Understanding movement parties through their communication

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ABSTRACT

In many countries, movement parties have gained traction among the electorate. This special issue spotlights the communication of movement parties as an avenue for researching their purchase on democratic politics. Through a combination of empirical studies and commentaries, the issue covers multiple countries where movement parties have established a foothold in politics. The introduction makes the case that communication has played a vital part in their rise. Movement parties have expressed greater sensitivity to neglected issues, a drive to renew links with marginalized social groups through more direct – chiefly online – communication with them as well as an ambition to overhaul both the party organization and the political system. While movement parties have signalled a desire to disrupt and reimagine politics, we argue for their critical examination against questions regarding the quality of democracy. Specifically, we problematize the mismatch between a populist rhetoric emphasizing the need for more immediate and greater participation in the party organization as well as policymaking and movement party practices.

Introduction

As countries across the world face the daunting task of making policy choices in rushed attempts to mitigate another severe economic downturn in little over a decade, this time at the hand of the global Covid-19 pandemic, the stage seems set again for new political realignments. In this article, we consider a primary indicator of political realignment – the surge of movement parties – whose multiple causes manifest conspicuously as a shift, on the one hand, of voter allegiances away from established and towards challenger parties; and, on the other hand, of party positions on the dominant issues of the time (Kriesi & Frey, 2008).

Popular mobilisations may long precede electoral contests as a more immediate vehicle for the articulation of collective grievances (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010). The social movements arising to champion them can act as a hotbed for new parties vying to weave fresh links with society, to maximize opportunities for realignment (della Porta et al.,

2017; Mosca, 2014). As we introduce this special issue, we propose a research agenda for the study of movement parties that concentrates on their communication as a multi-pronged avenue – for reimagining party membership, nurturing engagement with the electorate as well as for building innovative types of organization – that invites fresh reflections on the opportunities for participation offered by these political actors, as links with society are reformulated.

Communication can be a vital expedient for resource-poor political challengers hamstrung by precarious and weak organizational structures (della Porta et al., 2017). We discuss the relationship of communication to organization, particularly as movement parties seek renewed and wider ties with their base, extending over and above electoral support. We review evidence of movement parties adopting a populist rhetoric and discuss it against the literature on populist communication that has been shown to be predicated on the disintermediation of links with society through a bypassing of traditional media and journalism in favour of social media and network connectivity (Deseriis, 2020; Engesser et al., 2017). We then consider participation in movement parties stressing the mismatch between their democratic conceptions and the quality of democratic practices they have introduced. We conclude by presenting the articles in this special issue, underscoring their contribution to understanding movement parties through their communication.

An amalgamation of movements, parties and networked communication

An expanding domain of scholarly investigation, the relation between social movements and political parties has been retraced back to an interest in the capacity of the latter to sustain *linkages* with society that feed into their policies (Luttbeg, 1974), organization or electoral strategies (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010); or to questions regarding the capacity of social movements to maximize cultural and structural opportunities for mobilization, collective action and for them to gain political traction (Pirro, 2019, p. 787). Multiple possible entanglements of movements with parties have been explored under the conceptual umbrella of the term movement parties. Succinctly, they have been defined as 'political parties that have particularly strong organizational and external links with social movements' (della Porta et al., 2017, p. 5). At the same time, movements encompass multiple groups – of which one may be parties – into variable networks espousing a common identity (Diani, 1992). A prominent distinction between movements and parties flows from the modalities whereby they seek to effect social change, i.e., by institutional means in the case of parties putting forward candidates competing in elections and extra-institutional actions such as protests, by movements (Kitschelt, 2006).

The point of any neat analytical distinction is to allow observers to outline a phenomenon they investigate by specifying the categorical boundaries that separate it from other phenomena (Wang et al., 2019). However, teasing out categorical boundaries need not obviate movement-party intersections. Movements can feed ideas into party policy; they can bolster the numbers of party cadres or supporters, mobilizing the latter in the course of electoral campaigns or at the polling booth (McAdam & Tarrow, 2010; Vann, 2018). Parties can embrace and champion movement issues, providing previously inaccessible avenues for social change (Tormey & Feenstra, 2015, p. 599). They can

introduce movement claims directly into the electoral and later policy arenas, disrupting these through a critique of favourable bias towards the preferences of the political establishment (Pirro, 2018). In turn, party members are particularly likely to become involved in movement activities, regardless of their ideological leanings (Giugni & Grasso, 2021). Parties can thus shore up movement numbers. Equally, electoral success of a party can dampen movement mobilization (Minkenberg, 2019).

