Introduction

In traditional Western European understanding, political parties are a fundamental intermediary between society and the state and, therefore, a key factor for the realisation of a solid and healthy democracy. Parties have been observed to recruit candidates, structure electoral campaigns, group public opinion, draw up political programmes and organise legislatures. The crucial role of political parties was already undisputed when Schattschneider (1942, p. 1) wrote that ‘political parties created democracy and [...] modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the party’.

What is not undisputed is, however, if parties themselves have to be internally democratic in order to guarantee democracy at system level. Many authors, Schattschneider himself, but also Sartori (1965) and Schumpeter (1962), agree on the fact that “democracy on a large scale is not the sum of many little democracies” (Sartori 1965, p. 124). They see the essence of democracy in the existence of free and fair elections where parties compete between them.

On the other side of the discussion about the democratic role of political parties lies the social-democratic interpretation of intra-party democracy (IPD). Duverger (1954) observed socialist mass-parties as a prototypical example of IPD where power in concentrated in open to all comers branches which, via an organisationally complex system of intra-party representation, express a party leadership who hold accountable party’s elected representatives. In this view, parties contribute to system democracy not only via electoral competition, but also via a representative system of IPD.

However, Duverger himself, echoing Michel’s fundamental sociological law of political parties (1911), admits that mass party’s leadership ‘while democratic in theory’ ends up in being ‘oligarchic in reality’. (Duverger 1954, p.133).

With the aim of overcoming parties’ oligarchisation tendencies, European and Australian Green parties, in the 70s, tried to implement direct democracy within their organizations (Poguntke 1994, p. 4). Direct democracy is obviously not a creation of post Second World World left-libertarian and ecologist movements and parties. It is a political system inspired by the Rousseauian perspective that it is possible to create a single identity between rulers and ruled (Greiffenhagen 1973, p. 33). Green parties translated this ideal into the internal functioning and
balance of power of their organisation, trying to give to party’s grassroots direct involved in the internal decision-making processes (Poguntke 1994).

Together with the above-mentioned normative models of direct and representative IPD, IPD can, in practice, flows out in several different manifestations, definitions and magnitudes. IPD can be a question of accountability, candidate selection, policy formation, centralisation or many other aspects that regulate the internal life of a political party. However, Cross and Katz (2008, p.9) argues that it is possible to define IPD as a question of “who has real authority over what areas of party decision making”. Namely, adopting the tripartite framework of analysis of political organisation (Katz and Mair 1993 and 2002; see also V.O. Key, 1964), IPD is about the power struggle between the three faces of the organization, the party in central office (PCO), the party on the ground (POTG) and the party in public office (PPO). The more the power is concentrated at the level of POTG, the more the organisation would be internally democratic (Cross and Katz 2008, p.10).

This paper explores the IPD qualities of the Italian Five Star Movement (FSM) and is based on (1) content analysis of the Blog of the FSM’s founder – Mr Beppe Grillo – and (2) semi-structured interviews of party members and elected representatives.

The FSM is today a large – and organisationally complex – organisation, that participated to hundreds of local (regional and mayoral) elections, governs several cities (including Italy’s capital city Rome), and formed – just a few months ago – government in coalition with the League (after obtaining the 33% of the votes at March 2018 general elections2).

For this reason, this paper cannot examine the FSM phenomenon in its entirety (neither longitudinally nor territorially). Consequently, I decided to focus on several events that characterise its birth and early development as a political organization: its birth and the development of its early organisational configuration (from 2005 to 2009), the creation of its first “5-star” political program (2006 ‘primarie dei cittadini’), the primaries for the definition of its candidates to its first participation to general elections (2012 ‘parlamentarie’) and the birth (and closure) of its first internal managing body (the ‘direttorio’, respectively in 2014 and 2016).

The analysis of those early events confirms the findings of other studies (see, for example, Tronconi 2013, Floridia and Vignati 2013): the FSM’s internal division of power between its PPO, PCO and POTG is unbalanced in favour of the PCO, which created the party and controlled its development.

In addition, the paper proposes that the FSM can be best understood as belonging to the family of business-firm (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999) and memberless (Mazzoleni and Voerman 2016) parties. In fact, despite FSM’s members are empowered to vote online, their decisional contribution is relegated to marginal and controlled from above (from the PCO) issues.

This article is organized in the following way: firstly, in section number one, I will analyse the different prototypical models of political parties and the relative normative models of IPD. Secondly, in sections number 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 I will analyse several focal events of the birth and fist development of the FSM as an organisation.

Thirdly, in the discussion section (section number 7), I will compare the actual IPD approach of the FSM with the IPD normative models of prototypical party models and demonstrate that the party seems to adopt – in practice – the IPD approaches of the business-firm and memberless party models.

