using these tools and adopting a number of rules promised to guarantee more transparency and to prevent political careerism and bureaucratism, this new wave of political parties promises to mend the crisis of democracy, starting from the organisation that has traditionally acted as the primary link between the citizenry and the state: the political party.

The digital party, or alternatively the 'platform party', to indicate its adoption of the platform logic of social media, is to the current informational era of ubiquitous networks, social media and smartphone apps – what the mass party was to the industrial era or the cynically professionalised 'television party' was during the post–Cold War era of high neoliberalism. This emerging party-type integrates within itself the new forms of communication and organisation introduced by Big Data oligopolies, by exploiting the devices, services, applications that have become the most recognisable mark of the present age, from social media like Facebook and Twitter, to messaging apps like WhatsApp and

Telegram, channels on which people can follow any sort of political event such as a Five Star Movement convention. The rise of the digital party thus reflects how technological innovation has also shaped the political party, a form of organisation that for a long time had seemed impervious to change amidst a frozen political system.

The enthusiastic adoption of new technologies aims at improving the efficiency of political organisations, tapping into the flexible organisational affordances and mass outreach potential of social media. But it also has a clear utopian element. It is presented as the means of making politics more democratic and direct by, on the one hand, doing away with a number of structures and processes of traditional parties that are accused of having contributed in making politics excessively bureaucratic, opaque and corrupt; and on the other hand, ushering in new processes that can make people more involved in the political process. To this end, digital parties have transposed to the political arena some of the typical features of the operational model of digital companies leading to impressive feats, but also displaying many flaws, as seen in a number of controversial online consultations as described in the opening sketch.

The digital party is a 'platform party' because it mimics the logic of companies such as Facebook and Amazon of integrating the data-driven logic of social networks in its very decision-making structure; an organisation that promises to use digital technology to deliver a new grassroots democracy, more open to civil society and the active intervention of ordinary citizens. It is 'data hungry' because, like internet corporations, it constantly seeks to expand its database, the list, or 'stack', of contacts that it controls. The digital party is also a start-up party, reminiscent of 'unicorn companies' such as Uber, Deliveroo and Airbnb, sharing their ability to grow very rapidly. The Five Star Movement, in less than a decade from its birth, has managed to become the largest party in Italy, and is currently heading the national government, while many other formations have had a similarly explosive growth trajectory. Like social networks, it is a party that feeds on the 'engagement' which its supporters and sympathisers provide. It is constantly busy eliciting feedback from its member/user base, crowdsourcing ideas from it, balloting on issues, measuring the response of the public, and modifying its strategy and messaging accordingly. It is a party that adopts the free sign-up process of social media and apps, to lower as much as possible the barrier to entry and its definition of membership, and exploit the close-to-zero marginal costs of communicating online

with an ever-expanding base of members. In other words, the digital party is the translation of the business model and organisational innovation of digital corporations to the political arena and their application to the idealistic project of the construction of a new democracy in digital times.

The rise of the digital party constitutes a fascinating question for all those interested in the transformation of politics in a digital era, amidst a period of rapid political transformation, when normally stable systems, such as party systems, suddenly appear open to new interventions. Since the onset of the financial crisis of 2008, the political arena in Western countries has been invested by a veritable turmoil. This has been seen in a number of surprising developments that have defied the predictive ability of journalists, analysts and pollsters, from new protest movements like those of the 2011 movement of the squares that mobilised millions of people to the victories of dark horse candidates such as Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections. Many of these developments have been deeply intertwined with the use of digital technology and its capacity to disrupt deep-seated political equilibria. Yet the actual nature and implications of these transformations still escape our comprehension.

This book aims at developing a balanced account of this wave of organisational innovation, overcoming the twin evils of uncritical celebration and preconceived criticism that have so far dominated public commentary on the digital party. As with my previous work on social movements and social media, it stems from long-standing and in-depth empirical analysis, encompassing direct observations, 30 expert interviews with politicians, organisers and developers, as well as hands-on knowledge of the technologies utilised by these formations. Examining this material, I have focused on a number of key questions that should be of interest not only to scholars but also to political activists, and inquisitive citizens more widely. What is the nature and meaning of the digital party? How does it differ from previous party types, such as the mass party at the height of the industrial era, or the television party of the post-industrial era? How does it redefine processes of membership, leadership and participation? To what extent is this party type actually more democratic than previous party types? Is the digital party simply to be criticised or derided, as it has become customary for many activists on the left? Or should good democrats also take heed of its positive lessons?

In the course of the book, we approach these questions focusing on three formations that have epitomised the rise of the digital party – the Pirate Parties, the Five Star Movement and Podemos – while occasionally extending our investigation to other political phenomena that display similar organisational trends. For each of these formations, extensive empirical work has been completed, visiting party offices and campaign events, discussing with people involved in their organisational processes and in the development of participatory platforms and attending various campaign events. The discussion engages with the theoretical debates on political parties which have developed for over a century in political science, from evergreen classics as Gramsci, Weber and Michels to more recent scholarship of authors such as Otto Kirchheimer, Richard Katz, Peter Mair and Angelo Panebianco. A number of issues that are central to the understanding of the political party are explored: their root motivations and social composition; their ideology and values; their forms of organisation and participation; the nature of processes of decision-making; and the changing nature of leadership.