Movement-party alliances may take a local, contextual flavour accounting for the strength of electoral competition, political cleavages, prevalent socio-economic conditions or the participation by the latter in government (Giugni & Grasso, 2021; Kriesi, 1989; Piven & Cloward, 1977). Indeed, the literature on movement parties has highlighted their volatile and temporary nature. As della Porta et al. (2017, p. 24) argue, the term expresses a drive to shed light on 'complex and contingent dynamics developed when the field of party politics meets with protest politics with unexpected outcomes during critical junctures'. As such, they contend, the movement party has been a useful heuristic for social scientists who may otherwise be ill-equipped to bridge political party and social movement studies when observing what may be transient arrangements that nevertheless appear to encapsulate wider social change.

The seminal delineation of movement parties by Kitschelt (2006) has emphasized that the direction in which they develop is from movements to parties. Movement parties are a project undertaken by movement entrepreneurs seeking to move a limited set of neglected or new issues into the electoral and policy arenas with a new political vehicle organizationally more akin to a porous movement than a party with formalized rules and procedures. In his analysis, Kitschelt (2006) mapped out key organizational itineraries of movement parties as they navigate the electoral terrain and later negotiate institutional incentives. Of late, however, examples of movements taking root within established parties in majoritarian democracies – e.g., the Tea Party in the US Republican Party, Momentum in the UK Labour Party – conversely reveal movements as a vehicle for party renewal; for the revitalization and expansion of party links with society (Dennis, 2020; Klein & Pirro, 2020; Klug et al., 2016). They testify to a growing appeal of the movement-party nexus bridging protest and electoral politics over longer cycles of organization alternating between electoral competition, institutionalization and policymaking.

While electoral success can and has spelled the demise of the movement – as in the case of some far-right movements in Western Europe (Kitschelt, 2006; Minkenberg, 2019, p. 2) – the extent to which issues central to a movement endure or expand, can influence the viability of the movement-party as it alternates between periods in and out of legislatures or governments. The communication of such issues is therefore particularly salient to the relationship between movement-parties, movements and their support base. To grapple with this notion more widely, it may help to briefly turn to organizational communication studies. Communication Constitutive of Organization (or CCO) is a meta-theory rather than an explanatory theory that casts communication as the medium for the development and reproduction of organization; for the articulation of organizational boundaries, of its membership, of relationships among members and of the organization with its wider 'social reality' (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 303). Accordingly, the development, transformation, adaptation or impact of movement party relations with supporting movements, their membership as well as political rivals

or democratic institutions can be garnered through an examination of their communication.

The generation of movement parties that has emerged after the 2007–2008 financial crisis has stoked scholarly interest for their choice to marry the technological affordances for networked communication of information and communication technologies (ICTs) with an ethos of direct participation by their membership in both party affairs and the political system (Anduiza et al., 2019; Tormey & Feenstra, 2015). A low entry threshold, conceived of as 'an entitlement to participation' (Kitschelt, 2006, p. 202), has led to movement party membership being granted to anyone proactively seeking involvement, albeit not only in a party meeting or activity but also in their online networks of social and policy platforms (for insights into the Italian 5 Star Movement or M5S see Deseriis, 2020; Mosca, 2020). This conception of membership has been rooted in a critique of established, mass parties characterized by a delineation of the ordinary membership from the party leadership and activists (Tormey & Feenstra, 2015, p. 598).