1. Party models and the relative normative models of IPD

More than hundred years of research and analysis on political organizations resulted in a proliferation of party models. Parties have been classified based on their organizational and democratic characteristics (see, for example, Duverger 1954, Katz and Mair 1995), their generative environment (see, for example, Duverger 1954, Gunter and Diamond 2003), and their overall political and personal targets (see, for example, Wolinetz 2002).

Since this paper is about FSM intra-party organisation and democracy, I opt for the first of the aforementioned methods of differentiation. I therefore now analyse the IPD qualities of cadre/elite parties, mass-parties, catch-all/electoral professional parties and business-firm/memberless party models.

Many authors (i.e. Neumann 1956, Duverger 1954 or Ostrogorsky 1902), describing the first archaic forms of political parties, agreed on their fundamental features. Modern parties started in Europe in proto democratic parliaments as groups of notabilities that grouped together around reasons of MPs’ geographical proximity (for example, see the French “Club Breton”, Duverger 1954, p. xxv) or class interests, family traditions and ideological standpoints (Webber 1918, p. 90, Duverger 1954, p. xxv). The 19th and 20th century enlargement of the suffrage forced elected notabilities to create more complex organisations, which favoured the electoral connection between them and the growing number of electors. Cadre parties, also called parties of notables (Beer 1956, p.13), however never really reached a real complex organisational structure. The ideal type cadre party can be described as a group of office and vote seekers that are not interested in creating an extra-parliamentary organisation (the PCO) nor an empowered POTG. Therefore, the concept of IPD does not really concern cadre parties, at least in their prototypical configuration. The PPO is, in practice, the party and both the PCO and POTG, if they exist, are ancillary forces subordinated to the control and the will of the PPO.

From the organisational and IPD point of view, the mass-party has opposite qualities. If ideal type cadre parties are groups of notabilities or elites that look for votes and access to public office, ideal type mass-parties are the result of the mobilisation of the society. In particular, the enlargement of the suffrage was simultaneously the target and the reason why the mass-party developed in western European countries.

On the one hand, disenfranchised masses of society aspired to redistribute social, economic, political and electoral powers and a party of ‘social integration’ (Newman 1956), such as the mass-party, was the appropriate vehicle that could organise the collective action of the excluded masses and integrate them into the body politic (Krouwel 2006, p. 254; Katz and Mair 2002, p. 117). On the other hand, the progressive enlargement of the suffrage, once achieved, created the need to mobilise, organise and channel the larger and larger number of votes and voters available: the mass-party was, again, the adequate tool for the job.

In terms of IPD, the prototypical mass-party, described by Duverger, guarantees the highest possible level of representative IPD. Society gathered together in local branches (the POTG) that, through mechanisms of democratic representation, generate and keep under scrutiny intermediate and central bodies (the PCO) which in turn generate and keep under scrutiny the PPO. This is the theoretical glorification of representative IPD which, however, is undermined by a physiological tendency to bureaucratise and oligarchise (Michels 1911). The ‘iron law of oligarchy’ is therefore the real-world realisation of the Duvergerian mass-party representative IPD: representative IPD is applied via a bureaucratic organisation that is aimed at creating and guaranteeing bottom-
up democratic representation. However, the very fact of creating an organisation brings, automatically and physiologically, the collateral effect of oligarchisation: ‘it is organisation which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandatories over the mandators, over the delegates over the delegators. Who says organisation says oligarchy’ (Michels 1962 [1911], p.)

Both the Cadre and Mass party models have never been therefore totally and purely applied in practice. If, on the one hand, mass-parties tend to oligarchise, on the other hand cadre parties tended to camouflage into mass-parties: the mass-membership approach gave – obviously – mass-parties an electoral advantage that cadre parties had to fulfil and the mass-party organisation – in both terms of voter’s mobilisation and democratic legitimisation – was a better and catchier tool for the job. However, cadre-parties – camouflaged or not into mass-parties – never really bothered to apply the normative model of IPD that the socialist mass-parties preached for: cadre parties remain capitalistically funded, elite centred phenomena where members play – IPD speaking – a minor and ancillary role.

This phenomenon, which Duverger named “contagion from the left”, ideally forerun another similar – but opposite – phenomenon: ‘the contagion from the right’ (observed by Epstein – 1967 – in her analysis of the American party system) or – in European terms – the catch-all/electoral-professional party model (Kircheimer 1966, Panebianco 1988).

