

# Populism and anti-liberal thought: Lega and M5S in the Italian context

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## Abstract

This article discusses how the populist challenge can affect, directly or indirectly, the way the representative and liberal democracy works. Outside Latin America, Italy is one of the most typical cases of the populist challenge to liberalism. Indeed, in the General Election of spring 2018, the majority in the parliament was conquered by 2 populist groups: a) the Lega (17.35%); and b) the 5-Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle [M5S]) (32.68%). The main assumption herein is that the populist ideology should be encompassed by the larger family of anti-liberal thought. At that level, the populist representation shares some common points with fascism. Although the idea of populist representation is quite different from that of fascism, both of them are based on anti-liberalism and they have an intrinsic tendency to plebiscitarianism. That is, their focus lies on 2 dimensions: a) the differences and continuities between the Lega and the M5S; and b) the role played by anti-liberal thought. The second dimension is related to the idea of representation and it is divided into 2 further layers: a) how the populists build their own audience; and b) the institutional reshuffle they propose to enforce the people's will.

**Key words** populism; anti-liberalism; Italy; Lega; M5S; plebiscitarianism.

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## Populismo y pensamiento antiliberal: Lega y M5S en el contexto italiano

### Resumen

Este artículo discute cómo el desafío populista puede afectar, directa o indirectamente, el funcionamiento de la democracia representativa y liberal. Fuera de América Latina, Italia es uno de los casos más típicos del desafío populista al liberalismo. De hecho, en las Elecciones Generales de primavera de 2018, la mayoría en el parlamento fue conquistada por 2 grupos populistas: a) la Lega (17,35%); y b) el Movimiento 5 Estrellas (Movimento 5 Stelle [M5S]) (32,68%). Aquí, la hipótesis principal es que la ideología populista debe estar abarcada por la familia más grande del pensamiento antiliberal. En este nivel, la representación populista comparte algunos puntos en común con el fascismo. Aunque la idea de la representación populista es bastante diferente de la del fascismo, ambas se basan en el antiliberalismo y tienen una tendencia intrínseca al plebiscitarismo. Es decir, su enfoque recae en 2 dimensiones: a) las diferencias y continuidades entre la Lega y el M5S; y b) el papel asumido por el pensamiento antiliberal. La segunda dimensión se relaciona con la idea de representación y se divide en otras 2 capas: a) cómo los populistas crean su propio público; y b) la remodelación institucional que proponen para imponer la voluntad del pueblo.

**Palabras clave** populismo; antiliberalismo; Italia; Lega; M5S; plebiscitarismo.

## Populismo e pensamento antiliberal: Lega e M5S no contexto italiano

### Resumo

Este artigo discute como o desafio populista pode afetar, direta ou indiretamente, o funcionamento da democracia representativa e liberal. Fora da América Latina, a Itália é um dos casos mais típicos do desafio populista ao liberalismo. De fato, nas Eleições Gerais da primavera de 2018, a maioria no parlamento foi conquistada por 2 grupos populistas: a) a Lega (17,35%); e b) o Movimento 5 Estrelas (Movimento 5 Stelle [M5S]) (32,68%). Aqui, a principal hipótese é de que a ideologia populista deve ser abrangida pela família maior do pensamento antiliberal. Nesse nível, a representação populista compartilha alguns pontos em comum com o fascismo. Embora a ideia de representação populista seja bem diferente daquela do fascismo, ambas se baseiam no antiliberalismo e elas têm uma tendência intrínseca ao plebiscitarismo. Ou seja, seu foco recai sobre 2 dimensões: a) as diferenças e continuidades entre a Lega e o M5S; e b) o papel assumido pelo pensamento antiliberal. A segunda dimensão se relaciona à ideia de representação e se divide em 2 outras camadas: a) como os populistas criam seu próprio público; e b) a remodelação institucional que eles propõem para impor a vontade do povo.

**Palavras-chave** populismo; antiliberalismo; Itália; Lega; M5S; plebiscitarismo.

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## Populisme et pensée antilibérale: Lega et M5S dans le contexte italien

### Résumé

Cet article discute comment le défi populiste peut affecter, directement ou indirectement, le fonctionnement de la démocratie représentative et libérale. En dehors de l'Amérique Latine, l'Italie est l'un des cas les plus typiques de défi populiste au libéralisme. En effet, lors des Elections Générales du printemps 2018, la majorité au parlement a été conquise par 2 groupes populistes: a) la Lega (17,35%); et b) le MouVement 5 Etoiles (MoVimento 5 Stelle [M5S]) (32,68%). Ici, l'hypothèse principale est que l'idéologie populiste doit être englobée par la plus grande famille de la pensée antilibérale. À ce niveau, la représentation populiste partage certains points communs avec le fascisme. Bien que l'idée de représentation populiste soit très différente de celle du fascisme, les deux sont basées sur l'antilibéralisme et elles ont une tendance intrinsèque au plébiscitarisme. C'est-à-dire, son attention se concentre sur 2 dimensions: a) les différences et les continuités entre la Lega et le M5S; et b) le rôle joué par la pensée antilibérale. La deuxième dimension est liée à l'idée de représentation et elle est divisée en 2 couches supplémentaires: a) comment les populistes créent leur propre public; et b) le remaniement institutionnel qu'ils proposent pour faire triompher la volonté du peuple.

**Mots-clés** populisme; antilibéralisme; Italie; Lega; M5S; plébiscitarisme.

### Introduction

Representation, according to the populist rationale and the way how the relationship between demos and power is established, is the core issue of this article. Thus, it discusses how the populist challenge can affect, directly and indirectly, the way the representative and liberal democracy works. That is, the focus lies on how the populists build their own audience and on the institutional reshuffle they propose to enforce the people's will.

The primary assumption of populism is to establish a non-mediated link between the leader and the people and to tackle both the representative structure of democracy – that is, the intermediate bodies such as parties, trade unions, and so on – and the liberal one, providing people with ultimate legitimation to take part in every decision beyond the narrow rule of law paradigm. As explained by Nadia Urbinati (2014), representative democracy is based on a diarchic structure that separates will (the procedures and institutions) from opinion (the extra-institutional domain of political views).

