E-motions and participation in technopopulist Movement-parties. Enthusiasm and technopolitical disillusion

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E-motions and participation in technopopulist Movement-parties. Enthusiasm and technopolitical disillusion[1]

Social movements (SMs) protesting against the consequences of the austerity produced by the 2008 great recession leveraged collective participation as a paradigmatic way of revamping democratic institutions and processes. In southern Europe, participation was harnessed by technopolitical movement-parties (MPs) such as the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy and Podemos in Spain. These are political forces combining SM characteristics with a technopolitical narrative to induce 'e-motions': emotional arousal of the membership produced by idealising the potential of digital technologies to enact unprecedented popular participation in order to renew democracy. Combining technocracy (popular competence via technopolitics) with populism (people vs elite rhetoric) the M5S and Podemos built a technopopulist discourse able to generate emotional engagement of the membership and high expectations for collective participation. However, the centralism of the leadership and its control over technopolitics produced an individualised model of engagement which led to disillusion. The article firstly elaborates a narrative literature reviews on participation, technopolitics, movement-parties, populism and emotions to frame the affective relationship between participation and technopopulism. Secondly it uses qualitative methods to scrutinise the constituent process of M5S and Podemos technopolitics - when the digital process and infrastructures were created within both MPs – outlining the emotions elicited by technopolitical technopopulism.

Keywords: affects; emotions; Five Star Movement (M5S); Podemos; political behaviour.

Introduction

Social Movements (hereinafter SMs) are networks of mutual recognition based on the 'intersection between collective participation and personal commitment' (della Porta and Diani 2011, 127), as they demonstrate in response to the austerity policies to counter the economic

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crisis of 2008. The emotions[2] they generate must be understood in light of their collective - as opposed to mere individualistic - dimension (Gerbaudo 2014). The upsurge in 2011 of SMs such as the *Indignados* (the Indignants, in Spain, also called 15M movement), globally linked through digital technology and inspiring similar movements elsewhere (ie. occupy), have propounded more substantive forms of democracy and challenged the dominant understanding of the so-called New Social Movements (Cohen 1985; Gerbaudo 2017a), generating several brand new political configurations. One of these is the emergence of Movement-party (hereinafter MP) such as Podemos in Spain, which established as its DNA the affective, cultural, identity, organisations, strategies, and cognitive frameworks of the *Indignados* movement (della Porta et al. 2017). This highlights the importance of digital participation in the improvement of democracy (Berbeito Iglesias and Iglesias Alonso, 2021) and the introduction of new digital repertoires of action (Berbeito Iglesias and Iglesias Alonso, 2019). A different process generated the Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy, whose collective dimension was hetero-directed - but nonetheless central in the political narrative - by its two founders and leaders who instigated the growth of the membership in view of establishing a movement-party (Author 1.3).

According to the categorization of political parties proposed by Richard Gunther and Larry Diamond (2001, 2003), MPs constitute hybrid political formations that usually present a weak organisational structure with a common denominator based on a 'negative consensus' (2001, 30) against the dominance of markets and party bureaucracies. Collective participation is a fundamental discursive characteristic of MPs as they tend to show a weak system of interest aggregation in fixed and representative organs, although they often generate charismatic leaderships. The central bureaucracy is absent or flawed compared to more structured parties

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[2] The terms emotion and affect are used interchangeably in this text.

and they build their discourse on membership empowerment, giving them the right to decide on the future of the party both through direct democracy and plebiscitary decision-making tools. When they adopt digital social media technology - Technopolitics, Davide Vittori (2022) speaks of a combination of plebiscitarian intra-party democracy and party leadership empowerment.

Herbert Kitschelt (2006, 280) maintains that MPs are 'coalitions of activists who emanate from SMs and try to apply the organisational and strategic practices of SMs in the electoral arena'. They seek to influence and transform state institutions from within; the collective spirit they take from SMs is deployed within representative politics. They can emerge from existing political parties in what Paul Almeida (2010, 174) calls 'social movement-partyism', this is when opposition parties embrace causes, *repertoires* of action and objectives of SMs to oppose neoliberal politics, in Latin America. Drawing from his research on the Bolivian party MAS, Santiago Anria (2019, 8) suggests broadening the definition of MPs to encompass all parties that arise directly from SMs, and maintain a 'core constituency of grassroots social movements'. Morill and Chiarello (2013) refer to these phenomena as social movements within state institutions. These authors concur on the significance of collective participation in social movements, uptaken by political parties, establishing a direct link between the social mobilisation efforts of these movements and the processes of political decision-making, enhancing the representation of marginalised groups within the representative sphere. According to Donatella della Porta (2020), MPs constitute sources of democratic innovation that encompass substantive components in the conceptualization of democracy. These movements not only experiment with new ideas within their internal structure but also disseminate them within institutions, foreshadowing alternative forms of democratic politics beyond formal models and enriching the public sphere. MPs are challengers parties guided by political entrepreneurs that dispute the dominance of traditional parties in the

respective political market (Vries and Hobolt 2020), M5S and Podemos do so especially through an emotional mobilisation of digital technologies as democratic innovation towards participation. This resonates with Santos' (2015) argument that the main difference between MPs and traditional parties in Southern Europe lies in the fact that the former seek the 'same notion of complementarity between participatory and representative democracy that ought to guide the workings of the political system in the first place'.