Attention paid to this transformation of organizational communication was informed by observations that predominant parties in modern democracies had seen their traditional electoral base erode as socio-economic transformations diluted ideological bonds rooted chiefly in materialist values (Inglehart & Norris, 2017). As a result, parties started to compete in the centre-ground of the electoral field by courting voters using market research tools (Lees-Marshment & Lilleker, 2001) and permanent campaign communication strategies offline (Sparrow & Turner, 2001) as well as online (Larsson, 2016). Accordingly, their organizations became bureaucratic, centralized around the leadership and cultivating a top-down mode of communication from the party to the electorate (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 1658). Displacing it, in the case of movement parties, has been a *connective* modality of engagement. It complements and extends longer-running modes of participation such as attendance at physical gatherings (Bennett et al., 2018; Deseriis, 2020; Mosca, 2014; Tormey & Feenstra, 2015) and is predicated on 'technology platforms and affordances [that] are indistinguishable from, and replace, key components of brick and mortar organization and intra-party functions' (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 1666).

Accounts of movement parties as diverse as the Pirate parties in various European countries, the Italian *M5S*, the Danish *Alternativet,* the French *La France Insoumise* or *Podemos* in Spain, paint them as innovators seeking to revitalize participation by making networked communication central to their operation (Bennett et al., 2018; Gerbaudo, 2019). The renewal of the party organizational form that they beckon has hinged on direct access for the membership to the political agenda, to policy deliberations, candidate selection and voting in primary elections. Instrumental to such involvement, digital platforms have embodied a programmatic goal to enable a bottom-up input by the membership into the workings of the party.

The extent to which this communication modality realized with digital technologies has translated into meaningful participation in party decision or policy-making has been empirically shown to be limited and to become restricted over time (Rodríguez-Teruel et al., 2016, p. 572). Examples of the narrowing scope for input are candidate or policy choices that are predefined by small cadres of party activists before they are presented to the membership (Deseriis, 2020). Such strictures to participation have been described as an upshot of organizational adaptation, for example to administrative and territorial

specificities of states where movement parties operate (Rodríguez-Teruel et al., 2016, p. 580). The technologies themselves have contributed to these challenges, as parties have struggled with expanding their digital infrastructures, with moderating deliberations among the membership (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 1671), as well as with assembling new voter coalitions around unified online messaging (Siddarth et al., 2021). Conversely, those very technologies have helped reproduce the dominance of extant party hierarchies over a social media base gesturing their support without any prospect of a seat at the decision or policy-making table (as exemplified by the Australian far-right, McSwiney, 2020). In sum, in several countries, movement parties have been at the forefront of a recent shake up of party politics through a combination of experiments – not always successful – with networked communication with their support base, scaled with ICTs.

Populist communication by movement parties

The narrowing scope for supporter or member participation does not seem to have been strictly matched with a change in rhetoric. Movement parties have continued to extol the merits of direct democratic participation (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 1668; Deseriis, 2020; Mosca, 2014). This, in part, may be attributed to the populist communication (Engesser et al., 2017) embraced by some of them. As discussed below, movement parties mirror the main features of the dominant party model of the historical period in which they emerged, which – for those we discuss in this contribution – is the neoliberal populist party (della Porta et al., 2017).

Populism is a concept at the heart of a large body of literature straddling political science and communication studies (Albertazzi & Mueller, 2013; Anduiza et al., 2019; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Pirro, 2018). Described as an 'empty signifier' (Laclau, 2005), populism has been conceptually grafted onto political projects predicated on anti-elitism and a discursive claim to restore the 'supremacy of popular sovereignty' usurped by elites (Aslanidis, 2016, p. 96).

A singularity of logic, style and strategy characterizes populist communication (Engesser et al., 2017, pp. 1280, 1286). Logic pertains to the 'norms, routines and procedures' underpinning political messaging that, in the case of populist communication, circumvents media organizations to build a more immediate relationship with the public. This is achieved by dint of a distinct 'mode of presentation' which is used strategically to leverage 'power, legitimacy and [opportunities for] mobilization'. To take these in turn, a populist logic foregrounds unmediated communication with the people, envisaged as a homogenous entity defined along ideological lines as the nation (in right-wing populism) or the subordinate classes (in left-wing populism, Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1283). In that way, populism de facto embraces distinction and finds utility in associative yet insulated forms of online communication generically designated as echo-chambers (Bastos et al., 2018) that notably now span multiple platforms and national borders (Zuckerman, 2021).

