TECHNOPOPULISM: MOVIMENTO CINQUE STELLE, PODEMOS, AND THE RISE OF
DIGITAL DIRECT DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

Edward Harrison Leavy: Technopopulism: Movimento Cinque Stelle, Podemos, and the Rise of Digital Direct Democracy (Under the direction of Donald Searing)

How is the internet changing the way citizens engage with politics? Beyond voting for representatives, several parties in Europe have been inviting supporters to go online and vote on issues such as leadership and policy stances. Known as technopopulism, this trend is particularly central to two emergent populist movements: Italy's Movimento Cinque Stelle and Spain's Podemos. Similar to how online 'fake news' has been changing the way the public understands current events, online-based direct democracy has already begun changing the way the public engages with political processes such as lawmaking and selecting candidates. While the rhetoric of technopopulist parties frequently highlights their usage of direct democracy as proof that they truly speak for the masses, this thesis argues that these online tools in their current iterations are problematic for reasons such as only engaging a minuscule fraction of the public and potentially obscuring undemocratic practices by party leadership.

To my grandparents.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

While the growth of ICT in the civic sphere has lagged behind the commercial world, governments are increasingly following the private sector's lead by using technology not only to deliver services but also to solicit input and build a rapport with constituents. The trend of using the internet to engage supporters is particularly central to a variety of modern populist movements who seek to position themselves as truly representing the people and not their own interests. My thesis will explore the emerging trend of 'technopopulism' by focusing on two ideologically divergent parties: Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) in Italy and Podemos in Spain. These groups, respectively led by a former comedian and a former college professor, have defied the odds to become major political forces within their respective countries. My thesis will examine the rise of digital direct democracy as it relates to the current crisis of representative democracy across Europe. My research question will be whether this new way of involving supporters in the political process is a beneficial or detrimental development for contemporary democratic regimes. The thesis concludes that digital direct democracy further compounds problems associated with conventional direct democratic practices. Overall, I will argue that while the internet has the potential to better engage citizens with the political process, technopopulism in its current form is a deeply problematic response to the broader trend of declining public trust in democratic governments.

Section 1.1: Populism and Technopopulism

This thesis refers to populism as a style of rhetoric rather than a consistent ideology. In general, populism is a mode of political communication that claims to fight for the aggrieved common folk against the class of corrupt ruling elites (de la Torre 59). Due to the conceptual vagueness often associated with the term, movements that are vastly divergent from an ideological perspective can fall under the same populist umbrella (Higgins 2, Laclau 13). Populism also often features charismatic leaders and opposition to supranational bodies such as the European Union. While they tout novel direct democratic technology, Podemos and M5S both exhibit most of the traits associated with conventional populist movements.

Although the relationship between populist movements and online misinformation has recently made 'fake news' a household term, populists have been increasingly using the internet not just to spread their messaging but also to gather data. The term technopopulism refers to the rising use of digital technology to coordinate collective action and decisions on behalf of the so-called common people. Technopopulist parties use the internet to engage their party members and then claim that their actions are direct expressions of what the public desires. Voting takes place within the general categories of people, rules, and politics (Corbetta). This encompasses party leadership and candidates for public office, party rules and bylaws, and legislative positions. In contrast to the way these decisions are historically made by party insiders outside of public view, the results of online referenda are hailed as expressing the 'general will' of the people in a markedly different style than conventional representative politics (Mudde 23). The Pirate Parties of Sweden and Germany are among the first movements to have made extensive use of the internet as an anti-establishment political tool. While these parties refused any fixed or long-term leaders, the leadership of M5S and Podemos "has been evident in all phases in the

development" (Natale 110). Unlike the Pirate Parties that fixated primarily on issues of internet citizenship and copyright, M5S and Podemos have used technopopulism to pursue a wide political agenda.

Section 1.2: Movimento Cinque Stelle and Podemos

The first case study, the Movimento Cinque Stelle, emerged in Italy amidst conditions of economic turmoil and disdain with the establishment parties. At the time of the party's founding in 2011, Italy was ruled by a technocratic government that was supported by both the center-left and the center-right. M5S and its bombastic leader, Beppe Grillo, claim to be the voice of the silent majority who oppose corruption and want to protect the environment but also oppose immigration and further European integration. With a strong result in the March 2018 election, this outsider party is poised to play a leading role in Italian as well as European affairs. I will discuss how digital direct democracy is central to the party's rhetoric and has held open contests online for supporters to choose leadership, debate and vote on issues, and select which coalition the party should join in the European Parliament. This thesis will also discuss criticisms of M5S technopopulist rhetoric, such as concerns that the party is not as democratic as it claim to be and that its online platforms have been compromised by hackers.

The other case study is the emergent Spanish left-wing group Podemos. I will discuss the Spanish political, social and economic context leading up to the party's formation in 2014. The global financial crisis hit Spain especially hard as it burst a large Spanish housing bubble. Compounded by the eurozone crisis, the ruling socialist party implemented sweeping austerity measures at the behest of the EU. I will argue that Podemos' use of online deliberative and direct democratic platforms was designed to incorporate the millions of ensuing *Indignados* protestors into democratic politics. Spain was ripe for an emergent populist party as corruption scandals on

both sides of the aisle and overlapping economic ideologies contributed to a popular sentiment that the mainstream parties were colluding with each other rather than competing. Whereas the anti-austerity Indignados demonstrators used a system of hand gestures to make decisions by popular vote, Podemos used digital infrastructure to scale up this participatory spirit to a national party. I will argue that the technopopulist spirit of Podemos was part of a conscious decision to make deliberation public and transparent in contrast with perceived self-serving backroom dealings of the mainstream parties.

CHAPTER 2: MOVIMENTO CINQUE STELLE

In Italy, technopulism has powered the recent emergence of the anti-establishment *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (often called M5S or the Five Star Movement). M5S has sought to define itself as a social movement and 'non-party' while hailing internet-based direct democracy as a solution to Italy's democratic deficit (Ivaldi 370). While former comedian Beppe Grillo has been the face of the party since its foundation in 2009, his late co-founder Gianroberto Casaleggio is largely responsible for developing the movement's pro-technology platform. Overall, the party lacks a coherent ideology argument besides believing that the internet can bring about a 'digital utopia' through making society more decentralized, democratic, and libertarian (Natale et al 112). This section will examine M5S' background, assess its rhetoric around digital direct democracy, and briefly examine major criticisms of the party's technopopulist practices.

