ARE PARTY ACTIVISTS POTENTIAL OPINION LEADERS?

MATTEO VERGANI

Abstract

The article investigates whether or not party activists are potential opinion leaders, presenting the results of field research on four local branches of the Italian PD (Democratic Party). First, the article examines the most relevant "opinion leaders" theories, proposing an original method for recognising potential opinion leaders: the identification of three main features of the ideal-type of opinion leader (the identification with the group, the technical expertise, the social capital) within the biographies of the social actors. Second, the article presents a case-study assessing whether party activists of the local PD branches possess these qualities or not, by analysing the data coming from qualitative fieldwork: ethnographic sessions within the four local branches, and forty biographical interviews with the party activists. At the end of the article some remarks will be given about the methodology used, about the idea of a party opinion leadership and about the role of party activists in changing the voters' mind.

Matteo Vergani is a teaching assistant at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano; e-mail: vergani.matteo@gmail.com.

The Opinion Leader: The Philosopher's Stone of Politics

In the United States of the 1940s a group of researchers headed by Lazarsfeld conducted a study entitled "The People's Choice" (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948), challenging the current mass communication paradigm.[1] The fieldwork was on the effects of newspapers and radio programmes on the electorate within a local community in Ohio. It emerged, from the study, that 53 percent of the voters sampled strengthened previous political beliefs due to media propaganda; 26 percent of the sample changed from indecisiveness to the choice of a political party (and vice-versa); 16 percent of the sample was non-respondent or their answers could not be interpreted by the researchers; and only 5 percent of the sample declared that they had completely changed their idea due to the electoral campaign in the media. Moreover, the great majority of Republican voters demonstrated that they mainly exposed themselves to Republican messages, and the great majority of Democratic voters to Democratic messages (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948). The study clearly demonstrated the substantial ineffectiveness of the mass media communication in convincing people to radically change idea.

On the basis of the results of the Ohio research, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) indicated the "opinion leaders" as the key for changing the people's mind. The authors identified a "two-step flow of communication": from the mass media to the opinion leaders (step 1), and from the opinion leaders to the other people of the same social group, less active and less exposed to the media messages (step 2). The idea was that, while the mass media wield an indirect power in influencing the citizens' vote, interpersonal communication was the most powerful way of influencing the people's choice. If this theory were valid, involving opinion leaders in a party organisation would be crucial because of their power to persuade other people and to influence others' actions and beliefs.[2]

Many authors tried to find the way to detect opinion leaders within a local community, and many different techniques have been used. In general, there are two consolidated ways of identifying opinion leaders. First, the auto-nomination: individuals may be asked to decide whether they themselves are opinion leaders or not. Katz and Lazarsfeld used this method in their early research, yet it is methodologically weak because social actors hardly have a correct cognition of their own influence (Herrera and Martinelli 2006). Second, opinion leadership may be measured by analysing the quantity and the quality of the nominations received by others (Kelly et al. 1991; Lomas et al. 1991; Wiist and Snider 1991; Broadhead et al. 1995). For instance, Valente (2010) identified the opinion leaders by analysing the centrality of individuals within a social network (the degree of centrality is measured through the Social Network Analysis, Borgatti and Everett 2006). There are many possible versions of this method: key informants may select the leaders; all community members may nominate opinion leaders; the selection of the community members may be conducted using different methods, such as the snowball technique. These techniques have several limitations: for instance, the degree of influence wielded by an opinion leader is predicated, in part, on the potential adopters' assessment of his or her credibility and trustworthiness; leaders selected from outside the social group could be suspected of having agendas different from those of the members of the social group, or even agendas harmful to social group members (it is thus

necessary to define exactly who is a member of the social group); using only a select few individuals to nominate leaders may decrease the validity and reliability of the process (Valente and Devis 1999; Valente and Pumpuang 2007).

This article proposes a third way for identifying opinion leaders (or, at least, potential ones): the recognition of the opinion leadership features within the biographical (cultural, social, economical, technological) background of a social actor (both individual or collective). The hypothesis is that the social actor presenting all the opinion leadership features is more likely to be an opinion leader within the local community than the others. He is thus a potential opinion leader. According to the most relevant studies in the field, opinion leaders have three general, distinctive features.