Second, its messaging simplifies complex policy choices, which are painted in emotional and often negative (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1285), individualized, personalized and even aggressive language (Bracciale et al., 2021). Third, populist communication can be harnessed strategically to accrue power and legitimacy – including through the evasion of public scrutiny on grounds that populists derive their support directly from

the people. Populist communication can thus serve to mobilize 'the people' in rallies, at the ballot box or in other shows of approval enhancing the power of the populists (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1286). Online, especially, it may find fertile ground. Comparative evidence points to a tendency to vote for populist parties – including movement parties such as M5S and La France Insoumise – among politically active users of social media and mobile instant messaging services (Mosca & Quaranta, 2021).

In Italy, the epitomal movement party, M5S, espoused anti-elitism in both its left and right-wing guises by marrying calls for progressive and inclusive politics to tackle post-materialist concerns with the environment, identity as well as inequality with nativism, i.e., adversity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities, and Euroscepticism. It has done so with recourse to emotive language regarding immigration and a dichotomous approach to complex policy choices such as membership of the Eurozone, so as to mobilize a broad ideological coalition and maximize its share of the vote (Pirro, 2018, pp. 445, 452).

M5S additionally provides an illuminating indication of how a movement party embracing populist communication evolves once in government. It first formed a coalition government with the far-right Lega (2018–2019), which was followed by an alliance with the centre-left Democratic party, from 2019 and by a remarkably broad coalition including all parliamentary forces but the far-right Fratelli d'Italia, since 2020. Despite an overt post-election moderation of its language reflecting this change and its institutionalization as it entered into government (Ceron et al., 2020), M5S' anti-establishment claims lingered in the party's rhetoric. The online communication of its 'eclectic' or 'polyvalent populism' has been programmatically associated with the party's aforementioned drive to harness digital technologies for renewed citizen participation in party affairs and the legislative process alike (Mosca & Tronconi, 2019; Pirro, 2018, p. 451).

In Spain, drawing roots from the 15M movement and inspiration from Latin America, Podemos has been an exponent of the left-leaning variant of anti-elitism (della Porta et al., 2017). It has decried the plight of working people in the wake of the economic crisis and fiscal austerity, clamouring an aloofness of corruption-prone democratic representatives bent on structural adjustments that heightened rising inequalities (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2017, p. 988). Yet, similarly to M5S, it imbued its campaign communication with a syncretic populism eschewing erstwhile distinctions between the ideological left and the right. Its bifurcated media strategy appealed directly to supporters online while seizing on mainstream media news values to challenge the political establishment on the airwaves (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016, pp. 384–385). Electorally successful soon after its creation in early 2014, it has used emotive language to turn its intellectual critique into a rallying cry (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016, p. 386) but has displayed less of an appetite than M5S for nativist tropes (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2017, p. 997; Font et al., 2021). The intentional and explicit use of populist rhetoric was in part rolled back after the second Podemos Citizen Assembly in 2017. That forum delivered a more definitive turn to the left and the marginalization of the former political secretary, Íñigo Errejón, who left the party in 2019. Most recently, Podemos became a key partner in the first coalition government in the history of democratic Spain that took office in January 2020.

A third vignette, from Germany, is of right-wing populism reinforced discursively by the Pegida movement and the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party (Stier et al., 2017).

The former emerged in 2014 as a nativist reaction to the perceived composite threats of islamization, immigration, trade liberalization, Europeanization and gender politics (Kemper, 2015; Stier et al., 2017, p. 1366). It soon drew the sympathies of the AfD, a Eurosceptic party formed in 2013 to protest the European Stabilisation Mechanism (Kemper, 2015) created by the European Union in response to the sovereign debt crisis that afflicted Greece and other member states. Within a few years, the AfD 'veered to the radical right' (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; see also Schwörer, 2019) thanks in part to the xenophobic opinion climate seeded by Pegida.

The movement-party nexus became manifest in the autumn of 2015, in the midst of the refugee crisis, when a prominent AfD politician helped organize anti-migrant demonstrations in the East-German city of Erfurt (Kemper, 2015, p. 47). Their confluence was further evidenced by research revealing a substantial overlap – of up to one third – among their supporters on Facebook. Between late 2014 and the summer of 2016, such support was expressed with likes to posts on their public pages (Stier et al., 2017, p. 1373). On Facebook – an outlet favoured by both movement and party – both articulated an anti-elitism directed at the media and Europhile elites welcoming of refugees alongside an exclusionary outlook depicting immigrants as an outgroup threatening the community of the nation (Stier et al., 2017, p. 1378). Together, elites and outgroup carried the blame for an alleged demise of the German nation state (Kemper, 2015), acting as a rhetorical enemy against which movement and party bases were mobilized.

