The Impact of Online Participation Platforms on the Internal Democracy of Two Southern European Parties: Podemos and the Five Star Movement

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The article examines the impact of two online participation platforms on the internal party democracy (IPD) of the Five Star Movement (5SM) in Italy and Podemos in Spain. The article considers whether the frequent use of the platforms for internal consultations automatically translates into a higher quality of IPD. The conclusion is that the impact of the participation platforms on the quality of IPD is modest insofar as the leadership of both parties controls the subject, framing, and timing of the consultations to strengthen its own position. From this angle, statutory regulations, technological affordances, and high-frequency consultations function as a series of interlocking constraints on the capacity of ordinary members to participate on a regular basis, to influence the party agenda, and to make decisions based on alternative viewpoints.

Keywords: Five Star Movement, Podemos, online participation platforms, intra-party democracy, movement parties

Since the early 2010s, European parties such as the Pirate Parties of Sweden, Germany, and Iceland, the Italian Five Star Movement (5SM), the Spanish Podemos, and, more recently, the France Insoumise have been adopting a variety of online participation platforms (OPPs) with the ostensible goal of empowering their members. This is not a surprise, given that minor parties and insurgent candidates had already begun leveraging the low start-up costs of campaigning online in the previous decade (Chadwick, 2007; Margetts, 2006; Vaccari, 2010). At the same time, OPPs such as LiquidFeedback, X.Piratar, Rousseau, DemocracyOS, and Participa, to name a few, support member activities that go well beyond fundraising and campaigning. Such activities include selecting candidates, drafting and providing feedback on policy proposals, and contributing to the party program, among others.

The multifunctional nature of OPPs suggests that the analysis of these tools should not be limited to questions of efficiency, such as their capacity to lower the costs of coordination among independent teams

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of activists and to lower the costs of campaigning. Rather, because these platforms promise to empower ordinary party members while increasing the responsiveness of leaders and representatives, they offer a vantage point from which to assess the quality of internal party democracy and the current transformations of party organizations. In this article, we set out on this task by focusing on a comparative analysis of Rousseau, the participation platform of the Five Star Movement, and Participa Podemos, the participation platform of Podemos. Such comparison is cogent and justifiable from a historical, ideological, and organizational perspective. Historically, the 5SM and Podemos are two "movement parties" that originated from large movements of public opinion against political corruption and austerity measures (Della Porta, Fernández, Kouki, & Mosca, 2017). Ideologically, both parties refuse to situate themselves on the left–right political spectrum, claiming to defend the interests of ordinary citizens against political and financial elites (Vittori, 2017a). Although Podemos's brand of populism is left leaning, and the 5SM's is more centrist and adaptable to changing circumstances (Manucci & Amsler, 2018; Pirro, 2018; Vittori, 2017b), both parties see online participation as inherently democratic and enabling ordinary people to govern themselves. This technopopulist orientation (Deseriis, 2017a) is also reflected in the hybrid organizational structure of both parties, which combine charismatic leadership and vertical rule with frequent and binding consultations of the members via the OPPs.

For all their similarities, the two parties present significant differences, which are apparent from the different socio-political circumstances in which they were founded and their subsequent political evolution. Podemos was born in 2014, after the publication of a manifesto whereby university professors and leftist activists called for a political initiative capable of transforming the mass mobilizations of the 15-M movement into a party option, which would reclaim popular sovereignty beyond the traditional left–right cleavage. In the following years, however, Podemos clearly positioned itself on the left of the political spectrum, remaining an opposition party hovering around 20% of the vote. By contrast, the foundation of the 5SM dates back to 2009 and is inextricably linked to the figure of former TV comedian Beppe Grillo. Through the launch of a popular blog and a series of anticorruption campaigns, Grillo catalyzed a mass audience. Subsequently, the 5SM balanced its antiestablishment message with a centrist political orientation. At the general elections of 2018, 5SM was the first Italian party and formed a government with the radical-right party The League.

These two different ideological orientations and political trajectories translate into different organizational models. Because Podemos was founded by a collective leadership—albeit around a charismatic leader, such as Pablo Iglesias—its organizational structure relies on a variety of centralized and decentralized decision-making bodies. The political function of the Participa Podemos platform must then be analyzed within the context of this layered organizational structure. The 5SM, by contrast, does not rely on intermediary party bodies. Because the movement cofounders, Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio, saw the party-form as an inefficient and unnecessary intermediary between ordinary citizens and elected representatives, they created Rousseau to enable a direct relationship between these two groups (Deseriis, 2017b). Thus, the 5SM statute attributes a great deal of power to the general membership, which is meant to exercise its "sovereign will" via frequent online consultations.

But does a high number of consultations automatically translate into a high quality of internal party democracy (IPD)? The answer to this question depends on how the quality of IPD is defined. Thus, we will

first review the literature on IPD. Adopting an exploratory and inductive approach, we will argue that to assess the impact of OPPs such as Rousseau and Participa on IPD, it is necessary to go beyond the formal approach that undergirds much of the IPD literature to consider instead the relationship between the procedural conditions of the possibility of online participation and its actual unfolding.

The IPD Literature and Its Limitations

After the formulation of the iron law of oligarchy (Michels, 1915), parties were considered nondemocratic and opaque organizations whose elites were in charge of deciding on behalf of members. Whereas political scientists and political theorists have long considered oligarchic rule and internal party cohesion as necessary and even desirable conditions of a functioning representative democracy (see Duverger, 1954; May, 1973; Wilson, 1962), a more recent orientation grounded in participatory and deliberative theories of democracy sees IPD as beneficial to state-level democracy (Rahat & Shapira, 2017; Teorell, 1999).