The emergence of MPs as Podemos and M5S in Southern Europe can be seen as a process of democratisation. Those processes are not exempted from tensions and contradictions against the de-democratisation processes instituted by European and state policies adopted to overcome the economic crisis of 2008 (Author 2.3 and Author 3.4) - initially aimed at expanding the meaning of democratic sovereignty beyond voting, elites competition and delegated representation (Santos and Mendes 2017). Disrupting dominant political narratives and building on affective publics (Papacharissi 2016; see also Kioupkiolis 2018), they appeal to online/offline rational and emotional mobilisation through what we define e-motion: a political narrative to induce emotional arousal and activation for collective participation through digital instruments, that provide innovative perspectives to expand collective engagement through digital media in politics compared to traditional modes of interaction (Calvo 2018). E-motions are proposed by collective emotional appeals to the unprecedented democratic opportunities made possible by technopolitical cyber-optimism. They focus on collective participation as the enforcement of people's competence, elucidates the link between participation and technocracy in light of technopopulism. Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti (2021) define technopopulism as the combination of technocracy (popular competence through Technopolitics in the case of M5S and Podemos) and populism. E-motion identifies the emotional state aroused through ideological (cyber-optimism as a value) and technocratic

(online/offline organisation) discourse, which generate membership's participation and engagement.

The literature has outlined how digital technologies by political parties' can be operationalized in five domains: (A) membership, (B) leadership and candidates, (C) policy programme, (D) public image, and (E) resources (Fitzpatrick 2021). This article mainly focuses on the study of e-motions in relation to the first two domains: membership (which includes recruitment, integration, and member administration actions) and leaders and candidates (leader selection, communication campaigns, accountability) in order to focus on the organisational dimension of both MPs. Central to this analysis is the notion of Technopolitics, understood as easy to make politics through technology, the 'tactical and strategic use of digital tools for organisation, communication and collective action' (Toret, 2013, 3).

Technopolitics involves a cognitive and affective narrative of the socio-political change that must be understood by focusing on members' interaction and relationships, the practice or obstructions of bottom-up vs top-down processes, the social practices they generate in diverse sociopolitical contexts. Focusing on the emotions for the discourse on participation induced by Technopolitics in the constituent phase of the technopolitics of M5S and Podemos, we manage to understand how hyper-leadership (Gerbaudo 2019a) has reshaped collective participation in atomises and self-interested participation. Referring to Carole Pateman and Sydney Vereba, Biancalana and Vittori (2021) understand it as a symbolic function defined as 'pseudo-participation'. In fact, the new procedures of candidates' recruitment and digital participation, which are comparatively easier and more flexible in relation to traditional forms (Scarrow, 2015), have often heightened the individualization of the member's role and the fluidity of the relationship between citizens and the party. This, in turn, has weakened the collective dimension of intra party politics. To analyse the impact of this function we focus on emotions

as social constructs that shape both physical, symbolic, cognitive and virtual interactions in politics.

Populism is a 'continuous' political concept that encompasses rhetoric, ideology and communication style (Caiani and Graziano 2016) which is accelerated and expanded by Technopolitics. Populism is a stretched and complex concept that has been differently categorised by concurring approaches. Extant literature of the last three decades understands populism mainly as ideology, strategy, discourse, political logic or political style (Moffitt 2016). While there are a number of overlaps between these five approaches, this paper has adopts predominantly the political logic perspective for its focus on the mobilisation logic (Laclau 2005, Eklundh 2019). The research investigates how technopolitics is used to create the anti-elitist chain of equivalence though the mobilisation of emotions for participation as central signifier. Populist MPs combine the horizontal participation with centralised leadership in ways contrary to the - however controversial - horizontality characterising the dynamics and leadership formation of SMs in the digital age (Gerbaudo 2014; Papacharissi 2016). How do these two opposing dimensions coexist and how does their interaction occur in the constituting phase of MPs' technopolitics? To what extent does the impact of digital communication facilitate the emergence of technopopulist MPs? It is contended here that MPs are organisations that possess both SMs and populist characteristics in varying degrees, and that the focus on emotions reveals this relationship - indeed transition - between these two dimensions.

This research aims to understand how e-motion informs the leader-member relationship, thus defining the balance between collective participation versus populist centralism. M5S and Podemos were both originally grassroots participatory (digitally organised through social media technology) MPs, that also belong to the populist family (Biorcio 2015; de Nadal 2021; della Porta 2021; Correa, Barberá and Rodríguez Teruel 2021) (Author 1.3; 3.1; 3.2). However different organisational and discursive approaches to cyber-

optimism (Mosca 2020) for participation emerged: for the M5S technopolitical participation was narrated as an end in itself, a substitute for the party structure, the ideal to relativise political representation adopting 'direct democracy'. For Podemos technopolitics was introduced to support the party structure, allowing a broader participation of the membership in policy and organisational decisions to be enacted by the party quadres (Vittori 2017; Biancalana and Vittori 2021). We shall see how despite these differences, technopolitical technopopulism played a deleterious role in both MPs.

The research questions are: how are emotions, participation, technopopulism and technopolitics linked to the praxis of MPs? What long term emotions reflect lower or higher levels of collective participation in different moments of the development of MPs technopolitics? What is the impact of technopolitics on the participation of technopopulist MPs? What affective responses have been elicited by technopopulist technopolitics from the members of MPs? These questions contribute to understand the following: a) political processes within MPs; b) technopolitics as strategies at play in the transition from movement to party and from collective participation to centralised organisation and atomised engagement; and c) the revealing role of e-motion in defining the political behaviour and engagement of the members of MPs.

The following section offers a review of the literature on the links among Technopolitics, technopopulism and MPs. The third section addresses selected theory of emotions in SMs (mainly drawing from James Jasper) and technopopulism. Following the section describing the methodology and case studies, the fifth and sixth sections explore the affective resonance of the technopopulist and technopolitical participatory narratives of the M5S and Podemos, they are followed by a concluding comparative analysis section. The main findings show that while both the M5S and Podemos leveraged e-motions (hope and enthusiasm enhanced by the perspective of technopolitical mediation) to strengthen democracy

through collective participation, their technopolitics has delivered a centralised organisation and atomised participation, thus the initial phase of illusion was followed by successive phases of disillusion, which have disappointed their original grassroots activists and sympathisers. The long term positive emotions initially generated by collective participation have been transformed into negative emotions towards the leaders, organisation and democratisation perspective of both MPs.

