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## **Digital Movement Parties: A Comparative Analysis of the Technopolitical Cultures and the Participation Platforms of the Movimento 5 Stelle and the Piratenpartei**

### Abstract

The Pirate Party of Germany (PPG) and the Italian 5-Star Movement (5SM) are two digital movement parties that share several ideological features, including their roots in anti-establishment movements, their refusal to position themselves on the Left-Right spectrum, and their belief that the Internet increases the capacity of ordinary citizens for self-government and self-representation. To this end, both parties have adopted online participation platforms, which allow their members to contribute to the development of the party program, vote on strategic decisions, and propose policy initiatives. Given these affinities and given that both parties began their political ascendancy in the same years, their antipodal political destinies—ascendency to power for the 5SM, downfall for the PPG—are all the more striking. This article accounts for this divergence by showing how the technopopulist orientation of both parties conceals in fact radically different conceptions of political participation and internal party democracy. To this end, it considers the role that different technopolitical cultures have played in shaping the organization of these two parties in their early stages, and how the subsequent adoption and use of online participation platforms has led to internal strife and bitter disputes within the PPG and increasing centralization within the 5SM.

**Keywords:** Digital Party; Movement Parties; Liquid Democracy; Five Star Movement; Pirate Party

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The Pirate Party of Germany and the Italian Five Star Movement are two movement parties (Kitschelt 2006; Della Porta et al. 2017), cyber-parties or digital parties (Margetts 2006; Gerbaudo 2018) that share several ideological and organizational features. Ideologically, both parties have roots in anti-establishment movements, refuse to position themselves on the Left-Right spectrum, and believe that the Internet increases the capacity of ordinary citizens for self-representation. To this end, both parties have adopted online participation platforms that allow their members to contribute to the development of the party program, vote on strategic decisions, and propose policy initiatives.

Given these affinities and given that both parties began their political ascendancy in the late 2000s, their antipodal political destinies—ascendency to power for the Five Star Movement, downfall for the Pirate Party—are all the more striking. Although multiple causes have contributed to determine this divergence, there is little doubt that the Pirate Party of Germany (from now on PPG) imploded because it was unable to contain internal factionalism, which ended up undermining party unity and credibility in the public eye (Koschmieder 2015). In contrast, the centralized organization of the Five Star Movement (from now on 5SM) has allowed its leadership to marginalize internal dissent while minimizing its potentially negative impact at the ballot box. To be sure, the success of movement parties should not be assessed only in electoral terms. The scholarship on movement parties has in fact shown how left-libertarian parties such as the German Greens often put constituency representation above electoral performance (Kitschelt 1989; Poguntke 1993). Because post-1970s movement parties were tied to new social movements constituency representation translated in a commitment to

horizontal organizational principles such as “collective and amateur leadership, imperative mandate, rotation, open access to meetings, and gender parity” (Della Porta et al. 2017: 19). After the first electoral successes, however, such commitment came to collide with the pursuit of cabinet positions aimed at obtaining substantive policy changes (Kitschelt 2006: 288).

Digital movement parties such as the PPG and the 5SM have inherited several contradictions highlighted by the movement party literature. However, these parties also face new organizational challenges such as the need of distinguishing between online supporters and actual party members, translating online participation into effective decision-making, and defining the scope of digital platforms vis-à-vis traditional party organisms. Indeed, if the PPG and the 5SM share the “technopopulist” belief that digital participation is key to popular control over elected representatives and a truly democratic governance (Deseriis 2017a), a closer look at their internal organization reveals a significant variation in the powers afforded to ordinary members via online platforms. The purpose of this article is to assess such variation by illuminating the gap between the ideology of both parties and their actual organizational practices. Although scholars have fruitfully contrasted the participatory rhetoric of the 5SM to its lack of internal democracy (Treré and Barassi 2015), they have rarely considered the role that different *technopolitical cultures* play in shaping the organization of digital movement parties. This article begins to fill this gap by considering how the technopolitical cultures of the PPG and the 5SM have informed the conception and function of the participation platforms within both parties, and how the deployment and use of these platforms has in turn affected their internal organization.

### **1. Theoretical and Methodological Premise**

The article is divided in three sections. In the first section, I offer a definition of technopolitical culture and explore it along two dimensions: the ideological assumptions and belief system of its actors; and the organizational practices through which these beliefs acquire a material and social existence within a specific context. The second and central section of the article focuses on the participation platforms adopted by the two parties to empower their ordinary members. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate how, far from being neutral tools, the online platforms LiquidFeedback (PPG) and Rousseau (5SM) incorporate in their design political beliefs and rational rules of procedure, which mold two radically different decision-making processes and two opposite conceptions of democracy. The third and final part of the article focuses on how the platforms have reshaped the internal decision-making and organization of both parties and thus the technopolitical cultures from which they originated.