This article is not aimed at assessing the desirability of IPD for democratic political systems. More modestly, it seeks to assess the impact of two OPPs on the quality of IPD within two Southern European movement parties. To this end, we will first briefly review the IPD scholarship, which can be divided into two main strands of literature. The first strand measures IPD through different dimensions, the most important being the degree of participation in leadership selection, the representativeness and competition among candidates, and the responsiveness of the leadership (Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Kenig, 2009). To these categories, Rahat and Shapira (2017) add the dimension of transparency. Their IPD index is thus a five-dimensional matrix that measures participation, representation, competition, responsiveness, and transparency. If the index has the merit of going beyond the candidate-selection procedures as a proxy of party democratization, it still relies on a formal (or procedural) conception of IPD in that it is based exclusively on the analysis of party statutes, party websites, and other indicators that map the conditions of possibility of IPD.

The second strand of literature focuses on the key role of inclusiveness in internal decision-making processes (Cross & Katz, 2013) and, in particular, on how the more or less inclusive nature of intraparty participation may impact "decision-making over programme, personnel selection (leaders and candidates) and organizational structure" (von dem Berge & Poguntke, 2017, p. 144). Further, von dem Berge and Poguntke assess the impact of inclusiveness and the changing nature of party membership on two distinct decision-making processes: assembly-based decision making and plebiscite-based decision making. This distinction leads them to formulate two indexes—the assembly-based IPD index (AIPD) and the plebiscitary index (PIPD)—which account for decisions that are based on the "exchange of arguments within designated party bodies" and "the plebiscitary logic of one-member-one-vote" (p. 144), respectively. Although the combination of high levels of AIPD and PIPD could denote that the rank and file have the capacity to participate in decision making, von dem Berge and Poguntke (2017) also note that assembly-based deliberation and consultations of the general membership introduce "two competing logics" within IPD, which "show that the political effects of specific formal power constellations are highly dependent on the political context" (p. 151). In other words, there is no guarantee that a formal organizational structure designed to empower the rank and file will also substantially do so.

The cases of Podemos and the 5SM seem to prove this point. Whereas these parties rely on a variety of software tools and OPPs that formally multiply the opportunities for both assembly-based IPD and plebiscitary IPD, our findings show that the affordances of these platforms are often employed selectively to foreground voting at the expense of internal deliberation. Indeed, if we were to measure the internal democracy of Podemos and 5SM by the sheer number of consultations held on their OPPs, the two parties would be the most democratic parties in their countries. Yet, as we will see, it is the leadership of each party, not the ordinary members, that typically determines the subject, format, and timing of internal consultations. As a result, the party elite often calls for votes whereby its own position is legitimized and strengthened at the expense of the activist base. This is certainly not an entirely new phenomenon; several scholars have highlighted that since the 1980s, the party elites of several European parties have relied on internal consultations via postal ballots to empower the "docile" ordinary members, who are more likely to endorse the policies and candidates proposed by the party leadership (Katz, 2002; Katz & Mair, 1994; Rahat, 2013). At the same time, the high costs of postal consultations necessarily limited the scope of such consultations to key issues, including the selection of the party secretary and the ratification of electoral alliances.

An Inductive Approach to the Impact of Participation Platforms on IPD

Because OPPs such as Rousseau and Participa collapse the marginal costs of voting online, parties such as Podemos and the 5SM have greatly expanded the range and frequency of consultations. While AIPD and PIPD indexes would consider these binding consultations as a positive indicator of IPD, we argue that more opportunities to vote are not necessarily conducive to an increase in IPD. To support our argument, we will not propose a new model of IPD, nor will we add new dimensions to existing models. Rather, taking an inductive approach, we will observe how the impact of these platforms on IPD is ultimately determined by the conjunction of three distinct elements: (1) the statutory norms regulating the function of the OPP within the party organization; (2) the technical features of the OPP, which frame the material conditions of its use; and (3) the actual patterns of use and participation rates in the OPP. It is only by triangulating the formal analyses of the statute and of the digital affordances of an OPP with the empirical analysis of its actual uses that it is possible to determine how the platform concretely affects IPD.

As a foray into the argument, let us consider how the statute of Podemos formally introduces a direct democracy measure by allowing member proposals that pass a 10% support quorum (via Participa) to be converted into binding initiatives for the whole party to vote on. Although 10% could appear to be a reasonable threshold, the fluid nature of digital membership makes it very difficult for any proposal to reach it, given that many Podemos members no longer use their accounts, and the party makes no effort to publicize member initiatives. The lack of substantive impact of member initiatives affects in turn the quality of deliberation, with hundreds of proposals receiving few comments or none at all. Similarly, Rousseau embeds a direct legislation feature called Lex Members, which allows 5SM members to submit their own proposals for a bill of law. Although in this case, the members themselves vote for their favorite proposals through special voting sessions, the parliamentary group also applies a screening procedure to ensure consistency with the party line. While this may be understandable, the end result is that a negligible number of 5SM-sponsored bills are directly based on member proposals.

Last, but not least, the declining participation rate in national consultations over the years shows how formal inclusiveness may not result in a higher quality of IPD. This unmistakable trend suggests that as the use of these platforms becomes habituated, users tend to either participate on specific issues or disengage entirely. Thus, rather than engendering a hypothetical "return of the base" (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 162), these platforms seem to bring about a fragmentation of the base and an "atomization of internal relations. . . [which] isolates members from each other" (Ignazi, 2017, p. 249). This means that while organizational instruments of voluntary associations of citizens Rousseau and Participa can be categorized as digital democracy applications, their centralized management follows the logic of e-government applications (De Blasio & Sorice, 2019). In the next three sections, we will detail how this management logic emerges from the intersection of statutory norms, technological affordances, and high-frequency consultations.

The Statutory Norms That Regulate the Use of Rousseau and Participa

Although the statutes of Podemos and the 5SM do not detail the functioning of Participa and Rousseau, they do specify the role that online consultations of the membership play within the party organization. In both cases, such consultations share three common features: (1) They are binding for the entire party organization; (2) they can be easily called by the party leadership; and (3) they cannot be easily organized by the party membership.

