

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The failure of mainstream parties and the impact of new challenger parties in France, Italy and Spain

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## Abstract

Political parties share a very bad reputation in most European countries. This paper provides an interpretation of this sentiment, reconstructing the downfall of the esteem in which parties were held and their fall since the post-war years up to present. In particular, the paper focuses on the abandonment of the parties' founding 'logic of appropriateness' based, on the one hand, on the ethics for collective engagement in collective environments for collective aims and, on the other hand, on the full commitment of party officials. The abandonment of these two aspects has led to a crisis of legitimacy that mainstream parties have tried to counteract in ways that have proven ineffective, as membership still declines and confidence still languishes. Finally, the paper investigates whether the new challenger parties in France, Italy and Spain have introduced organizational and behavioural changes that could eventually reverse disaffection with the political party *per se*.

**Key words:** legitimacy; political parties; trust; Western Europe

## Introduction

Parties enjoy a very low level of confidence in almost all European democracies. Such anti-party sentiment is not the by-product of the economic 'Great Recession', as it has been growing since the late 1980s and early 1990s in all the industrially advanced Western democracies (Poguntke and Scharrow, 1996; Dalton, 1999; Polk *et al.*, 2017; Hooghe and Marks, 2018). In Germany, for example, already by the early 1990s, the word *Parteienverdrossenheit* (dissatisfaction with parties) was well underway (Rattinger, 1993).

Discontent with political parties is not limited only to those exercising power: it refers also to opposition parties – or, better, to traditional, 'mainstream'<sup>1</sup> opposition parties.

The recent voters' dealignment 'goes far beyond the short-term punishment of incumbents [...]: other mainstream parties which habitually govern hardly benefitted from the predicament of the incumbents' (Hernández and Kriesi, 2016: 19). 'People are not simply punishing governing parties, they are voting *against mainstream parties as a whole* [...] challenger parties seek to challenge the mainstream' in whichever form it presents itself (Hobolt and Tilley, 2016: 972, 981, emphasis added).

This raises the question whether the charges against mainstream parties concern their policies and activities, or rather if their guilt is, in a way, 'ontological'; that is, it consists in the mere fact

<sup>1</sup>The expression 'mainstream' parties has never been precisely defined in the literature. It usually refers to established and 'relevant' (in the Sartorian sense) parties, irrespective of their political alignment and location on the political spectrum. In most empirical cases, the connotation of 'mainstream' has been used in juxtaposition with minor, extremist, anti-system and 'niche' (Meguid, 2005) parties. In some cases, such as Mair (1995), mainstream parties are characterised as those parties which share similar policies or patterns of development (e.g. as they undergo a process of cartelization).

that they ‘embody’ the idea of the party in itself – the party *per se* – beyond any ideological or political standing. Actually, the recent voters’ shift towards ‘challenger’ parties seems to imply a selective refusal, limited to mainstream parties rather than to party politics as such. These parties present themselves as an alternative not in terms of policy, but rather of *modus operandi*: they contest mainstream parties for their outmoded and sclerotic organization and their consequent inability to interact appropriately with citizens and respond to their demands.

What is a challenger party, and how can it be identified? The category of challenger party, in part germane to the anti-establishment type previously advanced by Schedler (1996) and Abedi (2004), has recently been adopted by the literature (see, among others, Hino, 2012; Hernández, 2018; Schulte-Cloos, 2018; Van Spanje and De Graaf, 2018; Bakker *et al.*, 2020; and for a discussion Bélanger, 2017). At a high level of abstraction, this category refers to those, inevitably new, parties which put forth a radical opposition to all mainstream parties. They contest the latter’s ‘right’ to govern, irrespective of the fact whether they are in government or in opposition (Hernández and Kriesi, 2016; Hobolt and Tilley, 2016).

In this paper, we consider a particular subset of challenger parties: M5S (Movimento 5 Stelle/Five Star Movement), Lrem (La République en Marche/the Republic on the Move) and Podemos (We Can).<sup>2</sup> Although it might seem quite odd to include Lrem with Podemos and M5S, as the two latter parties are analysed together in many studies for their supposed similarities, also Emmanuel Macron’s party shares the same profile: it emerged as a challenger to all French established parties (Perrineau, 2017; Brizzi and Lazar, 2018; Rouban, 2018; Dolez *et al.*, 2019), and, even more, Macron contested political parties as such, which he defined abruptly in his political manifesto,<sup>3</sup> as ‘dead’ (Macron, 2017: 44). These three parties show a set of characteristics that differentiate them from all the other potential challenger parties, in particular the right-populist parties. No other party, in fact, satisfies *all* the following traits:

- large electoral support;
- loose and Internet-prone internal structures and way of functioning;
- very recent formation without relying on any pre-existent structure;
- original ideological references and political visions distant from all previous political families (with Podemos somewhat more traditional in this respect).

All these features are common to the three above-mentioned parties whereas any other ‘non-mainstream’ party does not match the multi-property classification – or taxonomy – so stipulated. The right populist parties may be large and offer a non-traditional ideological profile, but they are not Internet-based, and they rely, in most cases, on pre-existing partisan structures. In sum, this taxonomy of challenger parties matches the criteria of inclusiveness and mutual exclusiveness (Sartori, 1984).

Could the challenger parties counteract the spread of anti-party and anti-political sentiments? In principle, their success might demonstrate that people are still attracted by, and attached to, party politics; their comparatively higher recruitment capacity (although not along traditional modalities) and, even more importantly, their appeal to previous non-voters and alienated constituencies would suggest that these parties – and thus the political party *per se* – can still avail themselves of some credit.