Based on the assumption that reality is not objectively given (Ballacci, 2019), Pitkin (1967) argues that representation must be seen as a performative act, therefore, socially and historically constructed. Representation is a constitutive relationship that does not simply mirror pre-existing political identities, but it rather essentially contributes to create such identities (Disch, 2015). According to Michael Saward (2010), there are 3 crucial features involved in the representative process: a) the representation maker, in that case a politician; b) the representation maker's message; and c) the audience. In this framework, the audience must be regarded as an active subject, since it could reject, amend, or accept the claim-maker's message.

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The relationship between the audience and the claim maker has deeply changed since the social media became an instrument for the impressive rise of populist movements. Their outstanding effectiveness has 2 main reasons: a) they make the message visible to a broad auditorium; and, even more important, b) they provide in-depth insight into audience reaction to the message, through multilevel analysis by age, sex, occupation, and so on. Nowadays, the social media constitute a prominent tool for devising further communication strategies, correcting mistakes, and gaining a better understanding of audience behavior.

However, as it seems clear, the message for the audience is straighter, i.e. without any opposing individuals, it is easier for the demagogue to persuade people. The social media's revolution has certainly heavily hit the intermediate body and made the relationship between a society's top and bottom seemingly closer. To a certain extent, we are not far from what has been described about the impact of social massification and the leader's charismatic role towards the crowd in the seminal work by Gustave Le Bon (2013), firstly published in 1895.

Nevertheless, populism is not just a demagogical rhetoric used by a charismatic leader to increase his audience, it is also an overarching framework to grasp the relationship between *demos* and power, in other words, it must also encompass the way how the rhetorical discourse is translated into a consistent institutional apparatus (Eatwell & Matthew, 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Urbinati, 2014).

Most of the literature on the theme focuses mainly on the former point i.e. discourse. Yet, to advance towards a better understanding of the populist phenomena as a whole, it is key to address the institutional framework herein.

Now, populism is the main challenge to stability in liberal democracies<sup>1</sup>. But it is still hard to define exactly what populism is. The extensive literature on the subject is divided into several lines of interpretation. In political science, the twofold definition by Cas Mudde prevails: a revolt of the pure people against the elite(s) and thin ideology (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Nevertheless, lack of ideology and anti-elitism are not enough or, to some extent, the right way to explain the populist phenomenon. Somehow, fascism has derived from the same misunderstanding, since it has been interpreted by Emilio Gentile (2005) as a form of 'anti-ideological ideology' promoting the primacy of action over theory, the victory of irrationality over reason. Particularly, it is hard to find a coherent concept of ideology in populism, given its multifaceted actual manifestations. In spite of the differences, any populist discourse has the people as its main source of legitimation. Thus, the twofold definition proposed by Carl Schmitt (2004) is closer to a meaningful interpretation. The contrast between people's legitimacy and rule of law highlighted by the German constitutionalist must be resolved, so that the people's legitimacy prevails over the rule of law. Hence, the main enemy of populism is not democracy per se, but liberal and representative democracy. Representation is

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<sup>1</sup> As explained by Roger Eatwell, right-wing populism is a global phenomenon challenging liberal democracies: "Brexit and Trump actually followed the much longer rise of national populists across Europe, like Marine Le Pen in France, Matteo Salvini in Italy and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. They are part of a growing revolt against mainstream politics and liberal values" (Eatwell & Matthew, 2018, p. 169).

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at the core of a populist approach, thus the relationship between *démos* and power should be established according to the populist's ideal pattern.

Given the above, two questions emerge:

- How could a populist democracy be actually ruled?
- Which are, or which may be, the institutional characteristics of a populist regime?

At that level, the populist rationale represents a clear challenge to liberal representative democracy and, as Federico Finchelstein (2017) explains, since the defeat of fascism, populism is the only rhetoric allowed to escape from liberalism. Undoubtedly, the fascist's and the populist's answers to the crisis of liberal regime are quite different and they must not be confused, but they overlap somehow at least on one main point: the idea of people. Having the individual from the liberal perspective as a basis, in the populist and fascist view, the individual is replaced by the community, as a comprehensive and proto-totalitarian idea of the people.

As a result, the rejection of mediated democracy must be translated into comprehensive representation in the case of fascism, by means of hyper-democracy in populism. Ideology and intellectualism arise, in both cases, as a way to manipulate the people's will and then they are neglected by leaders. So, boundaries are not always easily distinguishable, but they exist. The very idea of populist representation is quite different from that of fascism, although they have another common point: an intrinsic tendency to plebiscitarianism (Urbinati, 2014).

## Italy and the populist challenge

Outside Latin America, Italy is one of the most typical cases of the populist challenge to liberalism. In the General Election of spring 2018, the majority of the Italian parliament was conquered by 2 populist groups: a) the Lega (17.35%); and b) 5-Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle [M5S]) (32.68%). The weight of populist groups increased in the European elections: the Lega's vote share rose from 17% to 34%. After the last Italian legislative election, held on March 4, 2018, the M5S joined the Salvini's Lega to establish an alliance between the two main populist parties. Their negotiations took many weeks and the new Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, took office on June 1, 2018. Professor Paolo Savona, whose anti-Euro attitude was well-known, was included in one of the first cabinet members' draft as the Minister of Economy.

Having in mind the huge concerns about the European policy, which involve staying within the Euro Zone, the new cabinet strengthened the bonds between Italians and Germans immediately. After all, both parties took several anti-Euro actions (Adinolfi, 2016; Passarelli & Tuorto, 2018), so that appointment was interpreted as a consistent and clear intent to step out from the Euro Zone. Following pressures from the Head of the State, Sergio Mattarella, Savona has been replaced by Professor Giovanni Tria, who became the guarantor of compliance with the Euro Zone's standards.

The populist nature of the new government was widely assumed by the Prime Minister, who stated, on December 11, 2018:

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If populism is that form that allows the distance between the people and the elite to be reduced, giving them back their sovereignty, then we claim to be populists.

