

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Beyond digital populism: civic culture and visions of political participation among Five Star Movement activists

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## Abstract

This article deals with the impact of intra-party transformations and access to power on the visions of political participation of activists taking part in populist anti-establishment parties with a strong emphasis on digital participation, using the Five Star Movement (M5S) as a case study. Going beyond studies conceiving the M5S as a populist and digital party, we argue that activists support a democratic ideal based on a civic culture involving a demanding role for ordinary citizens, who should be highly interested in politics and involved locally on a day-to-day basis. A negative vision of the Italian citizen judged as incapable of playing this role accompanies this ideal. Our article also demonstrates how political involvement in the M5S transformed the visions of activists, making them warier of direct democracy and more disillusioned about their fellow citizens. The analysis relies on qualitative semi-directed interviews with former and current M5S activists with diversified socio-demographics, political and participation trajectories in two Italian regions. More broadly, our article shows that the effects of entering government and intra-party reforms reinforcing the leadership at the expense of local activists are particularly strong in anti-establishment parties and clash with the conceptions of participation supported by activists.

**Keywords:** civic culture; digital parties; institutional change; participation; populism

## Introduction

The Five Star Movement (M5S) started in 2009 as a protest movement before becoming Italy's most important electoral force, a government party allied successively with the far-right and the centre-left, and now a major opposition party. It underwent through major intra-party reforms which have profoundly transformed its functioning (Ceccarini and Bordignon, 2016; Vittori, 2021; Crulli, 2022). It has commonly been labelled as a populist (Bickerton and Accetti, 2018; Manucci and Amsler, 2018), digital (Gerbaudo, 2018, 2021; Deseriis, 2020a) and anti-establishment party (Vittori, 2018; Cotta, 2020). Therefore, the M5S constitutes a crucial case to understand the impact of political power and intra-party reforms on the visions of participation of party activists. In this article, we explore these visions and analyse how changes in the party structure and strategies transformed them over time. This question is particularly relevant for anti-establishment parties built on the criticism of traditional parties and representative democracy and evolving towards normalization. More generally, this case has relevant theoretical significance for the debates on the state of representative democracy and the crisis of political participation.

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Local activists in the M5S have always enjoyed great autonomy within the movement (Tronconi, 2018). Although the party in Rome has been heavily scrutinized, the field activists (i.e. individuals who have been involved not only on the digital platforms but also physically in campaigning and local activities) attracted less attention (however, see Vampa, 2015; Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018; Biancalana, 2019; De Rosa and Quattromani, 2019). Most of these studies concentrate on the socio-demographic and political orientation of activists prior to the movement. Analyses focusing on the visions of political participation in the M5S privileged either quantitative approaches of party meetings (Ieraci and Toffoletto, 2018); the analysis of Grillo and Casaleggio's discourses (Bickerton and Accetti, 2018; Vittori, 2020); the analysis of the digital platform Rousseau (Stockman and Scalia, 2020; Deseriis, 2020a) or M5S voters' attitudes and visions (Tronconi, 2015; Corbetta *et al.*, 2018). We shift the focus to analyse the discourses of M5S former or current field activists in two areas (Emilia-Romagna and Campania), where the movement has been particularly strong and well implanted electorally, relying on 39 qualitative interviews. As Biorcio did on his qualitative study of M5S local activists (2015), we are able to understand activists' motivations and forms of participation in different contexts, while adding a diachronic dimension.

M5S field activists support a democratic ideal based on a demanding role for ordinary citizens, who should be highly interested in politics and involved on a day-to-day basis to develop the local "civic culture" (Almond and Verba, 1963) and "community" (Putnam *et al.*, 1994). A negative vision of the Italian citizen judged as incapable of playing this role accompanies this ideal. Our article also demonstrates how political involvement in the M5S transformed their visions, making them warier of direct democracy and more disillusioned about their fellow citizens.

After reviewing the literature on democratic aspirations within the M5S and on how intra-party reforms and the exercise of power may have changed them, we present the methods and materials of the article. We then analyse the vision of political participation advocated by M5S field activists and their view of Italian citizens, before discussing the transformative nature that the involvement in the movement has had on this vision. The final section elaborates on the implications of our findings on the wider literature on democratic aspirations and anti-establishment parties.