This is particularly evident in the case of the 5SM statute (MoVimento 5 Stelle, 2017), which reduces representative and intermediary decision-making organisms to a minimum so as to give power to the ordinary member. Indeed, besides the nonelective Assembly of the Members, the only representative ruling organisms are the political head, the Guarantor (a lifelong appointment reserved to the founder of the 5SM), the Treasurer, the Guarantee Committee, and the Committee of Arbitrators (MoVimento 5 Stelle, 2017, art. 5). However, it is only the Political Head or, alternatively, the Guarantor who has the power to call an online vote (art. 4 §b). Similarly, the Assembly of the Members—a political organism instituted in late 2017—is convened in a physical location or online "at least once a year" by the Political Head, or, alternatively, the President of the Guarantee Committee, or a third of the members (art. 6 §c). Yet the statute does not explain how a third of the members are supposed to coalesce, given that Rousseau does not embed e-mail lists, forums, chats, or instant messaging applications. Conversely, because the Political Head has direct access to the members' contact information, he can summon the Assembly any time he deems it necessary. Thus, although the Assembly is the sovereign body of the movement, it is convened only when the party leadership decides so.

Similar to the 5SM, the Podemos's statute also relies on a Citizen Assembly (*Asemblea Ciudadana*) as its "supreme decision-making body" (Podemos 2017, art. 1). This can take two forms: a permanent Citizen Assembly, which can make "binding decisions, on matters of great political relevance" at any moment (art. 6) via Participa, and an ordinary Citizen Assembly—that is, a party convention—which takes place every 18–48 months. Further, the statute institutes a set of elective political organisms—including the Secretary General, the Regional Secretaries General, the Citizen Council, the Coordinating Council, and the Guarantee Committee—whose function is to implement the political line at a national and regional level, represent different political orientations, coordinate the deliberative and executive branches of the party, and arbitrate disputes. Thus, Podemos's organizational structure is highly stratified; it combines regional

and national representative bodies with direct consultations of the general membership. The latter—the permanent Citizen Assembly—is convened by initiative of the Secretary General, or, alternatively, of the majority of the Citizen Council, when requested by 10% of the members, or by 20% of the active Circles, that is, of the local party branches (art. 6). This means that a wide range of actors can convene the Citizen Assembly. As noted, however, the 10% threshold remains significant, especially in light of the fact that Participa does not allow members to contact each other. Conversely, the Secretary General and the Citizen Council have direct access to the member database.

In sum, although the organizational structure of Podemos allows for a range of representative and intermediary bodies that are virtually absent in the 5SM, the general membership of both parties has a very limited capacity to organize without leadership input. To be sure, on a procedural level, both statutes foresee the possibility for individual members to introduce their own initiatives and for organized members to call for a vote. In practice, however, the unstated rule by which the party leadership retains exclusive access to the member database introduces a power imbalance between the party in the central office and ordinary members. It is worth noting that such an imbalance is also a by-product of the database based on a client/server architecture. Because the database requires the existence of a designated authority that controls access to the stored information, it is a technological system that is formally biased (Feenberg, 2017) toward centralization. But if power is embedded "in the very design of technology" (p. 34), then assessing the impact of a participation platform on the internal democracy of a political party requires an analysis of the relations of power embedded in platform design. Although such power relations may only be implicitly stated, they are no less consequential for IPD than the explicit norms of a party statute are.

The Technical Features of Rousseau and Participa

Participa Podemos and Rousseau were launched with two main objectives: (1) allowing sympathizers to become party members via a relatively simple and cost-free online registration process; and (2) allowing registered members to contribute to party decisions via the OPP. While the online registration feature lowers the costs for individuals to join the party, it also provides the party in the central office with a powerful instrument—a database whereby all members can be contacted at once. In theory, this communicative power imbalance between party leadership and party members is mitigated by the possibility for the latter to submit their own policy proposals via the OPP. In practice, however, member proposals have to pass through a series of procedural hurdles that substantially reduce or nullify their political impact. In the case of Participa, member proposals have to pass a 10% support threshold before they can be put up for a vote. In the case of Rousseau, member proposals compete with each other in special voting sessions that usually list dozens of proposals. In contrast, the proposals of the party in the central office do not need to pass any support threshold or to be voted against competing proposals.

These procedural constraints on the agency of ordinary members are even more evident when considering that member initiatives are only one among the many features offered by both platforms. This is particularly evident in the case of Rousseau, which has been adding several features, or areas, since it was first launched in October 2013. At the time of writing, the platform is divided into 12 areas. Five of these areas—Lex Parliament, Lex Europe, Lex Region, Lex Members, and Lex Members Region—are dedicated to lawmaking; the areas Activism and Call to Action are dedicated to the publicization of grassroots

initiatives; Sharing supports the exchange of administrative acts between city councilors and regional councilors; E-learning provides online courses to aspiring 5SM candidates; and Fundraising and Shield on the Net are dedicated to fundraising and legal support of party members, respectively. Last, but not least, a Vote functionality is activated any time 5SM members are called to exercise their voting rights.

While the platform places great emphasis on lawmaking, this is, by and large, designed as a crowdsourcing process rather than a collaboration between members and representatives. Indeed, the areas Lex Region, Lex Parliament, and Lex Europe are filled with hundreds of bills of law drafts uploaded by elected representatives. Because these areas do not feature threaded comments, members can provide feedback to their representative, but not to other members. The lack of deliberative tools is particularly striking in Lex Members, the direct legislation area of Rousseau. Here, members can upload a proposal for a bill of law and read and vote on other members' proposals, but they cannot collectively debate or amend the proposals. In short, the impossibility for users to communicate and collaborate with other users allows the party in the central office to manage the proposals of each member independently.

