

The personal party: an analytical framework

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After sharing, through its various steps of evolution, the form and status of a corporate body, the party organization is falling prey to the virus of personalization, which is invading so many realms of contemporary life. Italy provides the clearest example of this cross-national trend with Silvio Berlusconi's personal party. As a media tycoon and one of the wealthiest men in the world, Berlusconi could rely on a skilled professional apparatus as well as on huge financial means to set up, in a few months, a vote-generating machine and become a Prime Minister. His party model has been widely imitated, by both center-right and center-left organizations, with variations and deviations. This article presents an overview of the development of personal parties in Italy and an analytical framework based on Max Weber's types of personal power.

Keywords: political parties; leadership; personalisation

Introduction

The three pillars of the liberal regime – parliament, government, and the judiciary – have undergone relatively small changes in the past century. They have all grown in complexity and, in most political systems, there has been a change in the balance of power between the three, with government and the judiciary acquiring more weight at the expenses of the legislature. Yet, their basic functions have remained the same, as well as their representation in the public discourse, with Montesquieu's tripartite scheme holding fast as a favorite of political common sense. Today, with respect to the institutional bodies, the overall constitutional framework is not very different than it was at the beginning of the last century. This may seem surprising in face of the extraordinary transformations that our society has – more or less peacefully – lived through. How is it possible? The answer to this question and the key to institutional stability lays with the political party. It is the party that has promoted, represented, mediated, and eventually, shaped the process that – in political science parlance – is described as the democratic incorporation of the masses into the liberal polity (Rokkan *et al.*, 1999).

It will come, then, as no surprise that, contrary to other institutions, the political party has evolved through quite different forms and roles (Calise, 1992; Gunther and Diamond, 2003; Wolinetz, 2007). In this respect, one may consider the party as the buffer, the shock-absorber, and at last, the Prothean transmission belt of all sorts

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of societal pressures. Inevitable consequences are profound modifications of the party's own organizational structure.

The various eras are well known to scholars, as well as to – most – practitioners. First came the parliamentary party, a rather loose cohort of MPs that found its birth and codification in pre-Victorian Britain. Almost at the same time, on the other shore of the Atlantic, the parliamentary party boldly strived to cope with a mass constituency. It is important to underline the seminal role of American parties in their effort to successfully combine two types of party organizations which, in the European experience, were bound to remain separated, as Duverger's classification will make explicit on analytical grounds (Duverger, 1964; Chambers and Burnham, 1967). It was only when internal parliamentary parties were marginalized from the franchise extension that the external parties originating from – deep and long-lasting – societal cleavages developed as the dominant form of party organization through two world wars. With their cradle in Europe but their reach soon extending to all other continents.

Thanks to the crystallization of their oligopolistic hold on the political system, the basic structure of mass parties remained unchanged, as well as their pivotal role in most democratic regimes. Yet, with the withering away of the original cleavages and the rise of mass communication media as radio and television, parties began to be inexorably turned into catch-all organizations (Kirchheimer, 1966; Wolinetz, 2002). A definition that is mainly used to underline the transformation of their relationship with the electorate, but does also capture the evolution of the party's functions in an increasing number of directions, in coincidence with the expansion of the state machinery. The catch-all party thus turned into the hub of the democratic state, subsuming all sorts of tasks, goals and expectations. The stage had been set for the next step, the advent of the cartel party.

The cartel party is commonly understood to mark the apex of party power, as well as the beginning of its decline (Bardi, 2006; Katz and Mair, 2009). Parties' organizations increase their institutional leverage while, at the same time, losing their representative capacity. The party personnel appears as an entrenched elite with lesser and lesser linkages to the voters, thus contributing to the diffusion of an anti-party sentiment, which leads, for the first time, to a widespread reshuffling of existing dominant – and opposition – parties. Moreover, thanks to the fast-growing number of new democracies, by the turn of the century – and millennium – the landscape of party systems appears dramatically diversified with respect to only 20 years before. With electorates becoming increasingly volatile (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000), parties enter an era of unstable and unpredictable life cycles, with a new factor becoming the driving force for dismantling old parties and creating new ones. That factor is personalization.