However the distance between the two parties increased throughout the months and in August 2019 the alliance broke up.

The M5S and the Lega arose in the aftermath of the deep legitimization crisis within the Italian party system following the 2008 economic crisis and Monti's government, in 2011. Both parties<sup>2</sup> called for a less mediated democracy, i.e. exercised more directly. If, on the one hand, the M5S and the Lega share some common points regarding the institutional framework, on the other hand, they differ in how to reach that goal.

The Lega's case is extremely interesting, because the Lega and the Northern League (Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania [LN]) are not the same party, actually. The 'Lega with Salvini' is just a brand name that sprang up during the 2013 European elections, and it belongs to the Lega's leader. By means of an unofficial process, Salvini turned a regional group into a national one and, paradoxically, nationalistic, too. There is herein a direct link between the people and the leader, i.e. without any party mediation.

The M5S's case is quite different. Unlike the Lega, the M5S cornerstone is not the leader, but the people, expressing its will through several social networks, blogs, and since 2016, the internet-based platform Rousseau (Biorcio, 2015; Biorcio & Natale, 2013; I. Diamanti, 2014).

Furthermore, both parties have in their manifestos a deep institutional reshuffle project. This article tackles the differences and the common points of the two main Italian populist groups.

## Lega

### Northern League and Lega with Salvini

Given the Lega's multiple, blurred, and confused cadres, statutes, and militancy, it is not an easy task to explain its structure at first. Although the Lega and the LN seem to be the same party, in fact, they are not. They certainly overlap in many aspects, such as having the same leader, Matteo Salvini. For a better understanding of what the Lega is nowadays, it is necessary to step back to 2013. That year was the crucial turning point for Italian politics, due to, on the one hand, the earthquake triggered by the M5S's impressive results in the 2013 General Elections and the consequent populist renovation in all parties, including the LN.

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<sup>2</sup> We use the term 'party' here following the definition by Sartori (2005, p. 56): "a party is any political group identified by an official label that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections (free or non-free), candidates for public office."

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On December 7, Salvini was elected the party's Federal Secretary through primary election<sup>3</sup>, and just some months later, the LN suffered one of its greatest debacles in the 2014 European elections. Step by step, the new leader completely reorganized the LN's structure, strategies, and thought. Its main goal was extending the party's influence beyond the Po River. It was hard for the leader to overcome both the geographical and ideological constraints imposed by regional identity. The only way to achieve his goal was getting rid of internal opposition. The switching process from a regional to a nationalistic ideology and the conquest of Southern Italy were far from being unanimously accepted or definitively agreed<sup>4</sup>.

Although the new ideological roots became quickly clear, they are much more inconsistent now than in the past. Salvini has established close ties with the French National Front (Front National [FN]), led by Marine Le Pen, and made connections with the neo-fascist Italian movement CasaPound. In December 2014, a new group, Us with Salvini (Noi con Salvini [NcS]), a sort of LN's southern brother, was created. Matteo Salvini became the leader of both parties and kept tight control over them. In 2016 and 2017, NcS participated in local elections, with very disappointing results.

The foundation of a second party was a second step in the ongoing strategy. 'League for Salvini Premier' (Lega per Salvini Premier [LpSP]) was created through an official act published in *Gazzetta Ufficiale* (Lega per Salvini Premier [LpSP], 2017). The LpSP's goal was to merge the 2 different groups into a single party: the LN and the NcS. However, the LN and the LpSP still have 2 parallel cadres with different statutes and, above all, 2 different memberships: a) in Northern Italy, the LN; and b) in the Southern Italy, the LpSP (Orengo & Del Dot, 2018).

Therefore, Salvini has only partially reached his goal, although we must underline that, according to public opinion, the transformation process from a regional to a nationwide and nationalistic group has been successful. The results are striking. In 2018 Parliamentary Elections, LpSP won 18% of the votes (123 deputies), 17 of them from Southern Italy, and 58 Senator, 11 of them from Center-Southern Italy. The results of the 2019 European elections were even more impressive: LpSP won outstanding 34% of the votes and became the leading Italian party.

Although it is not clear whether the Lega's weak structure only obeys its leader, and the extent to which the party bodies' mediation has been left out of the main decision-making processes, Salvini is just a step away from the premiership. No party congress has even ratified the change from the LN to the Lega. The nationalist ideology i.e. the rejection of regional autonomy/independence, is far from being accepted within the old party cadres. This gives rise to hidden conflict between the old militants and the new political elite brought by Salvini's inner circle.

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**3** It is worth noticing that one week earlier, on December 8, Matteo Renzi was elected General Secretary of the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico [PD]), through primary elections, too.

**4** The claim for autonomy is still one of the main issues regarding the Lega's governors in Northern Italy.

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## The Lega's leader

As the literature on the subject almost unanimously proposes (Laclau, 2005; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Urbinati, 2014), populist movements are strongly linked to their leader's charismatic action and the Lega fits perfectly into that framework. As informed above, Matteo Salvini was elected the LN's Federal Secretary through primary election on December, 7 2013.

The LN is, or it was until 2013, the oldest party in the Italian parliament. The party's historical leader, Umberto Bossi, took office for his first term as senator in the summer of 1987, not long before the outbreak of the Clean Hands Operation (the Mani Pulite Inquiry) to fight corruption, in March 1992, and the consequent fall of the so-called First Republic, which lasted from 1946 to 1992. Since 1994, the LN has ruled all the Northern Italy and it remained in government with Go Italy (Forza Italia [FI]) for 9 years.

However, in 2012, the so-called *Carroccio* was experiencing its deepest crisis since its official foundation as a party, in 1991 (Passarelli & Tuorto, 2018). In September 2012, the party was shaken by several corruption trials, and one of them directly affected its founder, Umberto Bossi, his inner circle, and Francesco Belsito, the party's treasurer. Inevitably, there was a sharp drop in the party's results in the 2013 elections. The LN won only 4% of the votes, i.e. only half of the votes won on the previous 2008 elections. Over this period, the LN's leader was Roberto Maroni, former Minister of the Interior, from the party's conservative wing. On September 23, 2013, the Lega's federal council gathered to try overcoming the crisis, by calling an election for new leader on December 7 and also a party congress one week later.