In order to frame the challengers’ answer to mainstream parties, a large part of this paper is devoted to discussing the context which provided the outlet for their rise. The driving hypothesis reframes, *inter alia*, Katz and Mair’s (1994, 1995) and Mair’s (2013) analysis on the epochal

<sup>2</sup>For the LREM, see Cautres *et al.* (2018), Rouban (2018), Dolez *et al.* (2019); for the M5S, see Mosca (2020), Tronconi (2015, 2018), Bordignon and Ceccarini (2019), Vittori (2019); for Podemos, see Pérez-Nievas *et al.* (2018), Gomez and Ramiro (2019), Mikola (2017); for M5S and Podemos, see Mikola (2018), Deseriis and Vittori (2019), Gerbaudo (2019b).

<sup>3</sup>Macron’s book which introduced his candidature to the presidency was significantly titled *Révolution*.

transformation of political parties that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. It was in that period that parties lost touch with public opinion because of intra-party modifications which distanced themselves from the public, and led to a self-inflicted ‘disfiguration’: they became something different, which contrasted with the ‘logic of appropriateness’ (March and Olsen, 2013) with which (in particular, mass) parties were imbued. To gauge this disjunction, the focus of analysis will be directed towards an *interpretation* of intra-party dynamics (membership role and meaning, and leaders’ behaviour). It will be argued that intra-party modifications recently introduced by mainstream parties, the rules and praxes that these parties followed in their interactions with society and the state, and an affluent lifestyle adopted by party representatives and officials, might have further aggravated the party’s reception in the mass public.

The last part of the paper will discuss whether the new challenger parties have contributed to offsetting, and eventually solving, the crisis of legitimacy of the political party by offering different avenues of intra-party dynamics and societal relationships.

### The waning of the party logic of appropriateness

Following Linz’s (2002: 307ff.) witty and insightful suggestions (see also on the same line Fawcett and Corbett, 2018), one could reframe his points arguing that, in reality, citizens display contradictory attitudes towards political parties. They criticize intra-party fights but advocate internal pluralism; they want powerful leaders in charge but dislike personalization; they reject public funding for parties but also money from vested interests and big donors; they want parties devoted to general interests but they criticize the lack of commitment and attention to specific concerns; they consider parties ‘all the same’ but disdain tough party competition and open conflict.

All these charges, whether real and empirically validated or rather perceptive and emotional, in essence, mirror, on the one hand, the longstanding and persistent hostility to pluralism and the longing for harmony and concord (Rosenblum, 2008; Ignazi, 2017); and, on the other hand, nostalgia for a sort of mythical era when parties were repositories of public and private virtues: dedication, representativeness, responsiveness, internal democracy, honesty, congruence and so on.

The latter set of points is under investigation here. We question in fact:

- (a) which party characteristics were strongly criticized by public opinion, and which modifications (mainstream) parties introduced in recent decades in an attempt to recapture confidence – and how effective the modifications were; and
- (b) which challengers’ approach to politics and party organization could have counteracted mainstream parties’ deficiencies and pitfalls, and eventually reinforce credibility in the political party *per se*.

A diachronic perspective would help to gauge the present parties’ dismal status. We thus would inquire whether the present negative attitude comes from a perception of what parties were in the past. Indeed, parties enjoyed a completely different aura in the post-Second World War period. That was the parties’ ‘golden age’ (Katz and Mair, 1995; Janda and Colman, 1998) as, beyond their organizational strength, *they savoured confidence and trust* (Ignazi, 2017; *contra* Clarke *et al.*, 2018 for the British case). They were considered legitimate interpreters of the public’s will and claims.

That general sentiment, however, should not be overstated, nor should it conceal other attitudinal flows. In the same period, the mass public was also marked by different sentiments which displayed a less participatory and enthusiastic involvement in party politics (Corduwener, 2016). Political fatigue was also there: it was the inevitable outcome of the forced mobilization imposed by totalitarian regimes, and the Nazi occupation of the war years (Gildea *et al.*, 2006). In Germany and Italy, in particular, the ‘sacralization of politics’ (Gentile, 2006) overwhelmed

normal life and transformed habits, customs, attitudes and even the behaviour of ordinary people. Thus, the perspective of a *Stunde Null* in Germany – the erasure of the past to commence a new life from scratch – or the diffusion of the *qualunquismo* in Italy (Corduener, 2017) – a short-lived although not irrelevant anti-political and anti-party movement in the late 1940s – are two clear manifestations of this feeling. If these attitudes were particularly acute in post-totalitarian countries, in different guises and with different intensities, similar sentiments were present all over Europe (for a comprehensive overview, see Conway, 2004). Nevertheless, even taking this caveat into consideration, the post-war atmosphere was pervaded by political *engagement*, as described in Tony Judt's masterpiece *Postwar* (2005).

Party membership reached its zenith in most European countries in the 1950s, albeit with a far from uniform trend either across or within nations (Van Haute and Gauja, 2015). Actually, what was at stake here was not the level of recruitment, but rather the *meaning of membership* at the time. The idea of an active membership was an inherent element of enrolment in a party, particularly in mass parties, and even more pointed in socialist ones. Joining a party implied much more than vague support: it meant commitment. Such a vision brought with it the ethos of an encompassing effort by everyone in the party, from the rank and file to the top leadership, all devoted to the party's goals; and such goals, in turn, hinted at a general well-being, or, in other words, at *the achievement of collective interests*. Historical and sociological accounts, as well as internal sources of militants, cadres and leaders operating in mass parties during the early post-war decades, overflow with narratives of endless internal meetings, animated debates, tiring speech-giving tours, canvassing, crowded events and occasions, picket lines and so on.<sup>4</sup> In sum, militantism was the key feature of party politics of this period: intra-party activity and inter-party competition involved, and agonized, a sizeable number of people (Von Beyme, 1985; Judt, 2005; Mair, 2013).