Section 2.1: Italian Political and Economic Context

Italy's lack of public faith in the democratic process and deeply troubled economy have opened the door for emergent populist political movements like M5S. Politically, the last quarter century in Italy has been characterized by corruption and scandal. The *Tangentopoli* (roughly meaning 'Bribe City') investigations of the 1990's led to the indictment of over half of the Italian Parliament's members and the dissolution of a number of major political parties. Subsequently, corruption scandals have tarnished new factions such as Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* and the

hard-right *Lega Nord.* M5S claims to offer an alternative to the corrupt political establishment, although the party has faced its own allegations of malfeasance in recent years.

Movimento Cinque Stelle has also positioned itself as willing to stand up to EU leadership in contrast with perceptions of Italy's centrist politicians. The center-left *Partito Democratico* suffered its worst result ever in the March 2018 election as many in the Italian public saw the party as overly complicit with demands from Brussels for economic austerity and the acceptance of refugees (Horowitz "In Italy Election"). In sum, M5S has attacked pro-EU centrism as the source of both economic grievances and increased migration within Italy. While stopping short of calling for Italy to leave the European Union, M5S has taken advantage of the nation's tumultuous political climate by scapegoating EU leadership and the corruption of other parties as causing Italy's problems.

The precarious Italian economy has further compounded the lack of faith in mainstream politics. With stagnant wages and high unemployment, the 'losers' of globalization and postindustrialism have become increasingly sympathetic to the type of euroskeptic and anti-immigration attitudes espoused by the Five Star Movement (Corbetta 264). M5S' position as supporters of the economically aggrieved helped power the party to win across Southern Italy and the islands where problems such as unemployment are the highest. In the rhetoric of Grillo and other party leaders, Italy is the victim of a conspiracy by global elites including actors such as Italian Parliament, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. As Italy faces vast external pressures relating to its mounting debt and failing banking system, the party promises to "respond to the demands of the common people and not of the large corporations" (Ivaldi 360). As will be discussed later, M5S espouses its implementation of digital direct democracy as proof that they are putting power directly in the hands of the common people.

Section 2.2: Party Leadership

Before founding his web-based political movement, M5S leader Beppe Grillo was a prominent personality in Italian media dating back to the 1980's. In addition to telling jokes that targeted women, Jewish people, and 'negroes', he established his brand as an unfiltered anti-establishment figure by joking on television about the governing *Partito Socialista Italiano* being thieves (Treré et al 289). This overtly political subject matter troubled executives of the state-owned TV networks enough to effectively banish Grillo from their airwaves. When the RAI channel made an exception to this ban in 1993 and broadcast one of his shows, a staggering 15 million viewers tuned in (La Repubblica). Subsequently, Grillo has condemned RAI and its affiliates as compromised state run media (Kramer). Whereas Grillo grew dissuaded with television, newspapers, and radio as instruments of the political establishment, the comedian became enamored with the internet as a decentralized medium for organizing against hegemonic powers.

For much of his life, Beppe Grillo criticized the pervasiveness of new technologies and would even smash computers with a hammer as part of his stage act (Treré et al 290). This Luddite sensibility began to transform into a deeply-held enthusiasm for digital media after he encountered web entrepreneur Gianroberto Cassaleggio in the early 2000's. Upon first meeting Casaleggio, Grillo described him as a "crazy man. Crazy of a new craziness, in which everything changes for the better thanks to the Net" (Treré et al 291). Casaleggio's digital marketing enterprise became the host for the beppegrillo.it blog, which launched in 2005 alongside a one-man show tour that was named after the website's URL. Grillo described his new site as an "instrument at our disposal to realize a true democracy" and began writing obscenity-filled posts on topics such as ecology, globalization, consumerism, and financial speculation (Natale et al

107). As he gained a massive online following, the technology that Grillo once destroyed onstage had become the catalyst for his second career as an an anti-establishment political figure.

Whereas Grillo has been the provocative yet affable face of the movement, Gianroberto Casaleggio provided much of the techno-utopian philosophy that has come to define M5S. He founded the internet consulting firm *Casaleggio Associati,* which managed much of the movement's online presence while producing its own content. One such clip created by the firm, titled *CASALEGGIO E IL NUOVO ORDINE MONDIALE GAIA* (meaning Casaleggio and the Gaia New World Order), is an animated video showing a utopian future where technology has allowed for decentralized decision making in lieu of representative democracy (Casaleggio Associati). The video presents this future within a historical continuum where technology such as the printing press has positively altered the course of history. This timeline includes some boldly disturbing examples, such as glorifying the way Mussolini used the radio to broadcast his speeches via loudspeaker to every public plaza and how the Nazis used Leni Riefenstahl's films to spread their ideological message (Ibid.). In less than subtle terms, Casaleggio's video positioned Grillo as the next strong and charismatic European leader to seize control after using media to spread a revolutionary ideology. While Gianroberto Casaleggio passed away in 2016, his son Davide now manages the family business and continues to work closely with M5S.

Section 2.3: Political Emergence

M5S supports not only anti-establishment policies but also a style of governance that radically breaks with the mainstream. By inviting members to deliberate on key issues online, Movimento Cinque Stelle claims it wants elected representatives to be a 'terminal' that reflects the public's will rather than an independent agent or trustee (Natale et al 115). This cyber-utopian form of direct democracy is,

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characterized by Corbetta and Gualmini as "web populism," is contrasted with a dying liberal democracy. The existing clumsy, expensive, and inefficient Italian political apparatus will be replaced with the electronic agora by tapping the wisdom of crowds (Ibid.).

