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ARTICLE



Which organization for which party? An organizational analysis of the five-star movement

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ABSTRACT

While challenger parties are on the rise in Europe, there has been little attention paid so far to their organization. Even though new parties enjoying path-breaking electoral success soon after their foundation tend to lose votes at their second electoral contests, due among other things to their organizational structures, some parties stand as exceptions. Among them, the Five-star Movement is the most prominent such party in Europe. The party has undergone a number of major organizational changes in the last 10 years, which have halted its institutionalization process, but whose impact on electoral success were, at first sight, less relevant. How did the party deal with the issue of internal reforms and how did these internal reforms change the party structure? This article retraces the party's transformations and tests hypotheses related to three competing interpretations of the Movement's organization: those that see it as a business-firm party, a franchise party and a party movement. Eleven years after its foundation, I contend that the Movement should now be analysed as a 'plebiscitarian' movement party.

Keywords

Populism; political parties' organization; Five Stars Movement; comparative politics; Italian politics

Introduction

Challenger parties are on the rise in Europe (Hobolt and Tilley 2016): the electoral success of both radical-left and radical-right parties (and, in some cases, of new liberal parties) as well as their entrepreneurship on new political dimensions have been extensively debated in the literature (by among others, Allen 2015; Abou-Chadi, 2016; Roodujin et al., 2017). The challengers' growth has also been associated with the profound changes both in the political attitudes of the European electorate (Akkerman et al., 2016) and in the political systems (Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2015; Hernandez and Kriesi 2015). This is particularly true for Southern European countries (Hutter, Kriesi, and Vidal 2017), where mainstream parties suffered massive setbacks in the aftermath of the Great Recession and a new non-radical-right 'populist' wave – represented by Podemos in Spain, the Movimento 5 stelle (Five-star Movement, M5s) in Italy and SYRIZA in Greece – upset the political systems. While the literature has explored the reasons behind the success of new challenger parties both from a supply-side and from a demand-side perspective, comparatively few works have focused so far on

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a comparative analysis of the organization of these parties (Della Porta et al. 2017). Yet organization does affect new parties' chances of surviving in the political competition after their electoral breakthrough. As Bolleyer and Bytzeck (2017: 779) argue, '[n]ew parties that enter parliament quickly after their foundation, entrepreneurial parties formed without societal roots and parties that experience a change in leadership during their first term in parliament tend to lose more votes at the follow-up election than other newcomers'. The Italian M5s is among the most successful challenger parties in Europe. Its electoral breakthrough at its first national election outing in 2013 (t0) represents a new record among European political systems; in 2018 (t1) the M5s won the relative majority, again establishing a new record for a party at its second national election contest. Yet, at first sight, the M5s seems to possess some of the features listed by Bolleyer and Bitzek, which should have eroded its success: it was founded just 4 years before the elections; it has a clear-cut entrepreneurship and experienced a leadership change in 2017, before the 2018 elections. There seem to be some societal roots underlying its first local success – such as, for the example, its close relations with local social movements – and the leadership change was relatively painless for the party. These two apparently contradictory statements highlight two peculiar aspects of the Movement's organization, i.e. its multifaceted organization and its amorphous structure. In the last decade, the M5s changed its decision-making process several times, while at the same time claiming that direct democracy and disintermediation between the leadership and members were the guiding principles of its organization. Yet, how were these changes introduced, and to what extent did they change the original organization of the party?

This article thus proposes to examine the Movement's organizational structure. It will retrace the party's transformation and illuminate its inner workings by examining its process of institutionalization. I will therefore test hypotheses related to three competing interpretations of the Movement's organization: those that see it as a business-firm party, a franchise party and a party movement. While the party movement interpretation is superficially the most promising, the party's past lack of institutionalization suggests the need for a more careful assessment. I contend that the M5s should now be analysed as a 'plebiscitarian' movement party.

The first part of this article describes the theoretical framework and advances three guiding hypotheses. In the second part, I briefly review the genesis of the party and its first attempts at institutionalization. Thirdly, the article analyses the party's recent evolution (through statute reforms and the development of new internal roles). Finally, I use these last findings to test my hypotheses.

The organizational forms associated with the M5s

A private company oversees several crucial functions on behalf of the M5s, including candidate-selection and management of the party's online decision-making platform. This might easily lead us to assume that it reflects Hopkin and Paolucci (1999) business-firm model, which was based on Forza Italia and the Unión del Centro Democrático in Spain. Business-firm parties display very weak organization, low penetration at the local level, and a strictly hierarchical structure within the founding firm. This type of party lacks an official ideology or rooted relationship with civil-society actors or trade unions, while its organization relies on the pre-eminence of the leadership. Grassroots

membership is underdeveloped and, more importantly, is essentially supplanted by office-holding members. Finally, business-firm parties lack ‘the bureaucratisation of their internal structures, which creates a body of party members with a vested interest in the party’s survival, and in creating an “electorate of belonging”’ (Hopkin and Paolucci 1999, 332).