Participation and technopolitics

The digital era has forged new arenas for politics (Lilleker and Koc-Michalska 2019). Contemporary technological advancements not only mirror a potential transition from representative democracy to a more direct form but also propel a comprehensive transformation in the very nature of traditional political parties focused on representation. This shift is manifested in the increasing prominence of technological tools serving as direct means for citizen participation.

Within the realm of contemporary academic research, understanding participatory dynamics in the digital environment emerges as an essential component to unravel the intricate intersection of technology, civic engagement, and the quality of democracies. Cristian Vaccari (2013) has underscored the influence of digital politics not only in traditional events but also in more innovative forms of online participation, such as campaigns on social media or digital platforms for civic engagement. This approach leads us to comprehend that political participation should not be conceived unidimensionally but rather as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing diverse activities and participatory instances (Koc-Michalska, Lilleker, Surowiec and Baranowski 2014).

Additional significant contributions in this field further fortify the understanding of participative instances in the digital milieu. Zizi Papacharissi (2015) scrutinizes how online

emotions, expressed through digital platforms, impact on public participation and the formation of political opinions. Likewise, Nick Couldry (2010) delves into the importance of voice in the public sphere, highlighting how communication technologies and online platforms can both amplify and restrict individuals' capacity to engage in democratic debates.

The impact of digital communication on the organisation of social and political movements and their participation in democratic life has been rising for two decades. Initially, academic debates and journals special issues explored the potential of digital communication for affecting the nature and structure of political processes and power (Calenda and Mosca 2009), investigating the diversity of the 'internetscape', the relationship between online and offline processes, and the impact of digital communication as individualised versus social/collective political action. Although the digital literacy level was identified as a limitation (Anduiza, Cantijoch, and Gallego 2009), many questions were left unanswered at the time, including what qualifies online participation, how it affects offline participation and vice versa, what kind of social entrepreneurship, innovation and leadership would emerge and what participatory inequalities would be introduced or reduced by digital communication.

Loader and Mercea (2011) enquired into how digital communication challenged traditional political practices and institutions. They questioned the extent to which digital communication was conducive to an increase in participation, as opposed to populist rhetoric, also acknowledging the conflicting interests of different stakeholders and the 'disproportionate authoritative influence' of some of them. The debate explored the mutual reinforcement of digital media, SMs and participatory democracy (della Porta 2011; Gerbaudo 2017a) and the non-exclusionary relationship between the personalisation of online participation and collective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2011). The distinction between technology-driven non organised collectivities and collective actors (Dolata and Schrape 2016) contributed to define collective identities emerging from social mobilisations when collectivities get

organised, something that goes beyond technology, stressing the need to implement qualitative methods for enquiring into identity and participation (Gerbaudo and Treré 2015). The relationship between communication and participatory practices was analysed in light of the disruptive role played by technology (Karatzogianni, Schandorf, and Ferra 2020; Milan 2013), as a constituent aspect contributing to define the identity of SMs (Baumgarten and García 2017). Employing Hardt and Negri's concept of multitude, the idea of a connected 'multitudinous identity' was related to the *Indignados* movement to understand the formation of its meta-identity (Monterde et al. 2015; Pérez de Lama and Laulhé 2022). This definition aims to explain individual and collective interaction in SMs, characterised by diversity rather than homogeneity, advancing new forms of cohesion and transversal participation which created a political identity for MPs akin to the populist meaning put forward by Laclau (2005).

The 2008 great recession contributed to the rise of populism (Caiani and Graziano 2016), exacerbating the aversion to elites and reinforcing demands for political participation (Kioupkiolis 2018; Mattoni 2017) mobilising people in local groups. Although the analysis of post-2008 SMs in Europe (Shihade, Flesher Fominaya, and Cox 2012), mainly in the south (Baumgarten and García 2017; Biorcio 2014; Flesher Fominaya 2020; Matos and Sabariego 2020), increasingly focused on MPs which, in some cases, were able to form government coalitions, this was split between their SM or populist aspects. As a result, the debate on the interplay between digital social media technology, political polarisation and civic engagement revealed that online communication not only enhanced individualised political participation, but also fostered polarisation, reshaping and challenging democratic processes (Beaufort 2018; Gerbaudo 2017a; Sabariego and Sierra 2022). Populism trieves through polarised participation attached to collective identities produced by a charismatic leadership, this contrasts with horizontal - however conflictual - participation of SMs.

Different debates examined the impact of digital media on SMs and populism. On the one hand, dimensions such as ideology, style, strategy and actors were analysed to define the 'populist communication logic [...] conceived of as the sum of norms, routines, and procedures shaping populist communication' (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017, 1280), in order to show that digital technologies expedite populist communication. On the other hand, scholarship analysed how social and political movements incorporated the fact that digital communication had focused on the interrelation between culture and agency, as elements underpinning activist engagement, narrative and symbolic construction, meanings, emotions and identities (Mattoni, Barassi, and Kavada 2020). In this debate, a focus on the affinities and differences between the German Pirate Party and the M5S, highlighted the diversity of concepts and forms of organisation and participation (Deseriis 2020). Reducing collective participation through centralised leadership increased representative potential, which means that the successful construction of the party structure undermines the movement dimension.

A recent debate focuses on MPs' communication practices, underscoring the tension between the appeal to greater participation and Technopolitics (Mercea and Mosca 2021). Compared to right-wing MPs (i.e. AfD, Jobbik and UKIP), their progressive counterparts (M5S and Podemos) 'display a greater sensitivity to direct democracy', thus impacting positively on its quality. Nonetheless, 'a mismatch has emerged between democratic ideas and practices' (Mercea and Mosca 2021, 1334, Biancalana and Vittori 2021). The media ecosystems of MPs are dynamic and must be studied in combination rather than in an isolated fashion (Zuckerman 2021), in relation to their offline communication strategies, party structure and system (della Porta 2021).