Personalization is an established feature of contemporary politics. Yet, there is a lack of analytical frameworks as well as of empirical studies on its impact on political parties. Most studies focus on the institutional or the electoral arenas. That is, the impact of personalization on monocratic offices, as in Lowi's (1985)

landmark book on the transformation of the American presidency, and the increasing role of personal attitudes, resources, and strategies in electoral campaigns, both at the bottom and the top (McAllister, 2007; Calise, 2011). One important step towards bridging the gap between the institutional, the electoral and the party faces of personalization is offered by Poguntke and Webb's (2005) seminal study on the presidentialization of democratic regimes. The RISP present issue offers an unprecedented contribution to understanding how party leadership has deeply affected the transformation of political parties (Musella, 2015a; Poguntke and Webb, 2015). In this article, I shall try to go one step further, by presenting a systematic overview of the most extreme case of party personalization, consisting in the full control by an individual leader of a party he has himself created. With the survival of that party depending on the personal resources – financial, institutional, charismatic, and last but not the least, physical – of its founder.

The personal party

Through all the development stages reviewed above, a distinctive feature of political parties has been its corporate character; that is, the fact that its existence depended on the collective nature of its organization. In the myriads definitions one may find in the literature – from Hume to Burke and up to more recent authors as Ostrogorski, Michels, Duverger, and Panebianco – the party is indicated as a body of men, whatever the principle, interest, logic binding them together. The internal composition of this body would vary greatly, reflecting – by and large – different organizational structures. Nonetheless, the party has been characterized, from its inception, by the key trait of being an autonomous and self-perpetuating collective entity. The English language identifies this body with the self-revealing term of *corporation*.¹ A body turned into an institution.

The founding role of the concept of corporation in the making of modern politics is best highlighted in Kantorowicz's (1957) metaphor of the king's two bodies; that is, the separation of power from the mortal destiny of a prince and its incorporation into the impersonal and collective body of the state. The evolution of the king's second body is, to a large extent, coincident with the history of the modern state: the advent of a public sphere administered through the impersonal command of a bureaucratic machine. This pattern of impersonal, collective authority became dominant in political systems worldwide throughout the 20th century. The original character of corporate power resided in the possibility of separating power from individuals, regulate it by legal rules, and perpetuate it across time. However, as Weber (1968) would point out, its rise as the dominant form of modern society also depended from its capacity to cope with a major challenge of mass politics and mass

¹ On the origins of the concept of corporation, see Calise (2002) and the entry *Corporation* in Calise and Lowi (2010) and www.hyperpolitics.net. A landmark text on the legal environment where the concept of corporation was nurtured is Berman (1983).

industrial growth: predictability. The corporate bureaucratic machinery and its line of impersonal power offered a stable and orderly system of rational calculation of costs, benefits, risks, and interests on a large and long-term scale. This is in sharp contrast with personal power, which is, by its own nature, highly unstable, unpredictable, and cannot be accumulated much beyond the limitations dictated by a human lifespan (Sartori, 1987). Which brings us back to the recent transformation of the political party.

After sharing, through its various steps of evolution, the form and status of a corporate body, the party organization is falling prey to the virus of personalization, that is invading so many realms of contemporary life. Weber, again, offers us a key cue with his tripartite scheme of political authority, where he clearly separates the two types of personal power – patrimonial and charismatic – from the legal-rational type of legitimate authority. Weber's classification, however, may be misleading in that he tended to consider the two types of personal power as belonging to different contexts. Quite to the contrary, the contemporary process of personalization of politics often results from the interaction and accumulation of these two elements. This is certainly the case with what I have defined as the personal party, a transformation of the political party where a combination of charismatic and patrimonial resources replace the collective and legal-rational original party structure (Calise, 2000 [2010]).

The first component, charisma, can be understood as the ability of a leader to inspire the mass opinion with a sentiment of approval, trust, enthusiasm resulting in – more or less volatile – electoral consent. Contemporary charisma is by all means different from Weber's definition as 'resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him' (Weber, 1968 [1922]: 215). Its primary focus and driver is media communication, mainly through TV channels that offer unprecedented face-to-face access to unlimited audiences. The content of the message may still play a role, but within McLuhan's framework – and limitations – that 'the media is the message'. With respect to traditional charisma, the contemporary one thus puts a much heavier emphasis on access to media channels. Media are determinant in the rise of personalization not only as they allow for individual leaders to reach out to mass audiences, but because the media code of communication has become more and more personalized. Contrary to earlier phases in the rise of public opinion, media tend to focus on personalities much more than on issues (Mughan, 2000; Campus, 2010). The more so when the target are audiences with a relatively low degree of literacy.