Both cadre and mass parties, witnessing a depolarisation of society and voters and suddenly captured into the televised mass-mediated way to communicate, started to ‘de-ideologise’ their agendas and rhetoric and based inter-party competition on “softer and catch-all contents, such as the personal appeal of the party leader" (Krowel 2003, p. 30). Catch-all parties were described to drift away from the above described mass-integration organisational and IPD approaches and transform into ideologically mild electoral machines, where party funding was capitalistic, members lost their bottom-up democratic strength (pace Michels), party organisation professionalised in order to attract campaign-savvy specialists and the PPO gained substantial power within party organisation. POTG don’t hold accountable the PPO via the PCO, as it happens in the prototypical mass-party model: intra-party accountability ceases to function – in both the practical and normative cases – and the only link between electors and elected takes place outside the channels of IPD, namely via institutional local and national elections where voters can hold accountable parties and parties’ leaders in the poll both. (Katz and Mair 1995, p. 22).

The representative and accountability detachment between the POTG and the PPO is further championed by the cartel party model. Here the division of power is, if compared to mass-parties, totally overturned. Access to government and to state resources (which becomes possible and frequent for most political parties – except extremist minority parties) empower the parliamentary party which becomes definitively independent from both the party on the ground and the party in central office (Katz and Mair 2002, p. 123 and 124; Katz and Mair 1995 p. 16 and 17). This shift of power from the party in central office to the party in public office is visible in an increasing presence of members of the party in public office in the structure of the party in central office (Katz and Mair 1993).

More in detail, the PPO is observed to create a sort of internal cartel that protects its position of power inside the party (Katz and Mair 2009 p. 759). This process is described by the authors as an apparent democratisation of the party organisation “through the introduction of such devices as postal ballots or mass membership meetings at which large numbers of marginally committed members or supporters—with their silence, their lack of capacity for prior independent (of the leadership) organization, and their tendency to be oriented more toward
particular leaders rather than to underlying policies—can be expected to drown out the activists” (Katz and Mair 2009, p. 759).

Therefore, in practice, the oligarchisation we described above when dealing with the mass and catch-all party models is championed to a higher and more subtle level in the prototypical cartel-party model.

A harsher example of IPD deterioration is that of the business-firm (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999; Paolucci 2006; Krowel 2006) and the memberless party (Mazzoleni and Voerman 2016) models. The business-firm party model, exemplified by the Spanish ‘Union de Centro Democratico’ and the Italian ‘Forza Italia’ (Hopkin and Paolucci, 1999), can be described as a sort of harder version of the catch-all/electoral-professional party model, where the party leader creates and owns the party, and the PCO is a highly skilled staff-organisation that works under the command of the charismatic leader. The entrepreneurial dimension of the business-firm parties is exalted in the Forza Italia example: Berlusconi, the political entrepreneur and Forza Italia’s founder and owner, “is in fact a business man, and the organisation of the party is largely conditioned by the prior existence a business firm” (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999, p. 320). Berlusconi business firm was an empire of several companies active in the construction, media, financial and advertisement sectors.

Both Adolfo Suárez’s ‘Union de Centro Democratico’ in Spain and Berlusconi’s Forza Italia grew and flourished in an era when political communication was highly televised and both leaders made a deep use of TV as both an organisational and communicational tool. TV became the real link between votes and voted: charisma, top-down communication are the glue that keeps the party united or – more correctly – that keeps voters and uncommitted supporters loyal to the party brand (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999).

The memberless party is described by Mazzoleni and Voerman (2016). The authors observed Geert Wilders’ ‘Freedom Party’ in the Netherlands and Giuliano Bignasca’s ‘Lega dei Ticinesi’ in Switzerland and described them as radicalized versions of the business-firm party model. Similarly to business-firm parties, memberless parties’ founders tend to own and control their parties, keeping for themselves “exclusive power over candidate selection and agenda setting” (Mazzoleni and Voerman 2016, p. 7). In addition, similarly to business-firm parties, but in a more extreme magnitude and realisation, memberless parties “have no formal membership at all, because the party leader considers members detrimental to party cohesion and the party’s main party function, namely, vote maximization” (Mazzoleni and Voerman 2016, p. 7).

However, if on the one hand both party models focus political and electoral competition on personalities, on the other hand they differ in the way they construct their rhetoric and ideology. Business-firm parties were described by Hopkin and Paolucci (1999, p. 307 and 315) (1) to be characterised by a ‘lack of ideological orientation’ and (2) to be mostly ‘politically incoherent’. Memberless parties, instead, are characterised by a “clear and consistent populist message”, loaded with anti-immigrant, anti-cartel and anti-establishment marks (Mazzoleni and Voerman 2016, p. 7). Memberless parties’ “populist rhetoric provides a thin cover for top-down control that admits of little real party democracy” (Carty 2013, p. 20).