The first section of the article relies on historical accounts and critical readings of the social movements and political campaigns that led to the foundation of both parties. The second section traces texts authored by the developers and designers of LiquidFeedback and Rousseau to key texts in political theory and political philosophy that have inspired their original conception and design. In the third section, I rely on four in-depth interviews I conducted with a former Political Director of the PPG, two elected representatives of the Berlin PP, and a national “superdelegate” in LiquidFeedback to show how the introduction of the platform ignited a conflict between the Berlin Pirates, who had developed a distinctive technopolitical culture around its use, and those who resisted its implementation at a national level. In Italy, I conducted fieldwork in Rome, Milan, and at two national meetings of the 5SM in Palermo and Rimini in 2016 and 2017. Drawing from fieldwork notes, and interviews with activists of local Meetup groups I show how the introduction of Rousseau has caused anxieties among activists over the increased centralization of power and their inability to use Rousseau to have their voice heard beyond the local.

### **2. The Technopolitical Cultures of the *Piratenpartei* and the *Movimento 5 Stelle***

In the tradition of cultural studies (Williams 1958), a technopolitical culture can be defined as a materialized belief system, that is, an ideology embodied and embedded in actions, practices, norms,

and institutions (Althusser 1971), which concerns the development and use of networked information systems for political participation. Whereas all technopolitical cultures share the populist belief that digital participation enhances the capacity of a people to govern itself (Deseriis 2017a), the technopolitical organization of such participation is highly dependent on context and culturally inflected. In this section I show how the *Piratenpartei* initially focused on the organization of campaigns against government surveillance and government censorship that touched on culturally sensitive issues in Germany. In Italy, the foundation of the *Movimento 5 Stelle* was instead strictly connected to mass mobilizations against political corruption launched by the blog of Italian comedian Beppe Grillo that deeply resonated with the Italians' culture of suspicion towards the political class. As we will see, while the anti-censorship campaigns of the PPG ended up informing a decentralized and ideally leaderless party organization, the Beppe Grillo blog became the hub of a highly centralized national network.

### **2.1. Foundation and Early Years of the Piratenpartei**

The Piratenpartei was founded in September 2006 as a single-issue party devoted to Internet freedom, understood both as free access to information and privacy protection (Löblich and Wendelin, 2012). The incorporation and denomination of the PPG was certainly inspired by its Swedish predecessor, the Piratpartiet, which had been founded in January 2006 and had quickly gained popularity after the Swedish police seized the servers of The Pirate Bay, at the time the largest file-sharing website in the world (Falkvinge, 2013; Bukart, 2010). Whereas the Piratpartiet's program centered on copyright reform, the PPG had a stricter focus on privacy protection against government surveillance and censorship. To be sure, both the Piratpartiet and the Piratenpartei opposed the implementation of the European Directive on data retention (2006/24/EC), which requires Internet Service Providers and telephone companies to store data about their customers for six months and hand them over to the authorities for investigative purposes. But this campaign acquired a higher significance in Germany, where the corresponding national law was consistently challenged in court until the German constitutional court declared it unconstitutional in 2010.

Although private corporations also engage in data mining and consumer surveillance (Andrejevic 2007), it has been noted that German ICT policy activists primarily focus on *state surveillance* (Löblich and Wendelin, 2012). This is a culturally sensitive issue in Germany, which is associated to the German political past, and in particular to the vast surveillance apparatus deployed during the Nazi period and after World War II in the GDR (Löblich and Wendelin, 2012: 907). Surely, the need of building a political opposition to the directive on data retention contributed to the foundation of the PPG. At the same time, it should be noted that other civil society organizations such as the Working Group on Data Retention (AK Stock)—which had been founded in December 2005 for the same purpose—the association for civil rights and data protection FoeBuD, and the Chaos Computer Club (the largest European association of hackers) were well-equipped to conduct this campaign both in the courts and on the media.

Certainly, the PPG did not take a leading role in the opposition to the directive and did not see a significant increase of its membership base until mid-2009, when the then Minister for Family Affairs Ursula von der Leyden proposed a legislative initiative to block access to child pornography websites at the ISP level. The proposal sparked #zensursula (a portmanteau for “Ursula the censor”), a grassroots campaign against Internet filtering that organized protests in several German cities, including a 25,000-strong in Berlin, and collected over 130,000 signatures against the proposed legislation. Because some of the Zensursula organizers were also members of the PPG, the party directly benefited from its political success, with membership figures rising from 1,000 to 11,000 by the end of 2009 (Piratenpartei Wiki). The campaign turned the PPG into the main political referent for a loose network of associations operating in the field of Internet freedom and anti-censorship initiatives, including the aforementioned AK Stock, FoeBuD, and CCC, as well as the German Big Brother Awards, the Invisible Internet Project (I2P), websites such as Gulli.com and Wikileaks (Neumann 2011: 24), and the hacktivist group Anonymous.