The corrupt political class, according to M5S rhetoric, is supported by other deeply-embedded institutions such as the media. Per Grillo, the political and media "castes are united together and form an immense body, a super social group" that derives its power not from controlling the means of production but from "controlling means of information" (Ivaldi 360). Instead of prominently claiming to have good politicians that can fix the Italian government, the Five Star Movement's pitch to voters is centered around internet engagement as a means of fundamentally altering the way average citizens interact with politics. Grillo has hailed the internet as a provider of transparency and accountability, writing that tracking government and EU funding online would prevent fraud because "one doesn't steal through the Web" (Natale et al 112). Besides spreading the gospel of technopopulism through his blog, Grillo has used the internet to organize widespread anti-establishment political demonstrations and win elections.

Grillo and his marketing team used the meetup.com service to organize the inaugural 'V-Day' event on September 8th 2007 as a means of translating online support into real-world action. The demonstration's name was a reference to the movie *V for Vendetta,* in which the public of a dystopian future unites to bring down a corrupt authoritarian government, and the Italian word *vaffanculo*, a profanity that was in this case directed toward the Italian political establishment (Treré et al 291). Grillo's supporters attained 350,000 signatures for a petition that called for anti-corruption legislation such as banning convicted criminals of holding political office. While Grillo has not sought public office himself, he remains the president of the party

and the clear figurehead for the movement. With multiple convictions for charges including manslaughter, Grillo would not be able to serve under M5S' proposed ban on politicians with criminal records. In 2008, the movement put forth candidates under the name *Amici di Beppe Grillo List* (or Friends of Beppe Grillo List). Embodying the party's aim of replacing traditional media with web media, the agenda of the 2009 V-Day rally was primarily to protest government funding for print periodicals and television.

Later that year, the Movimento Cinque Stelle party was officially established and began to gain significant traction as the financial crisis prompted austerity measures from the government (Treré et al 292). Furthermore, other populist parties such as the centrist *Italia dei Valori* and the far-right Lega Nord were both investigated for corruption in 2012 which created space for the growth of a new anti-corruption voice. While the eponymous five stars represent five issues such as safeguarding public water and increasing connectivity among citizens, M5S' ideology is generally amorphous besides being opposed to corruption. The Five Star Movement proudly puts forth candidates who are not career politicians in a manner similar to Emmanuel Macron's *La République En Marche!* in France. For example, their candidate to be Italy's next Prime Minister is 31 year-old former website designer Luigi Di Maio. M5S is not easily characterized on the left-right spectrum due to holding progressive stances on matters such as the environment and welfare while being simultaneously reactionary on topics such as immigration and the European Union. The party went on to receive the most votes of any party in the 2013 parliamentary election (although winning only 109 of 630 positions due to a system that favors coalitions) and the second most votes in the 2014 European election while also winning several powerful mayoral positions in cities such as Turin and Rome.

In the March 2018 Italian elections, Movimento Cinque Stelle received over 32% of votes. While this was the largest share won by any single party, M5S fell short of the threshold required to form a government by itself. One party leader called the result a triumph while proclaiming that "everybody has to come talk to us" (Horowitz "In Italy Election"). Indeed, the Five Star Movement holds a great deal of leverage in ongoing coalition negotiations due to its strong electoral showing. While the center-right coalition led by the populist Lega Nord seems a logical partner at first glance, M5S had previously ruled out an alliance with the Lega. While this is subject to change, the rift between these two parties is symptomatic of Italy's geographical divide. Lega Nord, whose name means literally 'Northern League', once called for the secession of the industrial Northern Italy from the economically troubled South. While the Lega has recently tried to pivot to a more national campaign that scapegoats immigrants rather than Southern Italians, M5S vastly outperformed their populist rival in the South and the islands.

In terms of forging a coalition, remaining obstacles include the Five Star Movement's promise to provide universal basic income. Lega Nord leader Matteo Salvini has criticized M5S' proposed 'citizen's income' as encouraging laziness, saying that "paying the people to stay at home is not the Italy I have in mind" (Gallione). Although Salvini's party claims to now reject its anti-Southern origins, this issue shows how Lega Nord remains reluctant to support policies seen as redistributing wealth from the North to the rest of the country. Despite their differences, it remains very possible that M5S forges a coalition with the Lega due to their many common positions. Both parties are euroskeptic and opposed to migration. Furthermore, M5S and Lega Nord share similar pro-Kremlin views, such as "that the sanctions against Russia for its land grab in Ukraine hurt Italian trading partners as much as they do Moscow" (Horowitz "Will Russia

Meddle"). Perhaps shared disdain for migrants and warm opinions toward Russia will ultimately

prove strong enough bonds to overcome the factions' geographical differences.

Section 2.4: Usage of Digital Direct Democracy

Beyond the movement's innovative uses of a blog as a political platform and social media

technology as an organizing tool, digital direct democracy is crucial to M5S' technopopulist

identity. While Grillo and Casaleggio have predicted that the internet will ultimately help direct

democracy prevail over representational democracy entirely, the party elicits input from a

handful of engaged members in the meantime. Grillo's blog serves as a hub for conducting

> surveys among subscribers to the movement, not only as primaries for
>
> candidates at all levels, but also on issues such as expelling certain MPs from
>
> the movement, selecting a candidate for president of the republic, deciding the
>
> movement's position on clandestine immigration or civil unions (gay
>
> marriages), forming an EU parliamentary group with UKIP of Great Britain,
>
> and outlining an electoral reform bill (Caruso 591).

A separate online platform, *Rousseau*, is managed entirely by Casaleggio Associati and allows

members to participate in writing legislature. Although Rousseau allows for M5S supporters

with special skills in drafting bills to contribute digitally to the party, most online voting takes

place on Grillo's blog on an ad hoc basis.

In contrast with the party's lofty rhetoric about how digital deliberation is the best way to

solve problems, M5S has only followed through on a few of its promises about putting decision

making in the hands of the networked masses. Despite numerous "announcements that an online

platform would be set up on which activists could make structured contributions to the

movement's political choices, no such platform has been created" (Ibid.). While Beppe Grillo's

blog is positioned as a hub for open and productive debate, there have been criticisms that M5S heavily moderates their online forums and delete comments that defy the will of party leadership (Treré et al 298-299). According to Grillo, the website only deletes comments from 'trolls' and fake profiles rather than silencing legitimate opinions (Ibid.). When voting is opened up to supporters, this process often appears to be merely a rubber stamp on decisions made at the top rather than a legitimate solicitation of input.