In terms of IPD, both the business-firm and the memberless party models champion a drastic, both normative and empirical, democratic and organisational drift between party elites and party base. Echoing Katz and Mair, that analysed the catchallisation of mass-parties and observed the catch-all new conception of democracy where “party oligarchy actually becomes a virtue rather than a vice” (KM p. 14), in both the business-firm and memberless-party models party ownership and command become a virtue and members serve as “an instrument of the leader” (Mazzoleni and Voerman 2016, p. 8) or as a “personal instrument” (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999, p. 321).
2. The FSM

Beppe Grillo was one of the most famous Italian comedian in the 80ies and 90ies, years during which he run shows that dealt mostly with political satire and social and environmental issues. In 2004, Grillo met the Internet expert and utopist Gianroberto Casaleggio (Blog, 30th May 2012), owner of the private company of web marketing ‘Casaleggio Associati’, and decided to start a blog, www.beppegrillo.it, where his followers could follow his posts and provide comments (Mosca 2014, p. 40).

The blog became soon Italy’s most influential blog and transformed Grillo into an influential opinion-maker (Vignati 2015, p. 16). In July 2005, Grillo suggested to his followers to create local groups using the Meetup.com platform. This move transformed his followers into activists who could meet in person and self-organise local protests and initiatives that dealt – in the first years – with energy and environment related issues and – later – with anti-establishment and anti-political establishment claims (Mosca 2014, Lanfrey 2011).

If Duverger (1954) identified branches, cells, militias and caucuses as the basic organisational elements of, respectively, socialist, communist, fascist and cadre parties, local meetup.com-based groups are the basic organisational element of the FSM. They are regular, cost-free, real and web-based local gatherings of Grillo’s followers (Lanzone and Tronconi 2013, p. 55). From here on, we will call FSM’s local groups with the term normally used in the FSM’s jargon: meetup groups.

Adopting the tripartite framework of analysis of political organisations (Katz and Mair 1993 and 2002, see also V.O. Key, 1964), the activists of meetup groups, together with the registered users of the blog ‘beppegrillo.it’ and – later – of the websites ‘beppegrillo.it/movimento’ and ‘movimento5stelle.it’, are FSM’s POTG (Corbetta and Gualmini 2013, p.142; Tronconi 2013). As we will see below, members are, at least in theory and in Grillo’s rhetoric, entitled to drive collectively the party via several online platforms, forums and votes.

Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio, the co-founders of the FSM (Blog Grillo 30th May 2012), and the company ‘Casaleggio Associati’ represent FSM’s PCO (see Vignati 2013, p. 34; Pinto and Pedrazzani 2013, p. 101).

As described below, the PPO, following V.O. Key (1964) and Katz and Mair (1993 and 2002) framework of analysis, is made up by elected representative of both ‘5-star’ civic lists and FSM electoral lists.

3. The role of the three faces of the party in the creation of the FSM

The birth of the FSM happened in three distinct steps. First, in 2005, Grillo launched the blog ‘beppegrillo.it’ and, less than 6 months later, he encouraged his followers to self-organise via the meetup.com platform. Second, in 2007, he launched the Five Star civic lists. Third, in 2009 he officially launched the FSM. These three steps will be now analysed below in order to assess the role and power of PCO, PPO and POTG.

3.1 The Blog and the meetup groups

Beppe Grillo’s Blog was officially opened in January 2005. It was Grillo’s personal blog where the comedian expresses his ideas and his socio-political resentment against the political and financial system.

A few months after the launch of the Blog, Grillo took a step forward and created the organisational basic element of the FSM, the meetup groups. In the creation of the meetup groups, the role of the PCO was not only the one of initiator but also one of regulator and organiser. Via several posts on the Blog, the PCO instructed the
followers of the Blog about how meetup groups should operate and relate with the other faces of the organisation.

The post that launched the meetup groups recites:

   “I thought about how to give to all the followers of this blog the opportunity to meet each other, discuss, take the initiative and see each other. [...] I talked to my collaborators and I decided to use Meetup. Meetup is a website that allows to organise in an easy way gatherings between people that are interested in a given topic in the whole world and, also, in every Italian city.... Meetup offers several services such as the management of the members of a group, mailing lists, the organisation of meetings, forums and so on“(Blog, 16th July 2005).

More organisational details have been provided in the weeks that followed the launch of the meetup group. Grillo gave indications about (1) how the meetup groups should be named (“a first group in Milan was set up, named “Beppe Grillo’s Friends”” – Blog, 16th July 2005); (2) how he meant to relate and connect with the meetup groups (“I will try to meet groups on the territory during my tour and every time I participate in an event” – Blog, date); (3) the need to organise offline activities and meeting (“I give you an advice, give priority to things to do in the physical world, easy things, in your city. We are already on the Web, it’s in the real world that we have to move” – Blog, 17th September); and (4) the necessity to use booths to accompany Grillo’s shows and other initiatives/protests lead by Grillo (“I thought about how I could help. In my shows, starting from Milan, I will give the city group the chance to set up a small booth to promote its initiatives. To ask for it will be enough to send an email to my staff” and “Tomorrow, November 1, I will be at the Forli indoor sports arena at 8 pm to support the anti-incinerator committee... I invite the meetup groups of the area to participate with their booths” – Blog, 30th October 2006).