It is worth noting that while the PPG became a political referent for these groups, it did not organize them in a centralized fashion. The Pirates retained in fact a strong ethical commitment to self-directed, decentralized, and collaborative modes of engagement whose roots lie in the hacker ethic (Levy 1984; Himanen 2001), the Free Software movement (Kelty 2008; Söderberg 2008), the media-savvy components of the Global Justice Movement (Juris 2008), and the hybrid democratic governance of large FOSS projects such as the Debian distribution (Coleman 2013: 126-140). With these movements, the Pirates shared a culture of suspicion towards any form of centralization and authority, which laid its roots in the technolibertarianism of the 1990s (Barbrook and Cameron 1996; Turner 2006). With hackers and geeks the Pirates also shared the belief that a network can govern itself, and that *provided with the right tools*, any organization can implement radically democratic forms of governance (Deseriis, 2017a).

Since 2007, a group of Berlin Pirates had been discussing the possibility of developing software that would support Liquid Democracy, or delegative democracy by proxy voting, an emerging model of participatory democracy that combines direct democracy and representative democracy with the stated objective of overcoming the limitations of both (Mühlbauer and Huwald 2007). Although this debate had been mostly speculative and exploratory, the sudden increase in membership sparked by the Zensursula campaign multiplied the requests for an effective decision-making tool within the PPG. To fulfill this need, in the fall of 2009, the Public Software Group, a Berlin-based group of system developers, released LiquidFeedback, which is considered the first software implementation of Liquid Democracy.

In sum, the movement cultures that inform the foundation of the PPG stem from two distinct, but partly overlapping, milieus: a German ICT activist milieu, which is culturally sensitive to government surveillance and that came together in the organization of the Zensursula campaign; and the technical culture of FOSS programmers, whose growing politicization was part of a wider transnational tendency vis-à-vis increasingly restrictive IP laws (Coleman 2013; Adler 2018). As we will see, these two milieus shared a “proceduralist” view of political participation and democracy, which ended up colliding with the institutional governance of the PPG.

## 2.2. Incubation and Foundation of the 5SM

If the Pirates see networked participation as an antidote to the centralization of power, the Internet plays a distinctively different role in the initial conception and foundation of the 5SM. Prior to its incorporation as a “non-party” in October 2009, the 5SM was a *mass movement of public opinion* that coalesced around the figure of Beppe Grillo—a comedian whose biography and artistic trajectory embodies in many ways the deep distrust Italians harbor towards the political class. In 2005, Grillo launched *beppegrillo.it*, which quickly became one of the most visited and influential blogs in the world (Mello 2013). Using the blog as a digital extension of his theater shows, Grillo launched his first public initiatives against the corruption of the political class and of the Italian media system (Oggiano 2012: 94-119). He also kept publishing articles on a wide range of issues including recycling, clean energy, the degrowth movement, micro-credit and monetary sovereignty, and open source software—thereby addressing a much wider audience than the PPG.

Because the blog soon proved to be an inadequate medium for organizational purposes, Gianroberto Casaleggio, the administrator of *beppegrillo.it* and CEO of the web marketing company Casaleggio Associati, launched the first *Friends of Beppe Grillo* (from now on FBG) Meetup group in June 2005. In the ensuing months, dozens and then hundreds of FBG Meetup groups sprung up around the country. The need of coordinating the activities of the FBG groups led in November 2006 to the creation of the Meetup 280, a national discussion group for Meetup organizers originally focusing on topics such as participatory budgeting, digital direct democracy, degrowth, and open source software. By 2007, the Meetup 280 had turned into an organizational hub for an emerging network of local civic lists (*liste civiche*), and for an embryonic attempt to draft a national agenda for the nascent Movement from below (Ceri and Veltri, 2017: 43-49). The relative autonomy of the Meetups from the blog continued until the official presentation of the 5SM at the Teatro Smeraldo in Milan in October 2009.

On this occasion, it became apparent that Grillo and Casaleggio had no intention of letting the Meetup 280 contribute to the 5SM's political program, thus sidelining the organizers' attempt at building a decentralized national network (Ceri and Veltri, 83-90).

The incorporation of the 5SM engendered instead Grillo and Casaleggio's vision of a "non-party," that is, of a Movement without intermediary bodies and ruling organisms whose members would entertain an ostensibly direct relationship with their representatives via the Internet (Casaleggio and Grillo 2011; Casaleggio 2013). This techno-utopian vision was articulated in the "non-statute" of the 5SM, a short document that laid out the basic rules of the nascent organization and which promised to "recognize to the totality of the Network users the role of government and orientation ordinarily attributed to the few" (Movimento 5 Stelle 2016: 3). In order to support such broad participation, however, the 5SM needed a software that would incorporate decision-making functionalities, which were not available neither in the Meetup platform nor in the Beppe Grillo blog.