The M5s might also be associated with a relatively new type of organization: Carty’s (2004) ‘franchise party’ (Tronconi, 2018). Using the metaphor of a corporate franchise-based organization, Carty (2004, 10) states that this type of party is ‘recognizable by its common brand’. It has ‘a central organization which determines the product line and sets standards for its production and labelling, designs and manages marketing and advertising strategy, and provides management help and training as well as arranging for the supplies needed by local outlets. For their part, individual franchises exist to deliver the product to a particular market’. The main advantage of a franchise system is the creation of an ‘identifiable product which consumers can count on, a centrally controlled communication programme that ensures they are delivering a consistent message to their clients, and a leadership free to make decisions about product lines or target markets’ (Carty 2004, 11). Although the centre-periphery relationship and the role of members within the party may vary enormously, the ‘pact’ signed by the central office and the local units guarantee the centre’s control over certain features (such as communication, policy decision-making and the party programme). Still, at the heart of the franchise party lies a stratarchical organization through which local units enjoy a partially autonomous role vis-à-vis the centre. Although Carty does not provide a framework for the membership’s role within a franchise party, he argues (Carty 2004, 18) that ‘membership numbers and influence are likely to be tied to the autonomy and power of the unit, or units, through which members participate’. Thus, members should be empowered at the sub-unit level if and when members (and the local units in which members operate) have autonomy from the centre. Finally, leaders are vulnerable in franchise parties displaying stratarchical organization: on the one hand, leaders (both at national and sub-unit levels) possess relevant programmatic autonomy; on the other side, however, members know that the only way to effect changes in policy is to challenge the leadership. The ‘stratarchical structure provides a variety of platforms from which both party insiders and outsiders can mount leadership challenges and so constrain the capacity of the professional leadership to dominate the party’ (Carty 2004, 20–21).

Following the definition provided by Kitschelt (2006), the M5s has also been compared to a ‘movement party’ (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2016; Della Porta et al. 2017; Vittori 2017a). The main features of a movement party are the lack of a pure party in central office; insistence on an assembly-based structure (Scarrow, Webb, and Poguntke 2017) and consequentially on direct democracy, and anti-party rhetoric (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2015). The most widely used definition of a movement party is derived from Herbert Kitschelt’s work (Kitschelt 2006), which is based on the trajectories of Green (Burchell 2014; Frankland, Lucardie, and Rihoux 2008; Müller-Rommel 1998; Müller-Rommel and Poguntke 2002) and radical-right parties (among others, Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2013; Ignazi 1994; Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2007). Although the Green parties privilege an

assembly-based organization with a dual and rotating leadership and radical right parties focus on a top-down hierarchical-plebiscitarian structure, both party families share basic features with movement parties. Both are ‘coalitions of political activists who emanate from social movements and try to apply the organizational and strategic practices of social movements in the arena of party competition’ (Kitschelt, 2006: 280). According to Kitschelt (2006), this definition implies that (a) the party’s organizational structure, namely the party in central office, is weak and the membership is porous; (b) there is no institutionalized system of aggregating interests through designated organs, and (c) the party élite, once elected, tries to balance the need for continued grassroots mobilization and the party’s new institutional role within Parliament.

Disentangling the nature of the Movement’s organization is further complicated by its seemingly contradictory policy choices in the initial years of its existence. Not only does the M5s reject the labels ‘left’ and ‘right’, its policy proposals can be variously identified with radical-left parties (universal basic income), the greens (environmental protection), centre-right parties (the focus on small- and medium-sized firms), radical-right parties (immigration), pirate parties (the role of the internet) and pure anti-establishment parties (see Biorcio and Natale 2013; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2015, 2016). If one were to attempt to associate the M5s with a particular party family, then it would be logical to use the most common organization within the party family as a benchmark. While the M5s is commonly associated with a thin-centred populist ideology (Vittori 2017b), it remains controversial to locate this genuinely new party in either traditional or challenger party families.

In light of the above exploration of the types of organization associated with the M5s, this article will proceed to test three contrasting hypotheses:

- The M5s resembles a business-firm model and its organization is structured through the principles of a media company, Casaleggio Associati.
- The M5s is a franchise party with a stratarchical organization and a crucial reliance on local élites that operate independently of the centre.
- The M5s is a movement party, with a weak party in central office, an assembly-based organization and the absence of any hierarchically organized structure.

The organization as a crucial aspect of party institutionalization

The analytical framework of this article owes much to the work of Panebianco (1982) and Bolleyer (2013). According to both authors, the genetic model of the party shapes the way the party will be organized during its institutionalization process and is largely responsible for the unavoidable tensions that emerge during its structuration, i.e. ‘the tension between the self-interest of party founders to protect their own positions of influence in the party and the need to invest in a viable party infrastructure autonomous of its current leadership’ (Bolleyer 2013: 2). In particular, this tension is more likely to emerge when the party experiences its first electoral breakthrough, the amount of time between the creation of the party and the electoral breakthrough being a relevant variable for the institutionalization (or the lack thereof) of the party.