## **Populist, digital and local: visions of political participation within the M5S in the light of intra-party reforms and the exercise of power**

### ***The conception of political participation in the M5S: populist, digital and local***

The M5S does not fit easily within traditional classifications of party families. Many authors label it as a "populist" movement (Bickerton and Accetti, 2018; Manucci and Amsler, 2018) with a cross-party appeal owing its success to the criticism of the political establishment (Mosca and Tronconi, 2019). Most of the contributions on the vision of the political system advocated by the M5S show that it initially defended a form of direct democracy based on political disintermediation and digital tools. Authors who studied local activists underline its strong bottom-up participation dimension.

Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti argue that the M5S embodies "techno-populism": "the transformation of all citizens into experts: a move that neatly combines 'technocratic' and 'populist' elements into a single political offer" (2018: 141). According to Vittori, this form of populism puts direct democracy at the centre stage, through "the refusal of any intermediation of political actors between the choice of the citizen and the decision" (our translation, 2020: 76). Representatives are conceived as spokespersons, and direct democracy as the main channel of political participation to implement the popular will. This conception valorizes the capacity of each individual to decide through direct democracy, but not through a deliberative and pluralist process (Deseriis, 2020a; Vittori, 2020, 2021).

As other parties such as Podemos in Spain or La France Insoumise in France, the M5S has also been described as a “digital party” (Gerbaudo, 2018; Barberà *et al.*, 2021), and more specifically a “platform party” characterized by centralization around party leadership, disintermediation and a top-down approach of political consultations (Deseriis, 2020b). Direct democracy takes place through an online platform where registered members can debate and decide on various issues, monitor representatives, propose laws and participate in political decisions. This “direct parliamentarism” (Deseriis, 2020a), inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, disavows intermediary bodies and internal factions. The analysis of Beppe Grillo’s blog posts between 2006 and 2015 confirms that direct democracy was promoted actively by the party leaders and was at the core of the political manifesto (Manucci and Amsler, 2018).

The M5S is also rooted in local communities. Since its creation, local activists were independent from the party leadership (Passarelli *et al.*, 2013). The M5S initially developed as horizontal networks of local citizens’ associations and lists “certified” by Grillo (Vampa, 2015), with strong ties with existing social movements (Mosca, 2015; Biancalana, 2019). The Meetups were independent from each other, with no central control or coordination. In the campaign for the 2013 national elections, only non-elected activists selected locally could compete for the internal web-based primaries selecting the Member of Parliament (MP) candidates. Most of them did not have any political experience, although many had been active in civil society initiatives (Biorcio, 2015). Ieraci and Toffoletto (2018) estimated that in 2015 more than 1800 M5S Meetups existed, organized by 1600–2300 activists for a total of around 182,000 members. Their thematic analysis of Meetups reveals that activists focused mostly on environmental and organizational issues, and civicness, that is, the involvement of citizens in politics and society. The M5S reinvigorated a tradition of territorially organized activists who dedicate part of their time to civic issues, in a new fashion, outside of previously acquired ideologies (Biorcio, 2015). This view of participation echoes the concept of “civic community” of Putnam *et al.* (1994) based on active participation in public affairs; horizontal, reciprocal and cooperative relationships between citizens considered as political equals; virtuous and trustful citizen and the involvement in numerous civic and political organizations.

### ***A democratic ideal put to the test by intra-party democracy and the exercise of power***

The model of participation described above is not without contradictions. For Deseriis, “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” (2020: 1786). Intra-party reforms and the exercise of power have revealed or exacerbated latent conflicts between the various “faces” of the M5S, and in particular party leadership and grassroots activists.

Between 2009 and 2023, the intra-party organization of the M5S has evolved tremendously. It started as a movement with “non-statutes” in 2009 with the goal of “vanishing” in the near future (Grillo in Mosca, 2020). Since then, the movement experienced three statute reforms (in 2012, 2017 and 2021) and four distinct organizational phases (Crulli, 2022): the gestation phase (2009–2012); the entry into Parliament (2012–2017); the first experience of government (2017–2019) and the transformation into a “state-centred” party (2019 to ongoing). Its organization is characterized by the increasing domination of the party in central office at the expense of the party on the ground. Several conflicts arose since 2013, always resolved in favour of the party leaders (Tronconi, 2018), as illustrated by numerous defections and exclusions. According to Vittori, although it started as a franchise party with a stratarchical organization (Carty, 2004), the M5S can now be described as a “plebiscitarian movement party”, that is, as “a political party with weak intermediate structures and porous membership coupled with a resourceful leadership which controls the main aspects of the party organization” (2021: 47). Over time, the focus on direct democracy was associated with a pyramidal decision-making process, where