These debates show that there is still no consensus on the relationship between MPs, Technopolitics and populism, with some scholars contending that this relationship is straightforward and mutually reinforcing (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017; Gerbaudo

2019a). Nonetheless, others defend the need to decouple digital communication of MPs from their ontology, arguing that this must be understood in the broader political and media system of each polity, and that activists' offline, besides online, agency must be considered in the analysis (della Porta 2021). Referring to Syriza, Podemos and M5S, della Porta holds that the organisation and communication of MPs is characterised by democratic conceptions (not mere cyber-optimism) aimed at empowering their grassroot supporters by entwining online and offline processes aimed at expanding participation grounded in positive emotions, such as hope, and making this the ethos of MPs.

Considering that populism impacts on both institutional and civil society politics, two further findings are relevant here (Ruzza and Sanchez Salgado 2021). On the one hand, populism has been normalised in recent Italian and Spanish elections, while the populist style, rather than ideology, is having an increasingly greater influence on online behaviour (Bracciale, Andretta, and Martella 2021). On the other hand, once in government the M5S and Podemos have moderated their populist, anti-elitist and aggressive communication and assumed political stances and communication styles akin to those of traditional parties (Ceron, Gandini, and Lodetti 2021). This has led Mercea and Mosca (2021) to conclude that: 1) MPs' communication, organisation, and identity formation are co-constituent and must be analysed together; 2) the connection between digital communication and populism is made differently depending on the movement-party and its context; 3) democratic innovations, rising membership and electoral success, do not necessary imply a higher quality democratic participation.

The M5S and Podemos have been comparatively studied in relation to a number of aspects, including their sovereignty claims and political lines (Gerbaudo and Screti 2017; Ivaldi, Lanzone, and Woods 2017), identity and organisation (Vittori 2017, Damiani and Viviani 2019, Biancalana and Vittori 2021), internal democracy (Albertini 2019; Caiani,

Padoan, and Marino 2021; della Porta 2021; Gerbaudo 2019b) and as varieties of inclusionary populism (Font, Graziano, and Tsakatika 2021). Both parties are considered to be benchmarks in terms of digitalization (Barberà, Sandri, Correa and Rodríguez Teruel 2021, Biancalana and Vittori 2021). The M5S emerged as a centralised digitally constructed social movement since 2005, it has initially adopted meetup.com to collect individual support together with diverse other social media technologies to organise local clusters, and finally in 2012 started to introduce and centralise online activities in its own in-house technology later named 'Rousseau', demonstrating the capacity to navigate technological transitions to achieve organisational structure (Turner 2013; Deseriis 2020; Gerbaudo 2019b; Mosca 2020; Vittori 2022). Since its origin, Podemos has led several technopolitical innovations, such as its digital registration system, *Participa*[3] (Gómez and Ramiro 2019) with a crowdfunding space including its online participation and discussion platform in Reddit, *Plaza Podemos*[4], being the first political party to use this platform officially (Lioy, Del Valle and Gottlieb 2019; Lupato, Jerez and Meloni 2023).

This article focuses on e-motion as a determinant of technopopulism. The study of e-motion in MPs is particularly suitable for meeting the challenge of accounting for observable and concealed responses from members, including 'exodus, political apathy, and refusal to participate' (Deseriis 2020, 1783). The research focuses on emotions to dig into the quality of participation.

Emotions in technopopulist Movement-parties

This research adopts Jasper's (2018) typology of emotions in light of the mediations induced by technopolitical discourse, focusing on two of his five types of feelings, namely 'affective

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[3] https://participa.podemos.info/es
[4] https://www.reddit.com/r/podemos/

commitments' (stable feelings about others and subjects) and 'moral emotions' (feelings of approval and disapproval based on principles and intuition). These are the two long-term types of feelings identified by Jasper along with short-term feelings, such as reflex emotions, urges and moods. Assuming that all five types of feelings interact in subjects and the theory of group actions, data on which were collected during fieldwork, the accent is placed here on affective commitments and moral emotions, because in the medium/long term they explain how members' emotions crystallise in the dynamics of MPs.

The growing literature on populism and emotions mainly focuses on emotions relating to the outgroups enquiring into how negative ones (i.e. fear, anger, hate, insecurity, resentment, etc.) impact political behaviour and choice and the representative system (da Silva and Vieira 2019; Demertzis 2006; Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017; Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017; Salmela and von Scheve 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen 2018). However, populism may lead to demagogy, as well as to participation (Author 1.2, Author 1.4), and may also trigger positive emotions (Cossarini and Vallespín 2019; Eklundh 2019), while different platforms give rise to different emotions (Martella and Bracciale 2022).

Caiani and Padoan (2020) contend that populist leaders capitalise on pre-existing socio-cultural markers by appealing to symbols and emotions capable of giving them *momentum*. The *Indignados'* slogan '*Democracia real ya!*' (Real democracy now!) echoes the '*uno vale uno*' (each one counts for one) of the M5S, both being a call for participatory politics. These slogans marshal affective commitments and moral emotions, thus contributing to generate 'storytelling structures that sustain a modality of engagement that is primarily affective' (Papacharissi 2016, 310). 'Affective publics' is how Papacharissi defines 'networked publics that are mobilised and connected, identified, and potentially disconnected through expressions of sentiment' (2016, 311). In order to analyse emotions in MPs, research should focus on how populist leaders operationalise them in a multi-level analysis that also includes the structural

and subjective dimensions (Bonansinga 2020) of the people involved, thus underscoring the relevance of e-motions in members.

Participation in technopopulist MPs has a double scope: political ideology and the emotional inductor of political behaviour. Emotions are indicative of ingroup identification and 'affective loyalty' (Jasper 1998) to a political movement and the resulting participation. Jasper distinguishes between reciprocal and shared emotions: the former are those between members (what they feel for each other), while the latter are emotions shared by the group as a political objective (for a cause and against opponents) (Jasper 1998). Thus, the focus of the research is placed on the shared - as collective vs individualised - enthusiasm for and disappointment with 'participation' in MPs, while emotions are considered as qualitative indicators of political behaviour. Reciprocal emotions are a relevant interpersonal dimension which is interrelated to shared emotions. In line with the theoretical framework presented, we do not understand enthusiasm and disappointment as distinct emotions, but as emotion families in which several distinct emotions (such as interest, hope, commitment, pride, disillusion, disappointment, anger, contempt, etc.) are included. These are the two opposite poles of the e-motions that we study. It is also accepted here that confidence in participation, as a political ideology, contributes to generate emotional support for the group methodology (reciprocal emotions) and that there are different logics of participation that have posed a challenge for 'participatory enthusiasm' (Polletta 2016).