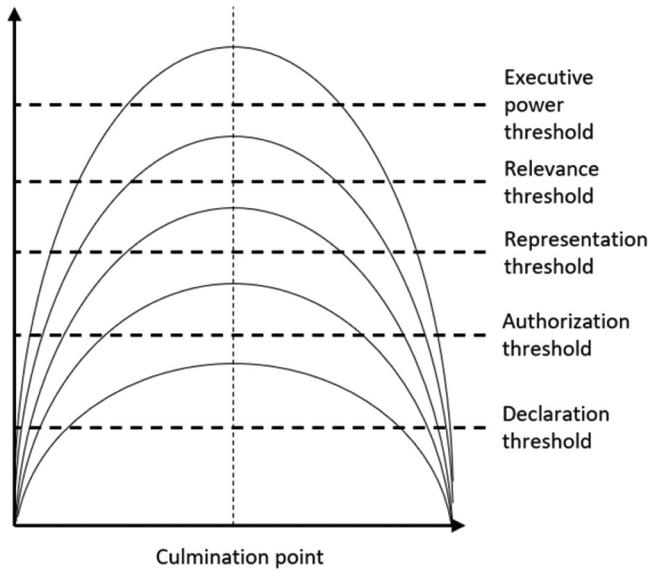


Figure 1. Parties’ electoral thresholds. Source: Adapted from Pedersen’s (1982) niche parties’ thresholds

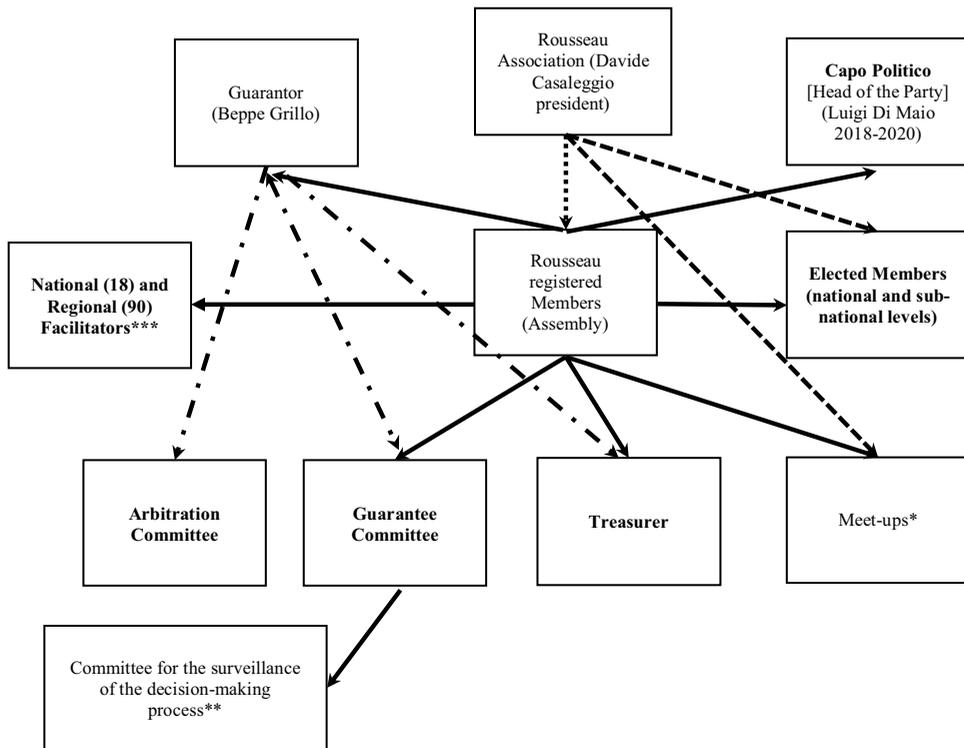


Figure 2. The Five-star Movement’s organization, according to the 2017 statute.

The party's electoral institutionalization will be examined using the seminal Pedersen scheme (Pedersen 1982) (Figure 1), which is built on Rokkan's analysis of party institutionalization. Following and adapting the Pedersen scheme, I identify five thresholds: a) declaration – when a party declares its intention to participate in elections; b) authorization – when a party meets all the requirements set by national laws to participate in the elections; c) representation – when a party elects at least one member to a legislative body; d) relevance – when a minor party becomes relevant under the definition provided by Sartori (1976), and e) the threshold of executive power. This last is not included in the Pedersen scheme but is nonetheless a crucial moment in the party's lifespan, since it means key figures within the party are likely to acquire responsibility in the government.

Furthermore, by building on Panebianco (1982), Levitsky (1998) and Bolleyer (2013), we can conceptualize organizational institutionalization as a twofold process. Firstly, the party's political practice undergoes routinization: that is, its rules and norms become internalized and routinized by both members and the élite. Secondly, while policy goals are the party's driving force in its non-institutionalized phase, institutionalization catalyses the process of value infusion, wherein the perpetuation of the organization becomes a value in itself.

Katz and Mair (1993, 1994) work on the three faces of party organization serves as the starting point for this article's exploration of the balance of power within the M5s (see Figure 2). According to Katz and Mair, three faces can be detected within any political party: the party on the ground; the party in central office, and the party in public office. This tripartite division permits a multifaceted analysis focused both on the relationship between the party and civil society (the party on the ground) and on the interplay between the party elites (the party in central office and the party in public office). When dealing with non-traditional political parties, it is tempting to restrict the analysis to charismatic leadership, which is frequently considered one of main organizational features of party families like the radical right (Mudde 2007; Urbinati 2013). However, the operationalization of charismatic leadership is troublesome, especially when dealing with its vague conceptualization and the endogeneity problem (Mudde 2007; Van der Brug and Mughan 2007). Alternatively, the innovations introduced by Green parties in terms of participation and party leadership might lead researchers to focus exclusively on the party on the ground and its relationship with the party in public office. This approach is equally problematic, however, because it overlooks other important organizational aspects such as member mobilization, the balance of power between factions, and the role of the party's elected representatives and local leaders. Thus, the three faces model remains the most promising approach in analysing both long-standing and relatively new political parties.