contributions from the bottom are marginal and validated from above (Manucci and Amsler, 2018), even though the party is formally decentralized on aspects such as candidate selection (Caiani *et al.*, 2022). Since 2021, despite Grillo's reluctance, Conte is the only official leader and is supposed to reinforce the presence of the party on the ground and to create a formal party bureaucracy. In practice, this has not been the case (Russo and Valbruzzi, 2022).

The use of the digital party platform also evidences this plebiscitarian tendency. Over time, the amount of consultations and the number of comments on law proposals and participation rates steadily declined, even though the number of registered activists increased (Mosca, 2020; Vittori, 2020). The platform has been criticized for its lack of internal party democracy. Online consultations have become even more sporadic since the replacement of the Rousseau platform by Skyvote in 2021. This trajectory follows similar centralization intra-party dynamics in comparable parties, such as La France Insoumise or Podemos (Gerbaudo, 2021; Lefebvre, 2022).

The first national electoral success and the exercise of power also challenged the democratic ideals of the movement. The thunderous arrival in Parliament in 2013 forced the party to “normalize” its style of communication and objectives (Tronconi, 2018). The successive choices to form a government with the League in 2018, with the Democratic Party (PD) in 2019 and to support the Draghi government in 2021 have further undermined the M5S anti-establishment message and were resisted by a significant fraction of activists. The M5S was not always successful in affecting government's priorities (Giannetti *et al.*, 2020) and its policy choices accentuated internal conflicts within the movement (Russo and Valbruzzi, 2022).

From this standpoint, we will test a general assumption: the internal transformations of the movement towards centralization and its strategic choices abandoning anti-establishment positions have affected negatively the visions of political participation held by activists.

## Methods and materials

We rely on the analysis of 39 qualitative interviews of M5S former or current field activists (as of 2022) in two regions where the movement has been particularly well implanted electorally and characterized historically by distinctive local political subcultures (Florida, 2014): Emilia-Romagna, a socialist subcultural area where a tradition of civicness is dwindling away, and Campania, always characterized by a parochial political subculture. The M5S is a “crucial case” (Gerring, 2007) to assess whether intra-party democracy and access to power affect the visions of participation of activists in political parties in general and populist, digital and anti-establishment parties in particular. The choice to focus on field activists allows taking the local nature of the movement seriously and questioning the effects of organizational change in the movement on participation beyond its digital component over time.

The selection of the interviewees diversified the activists' profiles by age, date of arrival in the movement, gender, level of politicization prior to the movement, political orientation and geographical location. We recruited activists through the Meetup platform and used a snowball method until sufficient diversification of profiles, based on existing literature (Biorcio, 2015; Ieraci and Toffoletto, 2018), was achieved. All this information is stored in a database used to characterize and interpret interviews. Among the interviewees (see the Appendix), 18 are currently active in the movement, 7 are or were elected at the local level and 21 have left the movement (after 2018, except for one). On average, they have been involved in the M5S for 9.4 years. In total, 46% became involved before 2013, and the other afterwards. They are predominantly male (62%), very often university educated (48%), middle-aged and more often oriented to the left (51%). Interviews lasted between 30 min and more than 2 hours. The interview guide (see the Appendix) dealt first with the social, professional and political experience of interviewees prior to the movement. Second, we talked about their engagement within the M5S. Then, we addressed our interviewees' conceptions of the political system, through some open questions.

Finally, interviewees were presented vignettes of institutional reforms embodying various visions of democracy and were asked to react about them.

We coded all of the 39 semi-directed interviews with software Nvivo, completing existing thematic codes elaborated for another research on French citizens and activists (Bedock, 2020). Each of these general themes is divided into sub-themes, constituted of various codes. A single-text segment could refer to several codes. In the remaining of the article, we first present the recurring elements that can be considered as a shared understanding of the democratic aspirations of M5S field activists, and second the effects of the involvement in the movement in (re)shaping these aspirations.