The participatory narrative and local practices of horizontality create ritual interactions and foster long-term emotional engagement (Collins 2004). Grassroots activism and technopolitical participatory mechanisms at the local level increase enthusiasm for participation. Enthusiasm has a strong effect on identification and loyalty to party politics and fosters participation (Marcus and Mackuen 1993). However, populist hyper-leadership and centralised technopolitics induce a feeling of betrayal of collective participation then

enthusiasm is replaced by bitterness, disappointment and delusion, as usually occurs when a movement ends (Adams 2003) or its (participatory) ideology changes.

Methods and case studies

The research compares two cases adopting an ethnographic approach centred on the participant observation online and offline of the MPs political activities on terrain (*e. g.* assemblies, meetings, activism activities, demonstrations and informal actions) and the analysis of the activities carried out through social media and official websites, performed by activists (predominant term in the M5S) and sympathizers (the term adopted initially to name the Podemos supporters but also widely used in the M5S). In order to study emotions elicited by collective participation, we draw on anthropological methodology of the narrative analysis of emotions (Beatty 2010). Our narrative analysis build on context, contingency and relationality between subject in order to identify shared (Jasper 2011) emotions in MPs local groups and collective communities. We participated and observed MPs activities, internal online/offline processes, practices and rituals. While most of the observation occurred in the local dimension, we also observed bigger scale events and followed the development on digital platforms. We thus complement participant observation with a digital ethnography of the technopolitical *praxis*, in what has been termed an Engaged Research Approach (Milan 2013). This allowed data collection to achieve a greater salience in relation to e-motion (including interpersonal relationships) and avoiding 'highlighting only one or other aspect—of language, feeling, tactics, or cultural meaning—and therefore risk turning people into caricatures, bearers of difference, social constructions' (Beatty 2010, 437). Participant observation is the primary source of our narrative data which are triangulated with in-depth interviews of M5S activists and Podemos sympathizers of different ages, classes and socio-cultural trajectories. Interviewees were selected on the criteria of socio-demographic diversity Interviews with 27 (20 M, 7 F) activists (in some cases with two people) in Italy and 30 sympathisers (15 M, 15

F) in Spain, and focus groups with 5 to 10 people actively engaged in the local groups (3 in Italy, 4 in Spain). The recruitment strategy was based on data collected through participant observation. Activists and sympathizers were invited to interviews and focus-groups based on activism preponderance (in organising and carrying on activities), attitude for group leadership (capacity to forge collective positions), frequency of participation and diversity of views (people with opposing views were generally invited). Interviews average duration is 40-60 minutes, focus-groups duration was 2 hours on average and involved five to ten people each.

In Italy interviews were conducted with representatives of different constituencies (including Rome and Bologna) and local activists, with participant observation being performed primarily in the city of Latina and sporadically in other cities in the occasion of big events. After the split of the local group (January 2015), data were collected with both local clusters so as to identify differences between their organisation, leadership, repertoires of action, membership interaction, work dynamics and theoretical leanings. In Spain, the participant observation was performed in the *círculos* (Podemos local territorial assemblies) in different neighbourhoods of Seville with interviews collected also in other constituencies (including Madrid and Barcelona). Data collected on the four dimensions that were used to categorise the qualitative dataset: elections, leadership, online platform and group dynamics (including local and inter-personal issues). This served a) to study the impact of e-motions on the horizontal relationship between members and the vertical relationship with the leaders, and b) to observe the impact of electoral politics on party organisation. These two axes of inquiry provide indication about collective participation of both MPs. The research is in accordance with the existing ethical provisions of the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra.

Although the M5S and Podemos have different socio-political backgrounds and ideological positions, they stimulate e-motion in a similar way and have comparable electoral

track records. Officially founded in 2009, the M5S dates back to 2005 when the expert in technopolitics, Gianroberto Casaleggio, created a blog for the famous comedian Beppe Grillo. It has been understood as an engineered SM (Iacoboni 2018) that pooled spontaneous participation in a centralised – if initially loose – structure (Turner 2013), thus triggering organised social mobilisation, such as square festivals and local activism (Author 1.3). Since 2012, the M5S has achieved a relevant level of local representation, while forming part of Italian governments since 2018, when it won 33 percent of the vote share (in contrast to 25 percent in the 2013 general elections and 21 percent in the 2014 European elections). Podemos was launched online in January 2014 with the manifesto *Mover ficha* ('Make a move: convert indignation into political change') (Caruso 2017) (Author 2.1). According to García Agustín and Briziarelli (2018), Podemos arose at a time of opportunity and urgency in which *Indignados* activists feared that the democratic drive of the 15M had reached a dead end. Podemos won 8 percent of the vote share in the 2014 European elections. In 2019, the party participated in the leftist coalition Unidas Podemos ('United We [in feminine] Can'), winning 14 percent of the vote share, subsequently forming a coalition government with the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers Party, PSOE). Since then, Podemos has obtained an important quota of power, with representation in local, regional and state institutions (Mateo Regueiro 2015), which has been progressively reduced in the last municipal and regional elections, in May 2023, reflecting the desillusion with the MP.