Launched in April 2014, Participa offers fewer functionalities than Rousseau and is used almost exclusively for voting. When a consultation is launched, members log in via Participa and cast their vote via a third-party application managed by the Internet voting company nVotes. Further, Participa allows members to make contributions to party campaigns via micro-donations. Finally, as noted, the platform also allows members to submit their own citizen initiatives (*Iniciativas Ciudadanas*), which can concern any political or legislative initiative. Until 2015, the citizen initiatives were submitted via Plaza Podemos, a website based on the social news site Reddit that allowed participants, including nonmembers, to "upvote" or "downvote" proposals. From Plaza Podemos, the most voted-on proposals were moved to Participa, where they still needed to collect 10% of registered members' support to be transformed into binding referendums. Beginning in October 2015, Podemos simplified this procedure by launching Plaza Podemos 2.0, which retains the same features of the previous version, but is housed under Participa and is thus accessible only to members. Besides submitting proposals for initiatives, members can submit their own interpellations to MPs and debate matters of general interest. Even though these features make Participa more formally oriented toward deliberation than Rousseau, the high support threshold makes the substantive impact of the member initiatives very low, if not nil.

The Uses of Participa and Rousseau

Although Participa and Rousseau were introduced to lower the costs of participation, as we have seen, the platforms embed normative and technical constraints that limit the ability of members to cooperate, propose their own initiatives, and influence the party agenda. Keeping these constraints in mind, it is still worth considering how members use both platforms when they decide to use them. For the sake of clarity, we divide participation into four dimensions, which capture both quantitative and qualitative aspects of participation: (1) the membership figures and the type of membership in both parties; (2) the participation rates in national consultations held on both platforms; (3) the outcomes of internal consultations; and (4) the quality of deliberation.

Digital Membership in Podemos and 5SM

As the literature on party membership has highlighted (Scarrow, 2015), participation within political parties has substantially changed over the past 30 years. Facing a weakening relationship with traditional side-organizations such as trade unions and environmental groups, movement parties have sought to make membership more flexible, introducing new instruments of participation.

In the case of the 5SM, sympathizers and supporters of the incubating movement founded the "Friends of Beppe Grillo" Meetup groups in 2005, four years before the official incorporation of the party. The ambiguous relationship between the Meetups and the party has often led to tensions between local organizers and the party in the central office so that the latter had to repeatedly clarify that FBG Meetup groups were not entitled to use the party symbol nor to form regional or national associations beyond the local level (Fico & Di Battista, 2015). In the case of Podemos, in 2014–2015, activists and supporters started hundreds of Loomio groups—a decision-making software program inspired by the deliberative practices of the Occupy movement—to meet on a local level. Podemos sympathizers also used social messaging applications such as Telegram, collaborative editing software Titanpad, and the social news site Reddit to develop online forms of participation that bypassed traditional organizational boundaries. As we have seen, the party leadership contained this democratic excess through a double move. On the one hand, the Plaza Podemos experiment was duplicated and housed within the official party website (plaza.podemos.info); on the other hand, a 10% support threshold was introduced for all citizen initiatives.

Becoming a member of Podemos and the 5SM is free of charge and can be done online by simply uploading a scanned ID. Certainly Podemos's selectorate is more inclusive than the 5SM's; it is open to Spanish residents and foreigners, whereas the 5SM membership is restricted to Italian citizens. At the same time, if we set aside their limited ability to influence the party agenda, it is the members themselves, not the party elite, who have the final say in all internal consultations. In this sense, possession of a digital membership marks the passage from the movement dimension to the party dimension of these movement parties; only registered members have the political right to vote and participate in internal party decisions.

Further, the relatively simple and cost-free registration process has allowed both parties to rapidly grow their membership base. As of November 2018, Podemos counts 510,000 members, almost twice as many as those counted in November 2014, and the 5SM has more than 100,000 members, more than the triple the number declared in December 2012 (Figure 1). The 5SM, however, has seen a recent drop in its membership figures. In December 2017, all 5SM members were asked to renew their membership by subscribing to the new *Associazione MoVimento 5 Stelle* (the third legal representation of the party since 2009) and a new party statute. As a result, membership dropped from 135,000 to below 100,000, to pass the 100,000 mark again only in August 2018 (Casaleggio, 2018). If this drop had a variety of causes, including the growing institutionalization of the party, the most immediate reason was likely of a technical nature—namely, members who signed up early on may have simply forgotten to renew their membership or were not sufficiently motivated to do so.
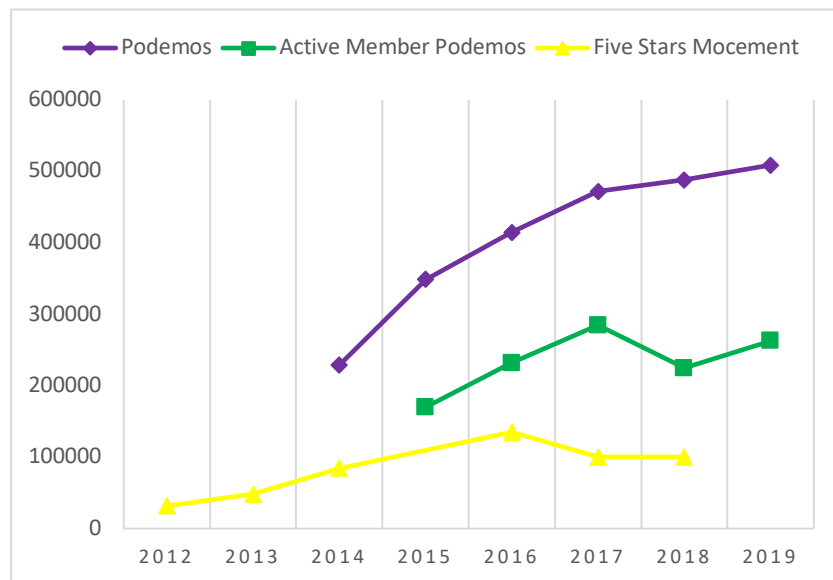
*Figure 1. Podemos and 5SM membership. Source: Own elaboration based on
data provided by podemos.info and ilblogdellestelle.it.*