### **A demanding vision of political participation**

M5S current and former activists consider that people should be involved politically in their local community and constantly participate in political activities.

#### ***The strong valorization of the act of voting and people's involvement in politics***

Seen as a duty and a moral obligation rather than a right, M5S activists consider voting as “democracy’s greatest institution”, “fundamental”, “one of the most important things in life” or “the ultimate expression of democracy”. A very small minority of them (3/39) admitted that they occasionally failed to cast a ballot, whereas all other activists said they never skipped an election (even if some casted blank ballots). Those who justified the importance of voting unmistakably consider the vote as one of the few opportunities for citizens to participate in their country’s future. Andrea (51, commercial agent, activist, first political involvement, Emilia-Romagna, 2007–) summarizes this conception:

[Voting] is the moment in which one tries to get interested in things. [...] All these people, then, at that moment think that there is also a political life, which is, how to move forward, how to change, how to interact with Italian politics.

This idea goes hand-in-hand with a conception of politics as the involvement of everyone, echoing the idea of “civic community” (Putnam *et al.*, 1994), pervasive in many interviews. Giovanni (49, IT consultant, formerly elected at the local level, first political involvement, Emilia-Romagna, 2006–2019) puts it this way:

One of [the] main duties [of politics] [...] is to involve people in the life of the community in an active way and possibly even make them... Creating a context that allows them to live their life to the fullest.

Far from anti-establishment discourses castigating politicians, politics is described as a “noble activity” (five mentions), a way to “contribute to something positive”, or an “interest for the collective well-being” (11 mentions). M5S activists are convinced about the importance to “take responsibility” in politics personally, as a service to the community. For instance, Gianna, 56, a teacher with a long experience in local associations in Campania, sees her activism in the M5S in continuity with her previous path:

I am now being given the opportunity to contribute politically as well, in the noblest meaning of the word politics, as commitment and service. Because my life has always been one of service: I used to do this service in the parish, service in voluntary work, I wanted to try to put myself at the service of citizenship, of politics too.

Therefore, the engagement in the M5S finds its roots in a previous strong civic engagement starting with a moral attachment to voting.

### ***A citizen involved in local politics and community***

For most activists, this first-person participation should take place at the local level. Most of them were heavily involved in their territory before the movement (through environmental associations, the parish, social and student associations or occasionally trade unions or parties). Those who elaborate on the role of the local level refer to the *Comuni* (municipalities) as the cornerstone of the Italian political system. The local anchorage not only allows for the immediate contribution to one's community and the common good, a strong motivation for M5S activists (Biorcio, 2015: 15), but it guarantees the possibility to control elected representatives in a context of strong independence of local government from party power (Freschi and Mete, 2020). This valorization of the local community often stems from the experience of being elected at the local level (see *infra*), as well as from theoretical preferences for delegating political decisions to smaller communities. For instance, Francesco (34, information consultant, ex-activist, first political involvement, Emilia-Romagna, 2012–2016) argues:

Lately I was really fascinated by the idea of a society based on communitarianism. So on smaller social groups where people know each other better and then the governance of public affairs is still perhaps delegated to a circle of people but who really know each other directly.

This predilection for local communities is pervasive both in Emilia-Romagna, characterized by a vibrant civic community, and in Campania where the existing local political culture is vertical and fragmented. In Emilia-Romagna, many activists engaged in the M5S because of their relative exclusion from the rooted but deteriorating social and political “red” networks (Ramella, 2000; Caciagli, 2011). On the contrary, in Campania, the activists we met were at the backbone of local associations and struggles well before the M5S. This goes to show the organic link between personal, local and political involvement, with the M5S activism valued as a reaction to the perceived lack of civicness around oneself.

### ***A political participation that should be permanent***

In the perspective of M5S activists, political participation should be exercised on a day-to-day basis. Several of them use interchangeably the terms “direct democracy” and “participatory democracy”, that is, a collective and deliberative activity in which citizens elaborate a political project together. This goes hand-in-hand with the refusal of the professionalization of politics. For Massimo (38, railway engineer, activist, first political involvement, Emilia-Romagna, 2013–), “the very idea of a political career is already something abhorrent”. These activists also want to limit political delegation and privilege a form of decentralized, “do-it-yourself” politics where citizens, through collective intelligence and discussion in small circles, elaborate their own platforms and policy proposals. Participation is not only collective, but also a moral obligation, as put by Pietro (57, skilled mechanical worker, activist with previous left-wing engagements, Emilia-Romagna, 2018–): “Participation should be a condition for everyone, within the limits of the time one has to dedicate to it”.