For the first time in Lega's history, members were allowed to vote directly for their leader through primary elections<sup>5</sup>. The contest was highly symbolic, since its founder, Umberto Bossi, was opposed by the young and charismatic Matteo Salvini. The poll results were ruthless: Bossi was heavily defeated (80% of thousands of votes chose the alleged outsider Salvini).

Although the primary assumption of Salvini's official rhetoric is grounded in the idea of a newcomer not related to the LN's corrupt political elite, in fact, i.e. completely and somehow paradoxically untrue. Indeed, Salvini has been a member of the LN since 1990, and he was a member of the Milan Council (from 1993 to 2006), a European Member of Parliament (MP) (from 2004 to 2014), and ultimately an Italian MP.

Furthermore, during his political career, Salvini has played many roles in propaganda. Firstly, he was a journalist for *La Padania*, the party's newspaper, then for Radio Padania, where he worked as a director (from 1999 to 2013). For 20 years, Salvini has dealt with the media rather than played ruling roles at a national or regional level. Therefore, undoubtedly the Lega's leader has strong media and communication skills. In fact, Salvini has become a prominent Italian leader thanks to his

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**5** It is worth highlighting that the LN's primary elections differ from those of the center-left wing PD. While only members are allowed to vote in the LN's primary election, the PD has open voting.

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rhetorical ability, developed by means of decades of professional practice and a cynical use of the social media.

## The leader and the audience

As stressed above, during his political career, Matteo Salvini has developed a strong and useful demagogic ability. The Lega's leader has always run not along with, but besides the party and the institutions. His attendance in the European Parliament and in the Ministry of the Interior's offices was very low, but his presence in the social media and on the streets is strong. Since he has been elected the party's secretary, in 2013, he froze the middle layers of his party and run as a lonely man playing on 2 stages: a) on the street, i.e. with a direct link to the people; and b) by means of the social media (Bobba, 2017; G. Diamanti & Pregliasco, 2019).

Luca Morisi, Professor of Philosophy and the Web at the School of Languages of the University of Verona, founder of the Sistema Intranet company, an internet communication provider, has been since 2013 one of the leading Salvini's spin doctors (G. Diamanti & Pregliasco, 2019). It is worth stressing that like Jair Bolsonaro, in Brazil, and Donald Trump, in the United States of America (USA), Salvini has succeeded in a sort of miracle: he inherited a weak party and turned it into the top force in the country. After being appointed Minister of the Interior, his communication staff has consistently increased. Outside the Lega's party structure and under Salvini's tight control, a huge, expensive, and overarching social media structure named as 'La Bestia' was built (Forti, 2018). Andrea Paganella, co-founder of the Sistema Intranet company along with Luca Morisi, joined that staff and was appointed Head Secretary.

Furthermore, just as in the cases of Trump and Bolsonaro, Salvini's official media communication strategy is run along a fine line between fake and non-fake news. In other words, the message is built in such a way that it could easily lead to misinterpretation. Moreover, several *Twitter* and *Facebook* accounts not directly related to the so-called Captain, nickname given by the spin doctor to the leader in order to support Salvini's policies. It is not by chance that *Facebook* has recently closed 23 accounts. With more than 2 million followers, they were spreading fake news in favor of the Lega and the M5S and against immigration as a whole.

To sum up, the Lega's communication strategy has three primary layers.

The first layer focuses on real life: streets, markets, actual events, and so on. That is where the content to be shared through social media is produced: selfies, the leader's speech, crowds surrounding the leader, etc.

The second layer consists in the official social networks: *Twitter* and *Facebook*. That is the real life where content is released and analyzed (followers can share, comment, and like it). It is a key source of information that can be used to reach more people and gain consensus.

And, finally, the third layer is the ambiguous space of unofficial social networks. That is where messages regarded as unfeasible otherwise, given their controversial nature, can be released. Since there is no direct link, it is hard to prove that they are related to the official party's body. However,

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this third layer is useful to capture the audiences' reaction to rather aggressive messages, fake news, and so on. These three levels are strongly interconnected. It is worth stressing that, although social networks play a key role in producing and spreading the Captain's thought, most of his audience is outside the social networks.

## The Lega's institutional framework

The question that we are going to answer herein is twofold: a) what the institutional framework proposed by the Lega is; and b) to what extent it is consistent with the populist ideal type.

The program proposed by Matteo Salvini, for the Italian legislative election held in March 2018, includes an extensive section on that subject. "Giving the people their sovereignty back" (LpSP, 2018, p. 1, our translation), as stated by the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, is certainly the cornerstone of the whole blueprint, which is moving forward to establish a true people's democracy.

As underlined by Ernesto Laclau (2005, p. 83), "populism requires the dichotomic division of society into two camps – one presenting itself as a part which claims to be the whole; that this dichotomy involves the antagonistic division of the social field" It is written in Lega's program that "Democracy means rule of the people. Its main essence is people's participation in the government" (LpSP, 2018, p. 20, our translation). Therefore, the question that has to be answered is: who has stolen the people's sovereignty? First and foremost, the main thief is the European Union (EU), i.e. not Europe per se, but 'the specific European model.' Sovereignty and anti-Europeanism are among the main points bringing together all the continental populist parties. Second, "international institutions, such as the United Nations (UN) or the World Trade Organization (WTO)" (LpSP, 2018, p. 20, our translation). Third, "the powerful international sovereign funds and the thousands and thousands of dollars maneuvered by them and their capacity to influence the State policies" (LpSP, 2018, p. 20, our translation). The typical victim's logic in this kind of party is not unlike the fascists' rationale soon after World War I<sup>6</sup>.

However, the enemies of the people do not come only from more or less unidentified foreign countries. The representative democracy's bodies are also to blame for having stolen the people's sovereignty; therefore, it is necessary to "develop the institutions of direct democracy to correct the distortion of representative democracy" (LpSP, 2018, p. 20, our translation). The Lega's project should be encompassed by the larger family of anti-liberal thought. As a consequence, all mediations between *démos* and power, the checks and balances, must be broken down and move towards establishing a bottom-up direct legitimation.