Reference to these participatory activities is relevant for the present analysis in two respects: *first*, they were collective and face-to-face activities; *second*, they were addressed to collective purposes without any consideration of individual, direct, personal benefit. Of course, ambitious people interested in a career within or through the party did exist (as analysed by Panebianco, 1988), but they had to hide such a purpose because the 'logic of appropriateness' of partisan life demanded the opposite direction. Appropriate behaviour in the party realm had to follow norms concerning *participation* in (and support for) the party policy on the part of members, and *devotion* to the cause and *disinterest* in any material benefits on the part of the party leaders and elected representatives. This was particularly true in the leftist parties.<sup>5</sup>

The 'social contract' binding members (and the loyal electorate at large) and leaders foresaw cost-free organizational activity by the former, and a 24-hour commitment, discarding any personal interest and benefit, by the latter. Leaders' personal characteristics were rated in terms of integrity and devotion to the cause (radically different traits compared to the present television-prone smiling and cool appearance). This is why, *inter alia*, members and loyal voters could accept abrupt changes in party policies without withdrawing because *they trusted their leaders*.

This interpretation might risk presenting a too rosy picture of party life in the 'good old days': ambition and power-seeking did exist, and internal fights among tendencies and factions pervaded intra-party life in the age of mass parties. Ideological and political exertions crossed the main European parties, from Socialists (Sassoon, 1996) to Christian Democrats (Hanley, 1994), from Liberals (Kirchner, 1988; Cooler and Van Haute, 2019) to Conservatives as the British Tory party (Crewe and Searing, 1988; Bale, 2012).

<sup>4</sup>Classics such as Maurice Duverger's seminal work *Les Partis Politiques* (1951) as well as, albeit in different terms, Neumann's (1956) typology of party of social integration provide evidence on this point.

<sup>5</sup>The comparison between British Conservative and Labour MPs provides evidence of the different ethical standards: 'serving in Parliament almost doubled the wealth of candidates of the Conservative Party, but had no appreciable effect for Labour candidates' (Eggers and Hainmueller, 2009: 351).

However, beyond all that, a ‘partisan ethic’ implying the accomplishment of a *collective, general outcome* permeated political parties. This ‘organization ideology’ (Panebianco, 1988) spread from left-wing mass parties to all the others, to the point of becoming hegemonic. As a consequence, public opinion developed precise expectations from politicians, at all levels. The public required that party members be active constantly in promoting party policies, and party leaders to represent the citizenry both in duly responding to its demands, *and in their own personal lifestyles*. Party high officials and MPs were all expected to behave like missionaries rather than managers or entrepreneurs. It was not by chance that an MP’s salary was many times less than is currently the case (Mause, 2014; Katz and Mair, 2018: 76). Moreover, salaries earned by MPs in all West European countries are much higher than the average salary of their country, with Italy and Austria at the top (Mause, 2014: 158).

If this overview is correct, then the gap on the one hand between *image* and *expectations* rooted in the political culture of West European citizenry in the early post-war decades, and on the other hand the *actual political-partisan reality*, is immense. Much of the disaffection towards parties comes from this mismatch: high expectations nurtured by a, sometimes mythological, narrative (mainly produced by, and referring to, socialist parties) of party activity are contrasted with the present individualistic and careerist behaviour of many party leadership groups, plus the privileges and status symbols those groups have availed themselves of in recent decades thanks to an amazing increase in resources available to parties (Van Biezen and Kopecky, 2017).

The abundant flow of money and the seizure of many positions in state-controlled bodies have enacted an almost inevitable ‘corrupting effect’. It is no surprise that a 2017 international survey shows that ‘people in the Netherlands (56%), Germany (59%), the UK (61%) and France (65%), *do not believe that most political leaders are honest*. Furthermore, most believe that politicians *do not live in the same world as normal citizens* – that they do not understand the everyday issues and problems ordinary people experience’ (Kantar, 2017: 4, emphasis added). More specifically, an Ipsos MORI (2009) survey on British citizens stated that ‘most MPs put their own interests first’ (62%), ‘most MPs use their power for their own personal gain’ (68%) and ‘most MPs make a lot of money by using public office improperly’ (68%).

In conclusion, the charges addressed to political parties, developed in comparison to the supposed virtues of a partisan golden age still longed for by the mass public, derive from the radical transformation of the *meaning* of being a member: with the coming of individualistic and personal drives, further heightened by the perspective of high salaries and fringe benefits once a representative position is attained, and with the parties’ greater availability of material resources in terms of direct public financing and indirect provisions, especially through patronage and clientelistic practices, parties have been regarded as an organization populated by free riders devoted to *the self-reproduction of privileges rather than by militants committed to ‘a cause’* (Katz and Mair, 2018: 64–65). This picture entails that the collective dimension of intra-party politics (Pizzorno, 1981) has made room for individual self-affirmation, even in economic terms. The importance of a recast collective dimension goes far beyond a nostalgia for social movements and so forth: it might recover what Elster (1986: 130), speculating on institutions, defined as ‘market failure’, the fault of ‘private uncoordinated choices’ to provide general positive outcomes. Transplanting his analysis into the party realm, we can argue that private drives – which have risen steeply since the time of Elster’s work – have pervaded political parties to the point of underscoring its ‘essential’ collective nature.