There have only been two instances where Grillo has opened up online voting on his blog where the outcome was contrary to Grillo's publicly expressed position (Caruso 602). When party members are asked to vote on meaningful issues, the selection of choices to decide between is often constricted. For example, the party asked members to vote on which EU parliament group to join after winning 17 seats in 2014. While the voting ultimately decided upon the eurosceptic Europe of Freedom and Democracy coalition, some party members and elected officials were upset that Grillo choice of Greens/European Free Alliance was not among the three options on the online voting platform (Armellini). For a party that hails the internet as a force for more transparent and accountable politics, it is worth noting that the tallying of results in this type of poll is not made available to supporters or the public.

Overall, the duo of Gianroberto Casaleggio and Beppe Grillo was characterized as a "diarchy that has substantial control over the party's resources" (Vittori 334). Since Casaleggio's death in 2016, it appears that Grillo's control over the Five Star Movement is as strong as ever. As hundreds of officials elected under the party banner have either left or been expelled in recent years, party leadership has frequently used online supporter voting to silence dissent rather than include new perspectives. When M5S senator Luis Orellana made remarks in 2014 questioning whether the unchecked power of Grillo contradicted the party's rhetoric of inclusiveness, his

expulsion from the movement was approved by a online vote. This vote was surely influenced by the blog post Grillo penned shortly before where he expressed his "hope that the Web will decide and confirm the verdict" of expulsion (Corbetta 259). Critics have argued that the rhetoric of M5S is threatening to the democratic process in the sense that it conceals calculated marketing strategies, hierarchical political processes, and practices that border on authoritarian (Treré et al 299). In this view, direct democracy within the party functions as a "obfuscating mechanism" to promote the party's leader as an autocratic leader with an apparent mandate from the people (Ibid.). Rather than tapping into the wisdom of the crowd to generate new ideas and build consensus, online voting within M5S in its current incarnation serves primarily to reinforce the power of party leadership and help silence opposition.

CHAPTER 3: PODEMOS

Resurgent populism in Europe and the United States is not limited to right-wing groups pushing back against globalization and migration. For example, the recently founded leftist party Podemos has become one of Spain's major parties by using media savvy and grassroots organizing to channel the outrage of anti-austerity protesters against both financial and political elites. Under the charismatic leadership of former university professor Pablo Iglesias, scholars have called Podemos "one of the first and most successful cases of a new political party stemming from a protest movement" (Casero-Ripollés et al 379). Following the momentum of the social media driven 15-M Movement, Podemos has incorporated a number of digital platforms where voters can not just receive information but contribute ideas for policy and vote on party leadership. This section will argue that Podemos' is an example of populist parties in Europe seeking to hybridize representative democracy in order to burnish claims of speaking for the masses rather than establishment insiders.

Section 3.1: Spanish Political and Economic Context

While left-wing populism is not a unique Spanish phenomenon, conditions in the country were particularly ripe for an emergent leftist movement. Before the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, Spain was already suffering from the burst of a housing bubble that led to skyrocketing unemployment and the highest growth of income inequality anywhere in the European Union (Nez 115). The nation's GDP growth rate had dropped from +3.8% in 2007 to +1.1% in 2008, with this figure plummeting to -3.6% in 2009 (Vittori 326). This economic

catastrophe was compounded by a lack of trust in elected officials and parties such as the center-left Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), ultimately leading millions of Spaniards to take to the streets in massive anti-austerity protests. Called either the 15-M Movement for its genesis on the 15th of May 2011 or the *Indignados* Movement meaning 'the outraged', these protests signaled widespread discontent with the political and economic status quo. The founders of Podemos have said that the overlapping political, economic, and social crises that fueled the indignados created a "'window of political opportunity' for setting out a new political alternative" (Nez 115). The distrust in elites and feeling of injustice as expressed in the 15-M protests was particular opportune for a populist group to emerge.

While Podemos offers a bold set of economic policies targeted at helping the average citizen, the party is also appealing to voters because it breaks the traditional binary nexus of modern Spanish politics. The socialist PSOE was charged, alongside the PP, with numerous corruption scandals leading to the housing crisis before then facing criticism from the left for implementing austerity as the ruling party at that time (Nez 116). The cartel party theory theorizes that inter-party competition has been gradually replaced by intra-party collusion in previous decades. Parties that are 'cartelized' abdicate their role in bridging society and the state, "while displaying variations of the following: (a) a decline in party membership, (b) dependence on state funding and (c) an ideological convergence with mainstream parties" (Vittori 326). The Spanish centrist parties of the PP and PSOE both show symptoms of being cartelized, such as convergence on the issue of obediently accepting EU demands for austerity (Tremlett). Amidst the perception that the two main parties were inadequately different from each other, parties like Podemos were able to offer real competition as outsiders of the establishment cartel.

In Spain, many anti-austerity protesters felt betrayed by both business leaders and politicians on the national and European levels. When a social movement like the Indignados emerges without a clear choice of who protesters should vote for, 'political entrepreneurs' can create a new party to channel this energy into electoral success (Kitschelt 278). Another important characteristic of populist parties is that they very often feature a larger than life leader who is the face of the party. With the preconditions for a new populist movement in place, Podemos and charismatic party leader Pablo Iglesias acted as political entrepreneurs by appealing to an audience that was hungry for a new option.

Section 3.2: Party Leadership

Pablo Iglesias Turrión, a former member of the Communist Youth Organization and scholar of civil disobedience movements in Italy and Spain, was elected in 2014 to be the head of the nascent Podemos party. With a ponytail hairstyle and an eyebrow piercing, Iglesias appears as a clear outsider from the *casta* of mainstream politicians in the Partido Popular (PP) and the PSOE that have dominated Spanish government since the death of Francisco Franco. Eschewing his eyebrow stud to improve his electoral image for the 2014 European Parliament elections, Iglesias became one of the five Podemos MEPs elected that year out of 54 total Spanish seats (Tremlett). Beyond his distinctive ponytail, the young leader is known for his slick communication:

> Appearing in multiple media and hosting his own TV programmes, Pablo Iglesias employs a plain language that communicates his message in an approachable and exciting way, offering a coherent and 'common sense' narrative for the causes of the crisis and the prospects of change, which can supply a common surface of inscription for various social discontents and diverse identities (Kioupkiolis 103).