Grillo started and favoured the organisational development of the FSM by way of encouraging his supporters to self-organise in local meetup groups using the meetup.com platform. Grillo also established the structure and the way he wanted meetup groups to operate. In this embryonic period, when the party was not yet officially born and no “5-star” civic lists or FSM’s lists have yet participated to elections, the PPO was still not existent. We can conclude that the initial organisational incipit has been sparked by the PCO and the POTG, which in those days was made up of the followers of the blog and local meetup groups’ activists, followed Grillo’s instructions without being involved in the decision-making process.

Obviously, as aforementioned, this work does not assess the quality of participation and autonomy (from the PCO) that each local meetup group had in that period (or has today).

3.2 Civic lists and local elections

The decision to attend local elections originated, again, from Grillo himself. The 25th January 2007 Grillo posted the following post:

   “I can see just one possibility. To claim back our natural rights. Of the territory, of water, of the air, of the light, of health, of transport, of the environment. All stuff that is ours but that has been taken away from us by the parties. **Start again from the towns.** The parties are anachronistic. Finished and auto referential. Far from Vicenza and the Val di Susa. Far from the citizens with election laws, amnesties, conflict of interests, all ad hoc. They are in a separate world. A club that reads the newspapers and goes on TV. That thinks about Lebanon
and Afghanistan. About the GDP, but not about pensions. About work but not about precarious workers. Things that have already been said, about which the national consensus is by now absolute. The parties are of the past. Romera’s Zombies hunting for voters. Choose civic lists in every town. A programme that you take care of, your children, the future. Don’t let even one decision be taken without consulting you. And be clear about this point, hard, intransigent, with the mayors and the councillors. Your employees. Whoever disobeys the rule, out with a kick up the backside. Today the blog is starting up the initiative “5 star towns”. A star for energy, one for connectivity, one for water, one for rubbish collection and one for social services.

For each star, the blog will put forward some real models.

In the blog I will give visibility to the best towns and before the end of the year I will publish the “Grillo Guide to the Towns” (Blog, 25th January 2007).

The 10th October 2007, Grillo provided the organisational indications of how to create the civic lists. His prescription was to fulfil four requirements (candidates must not be members of other parties; they must have no criminal convictions; they must not have served more than one electoral term; they must reside in the municipality or region where they are candidates) and to guarantee three commitments (candidates must give up their electoral mandate ‘if they no longer possess, or are shown never to have possessed, one or more of the above-described minimum requirements’; ‘the list must publish candidates’ curricula online and open a blog to allow citizens free exchange of opinions and criticisms with members of the lists’; the list must not create a coalition with other parties or lists, unless certified by the blog’).

Again, the decision to participate to elections and the organisational characteristics and requirements of local lists and candidates probably came - again - from the PCO. In fact, in 2007, when Grillo communicated the decision to create “5-star” civic lists, an internal online voting or deliberative platform for was not available (the first online vote to which FSM’s members participated was in 2012 for the ‘parlamentarie’, see below) and therefore it may seem reasonable to conclude that the POTG did not have any role in the relative decision-making process.

3.3 The National Five Stars Movement

The official and last step of the creation of the FSM happened in 2009 when, via a post oh his Blog, Grillo inaugurates the “Movimento Nazionale a Cinque Stelle” (National Five Stars Movement):

“It will come into life on the Internet. Every Italian citizen with a clean record and not signed up to a political party will be able to join”; “the parties are dead. I don’t want to create a ‘party’, an apparatus, a structure of intermediation, but I want to give life to a Movement with a programme. Let anyone who supports the programme present themselves to the voters and ask for the vote” (Blog, 9th September 2009).

It appears clear that the PCO drove and designed the entire process: the PCO (1) created the blog, (2) suggested the followers of the Blog to organise local Beppe Grillo’s meetup groups, (3) decided how, when and if to create “5-Star” civic lists and participate to mayoral and regional elections and (4) decided how, when and if to inaugurate the FSM as a national political entity. The POTG and the PPO (who came into existence after the first mayoral and regional elections) followed PCO’s decisions.
4. The three faces of the party and policy creation: the case of the creation of the first “5-Star” political program

The 8th of January 2006 Grillo launched the “primaries of the citizens”. In Grillo’s rhetoric, they represent an “example of direct democracy” (Blog, 8th June 2006).