Genesis and political entrepreneurship: the franchise-movement party

Officially founded in October 2009, the M5s had within 4 years become the second-largest and the most relevant anti-establishment party in Italy (Table 1). Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio had drafted Movement's organizational structure a few years before on the basis of Grillo's blog and the on-line platform meetup.com, which made possible the informal organization of Grillo's supporters at the local level.

Table 1. The Five-star Movement's electoral performance.

Regional level	National	European
3.4% (2010) *	25.6% (2013)	21.2% (2014)
16.2% (2014) **	32.7% (2018)	17.1% (2019)
15.7% (2015) **		

* % list vote in five regions in which the M5s participated in the elections

** % of list vote

Source: Own elaboration from the Italian Ministry of the Interior website.

Touring theatres around Italy (2005–2006) gave Grillo a wide audience, allowing his anti-establishment message to grow rapidly outside mainstream channels. Grillo's career as a political entrepreneur unofficially started after the success of the nationwide Vaffanculo Day (Fuck-off Day) rallies in Bologna (2007) and Turin (2008). During the same period, while working alongside Beppe Grillo on his blog, Casaleggio Associati was managing communications for Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values, IdV), an anti-corruption party founded by former prosecutor-magistrate, Antonio Di Pietro. The relationship between Casaleggio and Di Pietro combined with the success of the two rallies led IdV to add two 'independent' candidates, both backed by Grillo, to its list for the 2009 European Elections (this collaboration predated the official creation of the M5s). From an organizational standpoint, these initial years were characterized by a penetrative expansion (Panebianco 1982) from the centre to the periphery. Local members were free to organize and establish local units through the meet-up platform and to stand for sub-national elections with Grillo's endorsement (pending their list's approval by Casaleggio Associati). While the programmes for the local elections varied from case to case, the M5s drafted the guidelines – the so-called Carta di Firenze (Movimento 5 Stelle 2009a) – to which local members elected to office had to conform. The programmes demonstrated a focus on sustainable environmentalism, transparency and the promotion of principles of direct democracy (especially within the party) (Vittori 2020). However, nothing was drafted in relation to the organizational structure of the Movement. The very first attempt to institutionalize the Movement was the publication of guidelines for candidate selection, which were limited to the criteria potential candidates had to meet: the absence of previous involvement in any of the traditional parties and the absence of any criminal record. In this sense, while there was a 'centre' that coordinated the local cells (the meet-ups), it did not impose any enrolment procedures and the structure of the party remained porous. Although the Movement's structure was still undeveloped, its main focus was the direct democracy envisaged in articles 1 and 5 of the first version of its statute (Movimento 5 Stelle 2009b). Since Casaleggio Associati and Beppe Grillo owned the party logo, it was their duty to certify that candidates in the local lists met the party's requirements. In this phase, the party's support staff was comprised of Casaleggio Associati employees; there was therefore no party in central office in the sense intended by Katz and Mair (1994). At that point, the Movement's structure was more top-down than bottom-up because local cells had to conform to the guidelines drafted by the

centre. This first phase was characterized by a twofold organizational tendency: one inclined towards the structure of a movement party (because of its porous membership) and one inclined towards that of a franchise organization, because of the centre's control over Beppe Grillo's lists at the local level. The local lists, nonetheless, were relatively free to organize their own structures.

The first stage of the movement's growth (2009-2013): the top-down business-firm movement party

M5s electoral growth in the regional and local elections (Table 1) culminated with a victory in the city of Parma (2012) and first place in the Sicilian regional elections. The following year, in a critical election in which total volatility reached the highest levels (36.65%) seen since the Tangentopoli scandal, the M5s received the second-highest percentage of votes (25.56%), behind only the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD). Thus, in less than 4 years, the M5s crossed all the Pedersen thresholds, becoming a 'relevant' party (Sartori 1976) in the Italian political system. In organizational terms, however, the party was still in the process of institutionalization, this for two main reasons: a) the party had not yet routinized its internal rules and b) its value infusion process was still incomplete. The tensions surrounding the institutionalization of the internal rules arose because of the alleged lack of transparency and democracy within the party. The expulsions of several prominent local figures, such as Giovanni Favia, a regional councillor in Emilia-Romagna, Federica Salsi and Valentino Tavolazzi, city councillors in Bologna and Ferrara, marked a turning point. Following their expulsions, all three councillors criticized organizational aspects of the party, particularly the absence of internal democracy. Furthermore, the party lacked an elected party in central office to counterbalance its diarchic leadership, which controlled both the party symbol and its communications tools. While Casaleggio Associati and Gianroberto Casaleggio could be construed as the Movement's party in central office, Katz and Mair's theorization (Katz and Mair 1994) holds that this interpretation would be misleading. According to their work, the party in central office should both represent the party on the ground and exert checks and balances on the party in public office.