### The mainstream parties’ failure to redress

Party leadership throughout advanced democracies has perceived the mounting dissatisfaction in public opinion and has undertaken some changes to tackle it. Apparently, however, the transformations they enacted have had the opposite desired effect with respect to public feelings. Whilst public opinion – in line with scholars such as Kirchheimer (1966) – advocated for a renewed

militancy disinterested in terms of *individual* benefits, to be fulfilled in a *collective* environment for *collective* purposes, parties followed another route. On the one hand, they introduced managerial decision-making and fostered personalized politics relying on new media communication, discarding ‘old style’ militancy (Mair, 2013; Scarrow *et al.*, 2017; Katz and Mair, 2018); on the other hand, they ‘opened up’ decision-making processes related to leadership and candidate selection and, much more rarely, to policy decisions, to the party membership (as in the case of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) on the acceptance of the *Grosse Koalition* in 2013 and 2017–18) (see Cross *et al.*, 2016; von dem Berge and Poguntke, 2017).

The latter intra-party innovations were intended to counteract membership demobilization. In fact, the decline in party membership – the clearest, yet gross, indicator of party strain (Kölln, 2014) – accelerated everywhere with few exceptions (Spain, Portugal and Greece) in the late 1990s (Bardi *et al.*, 2017: 66). As a consequence, partisan militancy decreased too (see Gauja, 2013: 128; van Biezen and Poguntke, 2014: 209), albeit non-partisan campaign involvement seems to be on the rise, as in the 2010 British general election (Fisher *et al.*, 2014).

In principle, the opportunity to play a role in the intra-party chain of decision-making increases the importance of the membership. However, what is the effective significance of members’ empowerment, beyond a *perception* of more importance? Is this the better way to revitalize the linkage between party and society? Indeed, many shortcomings scale down the fervour for this solution (Ignazi, 2020).

Firstly, members’ empowerment may be motivated by internal pressures and power conflicts rather than by the intent of enlarging participation and ‘democratizing’ the internal life of the party. The call to the membership may be used as a weapon by the leadership against opposition parties with a plebiscitarian intent or by opposition, to show the lack of leadership consent in the rank and file.

Secondly, a direct call to membership and, above all, to party sympathizers bypasses a party’s collective organs and middle-level elites (see Rahat, 2009; Detterbeck, 2012; Faucher, 2015; Gauja, 2015; Aylott and Bolin, 2017). As a consequence, the intermediary components, traditionally considered the effective backbone of the party for their role as an aggregative clearing-house of demands, are now at pains to maintain their function (Heidar, 2006).

Thirdly, and even more importantly, the dispossession of functions and power of the intermediate party strata implies a reduction of *collective environments, such as assemblies and meetings, where these activities used to be portrayed*.

Finally, as appeals to party members via a direct, unmediated and individual modality eclipse the principle of delegated democracy, this raises the question of the type of democracy parties are instilling in their internal structures and, *in extenso*, in the political system. Compliance with a direct modality fosters a plebiscitary approach to politics (von dem Berge and Poguntke, 2017: 151).

The turn towards intra-party direct democracy – actually advocated and practised by the German Greens at their inception in terms of *basisdemokratie* – has not come out of the blue. It has been nurtured by a long-term frustration and disappointment with intra-party oligarchic practices. All this is not new, as exemplified by Michels’ ([1911] 1962) early criticism of intra-party dynamics. However, the German scholar was quite a realist on the illusory and manipulative character of direct democracy and membership (apparent) empowerment: ‘the weight of an oligarchy is rarely felt when the rights of the masses are codified and when each member may *in abstract* participate in power’ ([1911] 1962: 216, emphasis added).

Michels forecasting speculation has found empirical evidence. Schumacher and Giger (2017: 176) have demonstrated that ‘widening the selectorate increases leadership domination’. This has occurred because parties became more leadership-dominated and, to enforce that, they widened the selectorate, or that by widening the selectorate parties became more leadership-dominated. What we can do is to reject the notion that ‘widening the selectorate is correlated with less leadership domination’ (Schumacher and Giger, 2017: 176). In the same vein, Gauja

and van Haute (2015: 191, emphasis added) stated that: '(d)espite being granted more rights in some decision-making processes, *members' attitudes towards the functioning of their party and intra-party democracy are far from being unanimously positive*'.

On the basis of this evidence, the inclusion of larger numbers of members (and even supporters) in the selection process apparently has not increased the attractiveness of the party either in terms of membership, or in terms of higher involvement, or, finally, *in terms of confidence*. Thus, the warning suggested by Scarrow (2018: 16) is perfectly consequential: as the 'model of pluralist democracy rests on the willingness of a small portion of citizens to enlist and participate within parties, what happens if the number of formally enrolled partisans dwindles further, despite party efforts to make membership more attractive?' This is precisely the conundrum: since the negative trend in membership and confidence does not revert, it may foster a further shrinking of trust and, ultimately, hinder the legitimacy of parties as representative agents, with a 'rebound effect' on the democratic system.

In conclusion, the outcome of organizational changes by the mainstream parties is far from positive. Membership still shrinks and demobilizes, leaders go their own way, confidence plummets, and, on a different account, anti-democratic forces gain momentum. Although it may seem odd, the present ascent of populist forces is connected to the spreading of modalities of intra-party direct democracy. The plebiscitarian intra-party dynamics in use in many mainstream parties today affect (actually, *infect*) the political climate and practices in the political system as a whole: the populist surge of the present period has been nurtured also by this shift (see e.g. Bardi *et al.*, 2014: 249).