The gap between the programmatic statements and the practice became evident when the 5SM managed to win a stunning 25.5% of the vote at the general elections of February 2013. Growing impatient at the lack of tools that would allow members shape the direction of the (non-)party, in the spring of 2013 a group of 5SM programmers and elected representatives in the Lazio region developed Parelton, a decision-making software based on LiquidFeedback, with the goal of introducing it in municipal and regional administrations. It is here that the trajectory of the 5SM and of the PPG intersected if only for a short moment. In fact, as soon as the activists announced the release of Parelton, Grillo clarified that the only recognized platform of the 5SM would be the new "Sistema Operativo" (later to be renamed Rousseau), which was eventually released in October 2013 (Grillo 2013). Thus, in this circumstance, the party leadership marginalized, once again, the technopolitical wing of the party retaining a tight control over the internal decision-making tools and procedures.

In sum, the movement cultures that inspire the birth of the 5SM are thematically more diversified than those of the PPG, and can be divided into two main strands: 1) a large movement of public opinion against political corruption that is directly mobilized by Beppe Grillo through his shows and blog; and 2) a smaller activist base whose political practices are connected to local environmentalism and other civic initiatives. On an organizational level, these two strands assume two distinct forms: a *mass public of followers*, which materializes on a daily basis in the comments section of *beppegrillo.it* and, sporadically, via large protest events organized by the comedian; and a *networked activist base* that relies on the Meetup platform to organize locally while also trying to build a national network via the Meetup 280. *While the latter had the vision of a decentralized networked party, it did not hold the political power to build it.* As we will see, the participation platform Rousseau would become the main instrument for implementing a vision of digital (direct) democracy based on preference aggregation.

### **3. Different Conceptions of Democracy Embedded in LiquidFeedback and Rousseau**

As noted, the introduction of participation platforms such as LiquidFeedback (PPG) and Rousseau (5SM) had a significant impact on the internal decision-making processes of both parties. Indeed, far from being neutral tools, LiquidFeedback and Rousseau incorporate a range of political beliefs, design codes, and rational rules of procedure, which mold specific and emerging conceptions of democracy. LiquidFeedback is in fact the first working implementation of *liquid democracy*—or delegative democracy by proxy voting. Rousseau engenders instead a form of *direct parliamentarianism* (Deseriis 2017b). In this section I show how liquid democracy lays its roots in public choice theory, which frames the public interest as the aggregate choice of utility-maximizing individuals. In contrast, the Rousseau platform is inspired to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theory of the general will, which places the public interest above the particular wills of private individuals.

#### **3.1. The Roots of LiquidFeedback in Public Choice Theory**

Developed in 2009 by the Public Software Group, a Berlin-based group of four open source system developers, LQFB is an open source application that allows users to propose, discuss, amend, and vote

on civic and political initiatives. As compared to other decision-making software, LQFB's defining feature is that the software supports an advanced specialization of labor by allowing users delegate their vote to other users. Those who receive proxies, or delegations, can in turn transfer them to other users facilitating the emergence of chains of trust. Such trust, however, is not a blank check as delegators can revoke their proxy and vote directly at any given moment. Because of this reversibility or "liquidity" of the decision-making process, LQFB is the first implementation of Liquid Democracy (from now on LD), a model of delegative democracy whose modern origins have been traced back to Lewis Carroll's *The Principles of Parliamentary Representation*.

In this text, the English author envisioned a voting system whereby representatives who receive more popular votes than necessary to be elected, can transfer their extra-votes to unelected candidates so as to reduce the number of unrepresented voters (Carroll, 1884). During the twentieth century, various authors continued to theorize different models of delegative democracy (for a summary of this debate, see Jabbusch, 2011; Green-Armytage, 2015; Behrens 2017). Here I will just pause on a significant moment in the LD genealogy—namely, the encounter between public choice theory and delegative democracy. In 1967, public choice theorist and mathematician Gordon Tullock envisioned a system of political representation where each representative would have a voting power exactly proportional to the number of votes received (Tullock 1967: 144-157). Two years later, James C. Miller III developed Tullock's proposal envisioning the possibility for citizens to vote directly on any given law from their computers, or to send a delegate to Congress for the issue at hand, thereby decoupling political representation from party affiliation and fixed-term appointments (Miller 1969).

It is certainly no accident that public choice theorists developed an interest in delegative democracy. As an economic, market-based theory of politics, public choice analyzes collective decision making as the aggregate choice of utility-maximizing individuals (Buchanan and Tullock 1962: 43-44). As such, it frames the public interest as the *outcome* rather than the source of an ongoing deal-making activity whereby voters, public servants, and politicians achieve mutual gains by resolving conflicts through exchange. This "politics-as-exchange" transforms the relative intensity of individual preferences into the basis of a voluntary exchange from which all parties can benefit (Brennan 2012). From this angle, far from epitomizing a corruption in the political process, the institutional practice of logrolling—the exchange of support or favors among representatives—is "a dynamic process of adjustment and compromise wherein preferences of different intensities over different issues can be linked though trade" (Thrasher and Gaus, 2017: 3-4).