1. Identification with the social group. Opinion leaders need to be identified by their social group as members, reflecting the norms of their community and sharing the destiny of the social group. Many authors noticed that opinion leaders are found to be more innovative (Rogers 2003; Lyons and Henderson 2005),[3] better educated (Saunders, Davis and Monsees 1974; Summers 1970), having a slightly higher level of income (Marshall and Gitosudarmo 1995), and higher level of involvement with a particular issue (Kingdon 1970; Corey 1971) than non-leaders. Yet, if the differences between leaders and social groups are too deep, the leaders will not be recognised by the social group, and they will lose their privileged position in the network (Roch 2005; Valente 2010).

2. Technical expertise. Opinion leaders need to have a strong technical expertise on a relevant issue for the social group (e.g. politics). Leaders attend to media more than the others, and this provides them with the information that they need in order to lead and to stay abreast of what is happening (Cristante 2004; Confetto 2005). They pay greater attention to the quality information sources, such as newspapers and journals (Corey 1971; Levy 1978; Polegato and Wall 1980).

3. Social capital.[4] The more a social actor is at the centre of qualitatively and quantitatively relevant social relations within the social group, the more the social actor has the possibility to influence others' point of view, and to change the others' behaviour (Herrera and Martinelli 2006; Valente 2010).

Case Study: Activists of the Italian Democratic Party (PD)

The case-study discussed in this article is of the activists of the Italian Democratic Party (PD). The party was chosen because it presents a strong variety in itself, mixing new and old forms of participation. On the one hand the PD comes from the tradition of the PCI (Italian Communist Party): the strongest communist party in Western Europe until the fall of the Berlin wall. In the beginning of the 1950s the PCI was a revolutionary organisation with some 2,600,000 members and 200,000 active militants (Galli 1966; Alberoni et al. 1967; Biorcio 2003). On the other hand the Democratic Party was founded in 2007,[5] being a new project aimed at renovating the Italian political system after the fall of the First Republic and the stagnation of the "Berlusconi era." In the early stages many young voters joined the party becoming activists and asking for a change of the traditional forms of participation (Salvati 2003; Agostini 2009; Pasquino 2009).

The field research was conducted from October 2009 to September 2010 in four local branches of the Italian Democratic Party: Milan, Perugia, Rome and Naples.[6]

The four cities were selected for their heterogeneity regarding the social, economical, cultural, technological and political contexts. The cities lie in different regions of the country (North, Centre, South and the district of the Capital), each one characterised by a distinctive political subculture,[7] economical situation and digital divide. The hypothesis is indeed that, although PD party activists share many common biographical and ideological features, their aptitude for being opinion leaders is influenced by each different regional context.

The field research assesses whether or not PD party activists possess the three features (the identification with the group; the technical expertise; the social capital), by analysing the data of qualitative fieldwork: ethnographic sessions within four local branches, and forty biographical interviews with party activists. The biographical stories were collected through ten in-depth interviews in each of the four branches. The results were analysed using the software Atlas.ti in order to systematically find out and easily systematise and compare the aspects that are related to the opinion leadership features. In the following pages each feature will be discussed presenting some extracts of interviews collected during the field research. In this article the anonymity of the members of the local branch is preserved: only the first letter of the name, gender, age and city (e.g. M., F, 26 years old, Milan) of the people interviewed will be provided.

Identification Between Party Activists and Local Community

In order to be recognised by the social group, the opinion leader needs to share the same destiny, to suffer the same troubles, to live the same daily conditions. As already said, although leaders have been found to be slightly more innovative, educated, skilled, they cannot be too different from their social group, otherwise they will lose their privileged position in the network.

The identification between the opinion leader and the social group is probably the most methodologically complex factor to analyse, because it is necessary to define: (1) the indicators and/or issues to compare, and (2) the social group where the activists operate. First, there is a bulk of social, economical, cultural indicators that could be useful for assessing the identification between the activists and the local community. In this research, two huge national socio-political issues were selected for the comparison: the migration issue and the economic crisis issue. They were chosen because of their political centrality, and because of their huge impact on all the Italian cities. Second, the social group was defined as the local community where the PD branch operates: the activists were asked to indicate on a map the territory where they usually carry out political activities. The methodological choice was to compare the two issues between their presence within the biographies of the activists and their impact within the local communities. For example: if the economic crisis hit a specific local community hard, do the party activists share the same destiny? Do they talk about the economic crisis as a problem? Do they report carrying out political activities about the issue?