Given this setting, the question of party membership remains at the core of democratic politics. Even if we no longer live in an epoch of mass industrial society, where numbers equated to strength (in factories as well as in the army), membership numbers are still considered an indicator of the good (or bad) health of a party, for the simple reason that a party should demonstrate its solid linkage with society. The more members a party can display, the more it is considered in tune with society at large: as Seyd and Whiteley (1992) said, members are 'ambassadors of the society'. Membership has an intrinsic value for political parties.

But it is not a question of numbers, whose decline is unequivocal (Bardi *et al.*, 2017), safe exceptions such as the amazing increase in the Labour party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. The real trouble concerns the different *meaning* that, in present times, enrolling in a party has with respect to the era of the mass party. Such a difference is implied by the modality with which the adhesion was fulfilled in the past and is practised now.

Mass party recruitment implied a personal, direct, face-to-face encounter between local party members/officials and the applicant. Parties needed 'reliable and trustworthy' persons and thus they scrutinized and probed new members, adopting gatekeeping techniques such as introductions by existing party members, interviews, periods of probation and so on. Also, in the bourgeois parties, a controlled procedure was put in place. In this case, the rationale was completely different: it was rather the transposition into the party domain of the standard rules of gentlemen's clubs.

In any case, the applicant's contact with the party organization was physical and direct. Becoming a member was not limited to 'sending a cheque' or 'clicking a link'. A potential member had to interact with a community, and this interaction offered all the socializing elements to identify her/himself with the party. Becoming a member involved much more than supporting a specific policy; rather, it implied *sharing a common goal with others* (Pizzorno, 1981). All the educational and leisure activity of the mass party was intended to favour the formation of a partisan identity through a densely knit set of interactions. Parties created 'political subcultures' precisely to enforce and reinforce the political and *affective* linkage with the party and, in difficult contexts, to set up a secure and protective environment, as in the case of the German imperial SPD's 'negative integration' (Roth, 1963). The traditional vision of party adhesion and intra-party life implied face-to-face relationships, a modality of interaction that is at odds with the contemporary

sociocultural environment. Interaction – or expressive participation (Verba *et al.*, 1978; Pizzorno, 1981) – was a value in itself, much more than the decision-making process (and even the decisions themselves).

Indeed, parties have recently introduced different forms of political involvement beyond card-carrying/fee-paying membership to provide fresh militant energy (Scarrow, 2015). These innovations can be seen in diverging ways. Some argue for a *functional* similarity between party members and active party supporters (Scarrow, 2015, 2018; Kosiara-Pedersen *et al.*, 2017; Hooghe and Kölln, 2018). Members and supporters could be *functionally* interchangeable but *only if* they share a similar level of loyalty to, and identification with, the party as Hooghe and Kölln (2018: 9) stress. Only when both loyalty and identification have the same import for members and supporters does the card-carrying membership lose its salience. But this is not – and could not be – always the case because a difference still persists, and is unavoidable. A supporter is not bound by any form of ‘contract’ with a party, which is instead implied by full membership: the supporter can come and go without that, *apparently subtle but in reality compelling*, bond of moral obligation towards her/his party fellows and the party itself. If membership is an expression of sympathy rather than an element of partaking, involvement and commitment, it represents just a mere option among many others. This kind of loose relationship is perfectly congruent with the liquidity of contemporary society, by equating members and supporters; nevertheless, in this way, the party loses its boundaries, and thus its identity (Faucher, 2015: 421ff.).

Even where mainstream parties have introduced the category of ‘light’ and ‘multispeed’ (Scarrow, 2015) membership, they have neither attracted more people, nor recovered consideration and trust. The point is that these ‘light’ modalities entail a distant and impersonal relationship that contrasts with the party’s original imprint (a collective enterprise for collective aims) and with the public’s expectations. Mainstream parties have tried to ‘modernize’ their structure, but in this way, they have further weakened their offerings, precisely because of the inner conflict between these innovations and the ‘logic of appropriateness’ that still binds them.

In conclusion, the individualization of the role of the member, and the fluidity of the relationship between citizens and party, has enforced the discarding of a collective dimension in the party’s interaction with the public. This is not without cost for the party because it projects an image of self-referential, distant and oligarchic organization, de-linked from society and detached from people’s needs.

### Could the political party be recovered by the new challengers?

Could the mainstream parties’ dismal state be recovered by the rise of challenger parties? Could the three challengers taken into consideration here – LREM, M5S, Podemos – *re-energize partisan politics and surmount the major failings of traditional mainstream parties?*

According to what has been discussed in the previous sections, the failings of mainstream parties concern:

- their dismantling of outlets and opportunities for collective intra-party engagement;
- their inability to recover intra-party participation via direct participation presenting themselves just as a locus for personal carriers;
- their remoteness and their being neither ‘in touch’ nor close to citizens’ concerns because of their transformation into public agencies;
- their party officials’ affluence which further distances them from ordinary people;
- their lack of proper behaviour and their proneness to sleaze, malpractice and corruption.

In this section, we advance some considerations about whether the challenger parties, independently from their distinctive policies, could raise confidence in the political party as such, thanks to different operating practices. In particular, it will be questioned whether: they could

attract more people in terms of membership and votes; enhance intra-party democracy restating a collective arena for party membership's interaction, and effectively empowering all the participants; offer a more sober and transparent conduct. Differently said, are the challengers more in tune with the parties' logic of appropriateness, and could they thus hopefully/eventually restore trust in political parties?

### ***Have the challengers recovered attractiveness and mobilization?***

Lrem, M5S and Podemos have displayed a high level of mobilization of the citizenry. At the electoral level, Lrem and M5S were the most voted for parties in their respective last general elections (2017 and 2018); Podemos did not attain those levels but repeatedly surpassed the threshold of 20% of the votes in the general elections between 2015 and early 2019.