The absence of any party bureaucracy in the M5s in that period might have induced a comparison with a business-firm organization. The party's support staff at Casaleggio Associati had no political mandate to oversee the behaviour of the party in public office, nor was it elected by the membership. Rather, it resembles a managerial support staff serving both the CEO of the firm and the megaphone/guarantor of the party, respectively, Gianroberto Casaleggio and Beppe Grillo. Despite the centrality of the 'one-person-one-vote' notion in the Movement's rhetoric and the promise to institute procedures of direct democracy within the party (Vittori 2017a), mobilization in local electoral campaigns was mainly driven either by local units or by the presence of Grillo himself. Grillo was the main protagonist of several rallies throughout Italy, including the third Vaffanculo Day (Grillo 2013). Casaleggio's attempts and those of Grillo to centralize the party and the 'centre's' unilateral expulsion of several prominent party figures shifted the balance of power towards the party leadership, moving the party away from the initial franchise system towards a more business-firm-like organization. At the end of this phase, the M5s launched on-line tools designed to increase direct democracy and member participation. The subsequent on-line

primaries in 2012 and the first surveys launched on Grillo's blog from 2012 to the beginning of 2013 showed that the party still contained elements of a 'movement' in its organization.

The failed institutionalization attempt (2013-2015) and the de-institutionalization phase (2015-2017): the plebiscitarian movement party

The party's outstanding results in 2013 allowed the formation of a sizable party in public office, composed of 163 parliamentarians and several regional councillors. The party in public office was the first group of members with national visibility; before 2013, Grillo and Casaleggio Associati were the sole points of reference for all sub-national meet-ups and newly elected councillors. After the expulsion of several MPs and the voluntary departure of others in the post-election phase, the party in public office stabilized. Gianroberto Casaleggio's worsening health and Grillo's inability to oversee the functioning of the party (Grillo 2014) accelerated the first attempt to form a proper party in central office. This new facet of the party, called the *Direttorio* (Directorate), would be voted by the whole membership and would act to coordinate the parliamentary and local levels. The membership was given the opportunity to vote on its creation (Grillo 2015a) and on Grillo's five nominees (the MPs, Luigi Di Maio, Alessandro Di Battista, Carla Ruocco, Roberto Fico and Carlo Sibilia). Neither the Directorate itself nor the process of selecting candidates (they were hand-picked by Grillo) were included in the party statute. Party members also voted for two of the three candidates for the Appeal Committee (Grillo 2014) via online referendum. The M5s association's board of directors chose the third committee member. In another internal referendum the following year (Grillo 2015a), the membership voted to eliminate Beppe Grillo's website from the party logo with the clear aim of de-personalizing the M5s.

These decisions should have fostered internal institutionalization by shifting the party's structure towards that of a movement party by dismantling the strict leadership of a business-firm and instituting a supervising body (the Directorate) equipped to control the stratachization of the party. The organization of the party should then have been based on following characteristics:

- Casaleggio Associati, via the Rousseau platform since 2015, should have been responsible for the party's bureaucratic functions and communications, while a lightweight party infrastructure would coordinate online activism, the local cells and the elected bodies.
- The Directorate and the guarantors (Grillo and Casaleggio) should have undertaken the abovementioned internal coordination. Their somewhat reduced power was still comparatively greater than that of other bodies, including the party in public office.
- There should have been both on-line (internal consultations) and off-line (meet-ups) activism. The off-line groups should have remained outside the formal structure of the party, and every meet-up should have guaranteed free access to non-members, i.e. those not officially enrolled on-line. The meet-ups' internal rules should have been decided internally by the meet-ups themselves.
- In terms of policy-making, the parliamentary group (i.e. the party in public office) should have remained autonomous vis-à-vis the leadership and the Directorate. The

only references available to elected officials in this case were the scant programmes at the local, national and European levels (Movimento 5 Stelle 2009a; Movimento 5 Stelle, 2013; Di Cori 2014).

Though the value infusion of the party did proceed slowly towards incorporation (largely due to the lack of structured programmes), full-blown institutionalization was hampered by the party's failure to routinize its internal procedures. Without going into detail on the Movement's evolution, which has been amply discussed in the literature (Biorcio and Natale 2013; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2016; Ceri and Veltri 2017; Tronconi 2015), this article will account for the decisions most relevant to the party's organizational structure.

The first such occurred in 2014, shortly after the disappointing results of the European elections. The M5s decided to join a radical-right group in the European Parliament, Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD). The agreement was reached personally between Davide Casaleggio and the leader of the EFDD's main party (UKIP), Nigel Farage, thus excluding M5s MPs and MEPs from the decision-making process. M5s leaders did not meet with any other representatives of parliamentary groups. There were only three possibilities presented during the internal consultation on the issue: either the party would join the EFDD or the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group, or else it would participate as *non-inscrits* members – and consequently lose all the funding privileges granted to recognized groups. This consultation provoked major criticisms among MPs and ordinary members, who accused Grillo and Casaleggio of pre-determining the choice of EFDD (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2014). Two-and-a-half years later, Grillo and Davide Casaleggio used the same technique to cement an alliance between the M5s and Guy Verhofstadt. The party would be included in the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) in exchange for the Movement's support of Verhofstadt's candidacy for president of the European Parliament. On the heels of the Greens' refusal to accept the M5s in their group (Grillo 2017a), the M5s leadership brokered the alliance with Verhofstadt without any prior consultation of the membership. Only afterwards was the agreement ratified through an internal consultation. The alliance eventually fell apart due to internal disagreements within the ALDE group and the M5s remained part of EFDD.