The main axis of the constitutional reforms proposed by the Lega manifesto revolves around the 3 branches of politics: a) Executive Power; b) Judicial Power; and c) Parliamentary Power.

First, according to the Lega's project, balance within the institutional framework, based on parliament as a cornerstone, must change dramatically. The Executive Power should become the prevalent body in the hierarchy legitimated by the "direct election of a strong Head of the Executive"

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<sup>6</sup> The victim's rhetoric used to depict the *mutilated victory* after World War I was a major theme in fascist propaganda.

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who “must not be appointed by parliament” and he should also be the “Head of State” (LpSP, 2018, p. 21, our translation). The Judicial Power’s independence is dramatically reduced, subjugated to politics in two main ways.

Second, on the one hand, ‘judges must apply the law and not make it;’ on the other hand, constitutional judges must be elected by the Head of State (Executive Power), the parliament and the regional administrations. No role is assigned to the Judicial Power in order to choose judges for the Constitutional Court.

And third, the profound change in the balance within the Parliamentary Power due to the Lega’s blueprint with regard to the 1946 Constitution has favored the Executive Power. However, this is not the only radical change in the way how the MPs work. The number of deputies and senators must be steadily reduced, as well as their independence: “a binding mandate must be introduced to avoid deputies changing the party membership during their mandate” (LpSP, 2018, p. 21, our translation). Last but not least, it is proposed to abolish ‘referenda’s minimum quorum to increase their effectiveness.’

Clearly, the people/community has become the primary source of any legitimation, it is more powerful than the rule of law. This is due to the referenda reform, with direct election for the Head of Government and the Head of State and the MPs and judges’ limited independence.

As pointed out by Norberto Bobbio (1990), democracy has grown within liberalism and, to a certain extent, in contradiction to liberalism. Democracy means the power of the people, liberalism means the limitation of power, also the power of the people; here, the rule of law prevails over legitimation. It seems that the Lega’s blueprint has some features of the presidential model, but with the crucial difference of not including its strong checks and balances.

The stolen sovereignty’s rhetoric has turned into a directly exerted and illiberal democracy, where the hidden, implicit, and inevitable outcome is, as explained by Nadia Urbinati (2014), plebiscitarianism.

## **The four phases of the 5-star movement**

So far, there are four main steps in the M5S’s evolution: a) the period prior to the movement’s creation (2005-2009), entirely focused on the comedian Beppe Grillo; b) the movement’s birth, in 2009, up to the impressive victory at the 2013 General Elections; c) the party’s institutionalization and the rise of an established leadership, up to the end of the first Conte administration; and d) the new alliance with the center-left wing PD.

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## Building the audience (2005-2009)

In January 2005, Grillo's blog was opened. Along with the comedian, Gianroberto Casaleggio was one of the leading Italian characters concerning internet marketing strategies<sup>7</sup>. Casaleggio is a sort of head providing Grillo, the charismatic claim maker, with the knowledge needed to deliver pervasive communication through social networks and Grillo is for Casaleggio the voice capable of spreading the latter's messages – one of the most widely known is Casaleggio (n.d.). By far, this is the key cornerstone in the forthcoming M5S's life (Adinolfi, 2016). The discourse and the way how it has been established play a central role in audience building. This marks the very beginning of the new comedian's political experience: in just a few weeks, Grillo's posts became a rather influential reference. In October, the *Time* magazine included him among the 2005 European Heroes (Israely, 2005) and in December he was awarded the prize by the Italian economic newspaper *il Sole 24 ore* as the best news website. Four years later, in 2009, the *Forbes* magazine, which establishes each year a ranking of the most influent personalities on the web, placed Grillo's blog in 7th position<sup>8</sup>. In the beginning, the blog's themes focused just on complaining about the so-called *cast*<sup>9</sup>, i.e. the *oligarchy* in both political and economic terms. Indeed, the very first steps involved complaints against the big Italian companies, fraudulent bankruptcy procedures, and the consequent loss of stock values, especially among middle class investors<sup>10</sup>.

It is worth noticing that, in 2008, the Italian radical left-wing coalesced into a sort of cartel named as Rainbow Left (Sinistra Arcobaleno), which did not reach the 4% cut off established by the electoral law to have a seat in the parliament. Electors blamed the Radical Left-Wing for its participation in Romano Prodi's administration. As a consequence, a major non-mainstream opposition has suddenly disappeared and this opened room for a newcomer. Grillo's blog emerged exactly at that moment in public opinion as a unique legitimate oppositional point of reference. It annihilated, on the one hand, the non-mainstream opposition and, on the other hand, all mainstream parties were put by the comedian at the same level. Relying on an effective pun, grounded in the acronyms of the two mainstream parties, Grillo showed that the only difference between them is just an 'L,' so the PD became a People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà [PDL]) without the 'L.'

In other words, Beppe Grillo had a relatively long learning period that preceded his political experience, where he underwent a transformation from comedian to politician. Furthermore, soon his blog seemed to be something more than just a blog right from the beginning. The legitimization

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**7** As reported by Roberto Biorcio and Paolo Natale (2013), the meeting between Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio is crucial to grasp the entire project's evolution. Casaleggio has been one of the main Italian experts in developing web marketing strategies.

**8** "His highly political material struck a chord with audiences, and Grillo became a force in Italian politics. In 2005, he started sharing his thoughts on a blog – it's now available in Italian, English and Japanese, and is one of the most widely read in the world, making him a truly global Web Celeb" (Ewalt, 2009).

**9** Since 2007, *cast* has become a sort of synonym for the term *oligarchy* and it means an *irremovable political elite*.

**10** Given its consequences on the middle class, the most paradigmatic case of fraudulent bankruptcy was certainly that of Parmalat. For more information, see La Repubblica (2004).

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granted by Grillo's interventions to his people and against the oligarchy reached and compelled an increasingly trustful audience, willing to engage in an actual participation that goes beyond the narrow boundaries of the virtual world. In his blog, Grillo addresses the roots of a widespread activism throughout Italy, generally not linked to political parties, and to some extent distrustful of politics. He declares his will to use a megaphone in favor of those people and the complaints that nobody wants to hear.