Data were collected in the respective technopolitical constitutive moment, we could thus observe digital power centralisation in 2014-2015. Technopolitics was initially self-organised by local groups on different platforms (in Italy, mainly Meetup and Facebook; in Spain, Telegram, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit and Loomio). The centralised Technopolitics of these MPs emerged more clearly in a second stage, when party centralism fostered the use of its own specific platforms (Rousseau and *Participa*), which led, in part, to the abandonment of

alternative platforms, restrictions on participation in the virtual space and the alienation of local activists, individualising the participation and conducting the engagement (donating, voting, debating) in a technopopulist manner through its proper technopolitical channels. Engagement refers in this work to the studied transition from an active and in-person participation to the performance of online political activities digitally mediated through Social media, applications and platforms, characterised by low intensity participation.

E-motion in the M5S

The M5S adopted a post-ideological identity that expressly underscored the centrality of participation (Mosca 2020), a powerful empty signifier (Laclau 1996), to overcome the left-right divide (Author 1.3) in a Movement-party that was initially formed by a majority of left-wingers (Biorcio 2014) and non-ideologically oriented activists, but as of 2012 expanded to the right (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2012). Technopolitics was steered by Grillo's blog, followed by spontaneous creation of local group using diverse media (mainly meetup.com) and subsequently by a set of applications developed in-house (Federici, Braccini, and Saebo 2015) and eventually named 'Rousseau' (after the philosopher) to reinforce the emphasis of the participatory myth (De Blasio and Sorice 2018).

Enthusiastic participation was reflected in eager engagement in local struggles and anger about the socio-political situation in Italy. 'I was quite angry, unemployed, so throwing myself into battles also served as a personal motivation in a way, so I got involved. [...] We've also begun to 'get excited' about the Borgo Montello landfill issue' (Women 34 years old, interviews June 2015). Participation extended to electoral politics and activists displayed satisfaction, pleasure, pride and interest when describing their local participatory work in support of election campaigns. Election campaigns had been fought by local groups since 2008, with an emphatic spirit of dedication and enthusiasm for collective - as opposed to individual

- participation (i.e. the 2011 local elections and 2013 regional elections in Lazio). This tendency peaked in 2013 when the M5S obtained over 25 percent of the vote share in the general elections.

As the MP's initial electoral success increased its membership numbers, more regulations were established over time (Biorcio and Natale 2018) (Author 1.3). Its national representation (since 2013) and governmental responsibilities (since 2018) had a negative impact on collective participatory activities (Mosca 2020), participation becoming a way of individually legitimising decisions adopted by the hiper-leadership (Gerbaudo 2019a). Activists 'saw the enthusiasm that this movement whipped up. There was a palpable enthusiasm that no longer exists, [...] I believe - barring the unexpected - the movement no longer has the ability to whip up that enthusiasm' (Man, 35 years old, focus group March 2015). Elections had become a divisive factor since 2014, when disappointment was expressed about the procedures established by the national leadership to regulate the pre-selection process of candidates for the European election that excluded the possibility of collective organisation by local groups. The leadership allowed exclusively a process of individual candidacy and rushed the procedure.

> At the European [elections] [...] it was mostly because [...] the candidacy remained open for two days and they [the leadership] closed it [the application process] without warning. [...] And it was a disaster [...] because it caused disappointment, because so many people were excluded (Man, 45 years old, interview July 2015).

This is a powerful example of the technopolitical decision to deny activists local collective decision-making, resulting in the atomised membership and increased disillusion, anger and disappointment with the leadership and the collective participatory ideology and methodology. Some activists presented their individual candidacy, expecting to be supported by the local group, which was mostly unsupportive. The three - locally elected - national

representatives (MP) were progressively critical towards the technopopulism implemented by the leadership and did not participate in the European election campaign either, which further polarised the positions of the two factions emerging within the local group, namely, those who admired and trusted Grillo and Casaleggio - and less critically accepted their technopopulism and individualised participation - and those that were increasingly more disillusioned with them and felt betrayed about collective participation. For some activists, their admiration for the two leaders proved to be stronger than their desire for collective participation.

> I began to have full trust in him [Grillo] and also in his words. From the moment someone tells you, "If you trust me, you must place the same trust in the people who work with me." At that point, I began to trust him and, since then, haven't heard of any scandals involving them which have been able to question that trust. Despite being in the eye of the storm for almost 10 years (Man, 60 years old, interview July 2015).

The shift away from collective participation became evident in December 2014, when the three MPs, expressing disappointment and disenchantment with the party's failure to implement collective participatory politics, resigned from the M5S (Author 1.3). This led to the split of the local group at the peak of the polarisation between collective participation and centralised technopolitics, which crystallised the anger, contempt and disengagement experienced by local members. The divisions in the local group grew wider, prompting interpersonal antipathies and conflicts. 'This idea of creating two groups has caused so much crazy hatred' (Man, 41 years old, Interview May 2015). Interestingly, the split also breathed new life into the collective participatory ideology, with one group stressing that 'taking pleasure in participation' was an emotion on which any method should be based.

> We recently created one [a local group] from scratch and drew up a charter of values, a charter of principles and a charter of norms - we don't like to call them regulations. In short, we created an organisation that would allow us to carry out our activities in a collaborative way, that would allow everyone to take pleasure in making their own

contribution and in profiting from the contribution of others (Man, 59 years old, interview July 2015).

By imposing the use of Rousseau the leaders ensured their control over the MP's technopolitical at the expense of the disillusionment that this caused in the membership, as it was seen as a betrayal of its collective participatory ideal. This wave of disillusionment spread to politics in general, as evidenced by the following quotation in relation to the failed ambition to replicate the experience of Podemos in Spain by some former M5S activists:

> I thought that with '*Possiamo*' in Italy we could do something. But Grillo snatched the last hope we had of being able to do something, because anything else, similar to the M5S, is no longer credible in Italy. For me, it's now valueless, there's no longer any party in the world that can win me over and make me believe that I can vote for a person. So, there's just no hope (Women, 40 years old, interview July 2015).

The M5S' collective participatory politics generated enthusiasm and hope, but the technopolitical control of representative processes polarised conflicts and undermined collective action, thus leading to the disillusionment and disengagement of its grassroots members.