In terms of recruitment, these parties declare hundreds of thousands of numbers. However, M5S and Podemos – but not Lrem – make a distinction between standard members and 'registered' or 'active' members on the basis of length of membership (1 year for M5S, 6 months for Podemos). In the fall of 2019, according to their respective websites, the Lrem declared 418,377 members, M5S 117,194 registered members and Podemos 269,158 active members. These numbers are important but not impressive, especially if we consider that membership is costless (no fee is required) and easy (one has just to click on the party platform – and in Podemos one can enrol her/himself also through the local *circulos*). The 'procedural costs' for becoming a member calculated on the basis of the framework provided by Kosiara-Pedersen *et al.* (2017) shows that Podemos and M5S are comparatively lower than all the parties (Vittori, 2019). The same could be said for Lrem, as the procedure is similar (Fretel, 2019).

These membership figures tend not to be a very telling factor because of the comparatively easier and looser recruitment procedures. On the other hand, these parties have shown a remarkable capacity for mass mobilization, either in a traditional way (rallies) or in more innovative areas (the Internet and social media).

On the traditional side, the M5S convened supporters and militants during its festivals, which comprised political and leisure events, where hundreds of thousands gathered during the 2–3 days of the meetings. Actually, on the 'V-Day' (inaugurating M5S as a political presence) called simultaneously in Bologna and many other cities in September 2007, tens of thousands of people participated in rallies. At the end of the 2013 electoral campaign, the M5S gathered hundreds of thousands of supporters in Rome's Piazza del Popolo, a very large square and traditional location for left-wing massive rallies. Podemos, at its inception in January 2015, rallied almost 200,000 people in the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, and it maintained a high capacity of mobilization also in the following years (Mikola, 2018). The Lrem does not share the same propensity for mass mobilization, with the partial exception of the presidential and legislative 2017 electoral campaign. Its more 'elitist' sociological profile (Cautres *et al.*, 2018), although quite skewed towards the younger generations, and the leadership profile itself are not in tune with open air massive rallies – which are also disregarded by the other traditional French parties. Even the march organized in Paris on 27 January 2019, in support of President Macron and in opposition to the *Gilets Jaunes*, which gathered some 10,000–15,000 people, was not run directly by the party, rather by a flanking 'republican' movement, the *Fouleurs Rouges* (*Le Monde*, 27 January 2019).

Regarding innovative ways of mobilization, all three challenger parties have, since their inceptions, interacted with their members and a much wider audience through their own blogs, platforms and social media. The data on number of users, followers, posts and so on are very volatile as they change day by day. If we take the election period as a test, during the March 2019 electoral campaign for the Cortes Podemos ranked far ahead of all the others in Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (2,760,312 against 960,017 of the second party) (Posicion Politica, 2019). The M5S, which was hegemonic in the social media when it entered the political scene, it has been run-off

by the Lega (League) in the 2019 European electoral campaign. However, the M5S surmounted this disadvantage in term of Facebook and Twitter visitors thanks to more comments, thus exhibiting an ‘active and organized support for the digital strategy’ (Cepernich and Bracciale, 2019: 100–102). Lrem has built up its structure on the web and Macron has dramatically increased its followers in the social media already by the presidential campaign (Reputation Lab, 20 April 2017). After his election to the Elysée, these contacts inevitably skyrocketed. Moreover, the Lrem, as well as the M5S, have built up their organization on the Internet, with Podemos more inclined to keep also to traditional forms of organization.

The easy and costless recruitment provides these parties with a high number of members, higher than most of the mainstream parties; at the same time, the reliance on the web and the social networks proves quite effective as they reach a large audience. But the impersonal process of recruitment, and the absence or devaluation of any collective organs where people could interact, precisely because of the extensive use of Internet, have restored and even reinforced the atomization of political activity. Where no or limited interpersonal, direct, collective loci for expressing political will is provided, a party is reduced to an empty shell – at the mercy of top-down plebiscitary practices (Gerbaudo, 2019a, 2019b).

This means that the *collective and personal interaction is even less significant* for the challenger parties. In a way, this is the natural by-product of their newness: being the offspring of the post-2000s Internet society, they are the prototypes of a new societal environment, where an individual-based, ‘cold and distant’ modality of interaction with the party is perfectly acceptable. The political community they build up is a virtual one: there is no need to meet and interact face-to-face.

### ***Have the challengers revived intraparty activism and provided more intra-party democracy?***

The use of direct democracy and the writing-off of multistage internal decision-making process are at the core of the challengers’ organizational ideology. The empowerment of members and their effective inclusion in decision-making processes have been practised through members’ direct intervention via Internet platforms (Partecipa for Podemos and Rousseau for M5S, whereas the Lrem uses dedicated areas in its website). Members’ involvement is channelled into three avenues, described below: (i) selection of candidates and the leadership; (ii) consultation on organizational and political topics; (iii) participation in developing policy.

(i) The direct involvement of members for the selection of candidates and leaders is not a peculiar feature of these parties, as it has been in use in some mainstream parties too (Cross *et al.*, 2016). What could make a difference is the degree of openness in the procedure. The M5S is the more open as every (registered) member can candidate her/himself, with some conditionality, such as the person not having been a member of another political party or holding a criminal record. Until 2018, the candidacy was simply decided by a vote of members cast on the Internet platform. At the 2018 general election, instead, the party leader reserved the right to intervene in the selection; furthermore, other conditions and interventions from above were introduced for the 2019 European elections. In the first elections in which Podemos participated, it restricted the choice of candidates to a leadership-crafted closed list, to be voted ‘*en bloc*’; later, after criticism within and outside the party for this ‘undemocratic’ procedure, a more bottom-up modality was introduced in 2017. Lrem does not allow any say to its members: the leadership keeps total control of the selection at every election.