Through his media appearances, Iglesias became such a recognized figure that his face was used as the party logo on ballot papers for the 2014 election.

While Iglesias was steeped in Spanish Communism as a young man, Podemos markets itself as not just another far-left group. On a surface level, the party distances itself from the symbolic heritage of leftism. Explaining choices such as eschewing the hammer and sickle iconography, Iglesias has argued that Podemos does not represent the typical left-winger who was "content to put up with his 5 % [of votes], his red flag" because "that's the way the enemy wants us to be: mean, using a language that no one understands, in a minority, and hiding behind our usual symbols" (Nez 122). The 15-M Movement attracted not only leftists but also citizens who did not participate in conventional politics yet were upset with the state of affairs. Podemos has softened language historically used in communist rhetoric as part of their strategy to channel protesters' outrage into mainstream electoral success. For example, while 'anti-capitalism' sounds harsh to many potential supporters, Podemos leaders have used the phrase 'economic democracy' to convey a very similar idea to the public in a more palatable manner (Ibid.). Overall, Iglesias' party diverges from the conventional Spanish far-left more in style and tactics than in policy.

Section 3.3: Political Emergence

At its ideological core, all forms of populism are hostile toward political elites and appeal to supporters who feel they are victims or dispossessed. Left-wing populism, such as the movement led by Senator Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic Presidential Primary, targets economic elites in addition to establishment political leaders. In the Spanish context, the anti-establishment rhetoric of Podemos "is directed not only against uncaring and corrupt politicians but also against the privileged economic and financial elites, and the large IBEX 35 corporations

embodying a neoliberal hegemony" (Ivaldi 360). Podemos claims to be a new kind of political movement for a country whose politicians represent the elite class of society rather than the people at large.

The platform of Podemos is focused on providing concrete economic reforms that go beyond the promises of the center-left PSOE. Initial proposed policies included instituting a 35 hour work week, lowering the retirement age to 60, providing universal basic income, repudiating debt, and nationalizing sectors such as food, energy, and transportation (Sanjaume 78). Podemos is also staunchly progressive on social issues. For example, they "defend immigrants and socially marginalized sectors" while advocating more social rights for all (Kioupkiolis 100). Their defense of immigrants is notable because it shows how left-wing populist parties like Podemos are radically different from more reactionary populist groups that frequently scapegoat minority communities.

Podemos' grassroots movement is revolutionary but their attempts to capture the enthusiasm of anti-austerity protesters has so far not been successful in creating policies that resonate with enough Spanish voters to win power in government. While the party achieved moderate success in the general elections they have contested with over 20% of the vote each time, their share of seats decreased in 2016 compared to 2015. The next Spanish general election is years away and will follow a resolution to the Catalonia independence crisis, which has divided the anti-independence national Podemos leadership with its Catalan subsidiary. However, Podemos is still in as strong a position to form an unabashedly leftist government in Spain as any group has been since the 1930's. If a purple Podemos coalition finishes the task of their red predecessors, it may be due to their savvy use of digital direct democracy.

Section 3.4: Usage of Digital Direct Democracy

Iglesias took advantage of both television broadcasts and digital webcasts to spread the message of the newly-formed party. Where Podemos is truly revolutionary, however, has been in their use of online consultations with supporters to gather data and determine the party's policy platform. With the establishment of localized 'circles' where members and sympathizers can join for free and debate, Podemos can claim to be a hybrid body of both representational and direct democratic practices. After briefly discussing the way Podemos utilizes media and local organizing, this section will explore the way the party is digitally enabling its grassroots to influence policies and choices of leadership. Embodying Podemos' anti-elite message in practice, their use of direct democracy shows how technology is increasingly altering the way that citizens engage with politics. Podemos nonetheless remains very far away from truly being a direct democratic party because such a small percentage of the party's supporters, let alone Spanish citizens overall, currently use these online platforms.

In order to first recruit a base of supporters, Iglesias and other party leaders had to use all available means to spread their messaging. Iglesias' charisma was a catalyst in building popular support for Podemos as his plain yet exciting and coherent 'common sense' style appealed to the millions of Spanish citizens who were upset with the nation's political status quo (Kioupkiolis 103). While right-wing populist leaders such as Donald Trump or Beppe Grillo had significant resources and name recognition to facilitate their entry into the political scene, Iglesias was a university professor without Trump or Grillo's advantages. However, Iglesias successfully launched two popular television programs while receiving praise for his performance on established conservative talk shows (Tremlett). Iglesias' shows, *La Tuerka* and *Fort Apache*, are remarkable for not only succeeding in terms of conventional television ratings but also being

highly popular online. In addition to live 'streaming' of La Tuerka on the internet, each broadcast was also disseminated via social media such as YouTube. The show gained a cult following online and its YouTube channel had almost 40 million views as of early 2016 (Casero-Ripollés et al 384). As Iglesias and Podemos gained widespread recognition from the Spanish public, the party began to use technology to not only spread messaging but to receive input from supporters in a groundbreaking manner.

Direct democracy has been a key part of Podemos' strategy to channel support from the Indignados activists while differentiating themselves from the PSOE and PP. In the anti-elite and anti-austerity demonstrations of the 15-M Movement, decision making and debate were governed by popular vote. During these open-air assemblies, protesters took turns to speak while "using hand gestures – raised waving hands for "yes", crossed arms for "no" – to express agreement or disagreement" (Tremlett). While this style of deliberation was also used in movements such as Occupy Wall Street, no major American political party managed to embrace this concept in the way that Podemos has. As a newly formed party, Podemos "set up local and sectorial 'circles' of members and sympathizers, who debate politics and formulate policy proposals" and "made these 'circles' a key node in the organization of the party" (Kioupkiolis 104). These participatory forums aligned with Podemos' rhetoric that the new party was truly for the people and not controlled solely by a few powerful figures at the top of the organization.