Therefore, along with the blog, an actual platform consisting of small groups of citizens has been established (Biorcio, 2015). Again, the internet is useful to the comedian and the tool chosen for this purpose is the *MeetUp*. The idea behind the MeetUp network is to provide support to local struggles by promoting a new kind of activism rigorously outside the older parties' framework. Thanks to Grillo's legitimation, thousands of individuals decided to engage in the struggles (Biorcio, 2015). A real activist network springs out of the virtual world. One of the most important cases arising from the MeetUp in these years was the so-called '280,' whose main aim was establishing a civic list for direct democracy (Murphy, n.d.).

A third tool of political participation, after the blog and the MeetUp, has consisted in big events/demonstrations. Halfway between a traditional demonstration and a rather traditional spectacle, Grillo reached an even larger group of people. The so-called 'Fuck Off Day' took place on September 8, 2007, in Bologna, with 30,000 participants. There were 200,000 people participating in the whole network and more than 200 meetings were held throughout Italy (Corriere della Sera, 2007).

So, 300 signatures were gathered to support a referendum on the law against political professionalization and in favor of a rather direct democracy<sup>11</sup>. At the Liberation anniversary celebration (April 25, 2008), a second V-Day was organized to promote a second wave of referenda, then to abolish public funding to political parties and to the media. The relationship between the media, public funding, oligarchy, and freedom seems to be one of the main M5S's issues. More than 1 million signatures were gathered, but the referendum was disregarded by the Constitutional Court.

## The rise of the 5-Star MoVement and the victory at the Italian general elections (2009-2013)

After four years of experience, on October 4, 2009, the M5S, the instrument used to compete on the electoral arena, was created. The people, as pointed out above, was already there as a direct link connecting the leader to his audience. It is worth highlighting that the three participation layers, i.e. internet activists, local activists, and demonstrators/spectators, are rather different from each other and even irreconcilable to some extent.

Even rejecting the left/right axis, the M5S early roots were clearly connected to traditional left-wing's themes and their political participation forms. Each of the movement's stars represents

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<sup>11</sup> The bill proposes parliamentary ineligibility for those convicted of crimes with sentences exceeding 10 months, the limit of 2 legislatures for parliamentarians and the introduction of the vote in preference in the electoral law (Grillo, 2007).

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one of its main values: a) Environment; b) Water; c) Energy; d) Development; and e) Transport. However, on the other hand, language, mainly addressing internet participation, is blurrer. The letter 'V' in the noun 'MoVement' must be capitalized, because it recalls, at the same time, the V-Day, as a metaphor for the Normandy landing, the Fuck the cast (Vaffa), and Vengeance (MoVimento 5 Stelle [M5S], 2009).

Thus, as it happened previously for the MeetUp, the M5S emerges as a sort of franchiser whose aim is providing local groups with support to fight by sharing the Statute's values<sup>12</sup>. It is worth stressing that the years 2008-2013 were characterized by a huge wave of scandals that hit both businesses and politics. Moreover, the M5S's rise has happened along with the outbreak of the economic crisis. In such a contest, to bring several months of speculation against the Italian public debt to an end, as well as to avoid the Italian bankruptcy, in November 2011, Silvio Berlusconi's administration was replaced by Mario Monti's administration. Although the cabinet consisted almost entirely of university professors, parliamentary support came from the 2 mainstream party aisles: a) center-left wing; and b) center-right wing. The PD and the PDL coalesced into the same administration. As a consequence, public opinion blamed both mainstream parties for the outcomes of the sharp cut in public expenditure and the rise of imposition. This framework paved the way for the first MoVement's successful local elections, in 2012. In Parma, a mid-sized municipality in Northern Italy, Federico Pizzarotti was elected Mayor and in the Sicilian regional elections the M5S was the most successful party. Over the technical Monti's administration, the party system was under siege and sharply delegitimized. In February 2013, new general elections were scheduled and public opinion saw clearly who was accountable and who was not. There were 2 major themes in the electoral contest: a) Monti's austerity policies; and b) the scandals related to Monte dei Paschi di Siena's bankruptcy, regarded by many people as a bank close to the PD. In such a scenario, it is easy for an anti-system party to obtain consent. The 2013 general elections' results were impressive: the M5S was the first party (with 25.56%), and it was only due to a biased electoral law favoring party coalitions that it did not secure a larger majority: 109 out of the 630 deputies and 54 out of the 315 senators. Therefore Grillo's decision to participate in the electoral game may seem inconsistent; the leader's aim is conquering the institutions from within and opening the parliament like a tin of tuna (Grillo, 2013), changing the very practical rationale of political representation. The brand 'party' is explicitly rejected by its statute (M5S, 2009, Article 4), or, better said, by its non-statute. No physical seat and headquarters are allowed, the only one accepted by the non-statute is the website [www.movimento5stelle.it](http://www.movimento5stelle.it) (M5S, 2009, Article 1).

From the 2013 Italian political election on, the M5S became a stable player, 1 of the 3 wings in the parliament: a) center left; b) center right; and c) M5S. Since 2005, when Grillo's blog took

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**12** "If we look at the initial phase of the M5s, we find ourselves before a political force that has its origins in the humus of the movements and parties of the libertarian and radical left. This is the silent revolution, characterized by the struggle for the affirmation of transversal, post-ideological and post-materialist values such as civil rights and equal opportunities, peace, solidarity, development and ecology" (Corbetta & Gualmini, 2013, p. 34).

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its first step, until 2018, the whole citizen/movement relationship changed. The party has become rather vertical in the institutions instead of horizontal and local participation through the MeetUp has almost disappeared.

In contrast to its principles, even for the M5S, politics became increasingly professionalized. After the large wave of deputies elected in 2013, from November 2014 on, a rather restricted core emerged within the party, the so-called *directory*, which consists of Alessandro di Battista and Luigi di Maio – the latter is now the party’s political chief.