This conception of direct democracy as participation and deliberation clashes with the aggregative, plebiscitarian and atomistic form of participation proposed on the Rousseau platform (Deseriis, 2020a). This ideal is well substantiated by Antonio (40, IT employee, ex-activist, first political involvement, Campania, 2013–2021) who describes his ideal vision of democracy:

I would focus much more on direct and participatory democracy. I think direct democracy is not poll democracy. That is, “do you want this? yes or no”. Direct democracy must be something that comes within the canons of [...] processes of sharing ideas, confrontation, transparency, fairness of positions and so on. Then at the end of all of this, a decision is made.

The idea of bottom-up democracy attracted many of these activists into the movement, as “a community of people who would dedicate themselves to politics, even if only through volunteering” (Liana, 60, sociologist, ex-activist, first political involvement, Campania, 2015–2021), or as a “real-life utopia”. Consequently, the digital platforms were valorized not so much as a tool of decision, but of participation and deliberation. The same activists do not consider that a purely online form of activism is a true political involvement: digital participation can only go hand-in-hand with local participation. To conclude, while Putnam and specialists in political geography (Ramella, 2000; Caciagli, 2011) identified different levels of civicness depending on territorial subcultures, our study shows a shared and demanding view of participation transcending regional borders, as most recent work on declining political subcultures suggests (Florida, 2014).

### **A negative vision of the Italian citizen**

M5S activists compare themselves – active citizens – to the political apathy they find around them, which led them to realize the utopian nature of their demanding vision of political participation. Before being affected by the organizational and strategic changes within the party, this vision was challenged by an exacerbated feeling of inadequacy of Italian citizens who fall short from their ideal of participation (see *infra*).

### ***The gap between themselves (the active ones) and the apathetic citizens***

At various points during the interviews, the activists interviewed castigated the lack of civic culture of Italian citizens, seen as the cause of the declining state of the country. Almond and Verba defined “political culture” as “the political system as internalized in the cognitions, feelings, and evaluations of its population” (1963: 13), and described Italy as a country with “a premodern social and political culture” (1963: 39) riddled with apathetic citizens. Analyses that pointed at a diffused civicness with a high social capital in “red” regions of Centre Italy, opposed to the “white” North-East and to the “atomized” South, have since pointed out a general pattern of disengagement in political participation across Italy since the 1990s (Florida, 2014). Strikingly, M5S activists do share these negative and pessimistic analyses in many ways when they refer about their fellow citizens. For instance, Annarita makes this chillingly harsh observation (31, employee, ex-activist, active in green movements, Campania, 2014–2020) “substantially, we deserve everything that comes our way, all the degradation that we have, the Italian people deserve that. I deserve that”.

Several regret the political apathy of their fellow citizens, their tendency to cast a ballot without a proper reflection or even use derogatory terms such as “ignorant”, “lazy” or “selfish”. Paolo (46, logistics manager, elected locally, briefly in a right-wing youth political group, Emilia-Romagna, 2011–) mentions the case of his own wife, an engineer who does not know how the parliament works, as a proof of the lack of political education of Italian citizens. One of the reasons explaining the bitterness of M5S activists stems from the comparison between their demanding vision of political participation (involving time, energy, training and sacrifices) and that of their fellow citizens. For some activists, Italian citizens support parties as they support football teams, instead of engaging with politics. This nonchalance contrasts with the energy they spent, often in vain, to involve as many people as possible in politics. For instance, Giovanni explains:

The hours, and the days, and the blood and sweat that I put when I was in politics, I did it to involve as many persons as possible. And I was unable to do it in the end [...] Because people are disillusioned, for many reasons, because we live a frantic life, because we do not know each other, because people are more careless, because we do not want to spend the little time we have to read and learn more about a thing'

Rarely, some activists justified their lack of previous political engagement before the M5S by the lack of civic culture that they saw in other parties' activists, moved by personal gains rather than political ideals. However, they do strongly believe in the role of political education to develop the civicness of their fellow citizens.