On the one hand the local branch of Milan generally presents a high identification between the activists and the community concerning both the economic crisis and the migration issue. Although being in a traditionally wealthy area of Milan, the local community where the PD branch operates suffered heavily from the economic crisis,[8] and it has been directly hit by a huge flow of migrants for years.[9] Not only

are the activists aware of the issues and promote political activities about them, but there are also some activists belonging to the social classes that are protagonists of the phenomena: migrants and the unemployed.[10]

On the other hand the local branches of Rome, Perugia and Naples generally present a low degree of identification between the activists and the community concerning both the economic crisis and the migration issue. The PD activists of the branches are mainly old retired working class people, some students and some middle-high class workers of public companies (especially in Rome and Naples). The economic crisis is generally absent within their biographies (although the cities and their surroundings suffered from it badly),[11] as is the migration issue.[12] Yet, although the latter is totally absent, some of them recognised the former as a major issue for the local community, yet they admitted not representing it.[13] As the activists admitted during the interviews, the crisis is not even tangible for them: they are generally "protected" from its worst effects.[14]

Technical Expertise of Party Activists

If the PD party activists were potential opinion leaders within their local communities, they would have a strong technical expertise in politics. Actually, most of the activists of all the party branches have a recognised proficiency in politics: many of the elders have been running institutional offices (mainly in local institutions), and many attended schools and workshops of political training organised by political parties, unions or related associations at least once. The youngest members of the party branch of Milan and Perugia followed a more autonomous path of political training: they created their own independent associations, and organised some thematic meetings with national and regional political personalities (party leaders, Ministers, Councilors).[15] The activists report that their specific political training allowed them to successfully face the talks with ordinary people of the local community, especially if angry or disillusioned with party politics.

In addition to having a strong theoretical background, it is necessary for potential opinion leaders to always be updated about political happenings. They attend to media more than the others, gathering all the information that they need in order to lead and to stay abreast of what is happening, and always paying attention to the quality of the information sources. The fieldwork outlines a difference between the "media diet" of the activists of the larger and more international cities (Milan, Rome) and the activists of the other ones (Perugia, Naples). In Milan and Rome all the activists (up to more than 60 years old) follow politics mainly on the internet, through national (e.g. Repubblica.it, Corriere.it) and international news websites (e.g. LeMonde, The Times, the BBC, Al Jazeera), through mailing-list subscription on specific issues and through Twitter and Facebook profiles and groups of local politicians, associations and interest groups. More specifically, Facebook is one of the preferred medium for gathering information about local issues, otherwise difficult to find on the traditional mainstream media.[16]

In Perugia and Naples just a few activists use the internet: in the Southern regions (such as Campania) and in the more rural regions (such as Umbria) the digital divide is a relevant phenomenon, and affects not only elder but also young people (CISIS 2011). Although cities such as Perugia and Naples are different from their countryside, they are still less digitally developed than cities such as Milan

and Rome. The traditional daily press is the second preferred medium in Milan and Rome, but the first in Perugia and Naples. Activists report that they read, daily, many local and national newspapers, especially the ones more closely linked to leftist editors: "Repubblica" and "l'Unità." They report putting their confidence more in these newspapers than in TV channels. The latter have an awful reputation among the activists, in all the local PD branches. It is interesting to note that, according to a 2009 Censis national research, the majority (about two thirds) of Italian citizens gather political information mainly from TV, a quarter from newspapers, and only a few from the internet.[17] It follows that generally, PD party activists belong to a minority of people, concerning the precision and the variety of the sources of political information, although presenting regional differences due to the digital divide.

Social Capital of Party Activists

The possession of a durable network of relations provides the social actor with a set of resources necessary to be considered a potential opinion leader: the more the social actor is at the centre of relevant social relations (more or less institutionalised), the more he/she has the possibility to influence the others' point of view, and to change the others' behaviour. In other words: the more relevant (qualitatively and quantitatively) is the social actor's social capital, the more he/she is a potential opinion leader.