E-motion in Podemos

The affective and symbolic narrative of the *Indignados* were leveraged in the initial political actions of Podemos as its DNA, not only among its sympathisers (initial name for the membership) but also as a strategic discourse of the organisation (Guedán 2017; Iglesias 2014) in the interface between the territorial and thematic assemblies of the *círculos* and the Technopolitics of the organisation. Podemos' discourse revamped the 'regime of signification' (Deleuze and Guattari 2002, 119–20) of the *indignados* movement, reworking the empty signifier of participation (Laclau 1996) through Technopolitics combining indignation and hope. With an intense cyber-optimistic technopolitical discourse Podemos' leadership

impacted strategically over the growth and the implementation of the political activities of the *círculos*. The *círculos* (territorial and thematic) constituted themselves after the launch of the Podemos manifesto *Mover ficha* on 14 January 2014, using different digital media in complete autonomy and engaging offline and online activities; their meetings were broadcasted via online streaming. This initial approach generated e-motions through interest, enthusiasm and hope, as reported by activists: 'We're excited, we've never had the opportunity to change things in this way; it's the hope of change. "Yes, we can!"' (Woman, 26 years old, interviewed in July 2014 in a *círculo* in Seville). Hope and expectations were characterised by a sense of collective agency related to the idea of a way forward, since it offered the possibility of a better future (Snyder 2003) defined by a more substantive democracy under the motto, 'transforming the indignation in political change'[5].

The participation in the *círculos* expressed the engagement and opposition to what was considered 'elitist' (representative) democracy, based on elections: 'They're a caste. We must recover democracy' (Man, 50 years old, interviewed in a Podemos general assembly in Seville in march of 2014). The slogan *Sí se puede* (Yes we can) characterised the hopeful and enthusiastic narrative that found its highest expression in the main representative body of the party. The 1st *Asamblea Ciudadana* (Citizen Assembly - national level) took place in Vistalegre (Madrid) on November, 15 of 2014, barely ten months after the publication of the *Mover ficha* Manifesto. It was a turning point in Podemos technopolitics. It elected the first national leadership of Pablo Iglesias and its *Consejo Ciudadano* (Citizen Council - board of coordinators), allowing online voting through *Participa*, which was the digital platform of the party. Collective participation was not allowed and the collective political dynamics of the *círculos* was increasingly reduced. At the time Iglesias had been indicated as Podemos

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[5] https://twitter.com/PODEMOS/status/427516364656357377

frontman thanks to his presence in the television media as a political commentator. In Vistalegre, Iglesias broke the voting method, proposed by the Promoting group that he integrated with the signatories of the manifesto. As observed in the *círculos* of Seville between March and November 2014, there was no agreement with Iglesias voting method imposition. In the established voting method, the political project and the leadership would be voted separately. In his opening and welcoming speech, which de facto was his campaign talk, Iglesias threatened to leave Podemos if his political project and candidacy were voted separately. 'Heaven is not taken by consensus, it is taken by assault' (Pablo Iglesias in defence of his candidacy at Vistalegre and Plaza Podemos platform.

Iglesias thus established that the political project of Podemos passed through his leadership and undermined the possibility of dissent, which led to the abandonment and expulsion of other two existing political lines from the MPs. This breaking point initiated the passage from illusion to disillusion, from collective enthusiasm for participation to atomised support to a populist leader. This passage is in fact also a procedural change in the use of *Participa* as centralised technopolitics, which diminished the space for collective participation in favour of individualised engagement through the official platform. The membership in Seville - and elsewhere - showed an increasing tension between the e-motions for participation and the technopolitical and technocratic process produced by the hyper-leadership justified by its populism, the necessary struggle against *la casta* (the caste). This tension points to one of the peculiarities studied in Seville (see also Gerbaudo 2019a).

Since the breaking of the voting system of the Vistalegre assembly of November, 15 of 2014, Podemos' *círculos* engaged in a conflict for leadership deluded with the political project of the organisation (de Nadal 2021). The centralised power eroded collective participation in two ways: 1) by transforming the *círculos* in void structures, without any internal political

debate, and 2) the establishment of limits to the effective power, participation and representation of the *círculos* posed under the control of the Secretary General and National Citizenship Council (*Consejo Ciudadano Estatal*). Internal groups competing with the leadership grew stronger their criticism: 'There is no more political discussion in the assemblies, it's a waste of time, we´re tired and disillusioned, we don't have the power anymore' (Woman, 24, interviewed in an assembly of 'For Fair Primaries in Podemos' movement, December 2015). Juan Carlos Monedero, Podemos co-founder and Professor of Politics in Madrid, defined these processes as a sort of 'gentle Leninism' (Orduña 2014). *Participa* reduced the collective participation of the *círculos* to an individual vote on issues proposed by the *Consejo Ciudadano Estatal* (State Citizen Council), the executive council of the organisation, eliminating the collective participation from the circles and their capacity for political action. Asked about this question, a disgruntled sympathiser asserted, 'They're ignoring us, they no longer talk about politics or do anything, and this has reached a situation in which three or four people are fighting for the party leadership, worse than in a traditional political party …' (Woman, 32 years old, interviewed in November 2015 in a local *círculo* of Seville).

The disappointed and disillusioned reactions to this state of affairs instigated internal counter-power in different cities, to allow Podemos to remain faithful to its participatory approach from below. These attempts aimed at keeping the collective enthusiasm of the local membership in opposition to the hyper-leadership. A range of initiatives emerged from the *círculos* through territorial and digitally linked assemblies, such as *Abriendo Podemos* (Opening Podemos), *Por unas primarias justas en Podemos* (For Fair Primaries in Podemos), that began into the seven local territorial *círculos* of Seville, *Andalucía desde abajo* (Andalusia from Below). All these initiatives were removed quickly by the leader.