Fourth, in Hungary, Jobbik transitioned from a Christian right student movement to a political party which entered into Parliament within little over a decade (Pirro, 2019, p. 791). It pitched itself in opposition to a gallery of parties whose hitherto key shortcoming had been a failure to 'represent national values and interests'; it drew a direct connection between criminality and a minority group, the Roma ethnic community; it devised a varied portfolio of means to circumvent hostile media so as to nurture its support base on social media as well as through concerts and festivals appealing to the young (Pirro, 2019, pp. 792–793). As a counterweight to those purported ills, Jobbik championed an anti-capitalist, anti-globalist agenda. It lamented elite corruption and the dissolution of the ethno-national community in the face of the threat of criminality and immigration.

Lastly, in the United Kingdom, and especially under the leadership of Nigel Farage, UKIP embraced a populist communication style that made many among the British to regard it as 'the people's party' (Block & Negrine, 2017). As the party lost its main *raison d'etre* after the Brexit referendum (Usherwood, 2019), it had to reckon with a series of dilemmas as it struggled to reposition itself. It thus shifted from 'single issue populism' into being a more conventionally exclusionary European populist party (Usherwood, 2019, p. 1210). UKIP consequently took an organizational and discursive turn into movement politics (Hanna & Busher, 2019) with the Brexit referendum opening the party up to attempts by far-right movements and activists to transition it into the movement party form (Davidson & Berezin, 2018; Klein & Pirro, 2020).

These five examples of populist communication among movement parties on the left and the right illustrate how divergent ideological orientations are married to communication styles distinctly emphasizing either inclusivity or exclusivity. Notwithstanding evidence that regardless of ideology, extra-institutional activists among party ranks are one of the most active online contingents who may be responsible for more polarized party messaging on social media (Lobera & Portos, 2020), we can imagine the two extremes of

far-right movement parties magnifying exclusion (see for example McSwiney, 2020) and left-wing movement parties championing inclusion (della Porta, 2021). In-between the two poles, we can find ideologically eclectic, vote-maximizing movement parties.

Ideological positioning of movement parties additionally seems linked to their relationship with traditional media. On the one hand, leftist movement parties such as Podemos embraced alternative media as a tried and tested means to circumvent the mass media but not its penchant for infotainment, which in the end paved the way to a reinforcing relationship with the media that had been previously enjoyed by other political populists (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016). On the other, far-right movement parties have similarly tended to see legacy media as part of the corrupt establishment while expediently banking on the spread of online misinformation and conspiracy theories aligning with their political agenda (Bergmann, 2018). Ultimately, the ideological stance of a movement party seems likely to colour its communication in as far as 'populists on the left and the right interpret complex socio-economic and socio-cultural processes as favouring 'the elite' and going against the interests of 'the people', but they focus on different processes and evaluate them differently' (De Cleen et al., 2018). The same applies to democratic participation. While populist parties are often critical of representative democracy and strive for the introduction of elements of direct democracy (Mudde, 2004), when compared to far-right parties such as Jobbik, AfD and UKIP, the M5S and Podemos display a greater sensitivity to direct democracy. Indeed, as shown in the next section, the latter deeply informs their political programmes as well as the relationship with their members and the electorate. However, a mismatch has emerged between democratic ideas and practices as M5s and Podemos themselves became members of the political establishment by joining government coalitions.

Quality of democratic participation in movement parties

The standing of movement parties among the electorate and in relation to other parties has had discernible ramifications for voter turnout (e.g., by mobilizing apathetic voters, Passarelli & Tuorto, 2018), policy-making (e.g., through the plebiscitarian use of online fora to engage the membership in policy choices, Deseriis, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2019) or party systems (e.g., through the remodelling of party organizations and a renewed representation of ideological cleavages, della Porta et al., 2017). As such, movement parties have become primary exponents of alternative organizational and communicational approaches. Yet, there is variance in the degree to which membership renewal and its digital extension alongside the disintermediation of party communication with social media and other online platforms is associated with greater participation and a revival of bonds between the electorate and representatives. For this reason, we believe it is instructive to ponder the relation of movement parties to quality of democracy and specifically citizen participation as a key dimension of this concept.