Obviously, neither M5S nor Lrem elected their founding leader (and this is perfectly understandable); instead, Pablo Iglesias was formally elected in the first Podemos national congress (November 2014) with massive consent (86.8% of the votes) and later confirmed with different scores: very high at the second Congress, Vistalegre II (89.0%), more limited in 2018 (68%) when he called for a vote of confidence after the affair of the purchase of an expensive luxury home. Both M5S and Lrem selected political leaders to serve *below* their respective founders: the M5S

organized an Internet vote among registered members in September 2017 where the ‘official’ candidate promoted by Grillo was challenged pro-forma by low-key militants amid the disagreement of some M5S leaders about a procedure without internal debate. The Lrem National council acclaimed to the secretariat the (sole) candidate directly indicated by Macron, in November 2017, and massively voted (82%) in favour of a new one in December 2018.

(ii) Intra-party participation can follow a traditional path of discussion, and eventually deliberation, in local or upper level units, or take the form of Internet engagement. All three parties have practised the traditional modality in a rather peculiar way: local units are considered places for mobilization rather than loci for channelling members’ demands. These units are disjointed from the decision-making process, save for Podemos where in principle it is possible, while never practised (Pérez-Nievas *et al.*, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2019b). Moreover, the Lrem enforces its use to promote activity from above – through so-called ‘helpers’ – according to the needs of the leadership (Fretel, 2019).

The other way follows the Internet route. Both Podomos and M5S – the latter more frequently than the former – have called on members to vote on various issues; Lrem has done so only once, and very recently, in January 2020, for the approval of a new statute. Turnout has rarely exceeded 50% in both M5S and Podemos (Deseriis and Vittori, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2019b). With the exception of the first call for the election of Pablo Iglesias in 2014 (when membership numbers were much fewer), Podemos members have no longer been very visible on the Internet: the average turnout, until late 2019, was 26% with a declining trend in the last period. However, if one takes into account ‘active members’ only, the turnout percentage rises significantly and it reached a zenith in 2018 (78%) when members decided on the possible resignation of the Iglesias–Montero leadership couple. M5S registered members have been called on to vote much more frequently than Podemos, and the rate of participation has varied in accordance with the salience of the issue, from more than 70% to less than 20%. The recent referendum on support for a coalition government, along with the centre-left Democratic Party, held on 2 September 2019, recorded one of the highest turnouts ever (67.8%) equivalent to 79,634 voters.

All referendums have been called for by the leadership: no members’ initiative is allowed. This top-down, plebiscitary modality, in spite of the formal bottom-up members’ direct intervention, could explain the limited level of participation. In sum, not even these parties have revamped participation to any great extent, nor have they enforced more intra-party ‘democracy’.

(iii) The most innovative feature of these parties concerns the creation of articulated deliberative forums on their websites. Podemos and M5S (and the Lrem is following this trend) have set up specific platforms where members can interact with MPs or regional councillors, suggesting legislative proposals or commenting on those raised by MPs. M5S has developed a quite ambitious schema for this activity, but it is limited to a binary relationship between member and representative without the possibility of interaction among members (Vittori, 2019). The Lrem allows one-fifth of its members to invite the National Council to discuss their proposals; and the National Executive could call on members to express their views – but this has never occurred.

In sum, we can conclude that opening up to the membership in these parties has not entailed ‘less leadership domination’, and that even the challenger parties have not reversed the mainstream parties’ negative image of self-referential and top-down organization. These parties do not offer room for members’ and supporters’ direct interaction, nor they promote a collective dimension of decision-making, nor foster a deliberative arena appealing enough to members, as they do not show up even in the web. Even taken into consideration a more traditional pattern in Podemos, in general, the idea of the party as a *collective enterprise* – one of the faults affecting the attraction of mainstream parties – has not been recovered by the challengers, because all three parties conceive the role of the members in an ancillary and leadership-driven way.

### **Have the challengers offered a more ‘in touch’ profile and a more sober image?**

The abundance of money that parties have been enjoying until very recently (Kopecký *et al.*, 2012; Fiorelli, 2020) has produced a *displacement* in public opinion because it still retains the romantic idea of frugal, dedicated politicians, at every level of the party hierarchy, and fails to accept managerial and affluent people in leadership positions.<sup>6</sup> As an example, Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee found universal approval during his 1951 electoral campaign, ‘driving his modest family car with just one detective’ (Clarke *et al.*, 2018: 92). The move from a political organization centred on human resources and voluntary, interest-free dedication, to one based on individual self-assertion, career-minded and financial asset-grabbing politicians has been considered by the mass public a sort of ‘perversion’ of the party ideal (Fawcett *et al.*, 2017; Gossman and Sauger, 2017). This has potentially contributed to the party’s demise in the eyes of public opinion (Carty, 2013; Ignazi, 2017; Katz and Mair, 2018).