This helps understand an important factor in the growing weight of personalization within party organization. As leaders increasingly become the preferred item of media communication, their role is reinforced relative to the party nomenclature, both in setting the agenda and in framing the overall party message. This becomes at first visible in electoral campaigning, but quickly extends to other domains of party life (Farrell and Webb, 2000). The more so with the weakening of traditional

grassroots communication channels, as a consequence of the decline in rank and file numbers and role.

In moving to the other type of personal power according to Weber, the patrimonial one, we find a range of possibilities that offer an individual easier and faster access to party control. The first one is outright financial wealth, with its primary use consisting in the acquisition of extensive TV time, an extremely expensive undertaking. With the rise of campaign costs largely depending on the growing investment in media communication, it comes as no surprise that the first case of a personal party in a democratic competition was represented by Ross Perot's *United We Stand America* (Canovan, 1999). Besides being largely funded by its founder, the party's communication strategy almost exclusively centered upon the Texas billionaire's direct use of TV ads, with in-depth self-interviews in an unprecedented infotainment format. Although Perot would fail in his attempt to conquer the White House with a newly founded third party, his effort paved the road, a year later, to Silvio Berlusconi's successful quasi-impossible mission with Forza Italia. Berlusconi, a close friend of Perot, eagerly picked several of the most innovative features of Perot's campaign and quickly implanted them in the scheduling and content programming of the media channels he owned in Italy.

Access to media through relevant financial means is not, however, the only way in which patrimonial assets can contribute to the rise of a personal party. A determinant role in the creation and consolidation of Forza Italia was played by the human resources employed to staff the party (Poli, 2001). The top cadres, both at the center and the periphery, were largely drawn from two main branches of Berlusconi's corporate empire, Mediolanum and Publitalia. The *Cavaliere* went beyond the so-called 'business firm model' by directly moving hundreds of his own employees into the party's parallel organizational chart (Hopkin and Paolucci, 1999). In this respect, Forza Italia closely reflected the command line of a large corporation.

This evolution is all the more interesting as it perfectly matched the requirements of an increasing professionalization indicated by Panebianco (1982) as a distinctive trait of contemporary parties. Both Mediolanum and Publitalia provided, as if out of the mint, a complex organization with diffused territorial branches, trained in dealing with selected entrepreneurial and middle-class segments of the population, the clientele of their core businesses: insurance and media advertising. This turned extremely useful in the early stages of recruitment of candidates for the parliamentary elections, a process which had to be completed in a few months. Many of the MPs elected to the 1994 Parliament were political neophytes whose main linkage to the new party was their business connection to one or the other of Berlusconi's companies (Verzichelli, 1998).

Last but not the least, institutional assets can also become part of the personal resources of a would-be party entrepreneur. In the Western tradition, we tend to consider the priministerial or presidential office as a temporary role, whose outreach ceases at the end of the mandate. In most cases, this certainly still holds true, the more so if the chief executive's party has a strong control over his leader's

decision-making activity. However, especially when the Premier or President enjoys strong autonomy over his or her political supporters, the institutional leverage of the chief executive office can be transformed into a powerful instrument for accumulating personal influence (Musella, 2015b). One that can, in turn, be used to create – or reinforce – a personal party.

Varieties of personal party

Berlusconi's Forza Italia can be considered as an ideal type of the personal party, bringing together, at both the theoretical and the empirical level, the key features of a new party type. For one, it clearly belongs to the mainstream evolution of the party as an organizational structure, further developing the previous trend to maximizing the role of professional cadres vs. career politicians and grassroots militants. On the other side, the core of organizational strength and continuity is shifted from cohesive elites and collective decision making to personal leadership. In short, from an oligarchical bureaucratic machinery to the wealth and charisma of a media-appealing very strong personality.

However, as it is often the case with most ideal types, it is fortunate (?!) enough that we may have found one such a perfect specimen in real life. Indeed, Forza Italia, as a pure type of personal party, was more shortlived than it may have appeared since, with its transformation in the Popolo della Libertà, already lost some of its original characters (McDonnel, 2013).