Delegative democracy by proxy voting and LD extend this process to the social body by allowing ordinary voters to engage in negotiations that are ordinarily the purview of elected representatives. Indeed, under a delegation-based system, voters do not need to entrust a bloc of representatives, usually under the control of a single party, with the task of representing them *in toto*. Instead, they can distribute their preferences among a variable number of delegates so as to increase their chances of maximizing their net benefit. LQFB foregrounds this efficient allocation of resources by allowing users to transfer proxies to trustees for a single initiative, subject area, or all issues (Behrens et al. 2014: 26). Indeed, the software is designed to encourage politics-as-exchange on four distinct levels, which correspond to the four phases of the decision-making process: admission, discussion, verification, and voting (Behrens et al., 66-69).

First, because proposals need to pass an initial support threshold, proxy holders with a high voting weight have significant agenda-setting power, and their support is highly sought in the admission phase. Second, when competing proposals enter the discussion phase, potential supporters can make suggestions for amendment, and either confirm or withdraw their support depending on the proponent's response. Third, in the verification phase, the supporters whose suggestions have been rejected can introduce an alternative initiative, which may incorporate the proposed amendments. Finally, in the voting phase, proxy holders can decide either to vote directly or to transfer their voting weight (that is, all received proxies plus their personal vote) to other trustees. This transitive property is conducive to the creation of "chains of delegations" whereby intermediate proxy holders can have a significant bargaining power in determining the final outcome of a decision and can therefore act as

checks on the power of those who hold the highest number of proxies at the end of the chain (Behrens et al., 33).

In sum, as the first working implementation of LD, LQFB did not merely satisfy the need of a rapidly growing party for a distributed and scalable decision-making tool. Rather, by encoding a rationalist vision of democracy into a highly formalized design, LQFB shaped some internal party processes while generating *an emerging technopolitical culture around its use*. Because LQFB's most disruptive affordance is its capacity to turn every participant into a potential delegate (and vice versa) the Berlin Pirates proposed to use the software as the equivalent to a permanent party convention at a national level so as to correct the democratic deficits of large assemblies of party members (Koschmieder 2015). Such proposal, however, met the resistance of the Bavarian Pirates and of the party leadership, who feared that skilled LQFB users would have an undue advantage over non-skilled users. At the same time, the so-called "Liquid Wars" not only opposed users and non-users of the software but also invested the pro-LQFB camp. In particular, as we will see, native software features such as the open ballot system and transitive delegations caused anxieties over the creation of a database of politically sensitive opinions, and the concentration of power in the hands of few "superdelegates," respectively.

### 3.2. Rousseau and the Theory of the General Will

As compared to LQFB, Rousseau is not a generic open source software that can be adapted to many different uses and circumstances, but a proprietary participation platform that has been designed in house by the Casaleggio Associati to serve the needs of a rapidly growing party. As such, the platform functionalities are predefined and currently divided into 12 distinct sections, or 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 among city and regional councillors; E-learning provides online courses to aspiring 5SM candidates; Open Cities allows candidate mayors to prepare their own lists online; and the areas Fundraising and Shield of 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.

Even though Rousseau has been designed to support a preexisting organization, the platform incorporates a specific vision of democracy and political participation, which is all the more significant given that the "non-statute" that normed the foundation of the Movement disavows "the mediation of directive or representative organisms" within the party (Movimento 5 Stelle 2016: 3). Further, the 5SM leadership explicitly bars the formation of intermediary bodies such as regional associations of Meetups (Fico and Di Battista 2015) so as to prevent the formation of internal factions and strands. This anti-representational stance is also clearly articulated in the writings and programmatic statements of the two co-founders of the 5SM, who have repeatedly criticized the free mandate, advocating for the introduction of direct democracy measures such as online referendums, citizen initiatives, and recall ballots (Casaleggio and Grillo 2011; Casaleggio et al. 2013).

Given this conception of political representation, it is no surprise that Rousseau is named after the Swiss philosopher of *The Social Contract*. In this text, Rousseau famously argued that sovereign power, as an indivisible expression of the citizens' "general will," cannot be mediated by representatives. "Every law which the citizens have not ratified is invalid; it is not a law," he wrote (Rousseau 1998: 96). But if the general will cannot be represented, it can be *revealed* to the body politic "through the counting of the votes" (Rousseau, 108). Regardless of whether the general will is expressed unanimously or through majority voting, it embodies the common interest against the particular wills of private individuals. For this reason, the citizen who votes with the minority should immediately consider his vote as nothing more than personal opinion. If not, "long discussions, dissensions, and uproar proclaim the ascendancy of private interests and the decline of the state" (Rousseau, 107).