All the activists capitalise on their own social network of informal relations in the local community for electoral purposes. There is a sort of competition among the activists for having (and showing-off having) a large net of relations in the local community: the more the network of an activist is recognised as extended within the community, the more he/she is seen as influential, also within the party branch organisation.[18]

Some of the activists, especially the youngest ones in Milan and Rome, spend most of the time dedicated to politics on Facebook, where they present their thinking, they forward news and articles, they discuss with other people about politics. Yet the majority of the activists still cultivate their relations with people of the local community in the traditional face-to-face way: streets, bars and recreation centres are places where they meet people, they discuss, they express their point of view. During the electoral campaign, the activists intensify their presence in their networks of relations, reactivating all the contacts with friends, colleagues, family members and acquaintances. During that time the internet is seen as a less useful and sometimes even a dangerous tool, especially in Perugia and Naples: the preferred way for seeking votes is still the traditional, face-to-face one.[19]

While the party activists have a generally developed net of informal relations within the local community, the relations with more institutionalised groups present some difficulties. First, the party belonging is often seen by others as a primary source of identity, and this often generates mistrust if an association wants to maintain autonomy from political parties. For instance a young activist of the Milan PD branch was told he would be excluded from the electoral list of a student's association for the University elections, because the other students were worried about losing the autonomy of their political group if she became elected. Second, the Italian parties traditionally maintained strong and regular relations only with

"affiliated" institutionalised groups (such as associations, unions, companies, and so on) (Alberoni et al. 1967). It follows that, institutionalised groups willing to be perceived as autonomous by the community do not want to have close relations with the party. For instance a citizen committee initially assembling within the PD branch of Rome, soon decided to move to another more "neutral" location for the meetings.[20]

Conclusion

Several remarks emerge from the presentation of the results of the fieldwork. The technique proposed has evident limitations: relying exclusively on the social actors' narratives collected through biographical interviews, it may get stuck on the distortions of the social and personal representations. The biographic interview may overcome this distortions, for example through the accurate use of "neutral prompts" and through the analysis of non-verbal and contextual data (Gorden 1980; Holstain and Staples 1992; Chambon 1995; Atkinson 1998; Bichi 2002). Yet there is no possibility to test and control the possible distortions. It would be thus interesting to find a productive interaction between this technique and the one of analysing the quantity and the quality of the nominations received by others. Despite this limits, the case study allows to suggest some insights on the features of the party opinion leadership, and on the role of party activists within contemporary parties.

For what concerns the specific case-study, it is possible to say that the PD party activists demonstrated a weak identification with local communities, especially in the southern branches. From the discussion on the identification between the activists and the local community it emerges that only the PD branch of Milan faces relevant issues such as migration and the economic crisis. The activists of the other branches present the anomalous condition of not being hit by the economic crisis, although the surrounding territories and local communities are.[21] This regional difference may be explained by the economical and social features of the South of Italy, more exposed to the economic crisis, and less inhabited by that urban middle class that is the most relevant basis of the PD party organisation. In addition to that, although the political expertise of all the activists appears to be generally high, there is a relevant difference between the media expertise of the activists from big and international metropolises such as Rome and Milan, and activists from less developed centres such as Perugia and Naples. The digital divide in provincial areas (although urban, like Perugia) and in the South of Italy is still relevant, and affects the possibility of the PD activists to knowingly use the internet as a source of fresh, direct and "raw" political news, and leaves them anchored to the traditional mass media such as radio, press and TV. Traditional Italian media that is internationally known for it's lack of impartiality and freedom (for instance, according to the 2010 "Freedom of the Press" table of the Freedom House, Italy is at the 72nd position in the Nations' ranking). PD party activists present some of the opinion leadership features, and especially the political expertise. Yet they do not have all three features, especially in the South of Italy, where phenomena such as the digital divide leaves them with less resources than in other territories. The widespread distrust in politics and political parties among Italian citizens makes their influence weaker within the local communities. Thus the PD party activists do not yet possess all the features for being fully considered as potential opinion leaders.

More generally, it is possible to say that the activists' social capital is generally high in the local communities (although presenting regional differences due to the digital divide), yet it appears to be linked almost exclusively to the personal, informal network of the activists (friends, colleagues, family, and so on). They have difficulties in being accepted by other associations, and in integrating their political group with other different groups of the local community. It follows that, if the activists of a community know each other and see one another during their leisure time, they are likely to belong to similar social networks. As stated at the beginning of the article, the key-question is: are the party activists the key for changing the people's mind? The answer is: yes, they are. Yet they are able to influence only their personal social network: they hardly ever reach out to the majority of the local community members.