At the same time, by looking at the overall Italian party system across the last 20 years, we can better appreciate the extraordinary influence of Berlusconi's founding model, as well as its many variations and deviations (Venturino, 2010; Pasquino, 2014). Indeed, much as the large majority of parties operating in the Berlusconi's era tried, more or less successfully, to imitate the master, they also show severe limits with respect to the size and duration, two extremely important dimensions in assessing the relevance of any new party type.

One first variant is the notables' party. Such a party has been long present on the political scene, and is considered among the original models of party organization. In most historical references, notables' parties are loose gatherings of local politicians, trying to maximize their connections to the center through some form of parliamentary federation. Their linkages to the grassroots mainly rely on clientelistic or patronage ties with small sections of the population, and in this respect they may be seen as predecessors of the personalistic party landscape.

The more recent notables' party differs from the traditional one in two main respects. First, it refers to one single personality, with whom it is fully identified. In many cases, the name of the organization coincides with that of its leader. However, also when this is not the case, the command chain as well as the public message have one and only undisputed source. Second, also as a consequence of this one man – or one woman – identification, this party rarely has the ambition to become a

governmental party on its own grounds. Its aim is to become determinant in the forming of a governmental coalition or, in the worst case scenario, to be able to elect a group of MPs. For this reason, the development of notables' parties in the singular is best served by non-majoritarian electoral laws (Koole, 1994, 1996).

In the Italian case, the notable's party can be considered, to some extent, as the heir to the well-established tradition of party factionalism, a dominant trait of Christian democratic politics (Sartori, 1973; Boucek, 2009). However, it must be noted that there is no direct linkage to pre-existing parliamentary and electoral networks, which were national in scope and had considerably strong ideological connotations. Most of the newly formed notable's personal parties are, in turn, highly localistic in their electoral base and show little if any ideological consistency. Mastella's Udeur or Lombardo's MpA have been rather ambivalent with respect to the right or left positioning on the political spectrum and ready to switch alliance to better serve their ministerial goals.

A second type of personal party is what – for lack of a better definition – we may call the talk show party. That is, a party that fully identifies with and is run by a leader who owes his or hers electoral fortunes to the popularity gained through all sorts of media channels (of which talk shows are an influential one). The prototype is represented by Antonio Di Pietro, a prosecutor who became famous, thanks to his role in the so-called Mani pulite (Clean hands) pool, at the center of several of the most sensational Tangentopoli investigations. Founded in 1998, Di Pietro's *Italia dei Valori* has played a relevant role in the forming of electoral as well as governmental coalitions in the center-left, both at local and national level, for 15 years, until its inglorious dismantling due to Di Pietro's alleged mishandling of his party's assets (Newell, 2015).

Contrary to the notable's party, the talk show party presents a marked ideological stance, a pre-condition for its attempt to capture media attention and to transform it into an electoral following. In the Italian experience, this ideological space has been mainly occupied by radical pro-judiciary leftist movements. It is not by coincidence that, in the wake of Di Pietro, two more prosecutors, Luigi De Magistris and Antonio Ingroia, tried to build a personal party out of the popularity they had gained through investigations targeting political Vips. A media visibility that was largely amplified by their sustained participation to several talk shows with a large nationwide audience. Although Ingroia's attempt failed, De Magistris has managed to be elected as the mayor of Naples, Italy's third largest city.

Media have also been determinant in the rise of the most remarkable, after Berlusconi's, case of a personal party in Italy, Beppe Grillo's 5 Stars Movement. In his use of the media system, Grillo resembles Berlusconi's Forza Italia a lot more than the talk show type. Just like the *Cavaliere*, the founder of M5S kept an extremely tight and centralized control over the media presence and message of his party, including his own as well as that of his members (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013). All through the 2013 electoral campaign, which launched the M5S to sudden national

prominence, candidates were prohibited from TV appearances, a choice with the manifest function of avoiding that the message of the party be compromised by mainly young, unexperienced amateur politicians. The latent function was, perhaps, even more effective, as Grillo's choice created a lack of – and, consequently, a search for – party news, which inevitably tended to focus on his leader's mass rallies. Grillo was thus able to use television as his own personal channel, conveying a non-mediated message and choosing the most suitable locations for his appearances (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2013). A situation he was in the best condition to exploit thanks to his professional experience as a highly successful comedian.