As far as financing is concerned, the challengers’ standing is not uniform. The M5S has a radical, pauperist approach: first, it has rejected public funds even in the form of tax exemption, and second, it has severely curtailed MPs’ salaries to redistribute the money saved to non-partisan organizations and initiatives. The party relies on the MPs fixed contribution and on crowd-funding through the Rousseau platform which acts as an effective treasurer. In the last 2 years, the official budget of the M5S presents the amazingly low figure of around just 500,000 euros (Fiorelli, 2020). Podemos representatives have followed the same pattern, although with less stringent rules and minor amounts. Its proclaimed parsimonious style of politics was, however, disfigured by the affair of Iglesias-Montero’s costly new home. Moreover, Podemos lives on public funds because membership contributions and voluntary donations cover only a very limited share of its budget (less than 10% in 2017) (Fiorelli, 2020). Lrem, on the other hand, given the high-class profile of its leadership and most of the supporters (Cautres *et al.*, 2018), and the initial generous funding from vested interests and banks for the Macron presidential campaign (*Les Echos*, 13 March 2017; Cage, 2018), cannot present itself as an advocate of political-partisan paucity. Moreover, the medium-high class profile of the elected and the membership (Cautres *et al.*, 2018) inhibits the forging of a party’s sober image. On the other hand, the emphasis on crowd-funding during the 2017 electoral campaign is a sign of attention to the point (or an attempt to divert attention from the initial source of funding).

The image of parsimonious entities with a limited party budget and representatives’ low-profile lifestyle, in line with the expectations of public opinion, is only partially confirmed: the M5S, and to a lesser extent Podemos, are in line with that image, while Lrem does not match it at all.

### **Conclusions**

Political parties have been under the fire of mounting anti-party sentiment in recent decades. Their legitimacy has been, and still is, at stake. Traditional mainstream parties introduced some organizational changes to offset this general, negative, sentiment, which was coupled with shrinking membership, declining party identification and vanishing mobilization. The strategies they adopted to counteract demobilization and disaffection pointed to expanding the direct involvement of members. As a matter of fact, this move resulted in *individualizing decision-making processes*. The reforms introduced by many political parties have produced more

<sup>6</sup>This approach is precisely the opposite of many economists’ attempts to address the question. Take, for example, the epigraph in Messner and Polborn (2004: 2423): ‘Potential candidates for political office will be influenced in their decision whether to enter the competition – as in any other profession (*sic!*) – by financial considerations. The wage and/or other benefits of the office will have an effect on the set of candidates who are willing to run for office, and hence possibly on the person of the elected official and the policy outcome’ (emphasis added). Similar considerations are evident in papers by other economists where the ‘quality’ of politicians is rated on the higher salary a MP earns once he/she has terminated his/her office in Parliament. See, for example, Mattozzi and Merlo (2008).

atomization rather than sociability, more verticalization and concentration of power rather than participation and involvement, and a more plebiscitary approach rather than critical and deliberative attitudes. As Carty (2013: 19, emphasis added) has written, ‘individuals are isolated from one another and engaged in direct communication only with the party center, in a fashion that inhibits their ability to *act in common with each other*’.

This path has run counter to the ‘logic of appropriateness’ which regulates party activity. Since the inception of mass mobilization, parties were founded on ration myths of intra-party equality, participation and involvement in a collective environment for a collective purpose, dedication to the cause of discarding any personal interests, and integrity and sobriety. These desired ‘norms’ are still at the core of any party; everyone pays homage to them, but the actual choices of mainstream parties in current political systems have gone a different way. This mismatch between citizens’ expectations and the changes enacted by parties is at the core of the persisting, present uneasiness and dissatisfaction *vis-à-vis* parties.

The new challenger parties, as defined in this analysis, have provided an alternative to the working and structuring of mainstream parties. Their intra-party organization and their relationship with society and the state diverge to a different extent from the mainstream parties. However, these innovations do not seem to offer enough importance to modify the general (mis)consideration in which political parties are held.

The challengers’ Internet-based, individualized approach to intra-party dynamics (especially in Lrem and M5S) does not represent a sufficient remedy to the vanished collective face-to-face dimension of politics – a dimension which is ontologically still connected to the political party. If parties’ recovery passes through a recast, central, membership role, then the challengers’ attempts to revitalize parliamentary systems could also end up going in the wrong direction. Interaction through the Internet without physical structures (almost vanished in M5S, sporadic and occasional in Lrem, more diffuse and traditional, while limited, in Podemos) does not provide a remedy because the party, on the basis of its ontology and logic appropriateness, ‘could not’ be a virtual arena only: the norms derived from whichever party’s culture induce a need for physical interaction. Reliance on the Internet, the devaluation of inter-personal political activity (excluding, to a large extent, Podemos) and the extensive adoption of direct democratic procedures (less so in Lrem) have propelled these parties also to a plebiscitarian drive: Michels’ oligarchy has been substituted by a leader relying on absence and silencing of members and cadres.

On a different account, the citizens’ demand for more ‘parsimony’ by party officials and representatives in the face of the growing affluence of the mainstream parties is acknowledged by M5S only. Podemos relies financially almost entirely on state subsidies and, in addition, was trapped by the affair of the luxurious villa for the leadership. Lrem, had not paid too much attention to this question, until the *Gilets Jaunes* protests.

In conclusion, the newcomers have not yet offered an avenue for a general recovery of the parties’ role as trusted agents of people’s needs and demands. Survey data provide evidence of the persistence of a negative attitude: in Spain, politicians and parties are credited with trust levels of 13% and 20%, respectively (Lapuente *et al.*, 2018); in Italy, party approval remains around 10% (Ipsos 2018); and in France, even after the 2017 seismic election, the evaluation of political parties remains extremely poor, at just 9% (Cautres, 2018). The challengers have introduced some novelties in their organization and working, and in their relations with the external environment. These changes have only partially mobilized the citizenry but they have not reverted discontent and distrust towards parties. The challengers might be the flag-carrier of a party recovery, but apparently, it is not yet the right time.

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