Quality of democracy is a sprawling area of enquiry, which we reference here as a body of literature that has sought to map and evaluate the breadth of the relationship between the citizenry and their representatives. To maintain their legitimacy, the latter are normatively disposed to satisfy free and equal citizens who are able to participate in the affairs of the polity through various forms of association that keep governments accountable and

willing to attend to their citizens (Morlino, 2012). Citizen participation is a fundamental component of the concept pertaining to

> the entire set of behaviours, be they conventional or unconventional (…) that allows women and men, as individuals or groups, to create, revive, or strengthen group identification or to try to influence the recruitment of, and decisions by, political authorities. (Morlino, 2012, p. 204)

The extent to which movement parties have been innovators in respect to participation is a determination one might make against the backdrop of existing party models (della Porta et al., 2017), i.e., the dominant party type during a certain period in the course of the historical evolution of a party system. Accordingly, it has been proposed that a neo-liberal party model that preceded the surge of movement parties over the last decade has impressed on them certain characteristics despite their best efforts to challenge that very model (della Porta et al., 2017, p. 2). Neoliberal policy eroded the capacity of parties for representation through market-orientated reforms and trade liberalization – a failing thrown into relief by the 2007–08 global financial crisis – creating the conditions for new parties to step into the void (della Porta et al., 2017, p. 18). Yet, a hegemonic neoliberal populist party model that is 'organizationally thin, highly personalized, post-ideological and mediatized' has, at the same time, lent some of these features to movement parties.

As described, movement parties offered multiple remediations to the crisis of representation galvanized by neoliberalism – a more immediate and direct relationship with the membership, the importation of neglected or new issues into the representative arena and a robust critique of the status quo embodied by political and media institutions. As they have charted this path, movement parties have made strategic choices, of which we have discussed those pertaining to relations with reimagined memberships that are in turn tied to broader conceptions of democratic participation, public communication and political legitimation. Evidence to date suggests that the M5S in Italy and Podemos in Spain succeeded in channelling the votes of disaffected protestors rising against the establishment and austerity, respectively (Mosca & Quaranta, 2017). These are notable achievements attesting to the electoral appeal of populist communication among aggrieved social groups harbouring a sense of abandonment by the political elite (Aslanidis, 2017). They arguably add to the quality of democratic participation in those countries by affording hitherto politically disengaged citizens new opportunities to associate, select representatives and influence policymaking. They, however, have to be juxtaposed with the evolving adaptations of the party organization – which have restricted participation – and with any damage to participation likewise flowing from populist communication (e.g., a continued erosion of general trust, institutional trust or outgroup exclusion in the specific case of right-wing populism).

While digital platforms may ease access to party organizations – now more readily accessible at the click of a button – we would again note that diverse efforts by movement parties to broaden their membership have yielded disparate results. Podemos and M5S have succeeded in enrolling half a million subscribers (see Podemos, 2020b) and two hundred thousand, respectively, on their online platforms (see M5S, 2021). The level of enrolment on Rousseau, the M5S platform, was a rather disappointing result given that the party's stated goal was to reach one million subscribers by the end of 2018

(Gerbaudo, 2019). In terms of *quantity*, then, the experiment set up by Podemos seems comparatively more successful. However, it is worth stressing that just a tiny portion of those registered on the platform are active members (ibid.). Thus, in terms of the *quality* of member's engagement, the platform did not seem to have radically transformed the decision-making processes within the party. Additionally, as Gomez and Ramiro explain, 'the radically new notion of membership implemented by Podemos has not been able to remedy the voters-members gap' (2019, p. 544). Being male, highly educated, with a better employment status, active in voluntary associations and ideologically radical still distinguishes members and voters.