Membership figures suggest that a similar phenomenon may be at work within Podemos. Indeed, as we will see, Participa witnessed a sharp decline in voter turnout during the first year—a phenomenon that is also attributable to early adopters who stopped using the platform shortly after opening an account. These data suggest that in the same way that Rousseau and Participa have lowered the costs of participation, they may also have lowered the costs of dropping out; members who are "weakly tied" to the party (Granovetter, 1973)—that is, those who may not have developed a strong political commitment—are likely to leave the party just as quickly as they joined it. At the same time, it should be noted that exit from digital parties often remains unmarked. Unless members are required to renew their membership, they are likely to retain their membership even when they are no longer active. As we will see, this disconnection between the formal requirements of digital membership and actual engagement has had a significant impact on the participation rates in these two OPPs.

Voter Participation in National Consultations

Although the 5SM and Podemos use their OPPs for similar processes—including the primaries and binding consultations on critical issues—Rousseau ballots are much more frequent than Participa ballots. From December 2012 to November 2018, Rousseau has hosted a total of 79 national ballots, an average of 13.2 ballots per year. In contrast, from October 2014 to October 2018, Participa has hosted only 14 national ballots, an average of 3.5 ballots per year (Table 1).

Table 1. Internal Consultations per Year in Podemos and 5SM.

Party	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018 (November)	Total
5SM	1[1*]	3	23[2*]	4	10[1**]	31[20**]	7[2*]	79
Podemos			2	4[1*]	3	2	3	14

Multiple consultations held on the same voting day are counted as separate when they are related to different issues and as one when they regard the same issue.
* Party primaries at a national and European level.
** In 2016–17, the 5SM held a total of 21 (1+20) consultations on the party program, which are counted as separate. Podemos held only one consultation for the entire party program in 2015. Counting the 21 5SM consultations as one would drop the total number to 59, an average of 9.8 per year.
Source: Own elaboration from parties' websites.

Further, the 5SM consults its members on a wider range of topics, including legislative initiatives proposed by the members themselves. This is because much of Podemos's decision-making is entrusted with bodies such as the Citizen Council and the Secretary General, whereas the 5SM statute reduces elective and collegial organisms to a minimum in order to give power to the ordinary member. But are the higher frequency and wider scope of direct democracy consultations sufficient to claim that Rousseau has a higher positive impact on IPD than Participa?

The answer to this question depends on the specific conception of IPD that one intends to rely on. As we have seen, Rousseau does not support deliberative features, and the Podemos statute discourages deliberation on a normative level. However, even if the members do not determine the subject, framing, and timing of the consultations, they can decide whether to take part. In other words, because voter participation is an indicator of the inclusivity of any democratic process, the impact of Rousseau and Participa can also be assessed from the vantage of their actual capacity to activate the constituents they are ostensibly meant to empower.

Data show that with few exceptions, voter turnout rarely passes the 50% mark in both platforms. Additionally, participation tends to decrease over the years. In the case of Participa, in the first year, voter turnout declined from 54% in October 2014, to 43% for the election of Pablo Iglesias to Secretary General a month later, to 15.5% participating in the online primaries of July 2015. The lowest point was reached in November 2015, when approximately 4% of the total participated in the consultations for the presentation of the party program (Figure 2). To be sure, in this circumstance, members were asked to choose among hundreds of proposals, which means that the procedure required a high level of engagement and specialized knowledge of policy measures. Nevertheless, in 13 months, the participation rate plunged from 54% to 4%.

To address this issue, in 2016, the Podemos Participation Team begun grouping members in two categories: active members and inactive members. Drawing inspiration from one of the six citizen initiatives originally posted in Plaza Podemos, the team defined an inactive member as someone who has not used the platform in more than a year, providing two distinct turnout figures for the active members and the inactive members. As a result, the turnout in the referendum against a possible PSOE-Ciudadanos government

jumped to 72% of the active membership (AM) in April 2016 and remained at 60% AM in the vote on the electoral alliance with the leftist party Izquierda Unida in May 2016. However, when members were asked to express themselves on the voting procedure for the second party congress, the turnout dropped to 40% AM, and climbed again to 55% AM in the election of the Secretary General and the Citizen Council in February 2017. The irregular trend continued in 2018, when 46% AM voted on the use of the Podemos symbol in all electoral alliances in March, but only 31% AM voted on the proposal for a no-confidence vote to the conservative government of Mariano Rajoy in early May. A few weeks later, the referendum regarding the possible resignation of Irene Montero and Pablo Iglesias as parliament spokeswoman and party secretary, respectively, set a record high of nearly 190,000 voters (75% AM). In absolute terms, however, participation never passed the 50% mark after the first consultation of October 2014, registering an average turnout of 26% of the total members in the 16 consultations.
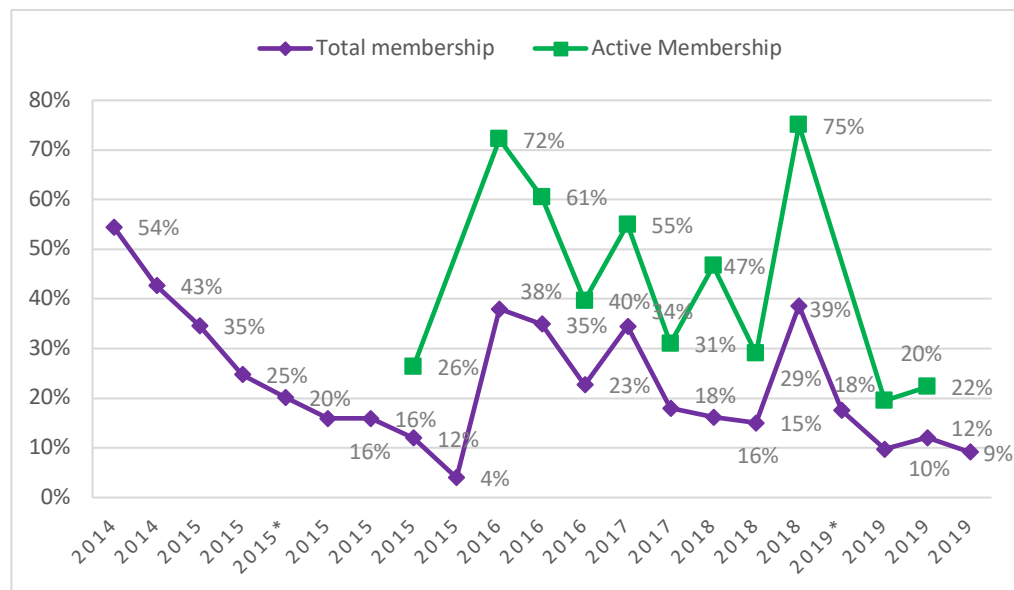