### ***The need to educate Italian citizens***

The culturalist discourse mentioned before often refers to the lack of proper political information and education of Italian citizens. Rather than supporting direct democracy and digital instruments to foster political participation, M5S activists typically consider that the solution to the political apathy of Italian citizens is the development of "political schools" or "training" to equip citizens to carry out their role properly. For Gennaro (65, union representative and journalist, ex-activist and active politically since the 1970s, Campania, 2015–2019):

Politics [...] can be useful to elevate people's conscience. To emancipate the people. [...] To change at the cultural level, change relationships at the personal level. For me, as an example, politics has been... Has not only been about waving a red flag. Politics changed me as a person as well.

Even though many analysts have underlined the anti-establishment nature of the M5S, many activists, especially those coming from the left, see with a good eye the educational role played by political parties in the past. Giovanni uses the word of "political acculturation" as a solution to fix abstentionism. The central role of political education by political parties is clearly at odds with the conception of Grillo or Casaleggio who advocated for the "vanishing" of the party, and suggests, again, that M5S activists aim at building a working local civic community built on intermediary bodies, including traditional political parties. In this sense, the "M5S political training school" announced (but not implemented) by Conte in 2022 was seen as one of the rare steps in the right direction by local activists among several negatively perceived changes within the party. The political education function of the parties, still emphasized by historians (for instance, Gatzka, 2022), is a structuring demand for M5S activists.

### **The effects of the movement in (re)shaping the vision of political participation**

The participation into the M5S has transformed the vision of political participation of many activists, making them more distrustful of other citizens and less convinced about the ability to bring about concrete change through participation. This is due to the disappointing experience of intra-party democracy and activism within the movement, to concrete experiences of local elections and candidacies and to the limitations of anti-politics evidenced by the experience of the M5S in government.

### ***The disillusion of intra-party democracy within the movement***

The disillusion associated with intra-party democracy deeply affected the views of political participation of the activists. They almost unanimously regret the physical absence of MPs, who spent gradually more and more time in Rome. The idea that territories have been "abandoned"



comes back in several instances. The frequent interferences of the national leadership with local candidacies, often leading to vetoes, discretionary exclusions or parachuted candidates, is particularly resented, especially in Campania. These interventions from the top produced strong effects of disengagement, bitterness towards the national movement and even in some cases court cases against the new Statutes in 2021. The gap between the deliberative, collective and local ideal of the activists and the vertical, centralized and discretionary practices of the leadership became increasingly unacceptable to many. For instance, mentioning an episode of 2016, Gioia (67, retired artisan, active in environmental groups, Emilia-Romagna, 2016–2021) explains, “they accepted lists formed in five minutes (...) whereas we had a whole path behind us, we did territorial assemblies, we discussed, we voted for candidates, really, a path that lasted months and months!”

The misuse of the participatory digital platform, often used to validate decisions already taken from the party leadership, also disappointed many activists and is in line with what happened in other populist digital parties (Gerbaudo, 2021; Lefebvre, 2022). As Paolo ironically puts it “even the questions, the way in which they were formulated, I mean...If someone asks ‘do you love your Mum?’, few people will answer no”. Gioia deleted her Rousseau account considering that the sort of digital participation proposed by M5S leaders “broke her dream” of participation from below. Gennaro states that the M5S “narcotized” everyone and “had a role of rage containment functional to the system” preventing meaningful political change. Other activists, on the other hand, were disappointed by digital platforms when they realized that the ideal of digital participation involving many activists on a regular basis to put forward complex policy proposals was not realistic in practice. For Giuliano (48, school administrator, ex-activist previously in anarchist circles, Emilia-Romagna, 2013–2019):

The normal citizen has no time. [...] Rousseau wanted you to go there and write a parliamentary bill. But what if I am working? [...] Only lunatics would go there. Someone with a little bit of competences who is an executive in a bank does not log into Rousseau in the morning to write the law.