As usual, he shared the initiative via his blog:

“up until today the primaries have been done by our employees [namely, the politicians]. It is time that we, the employers, do the primaries. From today on, I will publish one proposal on each of the important themes such as energy, transports, and electoral laws. I will be helped by recognised experts and I will receive your comments. The posts [namely, the proposals written by the experts] will remain available on the task bar on the right of the homepage under the title ‘primaries of the citizens’ together with your comments until elections” (Blog, 8th January 2006).

On the same post, Grillo attached the first of the five stars (or points) of the programme. It was focused on energy and was a detailed 1200-word long document that dealt with energy efficiency, co-generation technologies, and incentive schemes to favour the production of renewable energy (Blog, 8th January 2006).

From Grillo’s post, it is clear that it was him, and the experts he nominated, to draft the proposals, and not the users of his Blog. In addition, we can observe that Grillo himself decided the content and the stars (or points) of the programme.

On this issue, I interviewed one of the five experts that Grillo nominated. He was in charge of writing the Energy Programme. From his words, below, he confirms that he did not cooperate nor take inspiration from neither the comments of the Blog’s users nor the ideas of meetup groups’ members.

Me: Did you write the energy programme?

Interviewee: “The 8th of January [2006] the Blog published the programme about energy. I wrote that programme”.

Me: How?

Interviewee: “Using the knowledge I accumulated during my career and activism on energy and ecology related issues”.

Me: How did you meet Grillo?

Interviewee: “We met in Emilia Romagna at a rally against the construction of an incinerator way before 2006 and we started a collaboration”.

Me: Did he ask you to write the programme about energy? And how did he ask you to write it?

Interviewee: “Yes, he asked me to write the programme. He asked me to write it as an expert. He knew my knowledge and standpoint on energy and ecology and he wanted me to formalise them on a document”.

Almost a month after Grillo published the Energy Programme, another post appeared on his blog. The post recites: “today I do the recap of your indications about the program for energy”. He added “I collected your suggestions per each argument and I added them to the initial document. The document is attached” (Blog, 27th January 2006).

I compared the original document (Blog, 8th January 2006), wrote by the expert (my interviewee), and the final document that, according to Grillo’s words, is a combination of the original document and the suggestions of Grillo’s followers (Blog, 27th January 2006). The two documents are exactly identical. The comments of the users of the blog did not have any impact on the original document: user’s contribution was null. What Grillo called primaries of the citizens, a “concrete example of direct democracy and people’s participation to the common good” (Blog, 8th June 2006) did not imply, in any way, the participation of the citizens. Grillo asked an expert (the interviewee) to write a program on an issue and camouflaged this as a bottom-up process of citizens’ elaboration and consultation.

The 8th of June 2006 Grillo met Romano Prodi (Italy’s prime minister) and handed him the “results” of the primaries of the citizens. On both the YouTube video of the event, and a post Grillo wrote the same day, Grillo stated that:

“I showed to our employee, the Prime Minister Romano Prodi, the proposal we discussed on this blog about Energy, Health, News and Economy, the ‘Primaries of the citizens’. The proposals, concrete example of direct democracy and people’s participation to the common good, have been received by our employee Prodi with joy” (Blog, 8th June 2006).

We can conclude that the PCO had total control over the process: Grillo decided to develop the “5-star” program, chose its five main themes, nominated five experts and asked them to develop the programme. The users of the Blog and the meetup groups’ activists, namely the POTG, could only write unnoticed comments below the five posts that contained the five points of the programme. The role of the POTG was, de facto, null.

Again, as aforementioned, this work does not assess the quality of the (several) platform creation processes that have been developed by the FSM in the following years.

5. The three faces of the party and candidate selection: the case of the 2013 FSM candidates to general elections (‘parlamentarie’)

The analysis of parties’ candidate-selection methods hold significance because “they show how power is distributed within parties” (Rahat 2007 p. 158). The primaries elections of 2012 (named “parlamentarie” by Grillo) were aimed at choosing FSM candidates to Senate and Parliaments at the 2013 general elections.

In order to assess the level of inclusiveness of the primaries, I adopt the theoretical framework developed by Rahat and Hazan (2001). They assess the procedures of intra-party candidate selection by evaluating their degree of inclusiveness/exclusiveness through four criteria: 1) candidacy, namely the breadth of the subset of potential candidates; 2) selectorate, namely the breadth of the subset of potential electors; 3) decentralisation, namely if candidates are chosen by local branches or from centralised procedures or bodies; and 4) voting, which is about if candidates are voted or co-opted.
Selectorate was not open to the civil society but limited to the members of the FSM who registered on the FSM’s website before September 2012. Candidacy was restricted to FSM members who had been already candidate, but not elected, at previous municipal or regional elections in the ranks of the FSM or 5-star civic list. Moreover, candidates had to accomplish the following requirements: (1) have no criminal conviction, (2) have not previously served in any political institutions for two terms and (3) have not been a member of another Italian political party or movement (Blog, date).