*Figure 2. Voter turnout in Podemos consultations. Source: Own elaboration based on data provided by podemos.info. *Turnout in primaries at the regional level.*

Although voter turnout can be affected by several contingent factors, these data suggest that participation in Podemos is high when members are either called to express themselves on the election, confirmation, or resignation of the party secretary (43% of the general membership in November 2014, 55% AM in February 2017, and 75% AM in May 2018), or consulted on key issues such as electoral alliances and the use of the party symbol (60% AM in May 2016 and 46% AM in March 2018). Because Pablo Iglesias is widely recognized as the face of Podemos, and the Podemos symbol represents the party before the electorate, it is safe to assume that Podemos members tend to vote en masse in consultations that have a high symbolic and political value. If this is unsurprising, it confirms Katz and Mair's (1994) aforementioned insight that internal party consultations are likely to reinforce the party in central office.

Participation rates in Rousseau present similarities to and differences with Participa. To begin with, because the 5SM does not publish figures about the number of eligible voters at each consultation, we had to approximate the voter turnout to the most recent membership figures at our disposal (Figure 3). Data show that the first consultation held on the OPP in December 2012 (the primaries for the selection of candidate MPs in the 2013 general elections) is also the one that registered the highest turnout, 64%. Similar to Participa, the average turnout immediately dropped below 50% in 2013 and kept declining, with few exceptions, in the following years, reaching an average of 14.7% in 2017 (Mosca, 2018). Particularly striking is the contrast between the primaries of December 2012 (64% turnout) and the primaries of January 2018 (29% turnout). Further, the rate of participation in the 20 consultations for the party program was quite low, with an average mean of only 13%.
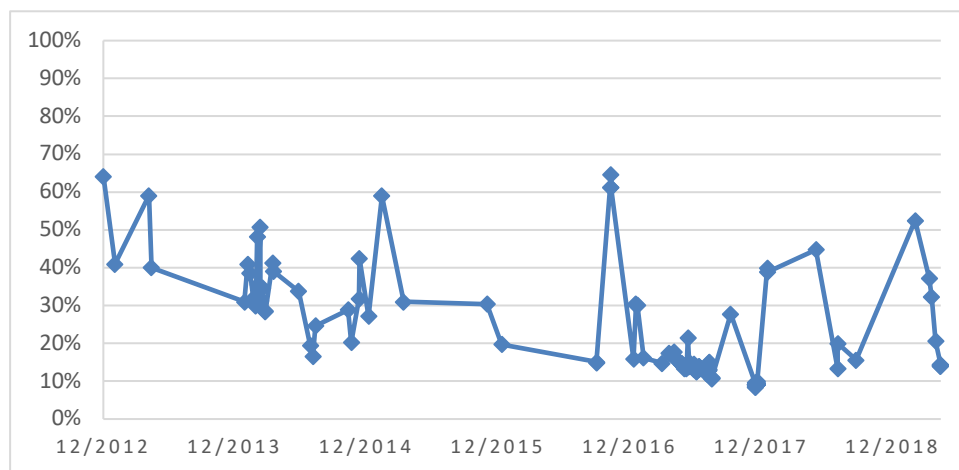

Figure 3. Voters turnout in 5SM consultations. Source: Own elaboration based on data provided ilblogdellestelle.it.

Measuring participation in absolute numbers also provides us with data that are worth considering. Similar to Podemos, the consultations with the highest participation involve issues that concern the party leaders, the symbol, the statute, and the signing of a government contract, and are thus essential to the identity and strategic positioning of the party. Significantly, however, participation via Rosseau did not show any increase in absolute terms from December 2012 to December 2017, while membership figures more than quadrupled during the same period as membership rose from 31,000 to 135,000 (Figure 1). Indeed, with the exception of the reform of the party statute in 2016, when more than 87,000 voters participated (in this circumstance, the ballot was open for an entire month), and the selection of presidential nominees in 2015, when 51,000 voters took part, participation via Rousseau never passed the 45,000 voters mark. This means that while the 5SM's capacity to attract new members and new voters increased dramatically over the years, the capacity of the Rousseau platform to enable participation decreased in the very same period.
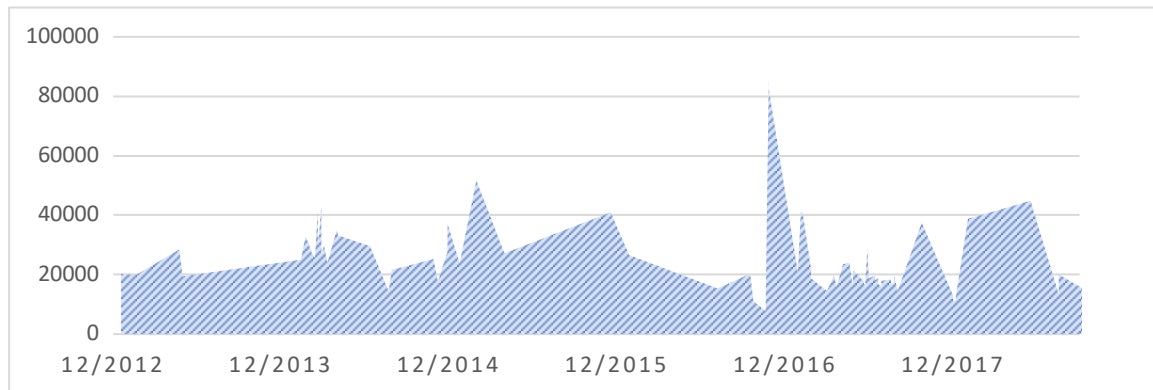
Figure 4. Total participation in 5SM consultations. Source: Own elaboration based on data provided ilblogdellestelle.it.