## The 5-Star institutional framework

Beyond the new political paradigm of self-representation, it is not easy to see which are the main features of the M5S, and the same applies to grasping how they evolved over time. The 5 main values, i.e. the 5 stars (environment, water, energy, development, and transport) lose their relevance step by step. Active participation through the MeetUp structure almost disappeared. From 2013 on, just one way to participate in it was left: direct vote through Grillo’s blog. However, the alleged post-ideological flexibilities, the rejection of left-right axes, are political attitudes per se to seek the widest political support. Nonetheless, there are 3 main ideas: a) direct democracy (as a way to overcome the overwhelming oligarchy’s power); b) environment; and c) minimum monthly wage.

The main idea of the M5S is to radically change the way how liberal and representative democracy works. At that level, it takes an overt ultra-democratic but anti-liberal connotation. Therefore, the relationship between *demos* and power should not be mediated by intermediate bodies. The web is the main instrument, the engine that made parties, trade unions, and reliable information sources obsolete (Casaleggio & Grillo, 2011), providing new ways to link *demos* to power. Given its choice for anti-professionalized politics, by following the principles of direct democracy, the M5S’s candidate selection has always taken place through an internet voting named as *Parlamentarie* (Linkiesta, 2012)<sup>13</sup>.

The M5S aims to foster an “efficient change of opinion and democratic confrontation outside associative or party link, outside mediation representative bodies” (M5S, 2009, Article 4, our translation). Also, membership is far from being similar to traditional rules. In the beginning, to become member, and thus vote through the internet, being registered and accepting the rules is enough. Membership is open to all citizens who do not belong to political parties (M5S, 2009, Article 5).

The main enemy consists in intermediate bodies, which stole people’s sovereignty: “political parties have replaced the popular will and removed people’s power of judgment” (M5S, 2018). According to the M5S’s program, it is necessary to strengthen those instruments, allowing citizens to participate directly. Just as in the case of party, the idea of representation is also rejected by the ‘non-statute.’ Representatives are no longer representatives, but spokesmen for M5S’s members and

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**13** It is worth underlining that, just as in the case of the M5S, the PD, even through different rules, has also adopted in 2012 a primary election to select the candidate to the General Election.

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any decision has to be taken through web conversations with members. The M5S's idea is that to avoid betraying people's will, a binding mandate for deputies should be introduced. Closed primary elections, i.e. open only to members registered on a website, such as in the case of *Parlamentarie*, for a given period is the way how candidates are selected<sup>14</sup>. Repeated waves of public judgment concerning the MP's activities are promoted on Grillo's blog and several deputies are expelled under the blame of failing to observe the movements' rules.

On the grounds of direct participation, all horizontal tools for exchange between militants are virtually banned. To promote direct and almost vertical participation, in 2016 a new internet platform called *Rousseau* has been created<sup>15</sup>. According to Gianroberto Casaleggio, the movement's main tool and operating system, and a sort of 'collective intelligence'<sup>16</sup>, as well as a means to achieve the main goal of the movement: direct or, in other words, plebiscitarian democracy.

## From the European elections (2014) to the populist government (August 2019)

European elections are another turning point in the M5S's stabilization process. In the manifesto optimistically entitled "Us We Won" (Modigliani, 2014), Casaleggio and Grillo did not clarify the movement's ultimate position. Seemingly, the M5S is not entirely anti-EU, and it is also not necessarily against a federal framework, as long as each 'nation'<sup>17</sup> joins voluntarily<sup>18</sup>. The stances towards the treaties that had been put into practice over the years around the Euro Zone are clearer. On that dimension, the M5S proposed to overcome the whole pact regarding austerity policies and budget deficit cuts. However, things are less clear about the Euro-currency market. On the one hand, it is written that M5S's members do have to decide, through a referendum (Modigliani, 2014); on the other hand, it may be useful to establish different Euro Areas: one for northern and another for southern countries (Modigliani, 2014). The ballot boxes were not rewarding in this case, since the movement won only 21%, less than in the national elections. The PD's strategy, i.e. focusing on fear of leaving Euro Zone, won 40%.

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**14** Paradoxically, for a party that takes membership as its point of reference, the scarce participation, about 95,000 voters, shows the contradiction of an ideology aiming to take bottom-up mobilization as its rule.

**15** "Its main goals are handling in several elective components (Italian and European Parliament, regional and local councils) membership participation" (MoVimento 5 Stelle, 2016, our translation).

**16** Nicola Morra, former president of the M5S's senators group, defines the new platform this way: "Rousseau is a challenge, a challenge that we could win and that we want to win. Rousseau is the collective intelligence that became little by little a reality" (MoVimento 5 Stelle, 2016, our translation).

**17** Throughout the program, the term *nation* is repeated over and over. In this context, it suggests certain common views with the right-wing's cultural world through which the M5S established a single parliamentary group in Europe and some doubts about the actual and undeniable European inspiration are suggested (Modigliani, 2014).

**18** Behind the concept of *nation* proposed by Casaleggio and Grillo, we may find, although with tones that are not exacerbated, yet, a child of *globalization*. In other words, that identity-based nationalism derived from commonality of values and defense of the 'people' against the 'elites' (Taguieff, 2012).

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Within the institutions, people have to take an actual position and, after a bargaining process that caused many doubts, from 2014 to 2019 the M5S entered the group “Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy” along with right-wing, anti-immigration, and Euro-skeptical populist parties such as the “UK Independence Party” (UKIP), the German “Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD), and the “Swedish Democrats”<sup>19</sup>.

Surprisingly, after the 2019 European elections, the M5S’s strategy made a U-turn on its anti-European stances. Though the M5S was by far the main party in the governmental alliance with the Lega, it soon became the leading Executive character. As a consequence, the results of 2019 European elections, held in May, were catastrophic for Luigi Di Maio. In just a few months, the M5S dropped from 32% to 17%.

The huge M5S’s defeat marks the beginning of a rather pro-European stance. In July 2019, the Lega and the M5S took opposite positions towards the election of the new President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. The first voted against, just as the other sovereignty parties while, surprisingly, the M5S voted for.