The clash between their demanding ideal of participation and the evolution of the party, in which bottom-up participation became more and more limited, has been hard to accept by many activists. As summarized by Massimo, the situation involves “opposite extremes. Initially, there was an extreme participation [...] Now we are in the opposite situation, with minimal participation limited to only very few moments”. A particular group of activists in Campania challenged the verticalization of the movement around the new statute and the leadership of Conte, which disregarded the results of the *Stati Generali* consultation (2021). Three interviewees unsuccessfully tried to challenge in court the leaders about the procedures they used to change the organization. As Lina (49, primary school teacher, experienced activist, Campania, 2005–2019) puts it:

[Conte and the others] are the abusive ones, because they betrayed the principles on which the Movement was born. [...] I do not participate actively anymore when there are votes, because I am certain that the votes are piloted, as well as Conte’s choice.

The date of engagement plays a significant role in explaining the disappointment felt by activists. Those who are the most critical of the lack of internal democracy generally became involved before the first electoral successes, were particularly attached to the original ideal of the M5S and often became inactive between 2018 and 2021. Only 4 out of 39 activists joined the movement from 2018 onwards. Recent national campaign and elections – in which the M5S lost more than half of its votes compared to 2018 – confirm that activism on the ground underwent a radical stop.

### **The transformative effect of candidacy and election**

Among the 39 activists we met, many were candidates (18) and/or elected (7) at the local level with the M5S. This experience also transformed their views of political participation. Contributing meaningfully to politics as a local representative is very demanding and complex, as testified by Marianna (town councillor since December 2021, Campania, 2014–), confronting her time as an activist, to her time as town councillor and assessor to the mayor:

I considered the activism that I was doing before as “doing politics”. So much so that when someone asked about my hobbies, I would say “politics”. I was doing activism. Since December, when I finally became part of the Town Council, I understood that what I was doing before was a joke, to use a euphemism, not to say some bullshit.

More generally, former candidates or activists who are currently elected insist on the idea that a lot of motivation and preparation is needed to contribute positively to politics. The unexpected complexity of public affairs led many of these newly elected councillors or candidates to realize the need to train themselves politically. Roberto (62, logistics worker, former town councillor for M5S, Emilia-Romagna, first political involvement, 2013–) recalls his first Town Council meetings: “I was born an ignorant, but there were also two engineers with me. And we looked at each other like ‘we need to study!’”.

Beyond the knowledge required to take part in public affairs, several activists mention the time required to make a proper political contribution. A group of local M5S councillors elected in Emilia-Romagna stress this idea: “the first years as a councillor have been very taxing” (Paolo); “[being a councillor is] quite demanding in time and energy”, and “not remunerated, besides a lump sum for councils” (Giovanni); “like a civil service” (Carlotta). As Giovanni’s experience testifies, doing the work of local councillor is “a full-time job if you want to do it properly”. This drove him reluctantly to pass his candidacy to other activists after his first term. The lack of structure and support to local groups by the M5S contributed to the departure of his successors from the movement.

Finally, for several of our interviewees, the experience of election made them even more critical about the level of political competence of other citizens, as already evidenced in works dealing with national representatives (Jacquet *et al.*, 2015; Rangoni *et al.*, 2023). Roberto became convinced that Italians are “lazy and selfish”, because of his inability to involve other citizens in his town. More generally, the experience as local representatives made M5S activists keener on privileging political education as the only way for citizens to contribute meaningfully to politics.

### **The difficulties of governing and the limitations of anti-politics**

The M5S represented for many a sign of hope and a political space where to invest time and resources in a collective effort to improve politics and society. The deception of this initial hope has been difficult to cope with for many when, after 2018, the M5S became “just another party”, where many MPs pursue personal gains and where politics is decided in Rome in small circles. Annarita sums up this roller-coaster of hopes and deception:

I was really moved by this will to change things, to see things in a different perspective, to say, maybe today it is like that, we live in a context of malfeasance and lobbies. Tomorrow it can be better because there are some people at the service of the community, there are some citizens for the first time. Not lobbyists, not businessmen. [...] But then, when you do find yourself in front of a harsh reality that you did not expect, then you get back with your feet on the ground and you start to think that maybe this utopia will never happen.

Several of the ex, or even current activists, do not have harsh enough words to describe the M5S representatives in 2022. Some call them “deaf”, “no-gooders”, “self-proclaimed” or unresponsive to voters and activists. According to Liana, these representatives are worse than traditional politicians because of the speed and cynicism with which they have adopted the ways of the old political class:

These ones settled in even worse than the others. Because really, most of the elected members of the Five Star Movement are no-gooders. [...] Maybe I talk with a bit of arrogance and presumption, but I know my path, I know that if I found myself with my hands covered in honey, I would have washed my hands.