There are, of course, many possible reasons for this divergence. Here we should limit ourselves to two considerations. The first is that the scholarship on polities such as Switzerland and California, where referendums and citizen initiatives are institutionalized, clearly shows that "there is a negative correlation between turnout rates and the frequency of referendums" (Qvortrup, 2005, p. 30). Whereas "the average turnout in Switzerland is just over 40 per cent [and] in California as low as 35 per cent . . . the turnout figure is much higher in those countries that use direct legislation more sparingly" (Smith, 2009, p. 114). These data might explain why Rousseau's average turnout was the lowest in 2017 (14.7%), the year with the highest number of consultations (95, distributed over 24 voting days). They might also explain why the average turnout in Rousseau (20%) was lower than the average turnout in Participa (26%). However, these data do not explain why participation spikes in certain consultations.

Thus, the second consideration is that members of both parties selectively engage in the consultations that they deem important (Marques de Bastos, 1993). As we have seen, these are consultations either that concern the party leaders or whose political stakes are perceived to be high. Significantly, however, some of these consultations do not have as much participation as one might expect. For example, only 18% of Podemos members (31% AM) participated in the consultation for a no-confidence vote against the Rajoy government, and only 28% of 5SM members participated in the election of Luigi Di Maio to Political Head of the 5SM—the first election of a Political Head in the 5SM after Beppe Grillo's resignation. A possible explanation for this relative disengagement is that the outcomes of both consultations were highly expected; Podemos was already at odds with the Rajoy government, and Di Maio had no serious challengers in the primary. This means that the voter participation in high-frequency consultations may also be affected by "the perceived importance of the issue on the ballot. The ordinary voter sees no reason for wasting his or her energy on relatively uncontroversial issues" (Qvortrup, 2005, p. 29).

Plebiscitarian Outcomes

On one level, the plebiscitarian outcomes of both consultations (98% for the no-confidence vote, 82% for Di Maio) seem to validate Qvortrup's insight on the uncontroversial and widely expected result of these consultations. At the same time, it should be noted that plebiscitarian results are not uncommon at

the intraparty level, given that members of a political party are politically more homogeneous and in agreement than members of society at large. From the perspective of IPD, however, the question remains as to whether such consultations present members with real alternatives to choose from, or participation is only meant to validate the position of the party elite.

In the case of Podemos, in none of the 14 consultations did the members reverse the position of the party leadership. To make a few examples, Pablo Iglesias was voted Secretary General by 96.9% of the participating members in 2014 and reelected by 89.1% of the members in 2017. The alliance with Izquierda Unida received 98% support, the proposal for a "government for change" received 91.8% support, and the proposal to use the Podemos symbol in all electoral alliances received 90.7% support. The only case in which support for a proposal dropped below 70% was the confirmation of Iglesias and Bescansa as secretary and parliament spokeswoman, respectively, where 68.4% of the members voted against their resignation. In this case, however, there is little doubt that the two leaders used the referendum to put an end to a prolonged media scandal and the internal controversy that had tarnished their own image.

A similar pattern is observable in Rousseau. In this case, it should be noted that in two early consultations—on the decriminalization of immigration and the participation of Beppe Grillo in a meeting with Matteo Renzi—the membership reversed the positions of the elite. Both consultations were held in 2014. Since then, the members have always backed the position of the party leadership with solid majorities. Particularly striking is the recent landslide for the government contract with the League (94%), a party whose political program was at odds with the 5SM on many critical issues. Among the most voted-on consultations, public subsidies for renewable energies (98.9%), the government contract, and the ratification of the new party statute in 2016 (91.6%) recorded the highest support. As was the case with Podemos, it was not possible to establish a relation of causation between controversy and participation because several consultations with high levels of participation were also uncontroversial. However, it is possible to verify that when a consultation is potentially controversial—as is the case with consultations on immigration, civil unions, and euthanasia—Rousseau never embeds links to alternative viewpoints. This was particularly evident in the case of the three consultations held in 2013–2014 to expel dissident MPs. In all three cases, while the rationale for the expulsion was prominently displayed on beppegrillo.it, the point of view of the dissenting MPs was nowhere to be found (Mosca & Vaccari, 2017).

Contrary to Rousseau, Participa has never been used to validate the expulsion of dissenters. However, it is frequently used to validate important decisions concerning the strategic orientation of the party. In this case, members are often presented with questions that are formulated in binary and nonneutral terms. For example, in 2016, the party asked its members whether they were in favor of entering a coalition government with the PSOE (the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) and Ciudadanos (an emerging center-right party), which had already signed a political pact, or intended to support Podemos's attempt at forming a leftist coalition government. Unsurprisingly, 88.2% of the members voted no to the Rivera-Sánchez agreement, and 91.8% backed the Podemos proposal. Similarly, in March 2018, the party leadership launched a consultation to determine whether Podemos should be running with its own symbol in the municipal, regional, and European elections of 2019. The consultation was launched to approve Iglesias's proposal to make the Podemos symbol visible in all ballots and also in response to United Left's request to dissolve the Unidos Podemos electoral alliance of 2016. Although the proposal could create

tensions with some of the local platforms known as the convergences (*confluencias*), it was approved by the usual landslide (93.3%) even though voter turnout was only 16% (46.6% AM). Significantly, the debate on the consultation was launched in Plaza Podemos only after its official start, de facto preventing members from contributing to the formulation of the questions.