The theory of the general will may help explain why binding consultations play a central role

in the 5SM platform and why “long discussions” or “dissensions” are completely absent from it. From December 2012 through December 2017, Rousseau hosted 65 online ballots, ranging from several online primaries to the ratification of the electoral program to the expulsion of dissenting MPs to the positioning of the parliamentary group on key policy issues (Mosca 2018). Particularly significant are the ballots that led in 2013 to the expulsion of several MPs accused of violating the Code of Conduct of the parliamentary groups. The ballots were announced on *beppegrillo.it* and subsequently ratified by the assembly of the members via Rousseau. The plebiscitarian nature of the consultations is evident from the fact that the blog represented only the point of view of the party leadership while ignoring that of the MPs. Even in this case, however, a Rousseauian conception of sovereign power may justify this course of action insofar as *The Social Contract* attributes to the government (embodied here by the 5SM leadership) the power to enact the general will and thus to represent the totality of the body politic (Rousseau, 97).

The fact that Rousseau enforces a politics of unity is also evident from the ostensible lack of features that may allow members to debate policy matters. The only areas in which users can provide a limited feedback are Lex Europe, Lex Parliament and Lex Region. Here 5SM representatives open their draft legislation for comment for a period of 60 days before introducing it into parliament. However, because these areas do not feature threaded comments, members can provide feedback to their representative but not to other members. Further, representatives remain free to adopt “the most useful comments” while providing a very limited rationale for their choices, if any (Deseriis 2017b; Mosca 2018). 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, read and vote on other members’ proposals, but cannot collectively debate or amend the proposals.

In sum, contrary to LQFB, which frames politics as a form of exchange between utility-maximizing individuals, Rousseau frames politics from the point of view of the general interest. On the one hand, the general interest of the 5SM community is “revealed” through binding consultations. On the other hand, the enforcement of such will is guaranteed by the party leadership and the elected representatives who retain the power to decide the subject and timing of the consultations, and introduce the vast majority of the bills on Lex. Although the ample autonomy of 5SM representatives is in stark contrast with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s critique of political representation, the 5SM leadership considers the representative as nothing more than a spokesperson (*portavoce*) of the 5SM community, whose internal differences are denied or minimized. In this respect, the platform is the locus where representatives are first *authorized* by the party members (via the online primaries) and then made *accountable* to the party base by reporting their legislative initiatives. If this vertical relationship between members and representatives is a form of *direct parliamentarianism* (Deseriis 2017b), such form is predicated upon the rigid separation of deliberation, which remains a prerogative of representatives, from the decisional moment, which is opened up to the whole party in the simplified form of preference aggregation.

#### **4. The Technopolitical Reconfiguration of the PPG and the 5SM**

In this final section, I will show how the introduction of LQFB and Rousseau contributed to reshape the technopolitical cultures and the internal decision-making processes of both parties. Whereas both platforms were designed to allow ordinary party members to influence high-level decisions, their actual introduction and use led to divergent results: bitter factional disputes in the PPG and consolidation of centralized management in the 5SM.

##### **4.1. The Impact of LQFB on the Internal Organization of the PPG**

As noted, Berlin was the breeding ground for LD in Germany and LQFB was developed in Berlin. In 2010-11, the Berlin PP successfully used the software to develop the program for the state elections of September 2011, where the party won 8.9% of the vote and 15 parliament seats, paving the way for similar successes in three subsequent state elections. Galvanized by the electoral successes and with membership figures rising to almost 35,000 members in 2012 (Piratenpartei Wiki), the advocates of



LQFB tried to scale the use of the software from the state level to the federal level, proposing to replace the party convention with a *ständige Mitgliederversammlung* (SMV), a standing general meeting to be permanently held online. As noted, the proposal met the opposition of some PPG leaders and especially of the Bavarian branch of the party, which feared that the Berlin Pirates could seize control of the party because of their advanced skills in using the software.

Capitalizing on various critiques of LQFB, in 2012 the Bavarian Pirates developed a fork of LQFB called PirateFeedback, which allows users to list five delegates in order of preference and does not allow trustees to pass delegations on. Even though the software had a limited use within the Bavarian PP its very development signaled that the two most powerful branches of the party were unable to agree on common decision-making tools and protocols. The conflict became public at the Neumarkt convention in May 2013, when the Bavarian Pirates blocked the attempt of the Berlin Pirates to obtain a supermajority to change the party statute and introduce the SMV. Here the liquid wars reached a point of non-return. Personal animosity among various party leaders amplified by social media sealed the destiny of the party, which failed to enter the Bundestag in September 2013, and faded out of the German political landscape as quickly as it had appeared.

Certainly, the meteoric rise and fall of the Piratenpartei can be explained with the lack of an authoritative leadership capable of mediating between the party branches at the federal level. At the same time, the lack of leadership was not accidental for a party whose young members had a strong anti-elitist attitude not only towards career politicians but also towards “any of their competent members who would get to a certain high position” (Weisband interview, 2017). This anti-political attitude invested political directors, members of the party Board, and even those who were in charge of implementing LQFB at a national level or who held a high number of delegations in LQFB.