My wish is that this work will contribute in making some order in debates where analysis tends to be case-study specific and where there have been few attempts at systematisation, and that it will provide some insights not only to scholars but also to the organisers and developers who are directly faced with the organisational questions raised by the emergence of digital parties. Before, we venture on this journey, it is fit to begin with a brief history of these formations, to continue with some highlights of the main features of the digital party, which will then be developed over the course of the book.

From Pirates to Momentum

The term *digital party* attempts to capture the common essence seen across a number of quite diverse political formations that have risen in recent years, and which share the common attempt of using digital technology to devise new forms of political participation and democratic decision-making. The early embodiment of this ideal type is found in a series of self-declared 'internet parties' that have claimed the role of champions of the new digital society, vis-à-vis the rusty and collapsing structure of a crisis-stricken neoliberal society and its worn-out politics. The most famous early examples of this trend are undoubtedly the

Pirate Parties, a group of parties campaigning for digital rights, that have been particularly successful in Northern European countries.

The first Pirate Party was founded in Sweden in 2006 by entrepreneur and former liberal politician Rick Falkvinge. It was created in the wake of the uproar generated by the judicial shutting down of Pirate Bay, a popular file-sharing service which wore with pride the stigma of piracy levelled at anybody downloading movies, books and video games for free, and especially those facilitating the circumvention of copyright laws. The formation was officially launched by Falvinge on the Direct Connect file-sharing hub, with a petition to register a new political party focusing on issues of copyright, file-sharing and patents reform. The new formation adopted as its symbol a black pirate sail, so shaped to resemble the letter 'P', and rapidly gathered thousands of supporters. After polling a diminutive 0.63 per cent in the 2006 Swedish general elections, it managed to achieve an impressive result in the 2009 European elections, when it scored 7.13 per cent of the vote, thus electing two Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) for Sweden. In 2010 the Pirate Parties International was founded in Brussels, with local chapters making significant gains in a number of European countries. In the 2011 Berlin State election, the German Pirate Party obtained 8.9 per cent of the votes, winning 15 out of 141 seats in the local assembly. After a brief surge at the polls, the party was marred by scandals and internal disputes, from which it has yet to recover. Another Pirate Party success has been the case of the Píratar in Iceland, founded by a number of notable digital activists such as Birgitta Jónsdóttir and Smári McCarthy. The Píratar scored well at the 2016 and 2017 national elections, being involved at some point in talks to join a coalition government which eventually failed. The latest pirate feat recently occurred in the Czech Republic, where in the 2017 legislative election the Czech Pirate Party obtained over 10 per cent of the votes, making it the country's third largest. However, looked at from an international standpoint, Pirate Parties seem to have lost most of their initial momentum.

While not employing the Pirate Party moniker, and not adhering to the Pirate Party International (PPI) which coordinates most Pirate Parties worldwide, other formations have emerged in recent years that come close in ideology to the Pirate Party. These include the Partido de la Red (Party of the Net) in Argentina, the Wikipartido (Wikiparty) in Mexico, and Partido X (X Party, also known as the Party of the Future) in Spain, which, as their names attest, make overt claim to being parties

of the internet. Like the Pirates, these formations propose a techno-utopian discourse which sees digital technology as leading us towards a better future. However, they have not been very successful in translating this vision into electoral results.

So far, the most impressive manifestations of the rise of the digital party have come from parties that, although drawing some inspiration from the Pirates and similar formations, and sometimes espousing a similar rhetoric of the 'digital revolution', are far more ambitious in scope and less single-issue oriented. Arguably, the most significant cases of recasting of the party form in the digital era are the Five Star Movement in Italy, in Italian MoVimento 5 Stelle (M5S) and Podemos in Spain, two populist formations that have heavily invested in the development of forms of digital organisation.

The Five Star Movement, which in the aftermath of the 2018 national elections ranks as the first party in Italy, was officially launched at an event on 4 October 2009 at Teatro Smeraldo in Milan. However, its origins go back to a series of mobilisations in the mid-noughties under the auspices of Beppe Grillo, the party's founder and long-time 'guarantor'. A charismatic comedian and satirist who had turned his theatre shows into raging attacks against the corrupt political class, Grillo promoted the development of activist groups that stood in local elections, in 'certified lists' called Friends of Beppe Grillo. A key step in this genesis was the anti-corruption Vaffanculo Day (literally 'Fuck Off Day') launched on 8 September 2007 in several squares around Italy. Fifty thousand people gathered in Bologna's Piazza Maggiore alone at the culmination of a campaign for 'clean parliament', highlighting the presence of dozens of politicians with criminal records. On this occasion the movement adopted the red 'V' symbol popularised by the cult movie *V for Vendetta*, which to this day appears in the Five Star Movement official name and logo.