TV represented, however, only one half of the media system of propaganda for M5S. The other no less important part consisted in the innovative and far reaching web-centered organization, which is Grillo's most striking contribution to the development of a personal party. Contrary to mainstream political precedents, where internet had mainly served as a bottom-up, loosely structured network for political participation, Grillo's website became the instrument for a neo-leninist model of cybercratic centralism (Calise, 2013). Every public statement from any elected M5S member had to be filtered through the website communication channel. No less important was the fact that all decision-making procedures took place through a voting system fully controlled by Grillo and his web-provider associate, Casaleggio. Access to ballots was restricted to long-term M5S members, and transparency of procedures and results were, to say the least, minimal, with no third-party independent certification. The validity of the process was thus left to the good faith of the few participants and the much more numerous bystanders.

Choices through such an unprecedented Benthamite mechanism included the list of candidates to the national parliament, a list which – in the so-called Porcellum electoral system – largely pre-determined the outcome for Senators and MPs, as well as the names of the 10 perspective candidates for nomination as President of the Republic, a particularly important selection as it allowed Grillo to play a disruptive role in the strategy of the center-left coalition. Pretty hideously, the secretive internet deliberation process was also used to sanction all behaviors from elected members – in parliament or in city and regional councils – which Grillo considered in contrast with the M5S very strict rules of behavior. In many cases, the vote resulted in the outright expulsion of the deviant member.

Last not least, personal parties have been formed through the institutional leverage of the Prime ministerial office. Owing to the fragmentation of the party system in the Second Republic, in many cases the premiership was not assigned to the secretary of the major party in the governing coalition. This was especially true with the center-left, which, in the 1996 elections, chose as leader of the *Ulivo*, its anti-Berlusconi alliance, Romano Prodi, an economist who had been the President of IRI, the number one Italian public enterprise. After being ousted from Palazzo Chigi through a parliamentary coup, the *ribaltone*, Prodi formed his own party, assembling a large number of parliamentarians and party cadres who had been closely associated to the *Ulivo* reform manifesto. Prodi's personal party,

I *Democratici*, passed through various denominations and organizational changes (Diamanti, 2005; Baccetti, 2007), to eventually merge with the DS, the former communist party, into the *Partito Democratico*, presently the largest party in the Italian Parliament.

Another case of prime ministerial party is *Scelta civica*, which was founded by Mario Monti in his effort to continue his political experience once his extra-parliamentary cabinet had been terminated and new elections had been called. Monti's shortlived experience is particularly instructive, as it exemplifies several among the inner factors accounting for the rise – and failure – of a personal party. The Rector of the prestigious Bocconi University and a former EU Commissioner, Monti was a complete outsider to the political scene when he was nominated by the President of the Republic as the Prime Minister of an unprecedented *Grosse Koalition* cabinet including center-right and center-left major parties (Giannetti, 2013). Monti quickly gained widespread popularity in the media and in the opinion polls thanks to his severe financial measures, which were convincingly presented as a necessary move to avoid the country's bankruptcy.

However, Monti's attempt to turn public opinion consent into electoral ballots for his brand new party was met with disappointing results (Bobba *et al.*, 2013). A meager 7% was barely a third of the hefty 20% that some pollsters had credited as a plausible target for *Scelta civica*, mainly basing their estimate on the large area of moderate, independent voters who would not self-qualify as either leftist or rightist (Garzia, 2013; Poletti and Segatti, 2013). Part of the spread between lofty expectations and the actual turnout may have been due to Monti's oratorical style. His technical and argumentative discourse, while fitting for a Prime ministerial post, proved less effective in the combative and face-to-face arena of live electoral confrontations.

Even worse than the media performance was the organizational one. Differently from Romano Prodi, who had been able to bank on his long-term membership of the Christian Democrats ruling elite, Monti was a total novice to the Machiavellian laws of political life. Without a firm grip from the top, *Scelta civica* quickly disbanded, with most of Monti's followers looking for a safer and more stable harbor for their career and ambitions. Monti was thus left alone to wonder why, contrary to what he had been repeatedly declaring as a Prime Minister, he had chosen the partisan route, and in its most personalistic fashion, rather than keeping his aloof image and stance as a man above parties, a disinterested servant of the State. An attitude, which according to many opinion makers, had qualified him as the perfect candidate to become the next President of the Italian Republic.