## Conclusions

In the beginning of August 2019, Matteo Salvini, the Minister of the Interior, and the vice-president of the cabinet decided to bring to parliament a vote of no confidence over Conti’s administration, bringing the populist cabinet formed in alliance with the M5S to an end. The Lega’s leader aimed to compel the Head of State to call new elections. The primary assumption of the Captain was that no other governmental majorities were found, thus elections were the only way out. However, unexpectedly, the M5S reached an agreement with the center-left wing PD and paved the way for a second government led by Conte. To a certain extent, that was a sort of powerlessness statement: populist decision-making processes have not been working. It is the second time in recent Italian history that attempts to overcome traditional decision-making patterns were defeated. The first was in 1994-1995, when Silvio Berlusconi tried to achieve his liberal revolution, but after 1 year, he was defeated and obliged to resign. Antagonistic legitimacy is one of the main promises of populist parties, but consensus democracy, i.e. a widespread mediation between several players, has been the rule so far (Lijphart, 2012).

It is certainly too soon to grasp which are the implications and what exactly means such a U-turn of the Yellow Movement. It is very unlikely that Grillini’s leadership gets rid of the populist ideology and the direct democracy tools, taking a rather classic liberal/representative democratic approach. Indeed, it is worth highlighting that the final seal of that alliance has been put by the M5S

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**19** “Committed to the principles of democracy, freedom and co-operation among Nation States, the Group favors an open, transparent, democratic and accountable co-operation among sovereign European States and rejects the bureaucratization of Europe and the creation of a single centralized European super State” (Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy [EFDD], n.d.).

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through internet voting on the platform Rousseau. That is, people's legitimacy prevailed over the rule of law again (Schmitt, 2004).

The long relationship between populism and the Italian political system had a major change in 1992. From the Clean Hands Operation on, the claim for a sharp renovation of the constitutional framework towards a less mediated paradigm has been strong and consistent (Mastropaolo, 2000). For a better understanding of the Italian road to populism, we should not focus on single parties and their claims, but on the way how the broad system has worked since the anti-corruption revolutionary processes began, in the 1990s. During that revolution, widely supported by public opinion and mass media, all the main populist themes were already there: a) corrupted elite; b) country decline; c) unfit political class; d) political system that does not allow the people to make decisions, etc.

The first step towards a huge renovation process in the party system was the electoral reform. The goal of the 1993 referendum held was to get rid of the electoral proportional system and introduce a majority system. The main aim was to allow the people to vote for the Head of Government in a rather direct way, thus reducing party power. Since then, there has been continued tension between representative democracy and direct democracy, in which the former has always won. Waves of referenda have been used to overcome oligarchy's resistance to political system reforms. The mediatization of the Italian politics has Silvio Berlusconi as its main character, but he was just the tip of a larger iceberg. Political parties seeking a sort of modernization and trying to escape the 20th century framework demobilize the two main mass-party apparatus: a) ideology; and b) membership. The way they found to seek legitimation was direct election of their leaders. Leadership became the main focus and the ultimate legitimation source in an increasingly fluid political game.

Several rounds of constitutional reforms have been put in place, but a large part of them were rejected, all of them focusing on a central theme: giving back decision-making power to the people.

As explained by Alfio Mastropaolo (2000), anti-politics has been the Italian *zeitgeist* for thirty years, thus to better understand the second wave of populist parties that started in 2013, we must encompass the first one and the LN has never left its populist roots when holding power (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015). So far, and somewhat paradoxically, the increasing competitiveness between leaders has been the main cause of the populist defeat. This is the context where the victory of even more explicit populist groups, such as the Lega and the M5S, must be framed. The evolution of Italian politics needs to be analyzed by considering the representative and liberal democracy crisis that emerged in 1992. Furthermore, as explained by Norberto Bobbio (1990), there is a contradiction between democracy, which must be legitimated by the *démos*, and liberalism, where legitimation is derived from the rule of law. At that level, the Lega and the M5S represent a qualitative step forward on at least 2 aspects: a) a comprehensive definition of people; and b) an anti-liberal form of people's representation. Therefore, there were 2 main layers on which we analyzed the M5S and the Lega: a) how they built their audience; and b) which are the institutions proposed by them to overcome liberal democracy and establish a rather direct link to the people.

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First, the audience may be split into 2 further different aspects: a) charismatic leadership; and b) discourse. Charismatic leadership stands as a cornerstone in both cases. Salvini and Grillo had an impressive ability to draw the attention of a large community and to constitute a reliable platform for their representative claims. Both of them had a media background, the latter as a comedian, the former as a professional politician specialized in marketing and propaganda.

Second, they both used social media as an echo chamber for their claims and as a way to reach a huge audience directly. However, they differ on the way that link is established. Grillo proposed himself as a person not interested in overlapping political roles. His blog is a sort of franchiser of bottom-up political positions, providing people's voice with a greater impact. Salvini is the uncorrupted politician that swept the corrupted elite from his party, the LN, and the political scenario. His voice is not spread by a blog, but through markets, roads, and police stations, which can establish connections and give rise to compelling ideological narratives (Ballacci, 2019).

Undoubtedly, the parties adopted two different strategies, but in both cases the social networks played a crucial role: behind a seemingly naïf communication, there was a highly professionalized structure.

But populism is not just a discourse, it is a complex political framework based on a discourse and an institutional arrangement that allows a less mediated representation. On that layer, we see that the Lega and the M5S have two different projects, but they share a common idea: people have to participate more directly in the decision-making process. How to reach that goal? The M5S's answer to this question is through *digital democracy*. The Lega had a rather traditional project based on 3 main reforms: a) direct election of the Head of Government; b) majority electoral law; and c) more powerful referenda. Actually, strengthening the referendum as a tool, getting rid of the minimum cut-off, and turning politics into a kind of daily plebiscite (Renan, 2013) is the main claim of these parties. Both political projects are based on the prevalence of people's legitimacy over rule of law (Schmitt, 2004), which is at the root of the diarchic system of representative democracy, where people's legitimacy and rule of law overlap each other (Urbinati, 2014).

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