Confronted with these dynamics, many of the Podemos sympathisers expressed strong feelings of disenchantment, disappointment and feeling of betrayal and manipulation. Some of the activists recognised to feel disillusioned with the way in which the party had gone back on its collective participatory promises and also failed on populism: 'They've become a caste, the story of the chalet [referring to the acquisition of an expensive residence by the leader Pablo Iglesias, whose acquisition was put to a vote in Plaza Podemos after the critics that appeared in the media] rocks the boat, they've let us down, they've manipulated us to get what they wanted' (Male, 55 years old, interview, July 2015). Technopopulism deprived Podemos' discourse and activism of the collective counter-hegemonic, emotional, meta-narrative focusing on participation (Rodríguez 2016, 180). 'We feel cheated; they've used our illusion, our desire to participate and change things, our time too, to end up equal to - or worse - than the other politicians we criticise' (Man, 43, interviewed after a local assembly in the *círculo* of Macarena, Seville, September, 2015).

Conclusions

The previous two parts explored the dynamics of the e-motions mobilised by M5S and Podemos, we have seen how in both cases the enthusiasm of the technopolitical constitutive phase was followed by the disillusion of the technopopulist overtake. The evidence presented shows how e-motion for participation through cyber-optimism imply a process of instigating action in movement-parties through technopolitics - by engaging affective publics with a participatory narrative - leveraged at both ideological and procedural dynamics. Membership emotions reveal the quality of participation in populist movement-parties. The leaders of both movement-parties have capitalised on e-motion, transforming the initial collective participatory enthusiasm into atomised technopopulist participation, mainly to legitimise their decisions, while jettisoning (local) collective action. When the electoral success of these movement-parties put paid to their original collective participatory ideal substituted by

individualised and atomised proceduralism reinforcing the leadership, this had a negative affective impact on their members. Although participation retains a symbolic significance in the statutes and discourses of the M5S and Podemos, its capacity to mobilise and motivate people on the ground has been undermined.

The long term emotions elicited by both technopopulism MPs are akin with our identification of two emotion families in which several distinct emotions exist (such as interest, hope, commitment, pride, disillusion, disappointment, anger, contempt, etc.). This indicates that the collective dimension of participation generates a democratic appeal that exceeds technopolitics. Similar emotional commitments (Jasper 2018) are produced by both MPs upon the transition from collective to atomised participation, regardless of their idea of participation. M5S operationalised e-motion for participation as an utopian opportunity to implement direct democracy, Podemos used e-motion to complement and operationalise a territorial party structure. In the first case the party was to be replaced by technopolitics, in the second case technopolitics was to structure the party, but in both cases the party became technopopulist through its hyper-leadership (Gerbaudo 2019a). Activists and sympathisers (believe to) build a novel collective space, similar to those of SMs, but soon crushed by representative dynamics. Collective participation was tolerated by in MPs, and manipulated to create MP's membership. Activists' expulsions in the M5S, and conflict with the internal democratic movement in Podemos, identify a common strategy to foster atomisation and homogeneity of technopolitical views compared to collectivism. While the analysis focuses on long term emotions, we have observed how they changed quickly (few months) in the political calendar, technopolitical critical phases are in fact short, this is related to the rapid electoral success of MPs.

M5S and Podemos membership mobilised beyond traditional ideological values and in fact MPs were keen to narrate themselves as postidological, and this provided the kind of membership crosscutting values and social interests that is essential to build technopopulism

(Bickerton and Invernizzi 2021). Questioning may arise if democracy can be value-free (beyond left and right) and an idea of flat sovereignty is possible. Since the beginning M5S and Podemos expressed a difference from far-right political outlets, their participatory narrative is related to the 'collective intelligence', collective interest, and direct engagement to achieve them. In fact both MPs made clear their left-leaning positioning in a later stage. In their origin collective participation was an instrumental value in itself. Indignation and anger upon which collective participation was mobilised generated personal commitment in the framework of a collective endeavour. Political imagination was at work beyond negative emotions but rather with a spirit of hope and expectation. Hope, however, does not maintain arousal without progression, local groups were activated by collective participation but they could not remain activated without escalating the participatory proposal to national politics.

Participation as an empty signifier mobilised by MPs aimed at redefining popular sovereignty allows the party dimension to grow, as reflected by their positive election results. However, the growth of the representative dimension through the centralisation of decision-making processes leads to the disengagement of the activist community, the loss of the movement dimension and the consolidation of Technopopulism. The distinction between activists (or so-called sympathisers) and voters is fundamental as the former clearly show how the affective commitments served to activate and deactivate their political engagement. If e-motion fosters activists' support for movement-parties, the populist objective of maximising electoral success (increasing their voter base) makes participation inconsistent. Participation is void of its floating capacity (as an empty signifier) to represent democratic demands of members for participation. Once MPs have entered the party system, however, the disaffection of their members has only had a limited impact on the support of the electorate. When technopopulist MPs start to elicit negative emotions from their members, this means that the

movement dimension has lost ground, but the party dimension (emerging thanks to e-motions) is capable of controlling the voter base created.

During the parliamentary term in which the M5S was, relatively speaking, the majority party (2018-2023), it formed three governments, one with the far right-wing Lega party, one with the country's centre-left parties and the last one the grand coalition led by Mario Draghi. Unidas Podemos signed a political agreement with the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers Party) in December of 2019, as the partner of a leftist government coalition with Pablo Iglesias as Vice-President. Initially, the M5S and Podemos vindicated participatory politics as a way of combating the exclusive practices of the 'political establishment'. However, they were all eventually perceived as having aligned with it and as having disregarded participation. Their technopolitical implementation of populist party politics (technopopulism) - operationalised to win elections - disillusioned progressively their original 'affective publics' (Papacharissi 2016) keen on participation.

While other researchers have analysed the failure in creating continuity between SMs and MPs based on rational grounds, this paper has examined e-motion as a consistent dimension of political processes dominated by a technopopulist use of technopolitics that impact online and offline participation as a strategic vector to understand Southern Europe MPs' politics of the last decade.

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