Several studies analysed the level of inclusiveness of the 2012 FSM ‘parlamentarie’ and most them applied Rahat and Hazan’s (2001) theoretical framework (see, for example, Pinto and Pedrazzani 2013, and Lanzone and Scotto 2014). They all agree that the FSM “parlamentarie” were then characterised by a rather exclusive selection process, revealing again an imbalance in the relationship between the three faces of party organisation in favour of the party in central office” (Pinto and Pedrazzani 2013, p. 106).

However, I argue that the quite restricted breadth of both selectorate and candidacy represent only partially a power supremacy of the PCO over the POTG. In fact, candidates have been selected by the base of the organisation – the POTG – and via a process of voting. Decentralisation and voting, the third and fourth criteria of the Rahat and Hazan’s (2001) framework of analysis, look therefore rather inclusive. In brief, we can probably describe the ‘parlamentarie’ as an example of online “closed primaries” (Biancalana 2016, p. 8): probably a rather exclusive process, but largely more inclusive and democratic if compared to the plebiscitarian use of members’ vote to ratify the ‘direttorio’ (below) and the top-down decision making process that characterises the other organisational moments that have been described above in this article (the 2006 primaries of the citizens, for example).

Where I see as a clearer imbalance of power is in the decision making process behind both the decision to join general elections, the decision to establish the parlamentarie and the creation of the rules concerning the execution of the parlamentarie. In this regard, similarly to other FSM’s strategical decisions, the PCO had central and normative role and the POTG could only follow PCO’s instructions. In a post published the 2nd of August 2010 on his blog, Grillo announced that:

“[t]he 5 Star MoVement will present itself at the national elections, whether or not they are now or in 2013 [...] The choice of candidates will take place online by means of the members’ portal. (Blog, 2010).

Later, the 28th of November 2012, Grillo posted the rules of the ‘parlamentarie’, dictating its candidacy, selectorate, decentralization, voting rules and other organizational details: “In order to avoid confusion, I clarify here the rules for the FSM’s candidates to the 2013 general elections...” (Blog, 28th of November 2012).

Another aspect that I believe sheds light on the FSM intra-party balance of power is the ownership and control over the web platform where the ‘parlamentarie’ took place. It is a proprietary platform that was designed, managed and controlled exclusively by the Casaleggio Associati. No external body, observer or guarantor have never supervised, reviewed or certified the procedures or the results of the FSM online elections (Mosca et al., p. 137).

Overall, I therefore believe that the case of the 2012 FSM ‘parlamentarie’ are a proof of the control that the PCO exercised over the organisation. The fact that the PCO decided to grant the POTG of the possibility to vote and chose FSM candidates has not to be seen as an example of POTG’s power, but rather as a PCO’s (1) organisational obligation and (2) strategical move.
6. The three faces of the party and the creation of the FSM ‘direttorio’ (board of directors)

Similarly to what we described above, the creation of the first official managing body of the FSM – called Grillo “Direttorio” – have been proposed by the PCO via a post on the blog. The 28th of November 2014 Grillo wrote that:

“The M5S needs a representative structure that is broader than the current one. This is a fact. Me, the camper and the blog are no longer enough. I’m pretty tired, as Forrest Gump would say. Thus while staying in the role of the guardian of the M5S, I’ve decided to put forward the names of five people, out of the many, many valid people. Thanks to their diverse backgrounds and qualifications, they will be able to operate on a broader scale for the M5S throughout the country and in parliament. Today I’m giving you the names in alphabetical order and I’m asking the signed up members to vote on this issue: Alessandro Di Battista; Luigi Di Maio; Roberto Fico; Carla Ruocco; Carlo Sibilia. These people will meet up with me at regular intervals to have a look at the general situation, share the most urgent decisions and with the help of everyone, create the future of the 5 Star Movement. Do you agree with this decision? You can express your preference here: https://sistemaoperativom5s.beppegrillo.it. Voting continues until 7:00 pm Italian time. Beppe Grillo” (Blog, 28th of November 2014).

In this case, which according to most FSM’s members and elected representatives is probably one of the most important and controversial decision on the structure of the FSM (several FSM’s threatened to resign from their role in the institutions and some of them did resign) we can observe that – again – the role of the PCO is one of supremacy. Grillo decided to create a managing body and decided its composition, co-opting five members of the PPO. Both the POTG and PPO could only ratify Grillo’s decision on the FSM voting platform and, in fact, it is what happened: 91.7% of the voters voted YES (34,050 votes) and the ‘direttorio’ was officially created.

In December 2016, in an interview to the Euronews agency3, Grillo declared that the ‘direttorio’ was dissolved. This time, Grillo did not even bother to ask his POTG and PPO to ratify his decision.