A Weberian typology

In introducing my analysis of the personal party, I have stressed its close relationship to two of the three types of authority of Max Weber's classification of

legitimate power. The personal party marks a sharp departure from the legal-rational, bureaucratic, and collective form of authority, which has been dominant in the development of political parties all through the 20th century, whereas bringing back the role of patrimonial and charismatic resources. As we have seen in our empirical excursus, both these terms may reflect properties and conditions different from those presented in Weber's analysis. Contemporary charisma is strictly related to one's ability to use – and be used by – the media, old and new. Moreover, patrimonial wealth may often include assets directly or indirectly derived from the occupation of an institutional office. However, in all these cases, we find a clear-cut distinction from the corporate organization, procedures, and resources allocation which distinguishes the legal-rational type.

If, then, a personal party results from the combination of patrimonial – both private and institutional – power and charismatic – that is, media-centered – resources, it may be useful to outline an analytical matrix that helps position along these two dimensions the cases we have just reviewed. As most schemes, this may sound as a simplification of a complex – and still largely uncharted – territory. Nonetheless, it contributes to bring into sharper focus similarities and differences among the empirical examples (Figure 1).

In the upper right quadrant, we have personal parties with a large role played by private or institutional resources, which yet lacked in adequate media penetration. Clearly, the size and scope of resources may vary a lot, as it is the case when comparing Monti as a technocrat and Prodi as a well-known political leader and former IRI President, and this certainly influenced their success in establishing a

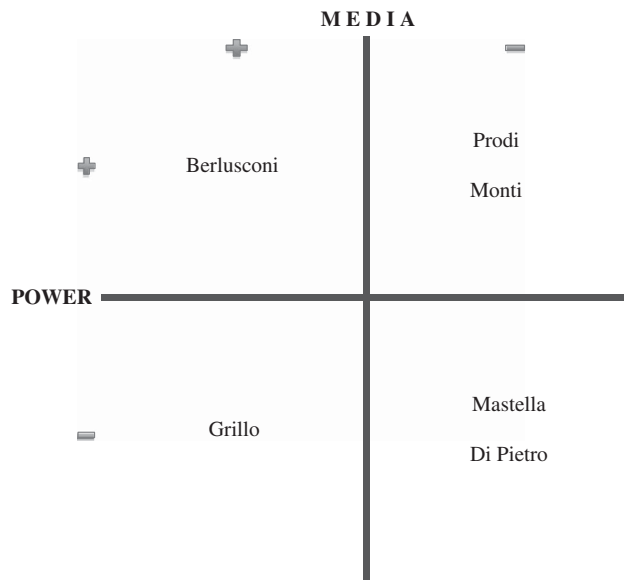


Figure 1 Types of personal party.

national party. In both cases, however, the lack of charismatic appeal was a key limiting factor. This quadrant is also helpful to chart some would-be personal parties that have surfaced for some time on the political scene but have not (yet) made it to enter the electoral game. Luca Cordero di Montezemolo – with his *Italia futura* – and Corrado Passera – with his *Italia unica* – are two top-notch representatives of the economic and financial establishment, with considerable personal wealth, managerial skills, and corporate networking. They both have repeatedly announced their intention to enter the political arena with their own personal party, but have lacked so far a media strategy adequate to their ambitions.

In the lower right quadrant, we find the personal parties that appear to be relatively deficient in both types of resources. The local basis of Mastella's power as a notable was partly compensated by his long-term expertise as a career politician, which helped him extend his party's reach into a number of other districts. He also proved to be extremely clever in making his small party's contribution determinant in a number of regional cabinet coalitions, as well as at the national level where he became, if only for a short time, Ministry of Justice. On the whole, however, Mastella never enjoyed media approval and rather became the target of widespread criticism, which contributed to relegate his party to a marginal role.