The second critical moment was Grillo's and, presumably, Davide Casaleggio's decision to dissolve the newly instituted directorate merely months after its creation. The decision to dissolve the Directorate came when major conflicts arose between its members, following a criminal investigation into M5s-sponsored appointees in the Rome City Council. On one side stood Luigi Di Maio, who was accused of protecting his protégée, Virginia Raggi (Mayor of Rome) and her inner circle against 'factions' led by other MPs; on the other side were Carla Ruocco, Carlo Sibilia and Roberto Fico, who endorsed a tougher stance against those involved in the criminal investigation. It was therefore impossible for the new organ to institutionalize within the party, especially with Luigi Di Maio, the most pre-eminent figure within the Directorate, under scrutiny for his relationship with the Movement's mayor of Rome, Virginia Raggi, since she was under investigation for problematic nominations. Di Maio's role within the Directorate was to resolve the emerging tensions by creating links between the local level, the leadership and the party in public office.

The M5s leadership made a third critical choice when it used its power to reverse important decisions taken by the membership, further preventing the party's institutionalization. In a 2014 internal consultation, members decided to back the MPs' support for the decriminalization of illegal immigration despite Grillo's continued opposition (Grillo 2013). Once the immigration crisis erupted in Italy (Grillo 2014), Grillo (2015b) started explicitly campaigning for a law-and-order position vis-à-vis the refugee crisis (this position was reiterated more recently by Luigi Di Maio 2017), thus de facto ignoring the outcome of the members' vote. The other case concerned the primaries for mayoral elections in Genova. While Marika Cassimatis won the nomination in a primary restricted to Genovese party members, Grillo refused to allow Cassimatis to use the M5s symbol, essentially excluding her from the party and invalidating the vote (Grillo 2017b). A second primary was announced: this time it was open to the whole M5s membership and the ballot included only two choices (neither of which was Cassimatis). Members could either vote for Cassimatis' runner-up in the original primary, or they could vote in favour of the party withdrawing from participation in the mayoral elections.

The fourth important decision was when the M5s leadership changed the party statute and the internal code of behaviour that applied to any elected party member when under investigation. The previous party statute (Movimento 5 Stelle 2009b) was composed of only seven articles, which specified the nature of the party (art. 1), ownership of the symbol (art. 3), the party aims (art. 4), enrolment procedures (art. 5 and 6) and candidate-selection procedures (art. 7). The 2016 reform added one article containing a link to the online document describing the party's internal rules (Movimento 5 Stelle 2016). Rather than further routinizing the party, these internal rules increased the asymmetry between the party in public office and the leadership while at the same time bureaucratizing the party's decision-making procedures. The rules established the criteria both for candidacies and for eligibility to vote within the M5s, and detailed the code of behaviour for elected members. More importantly, the 2016 statute reform codified the on-line voting procedures for the first time. The leadership was now entitled to call for an on-line vote and to provide case-by-case rules regarding timing and (virtual) polling hours. With the launch of the Rousseau platform and the most recent statute reform (Di Maio 2017), the party has further accentuated its tendency towards more top-down decision-making processes (Vittori 2017b), coupled with the organization of periodic online consultations. The procedure for member enrolment is typical of a movement party: potential members simply fill out an online form and upload a scan of their government-issued identification document. There are no associated fees or other costs. New members are granted the right to participate in on-line voting once the Rousseau web platform certifies their status. Notwithstanding the relatively simple enrolment procedures, the Movement's direct democracy online is highly centralized and follows strict rules in all decision-making processes (Deseriis 2017). Rousseau is controlled by an association (Associazione Rousseau) founded by Davide Casaleggio, Massimo Bugani and the MEP, David Borrelli. The latter resigned as M5s MEP in 2017, changing the composition of the association. Rousseau's tools for direct citizen participation only allow for limited bottom-up engagement because the platform is designed to discourage deliberation and promote plebiscitarian-like participation (Deseriis 2017). The constant decrease in activists' participation on the Rousseau platform is a direct result of this plebiscitarian structure (Mosca 2018; Deseriis and Vittori 2019). On-line

membership is coupled with off-line membership at the local level, where the meet-up system enjoys greater autonomy. Anyone can participate in the meet-ups, regardless of their registration status on Rousseau. Meet-ups can develop their own rules, especially in smaller cities where there are no on-line primaries, and the meet-ups themselves can select candidates (though candidacies must meet the Movement's internal criteria in order to be valid). In fact, the party statute technically had no jurisdiction over the meet-ups' internal rules or legitimacy since they are formally outside the party structure. However, the party leadership via Casaleggio Associati does certify the legitimacy of meet-ups' candidate lists before elections: this function is now centralized through the Rousseau platform.

The 2017 statute reform centralized the organizational and political resources of the party in the hands of two figures, the Capo Politico (Political Head) and the Guarantor. Until 2017, Beppe Grillo was the Capo Politico, but he stepped down in 2017 in favour of Luigi Di Maio, who resigned in 2020. The Capo Politico has acquired a substantial role within the party since 2017 (art. 7, Movimento 5 Stelle, Grillo 2017a), but still shares power with the party's Guarantor (Beppe Grillo). The Guarantor still has the non-negotiable last word on interpretation of the party statute (art. 8 letter a, Movimento 5 Stelle, Grillo 2017a). The Guarantor's mandate is indefinite and can only be revoked by a majority vote of the Guarantee Committee. In addition, an internal consultation must ratify the decision with a turnout of at least 50%+1 of the total membership. Moreover, the Guarantor is in charge of selecting the candidates for both the Committee of Probiviri (or the Arbitration Committee) and the Guarantee Committee. S/he also selects the party treasurer.