M5S has further differentiated members' involvement in party life extending it beyond online ballots to also engage them in the discussion of draft laws and in the proposal of law initiatives. Nonetheless, the multiplication and fragmentation of procedures did not generate greater participation as members perceived that 'who decides on the other side of the screen is generally not listening, not responding and that inputs from users are not making a difference' (Mosca, 2020, p. 16). Moreover, the Rousseau platform denies members any horizontal interaction and rules out any possibility to control the agenda from below (Deseriis, 2020). Democratic participation through digital platforms seems then to level off at the point where it involves significant numbers of citizens in cut-and-dried activities.

In the end, despite gaining government positions and resources, neither M5S nor Podemos were able to implement innovative participatory practices. In its first experience in government, together with the Lega, M5S created a ministry for direct democracy. Notwithstanding successful efforts to reduce the number of MPs through constitutional reform, it failed to introduce binding popular law initiatives and promises to involve citizens in the law-making process through the creation of a single portal for government consultations have remained unattained. As for Podemos, 'more effective bottom-up decision-making processes – such as citizens' initiatives, recall or extraordinary congresses – have never been implemented for lack of support' while a great deal of local structures – círculos or circles – have been deemed 'zombie circles' because of their inactivity and the absence of real citizen participation (Lisi, 2019, p. 254 and 256). Moreover, Podemos stopped using online ballots ('consultas ciudadanas') as a means to involve its supporters in party decisions after it became a member of the left-wing executive with the socialist PSOE. The last one was called in November 2019, concerning its participation in the coalition government (Podemos, 2020a).

Lastly, the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic to the organization of work and everyday life arguably presented an opportunity to put to the test alternative modes of citizen participation. In this respect, movement parties seemed better positioned and able than traditional parties to leverage digital media as engines of civic engagement. Nevertheless, as the pandemic compressed democratic freedoms reducing spaces for more or less conventional forms of participation, efforts to imagine and propose innovative modes of democratic participation did not originate with movement parties. Instead, local grassroots citizens' initiatives have arisen to meet this latest challenge (e.g., Frena la curva – Stop the curve – in Spain, which spread internationally in Europe and Latin America, see Falanga, 2020). Consequently, a rejuvenation of citizen participation wrought by movement parties seems to have been

constrained by observed similarities with the neoliberal party model as well as by a limited capacity to attract and retain supporters on online platforms and to use these to widen involvement in party affairs or policymaking, especially once in government.

Issue outline and conclusion

The articles in this special issue contribute to the systematic examination of movement party communication as an avenue for illuminating these parties' purchase on democratic politics. In her article, della Porta makes the case for a wider interrogation of movement party communication that steps outside their online platforms so as to approach their use as one of potentially multiple communication practices and underpinning party strategies. Failing to do so, della Porta argues, can lead to a partial treatment of movement parties that does not fully account for either relations within the party that are not manifest online – thus only offering a 'partial vision of the qualities of democracy in the parties as such' (2021, p. 5); or for prevalent understandings of ICTs within party systems. Both of these contentions are very welcome as they alert observers to a necessary, longer perspective one may now take on movement parties, their development and, most notably, any treatment of their communication as expressive of relations within such parties and party systems more widely. In this issue, Siddarth and her colleagues take up this very task in their analysis of the institutionalization of the Indian Aam Aadmi Party (AAD).

As indicated above, movement parties emerged as a reaction to perceived failings of retrenched established parties. The extent to which they have managed to maintain distinctly participatory relations with either membership or electorate has varied. In the case of the AAD, its meteoric electoral trajectory – repeatedly winning regional elections between 2013 and 2020 – was paralleled by its transformation from 'a movement party, to a political party with social movement origins, to an uneasy mix of political institution, personalistic political party and self-identified political "outsider"' (2021, p. 2). Siddarth et al.'s case study reveals a long-standing tension in the AAD between a drive to consolidate the party leadership – inter-alia through its structure and not unlike Podemos (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016) messaging concentrated around the leader – and renewed efforts to maintain the core anti-corruption ideology of the movement wherefrom it originated. AAD thus adopted a split communication strategy emphasizing both aspects to carefully segmented audiences on social media, where the anti-corruption movement had initially made headway.