7. Reflections and conclusions

Obviously, these are not the only strategical and organisational decisions that have been taken by the FSM since the ‘beppegrillo.it’ blog and the meetup groups were created back in 2005. However, they represent some of the central defining moments of its birth and early development as a political organization: its inception (from 2005 to 2009), the creation of its first “5-star” political program (2006 ‘primarie dei cittadini’), the primaries for the definition of its candidates to its first participation to general elections (2012 ‘parlamentarie’) and the birth (and closure) of its first internal managing body (the ‘direttorio’, respectively in 2014 and 2016).

In a democratic – directly democratic – political party we would expect to see the POTG having pivotal role and power. However, the role of the POTG tends to be subordinated to the role of the PCO, who initiated and ruled all the aforementioned FSM’s strategical and organisational decisions. Even when decisions were taken via member’s online votes, namely the ‘parlamentarie’ and the creation of the ‘direttorio’, the role of the POTG was

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3 https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2016/12/01/news/m5s-grillo-di-maio-raggi-108674/
subordinated to the role of the PCO. The latter, as seen above, was little more than an exercise of ratification: Grillo decided and communicated the need to create the ‘direttorio’, nominated its five members and then asked his POTG to vote and ratify his decision. The former, while partially inclusive and not a mere exercise of ratification, was however driven by the PCO: the rules about ‘candidacy’, ‘selectorate’, ‘vote’ and ‘decentralisation’ were decided by the PCO, and the platforms on which the vote took place are owned by the PCO and the results of the primaries were not certified by external or internal autonomous bodies.

If IPD is a question of “to what extent, how and in which aspects of party life the members are able to control what their party does” (Cross and Katz 2008, p.10), it is possible to conclude that the FSM was not – in the early years of his life as a political organisation – an example of IPD. This finding is shared by many authors (see, for example, Tronconi 2013; and Floridia and Vignati 2013) and challenged by many others (see, for example, Greblo 2011 or Biocli and Natale 2013).

The above documented inborn lack of IPD, together with the top-down inception of several salient organisational events and the PCO’s ownership of the party logo and online infrastructures (the websites, the blog, the online voting platforms) reveal, I argue, that the FSM can be best understood as belonging to the family of business-firm (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999) and memberless parties (Mazzoleni and Voerman 2016).

The FSM balance of power, unbalanced in favour of the PCO, is similar to most prototypical party models except, at least in its theoretical model, the mass-party. However, while – on the one hand – catch-all parties and cartel parties have been described, by their theorists (Kirchheimer, Panebianco, Katz and Mair), as oligarchised, professionalised and – therefore – depraved versions of mass-parties, where party leadership is won via an intraparty-competition between different elites, factions and centres of interest, on the other hand the business-firm party, the memberless party and the FSM are controlled – from above – by their leaders: Silvio Berlusconi in the case of ‘Forza Italia’, Adolfo Suárez in the ‘Unión de Centro Democrático’, Giuliano Bignasca in the ‘Lega dei Ticinesi’, Geert Wilders in the ‘Partij voor de Vrijheid’ and the Grillo – Casaleggio duopoly in the FSM.

The FSM, and both the business-firm and the memberless parties, are brand-new machines, designed from scratch, that de facto refuse – in the first place and from their very inception – to adopt any real (mass-party inspired) traditional organisation.

In addition, together with the abundantly discussed intra-party balance of power and IPD, other FSM’s characteristics, partially touched upon above, seem to confirm the FSM theoretical affinity to the business firm/memberless party family.

From the one hand, the FSM resembles to the business-firm party model mainly because of the role of the private internet-marketing company, ‘Casaleggio Associati’, in both the ideation of the FSM organisation and its political and electoral communication (Pinto and Pedrazzani 2013, p. 101; see also Hopkin and Paolucci 1999, p. 323 - 324). In addition, the leader of a business-firm party is observed to possess important political resources that empower him/her of a dominant position within the party and especially within the political arena: “personal popularity, organisational advantages, and crucially, access to unlimited professional expertise in mass-communication” (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999, p. 322). The Grillo – Casaleggio (and Casaleggio Associati) bond appear to adequately fit the definition. From the other hand, the FSM is described in the literature to adopt a populist message (Corbetta and Gualmini 2013) which characterises more memberless-parties then business firm parties (Mazzoleni and Voerman 2016, p. 7).
To conclude, as aforementioned, this paper does not aim to assess the FSM phenomenon in its entirety. It focuses only on certain (constitutive) events that took place several years ago. My PhD dissertation, which analyses the FSM more broadly (and longitudinally), provides contradictory evidences and offers different conclusions.

References

3. Biancalana, Cecilia. "Internet as a Tool of Disintermediation: The Case of the Five Star Movement (Italy)."