Podemos' many circles are inherently difficult to manage. As one journalist wrote before the 2015 elections, the "900-odd circles are key to Podemos's participative approach and local popularity, but they are hard to control. (The party still does not have a full list of them.) Anyone can join in and vote" (Tremlett). However, internet platforms corresponding to each local chapter have helped to assuage some of these organizational problems. Software by a company called

Loomio is now used to administer the circles (Kioupkiolis 105). Each group is accessible to anyone with internet access even if they cannot physically attend the circle's meetings. While Podemos previously immersed itself in popular social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, they have also taken steps for more direct involvement in issues by supporters beyond merely commenting on official postings.

In the process of transforming a social movement into an institutionalized political party, Podemos needed to create a centralized and vertical structure. However, Podemos has maintained a number of unique aspects compared to other partisan organizations such as regularly calling on all of its sympathizers to vote on collective decisions (Nez 127). From the party's inception, Podemos has offered online voting to determine the party leader and selection of candidates for public office. In 2014, Iglesias won the party's first ever 'citizen primaries' that were open to the public with the only restriction being a validation of cell phone number to protect against individuals voting multiple times (Castro). Once chosen to serve as candidates for elected office, Podemos holds a high standard for conduct and remuneration that embodies its goal of eliminating the political *casta*. Podemos limits the salary of representatives to three times the Spanish minimum wage while requiring term limits and a renunciation of all privileges directly linked to representative status (Nez 127). In particular, Iglesias embodies this lifestyle as he is known for sitting in budget seats when he flies and refusing the official car service granted to other leading politicians (Tremlett). After leaders are chosen online, Podemos also uses the internet to promote transparency and accountability for their elected officials. On the party's official website, users can easily find a list of all party spending and member salaries on the *Portal de transparencia* page.

Podemos is not just tech-savvy in terms of choosing leadership candidates and holding them accountable. As previously mentioned, Podemos asks its members to vote on a number of issues. Internal referenda known as *consulates ciudadanas* and the *consulate de investidura* also allow members to directly participate in deciding Podemos' stances on various policy choices and which other parties to join as coalition allies (Vittori 328). Beyond these ad hoc decisions, Podemos has made online debate among supporters a permanent feature of their online 'agora' website. Even including viewers who do not contribute ideas or evaluate the ideas of others, the number of daily visitors on the Plaza Podemos debating site is around 20,000 (Tremlett). This figure pales in comparison with the over 24 million Spanish voters that participated in the 2016 general election. While local Podemos 'circles' are accessible online for supporters unable to attend in person, voters who are perhaps less comfortable with technology or financially incapable of paying for internet access cannot join. Another downside to this form of digital direct democracy is that the decisions reached by online deliberation are not always entirely feasible. After the party's creation:

> Podemos then embarked on the complex process of writing a "participative"
> election manifesto, based on ideas from the circles and then voted for online. The
> result was original, but also impractical and uncosted. It called for a basic state
> salary for all citizens and non-payment of "illegitimate" parts of the public debt,
> although the manifesto did not specify which parts these were – two measures that
> Podemos has since back-pedalled on (Tremlett).

This demonstrates how the ideas generated by the public may be less practical than the ideas of career politicians.

It is logical that Podemos uses media innovations to try and capitalize on enthusiasm from a digitally-powered social movement like the 15-M protests. Social media and other new digital technologies were becoming extremely popular in Spain and were ubiquitous amongst the Indignados. "Digital networks thus catalysed the expansion of mobilizations by facilitating the sharing of information" among anti-austerity protesters who were seeking to coordinate their actions (Kioupkiolis 105). Dissuaded with the status quo of Spanish politics, many of the 15-M activists pledged not to vote in the 2011 election. In light of this, Podemos' technopopulist practices have been designed to bring these citizens into the voting booth by creating a bilateral rapport.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

This section will compare and contrast the two case studies before assessing the broader implications of technopopulism. Although Podemos is a left-wing movement while M5S is ideologically ambiguous, they both share the characteristics of having a strong leader and a subversive political approach. While they are fundamentally distinct parties with divergent applications of online technology, each emerged from similar conditions and make similar claims about the progressive power of direct democracy. I will discuss the potential benefits to digital direct democracy before analyzing some of the most common criticisms and comparing online referenda with conventional referenda. Overall, I will argue that this trend helps populist movements claim to be the true voice of the people without necessarily engaging with the public's input in any significant manner.

Section 4.1: Comparison of Case Studies

As previously argued, populism itself is a thin ideology that can play host to a broad range of other, thicker ideologies such as fascism or communism. In the case of M5S, populism can be largely non-ideological besides a general orientation against elites and in favor of technology. The policies promoted by each party vary significantly. For example, Podemos is coherently left-wing while the Five Star Movement supports some seemingly contradictory positions such as agreeing with the scientific consensus on climate change while also claiming that vaccines cause autism. Podemos and M5S together represent "a case of 'diverse but not disparate' forms of populism" (Ivaldi 354). Although ideologically different from Podemos

beyond being against elites and corruption, M5S emerged in similar conditions as Spain and Italy each "experienced a similar economic and financial crisis, mainly linked to the budget deficit (Spain), the public debt (Italy), and the unemployment rates (both countries)" along with similar 'cartelization' and corruption scandals among the mainstream parties (Vittori 334). Both Podemos and M5S claim that corrupt politicians within their countries are more oriented toward rent-seeking than doing the best thing for the public. Additionally, Podemos frequently accuses rival politicians of colluding with Spain's financial elite while M5S denounces the political establishment as conspiring with institutions such as the media and trade unions.

Podemos and M5S both use technopopulism as a way to give substance to their shared core message: their party cares about common people while the ruling *casta* does not. Podemos' rhetoric hammers political and business elites as being from the same greedy stratum whether they are on the left, right, or in private industry. Beppe Grillo and Pablo Iglesias both have popularized the term 'political caste' as an enemy to the people on both sides of the political spectrum that only cares about protecting its own interests, with Iglesias arguing that "the key to understand what is happening in Spain is not choosing between left or right, but a contradiction between an oligarchic minority and a majority of citizens" (Ivaldi 360). While Podemos is ideologically left-wing in many aspects, both parties claim to reject what Grillo has called the "empty dualism" of the left-right political spectrum (Gilioli). Furthermore, widespread corruption scandals in both countries contributes to notions that the political system is broken.