The success of this mobilising effort was due to the way in which the street credentials and celebrity status of Beppe Grillo, presenting himself as a new Savonarola, chastiser of political malpractice and corruption, were combined with the media savviness of Casaleggio Associati, a digital consulting firm led by Gianroberto Casaleggio, co-founder of the movement. It was thanks to the support of Casaleggio that Grillo established his popular www.beppegrillo.it, which in 2008 featured among the world's most powerful blogs, according to the *Observer*,[5] and which, until recently, acted as the movement's official house organ, with its

web address acting as a substitute for the party's official legal address. And it was following his advice that the movement structured itself around local groups, organised through Meetup, an online service that facilitates face-to-face meetings of people who share common interests. The party's policy platform initially resembled the one of a Green party, with the movement's five stars representing water (under public ownership), environment, free internet connectivity, sustainable development and low-carbon transportation (with electric cars, public transport a gradual build up in local elections between 2009 and 2012 and city bikes). However, it has progressively encompassed more populist issues, attacking political corruption and demanding law and order, and has not shied away from opportunistic attempts to win conservative voters over, especially on immigration issues.

Since entering the electoral fray, the party has experienced rapid success. After a gradual build up in local elections between 2009 and 2012, the party scored an impressive 25.5 per cent of the votes in the Chamber of Deputies in the 2013 national elections, to become the second largest party in Italy. It achieved further momentum in the June 2012 local elections, when the first successes in large cities arrived with the election of Virginia Raggi as the mayor of Rome and Chiara Appendino in Turin. This arc culminated with the Italian 2018 national elections, in which the Five Star Movement eventually became the first party in parliament with 32 per cent of votes in the Chamber of Deputies, well above the Democratic Party which had essentially ruled Italy since 2013, by humbling Matteo Renzi, who failed to have his party reach even 20 per cent of the votes cast. After protracted coalition negotiations, the Five Star Movement has gone on to form a government with right-wing populist party Lega, the other clear winner of this electoral round.

Fundamental to the party's identity, as a 'party of the Web', has been the question of digital and direct democracy, presented as a tool to skip party brokering and 'in-feuding'. Since its inception, the M5S has convened a series of online consultations with voters on local and national candidates (*comunarie* for local councils, *parlamentarie* for parliament, but also *quirinarie* to choose the candidate to support as the president of the republic, whose seat is on the Quirinal Hill in Rome), and online referendums on a number of issues, among others on the purging of representatives accused of having violated party rules. More recently, the M5S has created Rousseau, a discussion and voting system that was

initially described as the 'Five Star operating system' and contains a set of further features, such as participatory legislation at regional, national and European levels.

Though quite different from the Five Star Movement, in terms of ideology and organisational structure, Podemos displays a similar enthusiasm for digital media which justify his description as a digital party. Podemos – a name that is an adaptation of unionist Cesar Chavez's '*Sí, se puede*' and Barack Obama's 'Yes we can' – was launched on 17 January 2014[6] on the initiative of political science researcher Pablo Iglesias Turrión; he was supported by a group of colleagues and compatriots who orbited around the Complutense University of Madrid, including Juan Carlos Monedero, Iñigo Errejón, and various groups from the radical left and social movements, including the Izquierda Anti-capitalista (anti-capitalist left), a Trotskyist faction. The formation rode the wave of mobilisation initiated by the 2011 Indignados protest movement, also known as the 15-M for its starting date, on 15 May 2011, and capitalised on the celebrity status of Pablo Iglesias, a regular guest on political talk shows. Podemos's electoral force has proved itself since the European elections in 2014, when it received 8 per cent of the votes and five MEPs were elected just two months after its foundation. In the 2015 municipal elections in Barcelona and Madrid, two women, Ada Colau and Manuela Carmena, were elected as mayors, supported by civic lists assisted by Podemos. In the parliamentary elections of December 2015 and June 2016, Podemos came third behind the Socialist PSOE, and the centre-right Partido Popular. After opposing a coalition government of the PP and Ciudadanos, it is now externally backing a Socialist government led by PSOE leader Pedro Sanchez.

Compared to the Pirate Parties and the Five Star Movement, Podemos is more traditional in its leftist identity and its organisational structure, which incorporates various organs typically found in mass parties, such as the secretary and the party's central committee. However, it has been characteristic in its embracing of digital technology at all levels. For a start Podemos has used effectively social media as a mobilising tool and has quickly become the most popular Spanish party on Twitter and Facebook. Furthermore, it has pursued a digital democracy agenda similar to the one of the Five Star Movement, with the declared aim of bringing to the party the demand for 'real democracy' voiced by the 15-M movement. Soon after its foundation, it set up its own participatory portal, called Participa (Participate), through which members