A similarly bifurcated communication strategy was embraced by the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the wake of the Brexit referendum, Klein and Pirro highlight also in this issue. Its activists founded War Plan Purple (WPP), a spin-off group catering to the cultural agenda of the party's radical right flank, on social media. The WPP created an opening for UKIP 'to venture down a social movement route' (2020, p. 14) as the party reorganized following the 2016 referendum. UKIP moved in the opposite direction to the AAD, namely further away from the institutional arena and closer to the grassroots movement, reverting to a more familiar position of movement parties. Similarly, links to the grassroots have been cultivated by Australian far-right parties, who, as McSwiney (2020) explains, have used social media chiefly to reinforce exclusionary identities and discourse.

In their article, Lobera and Portos stress that, online, grassroots activists can play a pivotal role in the emergence of political challengers – such as Gerard Batten, UKIP's president during the period examined by Klein and Pirro – when they are co-opted into digital campaigns for office. Grassroots activism may both energize and radicalize campaigns. As the authors put it, 'activists may be favouring messages of more radical candidates, polarizing the discourse of their own parties' (2020, p. 13). Lobera and Portos argue that activists' extra-institutional participation drives online political engagement irrespectively of their party affiliation. In turn, this supports the hypothesis that movement parties can maximize their online campaigning by mobilizing greater pools of grassroots activists.

Examining the relationship between movement parties and their support base, Mosca and Quaranta (2021) importantly likewise indicate that a penchant among politically active social media users to vote for parties such as M5S may be owed not just to the populist communication of the latter online but also to their push to rejuvenate political participation and party decision-making. Evidence that, in Germany, the AfD did not benefit from a similar tendency is put forward by the authors as a basis for further scrutiny of the link between technological innovation by movement parties and their electoral gains. Likewise, varying institutional features, web regulations and constellations of media systems are shown by the two authors to matter in the relation between the political use of digital media and the vote for populist movement parties.

In their comparative analysis of speeches by leaders of M5S, Podemos, Lega Nord and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), Ceron et al. additionally paint a contrast between right-wing and 'non-right-wing' populist communication styles. The authors unpick differences between them to reveal a persistence of the right-wing style during periods in and out of government. Ceron and his colleagues argue that contrary to some expectations, right-wing populists may not moderate their criticism of the political establishment and institutions once in government or in a supporting coalition, something that M5S and Podemos leaders seemed more amenable to doing.

Yet, in a study resonating with della Porta's call for research on movement party communication to be observed in context, Bracciale et al. (2021) evince that a populist communication style was adopted across the board by party leaders during the 2018 Italian elections, on social media. They emphasize (p.12) that while 'the leaders employed and mixed populist style elements in different ways and at different intensities … the overall differences were slight'. Their investigation thus points to a normalization of the populist communication style, in recent Italian elections, that was nevertheless more prevalent among the messages of the M5S and the Lega leaders.

Finally, the implications of these empirical findings are thrown into relief by Ethan Zuckerman's contribution to this issue. In his commentary, Zuckerman paints a dynamic media ecosystem and advocates for cross-platform, transnational, and multi-media approaches to recent 'flows of attention' – e.g., to social and climate justice or far-right ideas – that scale and spill over, are driven by ideology, monetized by multiple platforms and advertisers, and are amplified or dampened by media organizations and social media users alike. To understand how strategic actors such as political parties or social movements negotiate those flows, scholars require new and improved tools, methods and data.

To conclude, we want to stress the importance of examining the communicative dimension of movement parties. As conceived by CCO proponents (Schoeneborn

et al., 2014, p. 305), organization and communication are interlocking constitutive processes whereby movement parties form and transform. Studying movement party communication can provide important insights into their relationships, originally weak and evolving structures, workings, and also their identity as a collective actor (Block & Negrine, 2017). Second, the 'elective affinity' between populists and social media (Gerbaudo, 2018) and a common recourse to populist rhetoric by movement parties should not obscure differences among them or their contexts and the need for continued, discerning analyses of their communication and media ecosystem. Third, democratic innovations pushed by movement parties should be critically inspected as evidence so far implies that increases in the number of members are often achieved at the expense of the quality of democratic participation, and that reaching government positions further distances movement parties from ordinary citizens.

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