Last but not least, some final remarks about the role of party activists in contemporary political parties. Many have been questioning on the function of party activists within party organisations. Some political executives described the party activists as a useless and damaging heritage of the past: "it's better to have five minutes on TV than ten thousand party members"[22] and "party members are a disadvantage; it would be better to use opinion polls for testing the public opinion, instead of using these extremists representing none among the common people"[23] are the beliefs respectively of a Spanish political executive of the PSE and of an English Labour Party MP. It is a fact that the party militancy today is less crucial for party organisations than in the XIX and early XX century, due to many different factors as the rise of media and opinion polls (Manin 1995; Sartori 1997; Wattemberg 2000), and the success of organisational models as the catch-all party (Kirchheimer 1971), the professional-electoral party (Panebianco 1982), the cartel-party (Katz and Mair 1995), and the personal party (Calise 2000; Poguntke and Webb 2005).[24] Yet, as the case study outlines (according to Raniolo 2002, and Scarrow 2000), party activists are not only a source of voluntary work, but also a powerful source of legitimacy in front of the public opinion, and provide the party a stable catchment area allowing to survive under any weather circumstances.

Notes:

1. At that time the communication studies were divided into two main approaches: on the one hand many scholars were still thinking that the media had the power to influence the audiences directly, inoculating people with messages like a hypodermic needle. On the other hand some other researchers were starting to study the audiences' practices of negotiation and resistance to the mass media messages (Berger 1995; Croteau and Hoynes 1997). Lazarsfeld's research has been one of the milestones of the second approach.

2. Actually, however, although the theory is based upon simple assumptions, his operationalisation is methodologically very complex. First, subsequent researches demonstrated that the original "two-step flow" model is too simple, and does not fit with the complexity of reality: opinion leaders may obtain information not only from the media but also conversing with other people and other opinion leaders (Mcquail and Windhal 2003). The media messages thus pass through "n" opinion leaders before arriving to the social groups: the "two-step" model becomes a "n-step" model (McQuail 2010). Second, the relation between the reception of the message and the interpersonal conversation is not univocally defined, as the original theory implicitly assumes: the opinion leaders may know about an issue through the conversation with other people, then they may start to selectively gather information from the media and, finally, they may report their ideas to the social groups. Thus it may be misleading to assume that the opinion leaders receive the very first flow of information from the media, almost exclusively forming their opinion there (McCombs and Becker

1979). Third, there are many different kinds of opinion leaders, and their weight on the respective social groups has to be studied in both the "virtual" life and "real" life (Nisbet and Kotcher 2009): there is not an ordered structure of independent social groups, each one led by one single opinion leader. Rather, there are many opinion leaders having smaller or greater (stronger or weaker, more specific or more generic, more "virtual" or more "real") spheres of influence, and having many reciprocal overlapping areas in which their influence is negotiated depending on specific themes and times (Herrera and Martinelli 2006).

3. Becker (1970) questioned whether opinion leaders would always be earlier adopters of innovations, hypothesising that opinion leaders would be earlier adopters only of innovations that were compatible with the community norms but later adopters of innovations perceived to be incompatible.

4. There are multiple definitions, interpretations, and uses of the label "social capital." This article refers to the classic Bourdieu's definition of social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word" (Bourdieu 1986: 51).

5. The PD was officially founded on 14 October 2007 as a merger of various left-wing and centrist parties which were part of "The Union" in the 2006 general election. Several parties merged to form the Democratic Party, however its bulk was formed by the DS (Democrats of the Left) and La Margherita (The Daisy).

6. The research was conducted in only one (among ten of them) territorial branch of each city. Every branch is called "circolo" (circle), and counts up to some fifty activists. The head of the local party organization was asked, in each city, to recommend the "best" branch in terms of quantity and quality (heterogeneity, effectiveness, assiduity) of participation.