Economic conditions have also been similar in Spain and Italy. Both part of the PIGS bloc alongside Greece and Portugal, public debt and banking instability are still high in both countries after a decade of turmoil. While Spanish banking debts required bailouts first from Madrid and then from Brussels, Italy had not experienced a recent housing crisis like Spain and

thus Italian sovereign debt did not escalate to the same extent (Quaglia 502-503). While Italy's banks have not suffered in the same way from mortgage related debt, the country has been trapped in a cycle of economic crisis largely due to a lack of credit and a public sector without the resources necessary to stimulate their economy (Ibid). Despite not requiring the same level of financial assistance as Spain, both countries have enacted large public sector cuts as a result of pressure from the European Union. These austerity measures have proved extremely unpopular on a domestic level in each nation, further eroding public faith in mainstream political parties (Tremlett). Iglesias has claimed that the PSOE and the PP promote the same "technocratic consensus behind market liberalization policies" (Kioupkiolis 102). These conditions proved ripe for bottom-up political movements to emerge in contrast with the neoliberal political establishment that supported business elites while forcing austerity on individual citizens.

Beyond conditions in Spain and Italy on a political and economic level, the social sphere of each country has been ripe for an internet-focused political movement. While not quite as prevalent as in regions such as Scandinavia, internet access has become very widespread in Spain and Italy (Eurostat). The percentage of households with internet access in each of these two countries has grown from around 60% in 2010 to around 80% in 2016 (Ibid.). If this trend continues, almost everyone living in Spain and Italy will soon be online in the near future. Young Spanish and Italian citizens have the highest rates of advanced internet usage, which may have helped the technopopulist M5S win a plurality of the 18-34 year old demographic in the 2018 election (Fortunati 329-331, Ipsos). Overall, the conditions from which M5S and Podemos emerged have a significant amount in common. Their economic hardships were compounded by a "process of cartelization among the mainstream parties and having been immersed in several corruption scandals in which several high-ranking politicians were directly or indirectly

involved" (Vittori 327). Overall, a loss of faith in conventional political solutions created an appetite for not only new parties but new ways of engaging with the political process.

Section 4.2: Direct Democracy in the Internet Age

In terms of digital direct democracy, the two parties have employed similar methods but accompanied by different rhetoric. Each technopopulist movement has used the internet to coordinate collective action, select leaders and representative candidates, and provide input on legislative issues. Whereas discourse from Casaleggio and Grillo has heralded a near future where citizens engage directly in all political matters using technology, Podemos' leadership has not mentioned a similarly lofty vision for the future. While technopopulism is presented by M5S as part of the 'supersession' narrative in which radical new governance based on digital media will replace traditional media and traditional political parties, Podemos presents technopopulism only as a step toward strong socialism replacing the current political status quo (Natale et al 115). Overall, while each party has different stated goals for using direct democracy, both systems have a number of serious flaws as currently implemented.

While voting on political matters online is novel, a hybridized political system with both representative and elements of direct democracy is nothing new to either Spain or Italy. Spain has had a number of prominent referenda ranging from a 1986 in-out referendum on NATO membership to the 2017 independence vote within Catalonia. Italy has also opened up noteworthy decisions to public voting, such as allowing divorce as of 1974 or declining constitutional reforms to its parliamentary system in 2016. The term direct democracy refers to citizens participating in the legislative process through either voting in initiatives and referenda or deliberating through forums such as a tow hall meeting (Haskell 50). Whereas it is easier for the public to vote in a referendum than to express their opinion in a way that influences

lawmaking, the internet has made it more realistic to open up deliberation beyond professional politicians or the dedicated few patrons of town hall style events. As the number of internet-connected citizens grows everyday, it seems clear that "instant democracy becomes more feasible and more attractive to people" (Haskell 148). In Europe, for example, there is already an online web page for submitting and voting on petitions to EU Parliament. Rather than collecting signatures on a street corner, EU citizens can now rally support for a cause by just sharing a link over email or social media. Whether this would be as desirable as promised by techno-utopians like Gianroberto Casaleggio, however, is much less certain.

While direct democracy can be an effective complement to representational democracy in terms of supplementing political articulation and providing additional space for debate, there are also clearly downsides such as "a general restrictive effect of direct democracy on minority rights" (Marxer 84). While this type of process involves people beyond just political representatives, it still leaves out large segments of the population. Beyond minorities, deliberative democracy excludes people who are not well-educated or lack the time to get to know issues thoroughly (Haskell 149). Additionally, interest groups often descend upon direct democratic processes as a means of more directly influencing policymaking. While politicians do occasionally vote against the wishes of their constituents on certain issues, these instances are often unavoidable yet unpopular decisions such as solving budget exigencies (Haskell 152). The impractical results of direct democracy, digital or otherwise, is best encapsulated by Podemos' aforementioned retreat from the uncosted proposals submitted by its supporters in 2014.

With current technology, the populations of modern nations are too large to feasibly hold online votes where every qualified voter participates like an ancient Athenian agora. In Podemos and M5S, only several thousand supporters engage in policy deliberations online. Although

participation is somewhat higher for leadership elections, it is hard to claim these inputs

represent the will of the public when only a minuscule fraction of the overall public takes part.

For example, while almost eleven million Italians voted for M5S in the 2018 general election,

only 37,000 took part in the party's 2016 leadership election (Jones et al). Online referenda face

criticism of being less than fully democratic when not every desired choice is included as a

possible voting option. As previously mentioned, the ideas generated by popular vote online may

make for untenable political positions when trying to win elections.