Some of the activists, such as Luisa (65, teacher, elected city councillor who left the M5S, Campania, 2010–2020) became pessimistic about the very possibility to change the Italian political system, arguing “the system accepts you or rejects you according to your capacity to fit in a design that already exists”. The constant switch of alliances from 2018 to 2023 reinforced this conviction. The alliance with the PD, perceived as the symbol of the patronage system dominating Italian politics was seen as a major blow, as was the later choice of supporting the Draghi government in 2021. The activists often referred to the MPs as being increasingly wary of losing their seats, turning into different persons with different interests, separated from the will of grassroots activists. The general disappointment of M5S activists with the normalization of their party confirms similar findings about other anti-establishment parties (Pytlas and Biehler, 2023).

### Discussion and conclusion: the aspiration towards a “civic culture”

“*Uno vale uno, ma uno non vale l'altro*” (“Everyone counts as one but one is not worth the other”). This twisted motto, mentioned by various interviewees, summarizes the view of political participation of M5S former and current activists. Everyone should participate and contribute to the social and political life of one’s country and local community, as politics is not the preserve of professional politicians. However, as of today, a new civic culture is needed, because of the failures of Italian citizens to live up to this ideal. In many ways, going beyond regional borders, the ideal expressed by M5S activists echoes Putnam and colleagues definition of a “civic community” (1994). More broadly, our study puts into perspective some of the works analysing the early days of the movement. The M5S was undeniably born as a movement criticizing the Italian political establishment and developed a populist discourse placing the ordinary people at the forefront. M5S activists, just as the leaders of the movement, criticize elected politicians as members of a corrupted elite. At the same time, moving from existing literature, we show that activists have a demanding vision of citizen participation involving the development of civic culture, intense participation and contribution to the political community. M5S activists are wary about the ability and will of Italian citizens to comply with this ideal.

Our second contribution is to show how intra-party democracy and the exercise of power clash with this demanding ideal of political participation. The activists did not abandon their aspiration to political participation, but often realized that this ideal was unachievable. The experience within the M5S, punctuated by disillusionment, brought many activists to become pessimistic about the ability of the M5S to embody this ideal of participation; and questioned the ability and will of Italian citizens to fulfil their expectations. In 2022, the movement is torn between those who want to revive the participation ideal and those who accept (sometimes reluctantly) its evolution towards a more traditional party structure.

Beyond the M5S case, our study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, we show that populist and digital parties can be at the same time anchored in a civic vision of participation. M5S leaders support an unmediated form of political representation at the service of a

monolithic, anti-pluralist and unitary general interest: the will of the people (Caramani, 2017). M5S local activists, on the other hand, support a permanent link between representatives and citizens through a collective and deliberative process. More generally, our article invites us to question the contradictions in terms of democratic aspirations between the different “faces” of parties such as the M5S, Podemos or La France Insoumise, or other movement parties (della Porta, 2021). The study of conflicts over the practice of intra-party democracy constitutes a fruitful avenue to understand these contradictions (Barberà *et al.*, 2021), as organizational transformations impact the democratic perspectives of the activists. Similar findings exist for social movements with a strong emphasis on democratic reform (Gerbaudo, 2017).

Second, we contribute to the literature that studies the consequences of entering government for anti-establishment movements. Joining a government involves strategic and ideological dilemmas for new and outsider parties in general – the “costs of public office” (McDonnell and Newell, 2011; Bolleyer *et al.*, 2012) – and anti-establishment parties in particular (Vittori, 2018; Cotta, 2020). Governing implies choices that clash with the party’s original positions. For some activists, these compromises were enough to push them out of the movement, while others endured them while not liking them. Ultimately, our article shows how the experience in government of anti-establishment parties has not only radical effects on the parties’ manifestos and political positions, but also on the activists’ and supporters’ conception of participation. These effects are particularly strong in movements that base their electoral success on a radical criticism of the current state of the political system.

Finally, we contribute to the debate on the crisis of political representation, showing that internal party dynamics are as important as the study of the elite–voters relationship to understand the sources of political disengagement.

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