After the 2019 European elections, Luigi Di Maio launched a new function on the Rousseau platform called the *area d'ascolto* ('listening area') in order to ask members their opinions on several organizational reforms the party wanted to make. They included a partial reform of the rule on term limits, in accordance with which elected members could represent the party for only two terms regardless of the institutional level at which they were elected. They also included alliances with civic lists at the local level; the issues to be voted on, on the Rousseau platform, and, more importantly, the creation of new roles at both national and regional levels: the so-called *facilitatori* (facilitators). Regional facilitators (90) would connect MPs and MEPs, and elected members and regional councillors; they would relate with local-level activists, and manage activists' political training. National-level facilitators (18) are of two kinds: six are responsible for organizational aspects of the party, while 12 are responsible for the party's policy development. The latter leads the so-called *teams del futuro* (teams of the future), each of which supervises a specific policy field. Each *team del futuro* is composed of eight members. Currently, the Movement's *sui generis* national party in central office consists of 114 members; yet, the statute has not yet codified any formal power for them. In fact, the Capo Politico can immediately suspend any regional facilitator, even though their removal has to be approved by the Arbitration Committee.

Which party organization?

More than 10 years after the foundation of the party and 15 after Beppe Grillo's first blog post, the M5s remains a relatively small organization. Excluding the V-Day rallies, there

has never been any mass mobilization behind the M5s. The meet-ups have so far selectively supported the bottom-up mobilization of civic platforms (Lanzone and Tronconi 2015). Still, the creation of the party was top-down and centripetal: Grillo and Casaleggio were the catalysts for the party's resources. This top-down organization took different forms over time. In the initial years of the Movement's existence, Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio's leadership and ownership of the party logo were the trademarks of the organization. Then, the party became identified with the centralization of party resources in the hands of the Capo Politico, the Guarantor and the Rousseau association. Nonetheless, there were social movement-like traits visible, though technically there was no social movement with a national projection behind the M5s. The *sui generis* mobilizations organized by Grillo and Casaleggio – the three V-Days – were meetings generated with the aim of denouncing the privileges of different 'castes' (politicians and the media) and collecting the signatures needed to place various bills before Parliament. During these years, the M5s resisted all attempts at institutionalization both at the national and local levels. At the national level, the dissolution of the Directorate left the party without an intermediary structure between the local level and the national élite. The leadership has instead remained unconstrained in each reform of the statute. Grassroots democracy and bottom-up participation are confined to on-line votes at the discretion of the leadership, without any formalized deliberative mechanism. At the local level, the meet-ups are still formally outside the configuration of the party.

The main recent change is the creation of the so-called facilitators in each region: Only with this recent internal reform do local and regional councillors now have a formal relationship with members, civil society and the national organization. Although the party's elected members do participate in and support the activities of the meet-ups, these have no formal power to impose their decisions on elected members. Despite these reforms, any conflict at the local level is still resolved *ex-imperio* by the national leadership, as exemplified by the Movement's withdrawal from local elections in several cities (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2016). Although the M5s project envisaged a leaderless movement centred on an empowered membership (Casaleggio and Grillo 2013), this has not been borne out in practice. The disproportionate organizational resources granted to the leadership over the three phases analysed here have created an important asymmetry in the balance of power vis-à-vis both the party in public office and the sub-strata of the party, whose existence literally relies on Grillo's and Casaleggio's certification of candidate nominations at least until this became a function of the Rousseau platform.

Following the three hypotheses outlined at the beginning, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions. The M5s cannot be regarded as a business-firm party (hypothesis 1). While the M5s displayed a weak central organization and hierarchical structure between 2009 and 2013, the recent bureaucratization of the party and the on-line procedures of direct democracy belie the suggestion that the M5s is a business-firm party. Even in its first phase, the M5s lacked three crucial elements of a business-firm structure, exemplified in the non-marginal role of the membership; the structuring of the party at the local level, and the absence of a firm-like structure. Firstly, while members are marginalized in a business-firm organization, within the M5s they formally retain the last word on any decisions made by the leadership (and in at least three internal consultations they have reversed leadership-sponsored proposals). Secondly, the Movement's growth at the local level has been accompanied by the support of civic platforms all over Italy.

Meet-ups may be outside the formal structure of the party, but their role was (and to some extent still is) important in shaping M5s politics at the local level. Finally, neither traditional firms nor Casaleggio Associati itself are points of reference for the Movement's structure, unlike in the case of Forza Italia. Casaleggio Associati is a private firm acting in a supporting role by providing staff and communications tools to the M5s and its leaders. Although Gianroberto and Davide Casaleggio headed the firm, this does not make the M5s a business-firm organization *per se*.