The Low Quality of Deliberation

That the discussions hosted in the "Debates and Opinions" section of Plaza Podemos 2.0 has not had an impact on the consultations bespeaks the disconnection between the opinion-forming process and decision making in Participa. This lack of impact is reflected in the scarce participation. To put this in context, as of November 14, 2018, of 8,021 debates listed in Plaza Podemos 2.0, only 20 featured more than 100 comments, with the vast majority of the discussion threads consisting of the opinion of one or two members. Similarly, of 2,370 citizen initiatives (*iniciativas ciudadanas populares*), only 59 had more than 1,000 endorsements (*apoyos*). Because of the 10% support threshold, none of the member proposals has been transformed into an actual initiative. Further, the 200 most supported proposals were all posted in 2015 except for one, which was submitted in 2016. This means that as it became clear that the threshold was unreachable (the most-voted-on initiative had "only" 6,100 endorsements), participation faded. Thus, similar to the Debates and Opinion section, the ICP section of Participa does not seem to have any substantive political function as of this writing.

In Rousseau, deliberation is even less developed than in Participa because the OPP does not support features for group communication and cooperation. The only comment feature appears in the three Lex areas (Lex Region, Lex Parliament, and Lex Europe), where members can post comments on draft bills uploaded by their representatives. As noted, however, members cannot reply to each other. Thus, this kind of feedback does not meet the fundamental criterion of reciprocity in (Web-based) deliberation, which states that "participants should listen and react to the comments formulated by other participants" (Kies, 2010, p. 42). Although these comments actually do help representatives amend and improve their draft laws, their quantity drastically decreases over time. Indeed, participation in the Lex areas steadily decreased in spite of the nominal increase of the membership base over the years. As Mosca notes, "The average number of comments per law" posted in the Lex Parliament area "amounted to 446 in 2014, 184 in 2015, 144 in 2016, and 63 in 2017" (2018, p. 13). In 2018, the average was 61 comments per bill (as of December 10, 2018). Finally, "only 39% of the 326 law proposals commented on Rousseau until the end of 2017 received at least one answer from the person in charge of managing the discussion," and "the proposals were clearly modified in light of the discussion" in only 22 cases (Mosca, 2018, p. 14). Thus, similar to Participa, it is clear that member feedback in Rousseau has a minimal substantive impact on the action of representatives.

Conclusion

This article examined the impact of two online participation platforms, Rousseau and Participa, on the internal party democracy of two emerging political parties, the 5SM and Podemos. While the IPD scholarship often measures the quality of IPD via indexes, which are based on a formal assessment of specific dimensions, our approach has been to examine both the conditions of online participation (as emerging from the intersection of statutory norms and technical features) and the actual trends in

participation. Because this in-depth analysis is only applicable to a limited number of cases, it is not meant to provide an alternative model to existing IPD indexes, but to show their limitations when considering a complex phenomenon such as digitally enabled participation in political parties.

On a statutory level, we have argued that whereas the 5SM deploys Rousseau within a thin organizational structure, Podemos uses Participa within a stratified organization. This means that, as compared with Participa, Rousseau has a higher political weight within the party organization—as demonstrated by the higher number of functionalities and the higher frequency of consultations. On a technological level, however, the relationship between the two platforms seems reversed. Whereas Rousseau does not allow members to communicate with one another, Participa embeds deliberative forums for member-sponsored initiatives. These "citizen initiatives," however, are undermined on a normative level; the Podemos statute introduces a support threshold that makes it impossible for the whole party to discuss and adopt them. Similarly, 5SM members who propose a legislative initiative have to pass through several procedural hurdles and political filters, which greatly reduce their number and political impact.

Although these mutually reinforcing normative and technological constraints on the agency of ordinary members do not prevent them in theory from participating within given conditions, in practice, the participation rate in online consultations has declined steadily over the years. Indeed, more than two thirds of registered members do not participate on a regular basis. Such a decline is particularly striking when considered against the constant increase in the membership base of both parties. Of course, the "liquid" nature of digital membership makes it difficult to gauge the political significance of turnout rates because the moment of exit often remains unmarked in digital parties. Further, the perceived importance of an issue may determine significant fluctuations in the participation rate. Overall, however, there is little doubt that both platforms have seen a steady decline in participation over the years, which seems to go hand in hand with the multiplication of consultations and the plebiscitarian results. Not accidentally, the decline in turnout is more marked in Rousseau, where the frequency of consultations is higher than in Participa. Simply put, participation in these two OPPs is low—both quantitatively and qualitatively—because members are burdened with too many decisions and perceive that either the issues at stake are not important, or the outcome of the consultations is irrelevant.

In this respect, our conclusion is that statutory regulations, technological affordances, and high-frequency consultations function as a series of interlocking constraints on the capacity of ordinary members to participate on a regular basis. This means that the impact of Rousseau and Participa on the quality of IPD in the 5SM and Podemos is modest. To be sure, some of these processes are still experimental and could be improved in the future. However, both parties have shown little interest in engaging their members to redesign the OPP. From this angle, the primary question that this study poses to the IPD scholarship and the digital democracy scholarship is whether the capacity of OPPs to lower the costs of political participation will effectively democratize political parties, or the multiplication of "top-down" consultations will set in motion participatory processes that are not very inclusive—and thus hardly democratic—because they are based on self-selection. From this angle, further research is needed to understand whether the cases of Podemos and the 5SM are indicative of a broader trend in parties that make intensive use of digital decision-making tools, or the highly polarized political systems of Southern Europe overdetermine the centralized management of participation platforms.

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