Indeed, the transitive delegation feature of LQFB is conducive to the formation of power-law distributions (Barabási 2002), that is, to the concentration of power in the hands of few “superdelegates.” Although superdelegates such as Martin Haase stress that their power was always subject to scrutiny and thus easily reversible, they also note that “an informal power can be very powerful” as the software was often used to prepare motions that were eventually approved at the party convention (Haase interview, 2016). It was only a matter of time before this factual influence collided with the formal power of the Board, which was defeated by Haase in several circumstances in spite of the fact that he had no formal appointments within the party.

The second software feature that proved to be highly controversial is the open ballot system. Whereas the software developers had implemented this feature to ensure the verifiability of the vote (Behrens et al., 2014: 39-57), some Berlin Pirates argued that the transparency of LQFB posed a threat to their privacy and begun using pseudonymous names. This ignited a whole dispute on the verifiability of pseudonymous accounts, which was initially solved by allowing pseudonymous users to identify themselves at local Pirate meetings (Reinhardt interview, 2016). But the dispute had political and philosophical implications that went beyond the privacy of individual users. Because a LQFB user can both transfer *and receive* delegations, she can be simultaneously delegator and trustee. This raises in turn the question of whether trustees have a right to privacy, given that voting on behalf of someone implies a responsibility that voting for oneself does not (Haase interview, 2016).

Thus, in blurring the boundaries between participation and delegation, direct democracy and representative democracy, the *LQFB* system *displays emergent properties* that put into crisis notions of privacy and accountability based on existing systems of governance. Further, the actual use of the software raised doubts and anxieties over the concentration of power in few hands, and the creation of a database of politically sensitive opinions. As we have seen, these anxieties were consistent with the technopolitical culture of the Piratenpartei, which stemmed from anti-censorship and anti-surveillance campaigns, and valued leaderless and collaborative forms of governance. Thus it is no surprise that some of the Pirates who derived their power from the formal governance structure of the party exploited these anxieties to block the attempt to replace this governance with the LQFB-powered SVM (Delius interview, 2016).

In this respect, it is certainly ironic that a piece of software that was introduced with the

ostensible goal of supporting networked self-governance—a goal that found a wide ideological support within the party—ended up becoming the main obstacle to it. At the same time, LQFB’s emphasis on the autonomy and sovereignty of individual users may point to an irreducible contradiction in all digital politics—namely, the difficulty of striking a balance between online participation, which tends to empower individuals, and a key institution of representative democracy such as the political party, which is meant to express and organize the will of a collective.

#### **4.2. The Impact of Rousseau on the Internal Organization of the 5SM**

If the introduction of LQFB generated a distinctive technopolitical practice around its use, the same cannot be said of Rousseau. Because the platform does not support group communication, and users can only perform individualized tasks, the platform has not generated a technopolitical community and an internal debate about its potential and limitations. This does not mean, however, that the platform has not changed the relationship between ordinary party members, party activists, and party leaders.

As noted, the binding vote is the most important functionality of Rousseau both at the design level (as it is meant to reveal the general will of the 5SM community) and at the level of its actual usage, as 5SM members use Rousseau mostly for voting (Sabatini 2018). However, because the party leadership controls both the subject and the timing of the consultations, it can use them strategically to strengthen its own position. This is not an entirely new practice as many European parties have been holding internal consultations, mostly via postal ballots, at least since the 1980s. It has been noted that while these consultations have the ostensible goal of empowering the general membership, they can also be used to silence or weaken internal dissent. This is because “the ‘ordinary’ members... are at once more docile and more likely to endorse the policies (and candidates) proposed by the party leadership and by the party in public office” vis-à-vis the party activists, who are usually more critical of the leadership (Katz and Mair 1980: 14).

My own interactions with 5SM activists confirm this insight. During fieldwork I conducted in Rome, Milan, and at two national meetings of the 5SM in Palermo and Rimini in 2016-2017 5SM activists often voiced their concerns about the lack of deliberative tools within the platform, the limited time allowed for voting, the impossibility of cooperating with other members via Rousseau, and the centralized nature of the platform. For example, one long-running organizer of a Meetup group in Rome told me that the area Call to Action “now hosts many events that were previously accessible only if you were a member of a Meetup group or took the time to visit the pages of each Meetup. On Rousseau it is much easier for them [the party leadership] to control us because the events are all available in one page” (Interview with Meetup organizer, 2017). Similarly, at the Rimini National Meeting of 2017 an activist from Cupra Marittima, a town near Naples, told me that the launch of Call to Action “created a problem” in her Meetup. According to her account, a young activist from the Cupra Meetup with whom she and other activists had a dispute, created a new event page on Call to Action, trying to gain legitimacy by establishing a presence for a new Meetup group on Rousseau. Besides reclaiming the independence of the Cupra Meetup from the party (as we have seen, FBG Meetup groups are not officially affiliated to the 5SM), the woman worried that Call to Action could “duplicate political processes,” not only in her home town, but across the nation (Fieldwork notes, 2017).