Nor is the M5s a wholesale franchise system (hypothesis 2). It did have the structure of a franchise-system before its official foundation in 2009. Between 2006 and 2009, a weak central organization provided the 'brand' for sub-units that complied with pre-determined requirements. However, in Carty's analysis sub-units should be powerful enough to be influential at the local level. If such a phenomenon occurred within the M5s, it had ceased by 2009. The Movement's central organization has renounced electoral opportunities at the local level to avoid delegating conflict resolution to local meet-ups or to the party in public office. The M5s is not stratarchical, because the mobilization capacity of local meet-ups that choose to separate from the party is virtually non-existent without the M5s brand. More importantly, the M5s leadership is not vulnerable from within; on the contrary, it has until now been the backbone of the party.

Finally, while the movement party framework (hypothesis 3) fits the organization of the party better, the latter remains distinct in some respects. The M5s is different from a movement party of either the left-libertarian or radical-right ideal types because there is no identifiable social movement behind its genesis. It is similar to the left-libertarian ideal-type in its attempts to replicate assembly-based (bottom-up) organization on-line. It resembles radical-right parties in terms of the power granted to the leadership. However, in this respect both ideal-types are misleading: the M5s combines the use of non-deliberative tools of direct-democracy and a weak internal organization with an unconstrained resourceful leadership. The fact that the Rousseau platform has been controlled so far by an outside association further testifies that the party on the ground cannot challenge the organizational leadership embodied by Davide Casaleggio. Actually, the statute makes any bottom-up challenge to the Capo Politico and the Guarantor very unlikely. Moreover, this vertical control of the on-line platform prevents the formation of factions or currents that might aggregate different interests.

Although the literature on party organization stresses the emerging power of the party in public office vis-à-vis the party on the ground and the party in central office (Katz and Mair 2009), the M5s shows a different trend. Two-thirds of the actual leadership – the president of the Associazione Rousseau and the Guarantor – is outside the party in public office but can nonetheless constrain, and impose decisions on, the party in public office. In this sense, the M5s can be regarded as a movement party with plebiscitarian traits. It is a party whose basic structure resembles some traits of the Green movement party ideal-type (in particular, porous membership, a weak party in central office and a non-institutionalized system of aggregating interests). However, its leadership, like most radical-right movement parties, controls most of the symbolic and material resources available, this through a careful use of the tools of direct-democracy. A plebiscitarian movement party is thus an original combination of a bottom-up-designed structure with top-down control of decision-making processes. The recent reform, which introduced a *sui generis* party in central office, though important from a symbolic standpoint, did not

reverse the balance of power between the party faces, as the national facilitators and the *teams del futuro* do not have any substantial power of control over the Guarantor, the Capo Politico or Rousseau. Rather, they mainly perform coordinating roles within the party.

Conclusion

The Movement's (five) stars have not been eclipsed yet, even though the power of the party's appeal declined markedly after the 2018 election. Yet, contrary to many other examples, the M5s represents a success story when compared to the short life spans of many of the new parties entering parliaments in various democracies (Bolloyer 2013). In some respects, therefore, the party has been an exception to the trend experienced by new parties in old political systems. Yet, in other respects the M5s, like other new parties, faces the very same conundrum of all new parties, i.e. the trade-off between short-term electoral gains and the long-term resilience afforded by institutionalization. As one of the most successful parties in Europe, therefore the evolution of the organization of the M5s acquires great relevance, both for inquiries into the organizational nature of the new 'populist' wave in Southern Europe and for analysis of the new movement parties that have grown since the Great Recession. Despite the party's resounding success in two consecutive elections, electoral institutionalization was not accompanied by party institutionalization, but its structure changed significantly following the launch of Grillo's blog in 2005. It started with a franchise system of list certification at the local level: at the time, the meet-ups had a moderate amount of autonomy in decision-making at the local level but the leadership had ultimate control over local lists' participation in elections. It then adopted a more business-firm-like organization, in which the leadership had control of the party's main resources. The comparison was strengthened by the party's weak bureaucratization and the isolation of all critical voices. However, when the party overcame the electoral threshold, it started embodying its structures in a system of rules that moved the party away from the business-firm model. The party's most recent evolution is exemplified by the statute reforms (of 2016 and 2017, plus the recent changes in 2020); by the development of an on-line platform, and by the codified system for new internal elections.

Of the three ideal-types associated with the M5s, the movement party ideal-type has most consistently reflected the party's organization since its beginning. Nonetheless, the Movement's structure differs in some respects from the movement party ideal-types of both green/left-libertarian parties and radical right parties. The party's direct-democracy tools for candidate selection, decision-making and policy development share bottom-up aspects with left-libertarian parties. The centrality of the party leadership is typical of radical-right parties. The M5s is unique in having plebiscitarian elements, seen in the distribution of its organizational resources, its management of the on-line platform, its top-down leadership selection processes (i.e. the creation and the dissolution of the Directorate), and the power acquired by the leadership through the recent statute reforms. Thus, the M5s can be defined as a plebiscitarian movement party, i.e. a political party with weak intermediate structures and porous membership coupled with a resourceful leadership, which controls the main aspects of the party organization (in this case, the party platform, the tools of direct democracy and candidate-selection at

the local level). It remains to be seen whether the governing experience acquired since June 2018, and the challenges related to the appointment of a new Capo Politico, after Di Maio resignation in 2020 will reshape the balance of power between the party's different faces.

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