On the other side, Di Pietro never succeeded in transforming his well-established public opinion consent into a stable party organization. The lack of a personal power capital – patrimonial, managerial, institutional – made him constantly dependent on his media performances as a muckraker and the adamant paladin of all magistrates fighting against political corruption. Di Pietro's relationship with the media was, however, a passive one. Differently from Grillo or Berlusconi, he lacked any form of autonomous access to – and control of – communication channels. Once a quite popular news program accused him of having used some of the party finances for the private benefit of his own family, Di Pietro's image was irremediably blundered, and his personal party sank with him within a fortnight. The lesson to draw from this quadrant is quite evident. With an electoral system allowing for even a very small party to make a decisive difference, it is extremely tempting and relatively easy to create one's own personal brand and/or organization. Quite different a task is to be successful in developing it into an established and respected player in the national party system.

In the lower left quadrant, we find the most interesting newcomer in Italian politics. What is extremely fascinating in Grillo's M5S is its complete lack of financial or institutional resources. In spite of the absence of an autonomous power basis, the comedian and his internet partner were able to create, within less than 5 years, a party which scored a quarter of the ballots cast at the February 2013 national elections. Certainly, an important role in the M5S exploit was played by the federation of civic lists, which constituted its territorial backbone (Biorcio and Natale, 2013). However, they had existed for a long time before, with little if any local relevance and no national audience whatsoever. Their policy platforms, as well as their membership, looked quite heterogeneous, thus offering a complex and

very uncertain picture for any effort of organizational unification. Grillo's success consisted in his offer to become the unitary spokesman of so diverse and scattered a galaxy of social movements, and to do so through a website.

Grillo was thus able to merge two aspects of the internet world, which tend to diverge and be kept separate: the participatory, 2.0 drive of the social networks and the top-down technological control of all forms of access and information retrieval. These two faces of the web medal are no news to the public discourse on pros and cons of the cyberworld, and represent a constant warning to any form of unrestrained enthusiasm for the promises of e-democracy (De Rosa, 2014). Grillo's bold and unprecedented move was to melt these two faces into the unitary cast of his personal party, safeguarding the ideological banner of bottom-up net citizenship, whereas keeping total control of every aspect of internal and external communication. One needs only add the shrewd strategy Grillo adopted to avoid TV appearances of M5S unexperienced young candidates and to concentrate all TV exposure on his successful mass appearances as a professional comedian to conclude that Grillo's personal party qualifies as a perfect example of full and synergic exploitation of the old and new media environment.

The upper left quadrant, with Berlusconi's Forza Italia, is the best known, and the one which largely accounts for the widespread adoption, in the common parlance as well as in the scientific discourse, of the new concept of the personal party. There is often a tendency to overemphasize, in Berlusconi's success story, his role as a media tycoon, the owner of a TV empire that he could place at the service of his party with no financial or content limitations. As the combination of the two axes reminds us, the building – and maintenance – of Forza Italia was no less dependent on Berlusconi's corporate organization, with its diffused territorial branches and managerial professional staff. In this respect, Forza Italia is likely to remain a unique example of a successful, lasting merging of personal media and personal power (Bordignon, 2013).

Conclusion

Political parties have long qualified for becoming the next dignified institution in contemporary political systems. One which, according to Walter Bagehot's aphorism, continues to be credited with playing a role that it has long quit performing. Yet, many predictions in this direction notwithstanding, parties remain centerstage in the political arena as well as in the public debate. The survival of parties owes a lot to their exceptional capacity of adaptation. The personal party may be seen as the latest, albeit extreme, case in this Darwinian evolution of the species.

The communication environment, once the monopoly of entrenched elites at the top and grassroots party channel at the bottom, has been colonized by old and new media transforming public discourse into a hostile territory for traditional party nomenclature. While making it most attractive for all sort of charismatic leaders, as long as they prove able to convey a strong and persuasive message

(Manin, 1995). Meanwhile, an ever more volatile electorate appears to have relinquished any stable linkage to the original cleavages were most major parties had found, for over a century, their source of ideology, authority, and consent. Thus leaving the electoral market open for all political entrepreneurs who have enough resources, private and/or institutional, to try to win the new game.

To be sure, personal parties are not alone on the scene of democratic politics, with traditional parties still playing an important and often decisive role. Moreover, for the time being, Italy remains exceptional in presenting such a relevant and diversified record of personal parties. Yet, personal parties are fast spreading in quite a number of democratic – and non-democratic – regimes. It will be most interesting to see how the story, and the theory, will unfold.

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