Thus, while 5SM members generally see Rousseau as a critical decision-making tool at a national level, the activists seem aware that Rousseau is unable to scale the kind of deliberative processes that make their participation in local activism meaningful. Indeed, two seasoned activists of the Milan FBG Meetup—the first FBG Meetup created in Italy—showed me how their group relies on a wide range of software tools to prepare and organize local events without having the need of taking an online vote on any of these initiatives (Interview with 5SM activists, 2017). From this angle, the consensus-oriented deliberative practices that drive activism at a local level seem almost at odds with the direct democracy model based on preference aggregation engendered by Rousseau. To be sure, the deliberative model and the aggregative model of direct democracy are not necessarily incompatible as deliberative software tools such as forums and wikis could be used in theory to support debate and

collaboration while voting software tools could be used for preference aggregation.

De facto, however, in the 5SM this integration is only hypothetical as authentic deliberation remains either confined to the local level or to deliberation within empowered spaces. This is due to the fact that Rousseau rigidly separates deliberative capacity from decisional power, leaving the former almost exclusively in the hands of the party leadership and of elected representatives. As noted, such separation was already present in the original organization of the 5SM, which combined the atomized followers of *beppegrillo.it* (a mass public) with the activism of the Meetups (a networked public). By endowing the mass public with voting power and denying the networked public any capacity to control the agenda from below, Rousseau has sanctioned the subordination of networked activism to the atomized party member. From this angle, the decision-making model that undergirds Rousseau is more akin to the audience democracy of broadcast media (Manin 1997) than to the democratic innovations (Smith 2009) of networked media.

Curiously, however, even when Rousseau is measured via the yardstick of preference aggregation its numbers fail to match the impressive electoral rise of the 5SM. Indeed, data show that in spite of a nominal increase in the party membership actual participation in Rousseau is constantly declining both in voter turnout and the average number of comments per legislative initiative (Mosca and Vaccari 2017; Mosca 2018). Of course, several hypotheses can be made on the root causes of this decline, including the institutionalization of a movement party that now privileges electoral performance over grassroots participation (Corbetta 2017). Nonetheless the aforementioned lack of in-platform support for group communication prevents the development of an online community at a national level while relegating several deliberative processes to non-specialized platforms such as social messaging applications and social network sites.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that although the PPG and the 5SM share a faith in the democratic potential of the Internet, their technopolitical cultures have had a significantly different political weight within the party organization. As we have seen, the PPG technopolitical culture valued decentralization and individual autonomy from government surveillance and censorship. In line with this sensibility, LQFB entrusts individual users with several deliberative capacities—including the power to influence the party agenda and to allocate or receive delegations. In contrast, the 5SM was born as a mass movement of public opinion led by a charismatic leader, with a smaller networked activist base. Because this base was politically marginal the Rousseau platform engenders a politics of unity by foregrounding the decisional moment as the undivided expression of the 5SM's general will.

Thus, from a strictly procedural point of view, LQFB implements a decision-making process that is far more democratic and sophisticated than Rousseau. At the same time, the hurdles encountered by the Berlin Pirates in transforming LQFB in a permanent party convention suggest that scaling an online participation process from the local level to the national level can cause distrust and conflict if the process is not adequately socialized within different party branches. In contrast, the centralized deployment of Rousseau has had the undeniable political advantage of introducing simultaneously a standardized consultation procedure on different scales, including the possibility for users to comment on regional, national, and European legislation.

To be sure, the difficulties encountered by the Pirates are also a byproduct of the peculiar federal structure of all German parties—something that does not pertain to the statutory organization of Italian parties. In this respect, this comparative analysis suggests that while a technopolitical culture can influence the *design* of a participation platform the actual deployment of the platform within a party is a *non-linear process* that is shaped by statutory regulations, internal party struggles, and wider sociopolitical and sociocultural differences that may exist within a nation. If such tensions were explicit and played out in public in the case of LiquidFeedback, the low level of participation in Rousseau suggests that the platform is unable to capture several participatory processes. From this angle, a broader lesson to be learned here is that the analysis of non-habituated media practices such as the use of online participation platforms should account not only for the positively observable uses

of such tools but also for the forms of resistance that may emerge in response to their introduction—some of which may be overt, and some of which may be expressed more quietly through exodus, political apathy, and refusal to participate.

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#### Interviews and Fieldwork Notes

- Interview with Fabio Reinhardt, Former state representative of the Berlin Piratenpartei, Berlin, 20 October 2016.
- Interview with Martin Delius, Former state representative of the Berlin Piratenpartei, Berlin, 20 October 2016.
- Interview with Martin Haase, Piratenpartei member, Berlin, 21 October 2016.
- Interview with Marina Weisband, Former Political Director of the Piratenpartei, Skype, 14 March 2017.
- Interview with two 5SM activists, Milan, 28 January 2017.
- Interview with Meetup organizer, Rome, 3 March 2017.
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