Political opponents and critical scholars have called M5S' technopopulism a distraction

from Grillo's authoritarian aspirations, whereas Iglesias has been accused of 'online Leninism'

(Treré et al 299, Müller). As data has become one of the most valuable commodities in modern

times, technopopulism might be nothing more than another means of gathering information on

public opinion. However, there are some apparent benefits to digital direct democracy besides

the hollow appearance of expanded participation. Scholars have argued that deliberative polling

is shown to have positive spillover effects for participants. For example, there is evidence that

participants in online deliberative polling gain in knowledge and shift in policy preferences by

the end of the debate (Smith 157). While this effect is more pronounced when the debating

process occurs in a face-to-face setting, holding discussions of policies and leadership candidates

online helps to politically engage citizens who might not spend an evening or a weekend

attending a town hall meeting in person. This seems to be especially true for tech savvy people

under the age of 40. Whereas critics of direct democracy claim it is impossible for the average

citizen to understand complex issues at hand, this argument overlooks "the fact that it is equally

difficult (or easy) to follow and understand representative politics" (Marxer 84).   While the

strategy of digital direct democracy is particularly fitting for anti-establishment parties like M5S

Podemos, this type of phenomenon may soon spread to more conventional parties seeking to make voters feel like they truly have a voice in the political process.

Overall, direct and representational democracy are not necessarily opposing and mutually exclusive forces. "The institutionalization of direct legislation" may actually only make sense "within a system of representative democracy" as parties and other political institutions play an important mediating role (Smith 140). As technology has increasingly facilitated debate and voting among the public, it is becoming more feasible for existing democratic systems to begin incorporating online public deliberation into the legislative process. Furthermore, there is potential for online referenda to move beyond the party level and become more broadly incorporated within national and even supranational political systems such as the EU, where perhaps the internet can help bridge gaps between regions and foster a sense of Europe as an interconnected community.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The new level of connectivity offered by 21st century networked technology has set the stage for hybridized political parties claiming to grant their constituents some of the power typically concentrated in the hands of technocratic elites. The rise of Podemos and M5S is demonstrative of this trend, as Podemos has used social media to channel the energy of anti-austerity protesters into a conventional party while the Five Star Movement used the internet to organize a protest movement of their own. As institutionalized parties, they have incorporated digital direct democracy to varying extents into their operations. Although Podemos has failed to take control over Spanish parliament, the party will remain relevant as long as inequality continues to grow and voters remain jaded with major political parties that are perceived by many as corrupt and cartelized. In Italy, where similar problems have plagued the nation's political establishment, M5S and its similar platform of digital direct democracy won the most votes of any single party and will almost certainly be involved if a coalition government emerges. Five Star Movement's strong result in the most recent Italian general election shows the appeal of offering not just a different breed of politicians but a different manner for the public to engage with political discourse. With centrist parties also hemorrhaging support in other major European countries such as France and Germany, more technopopulist parties are likely to emerge in the coming years.

While it appears that this trend is spreading to other countries and parties, it is not clear whether it will actually lead to better political outcomes. With other emergent populist parties

across Europe like Greece's *Syriza* and Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland* also supporting more direct democracy in their nation's politics, populist groups are currently the most vocal advocates for the hybridization of representational democracy (Chase). Mainstream political parties such as the UK's Labour have also recently started using online polling of members to select leadership in recent years. Although Podemos and M5S' deliberative websites for leadership decisions and policy discussions are currently only used by a small percentage of party members, their existence helps to substantiate claims of being different than the cartelized establishment parties. In the case of the Five Star Movement, the party has not eliminated corruption and invited debate as promised in the rhetoric of Grillo and others. Beyond accusations of silencing dissent within the party, M5S currently faces scandals regarding improper expenses and nepotistic appointments by lawmakers (Kirchgaessner et al). An informed public should question whether a party's claims of using technology to improve democratic practices is a distraction from less desirable practices. While corruption and lack of healthy debate between establishment parties is clearly undesirable, outsider parties are not necessarily free themselves from corruption or open to healthy debate.

In recent years, the internet has proven to be more morally ambiguous than initially suggested by the leaders of M5S and Podemos. Whereas Beppe Grillo has said that the web is "the medium that gets closest to truth", the rise of 'fake news' effecting the 2016 United States election and elsewhere has proved that this is not always the case (Natale et al 114). Online policy deliberation within these parties has led to suggestions of policies that are fiscally untenable such as within Podemos or at odds with the scientific consensus such as within M5S. Furthermore, the results of digital referenda can themselves be 'fake news'. The Italian Data Protection Authority has recently called for the Five Star Movement to take additional steps to

guarantee the security of their voting websites following reports that the Rousseau platform was

hacked by an anonymous group in 2017 (Jones et al). This breach hindered the online vote to

select a candidate for Prime Minister and compromised secret data on donors and members, with

one Italian scholar saying that the "hacking problem is very serious for 5-Star because it

undermines the credibility of their direct democracy message" (Ibid.). While the internet has the

power to connect people across time and space like never before, it also presets unprecedented

challenges of security and accountability.

Podemos wants more direct involvement from their supporters to prove that they really

are the party of the '99%' of non-elite citizens, making use of a phrase borrowed from the

Occupy movement (Nez 121). Short of a violent revolution, however, the 99% still need a way to

actually implement their suggested reforms within the existing system. In Italy, a new electoral

law passed in 2017 made it more difficult for 2018's vote to produce a clear-cut winner. M5S say

the measures were enacted due to fears that the Five Star Movement would turn its lead into

opinion polls into an electoral victory (Zampano). When "legislatures fail to act, or act in

middling ways," it pushes advocates toward direct democracy and alternative parties (Stearns

369). Not dissimilar from how dissatisfaction with the status quo in the UK led to the referendum

on EU membership, perhaps a digitalized version of direct democracy will help power more

startling electoral results in the near future.

While technopopulism might not be very effective in engaging older citizens or people

without regular internet access, the "idea of having individual citizens directly involved in

transnational policy-making using online tools" seems much more natural to young people than

"to older people who are used to the old ways of making politics - or more accurately: of

watching politics" (Marxer 239). The most digitally engaged citizens are often also the most

economically aggrieved. With youth unemployment rates recently reaching 36.9% and 44.1% in Italy and Spain respectively, young people have an incentive to use their tech savvy to support a new style of politics (Vittori 326). Overall, the small number of citizens presently engaging with digital direct democracy has the potential to surge with the further development of technology and the political awakening of recent generations that have grown up with internet access but few economic prospects.

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