7. According to Trigilia (1986), a local political subculture is defined as a distinguishing socio-political local system, in which there is: a high grade of consensus toward a certain political actor, and a high concentration of local economical, social and political interests. In a system characterised by a homogeneous local political subculture there is always a thick net of institutions (i.e. political parties, churches, groups of interests, aid agencies, and so on) that are coordinated by a powerful actor controlling the local government and the relations with the central national power (Trigilia 1986). Scholars widely studied, especially in Italy, the features of the local political subcultures and their relations with the political system (Sivini 1971; Trigilia 1981; Caciagli 1988; Bagnasco 1996).

8. According to the most recent population census data, about one in five workers is an entrepreneur or freelancer (three times more than the national average), about an half of the population is occupied (10 percent more than the national average), about a quarter have got a university degree (about 20 percent more than the national average). Yet, the local community was strongly hit by the economic crisis due to its features: as autonomous workers, entrepreneurs and freelancers were more exposed to the fluctuation of the market than public workers and employees; in Milan only 63 percent of people with university degrees find a job within two years; the number of precarious contracts have been constantly growing especially for young people. Data refers to 2009-2011, and was collected from the official website of the National Institute of Statistics (www.istat.it), from the official website of the Italian General Confederation of Labour (www.cgil.it), and from the "Census Informative System" of Milan (http://www.comune.milano.it/dseserver/sice/index.html).

9. According to the 2010 Caritas/Migrantes Dossier on the Immigration in Italy (www.dossierimmigrazione.it), Milan has more than 200,000 foreign residents (about 15 percent of the population), 13 percent of which are second generation.

10. For example, one of the activists interviewed during the fieldwork is a second generation Sinhalese girl, born and raised in Italy but still a foreign resident because she is not allowed to become an Italian citizen under the current law. Although not having the right to vote in Italy, she leads a group within the party branch working on the rights of second generation immigrants.

11. According to the National Institute of Statistics (www.istat.it), in 2009 the economy of the

Umbria Region reached one of its all-time lows, with a regional product diminished by about 4.5 percent. The unemployment rate in Perugia rose from 4.2 percent in 2007 to the 6.5 percent in 2009: from 12,000 to 16,000 people unemployed, and the unemployment rate in Naples rose from 12.4 percent in 2007 to 14.6 percent in 2009: from 123,000 to 137,000 people unemployed.

12. According to the 2010 Caritas/Migrantes Dossier on the Immigration in Italy (www.dossierimmigrazione.it), Rome has more than 300,000 foreign residents (almost 11 percent of the population); in Perugia the foreign residents are about 10 percent of the population; the Campania Region is the 7th in Italy for the number of regular hosted immigrants, and Naples hosts more than 50 percent of them. Although being a less relevant phenomenon than in other cities of the Centre and North of Italy, migration has a significant social impact in Naples (Ammaturo et al. 2010).

13. "The most troubled people of the neighborhood do not vote, they don't feel represented by anyone … they have lost the faith in politics […] they feel that no one cares about their condition, their troubles … the percentage of these people is growing day by day […] here we have a growing percentage of discouraged people who abstain from voting" (G. M., 40 years old, Naples)

14. "The crisis here is not tangible nor relevant […] within the party branch there are not only wealthy people, but also people who need to look after their living expenses, maybe paying more attention to the shopping recently ... however no one, for example, is going to give up their holidays" (S. F., 28 years old, Perugia)

15. "We created an independent association, and every year we organised a three day summer school […] three days of conferences, consideration of the centre-left, reformism … we had very important guests, such as the ex-Minister Visco, Bersani […] we were about one hundred young people, coming from different party branches and associations, such as the young Hebrews, the young Muslims, entrepreneurs, young researchers" (M. M., 26 years old, Milan)

16. "I follow the protagonists of the territorial politics on Facebook […] all the people who publish news about their activities and about local politics on their profile […] By following them, I am always up to date on what is happening in local politics" (I. F., 31 years old, Milan)

17. Censis is an Italian center of study on socio-economical issues. The research data is available on www.censis.it.

18. "The thing that helped me to being accepted in the local branch, and that helps me in my request for being a candidate at the next Municipal elections as a Councilor, is that I work at the supermarket in the neighborhood. I know everybody here, I know what they think, what they like and what they dislike. And thus everybody knows me." (A. M., 28 years old, Perugia)

19. "When on Facebook one forwards a communication indicating one should vote for a candidate, he may be perceived as arrogant […] the only way to do this thing is the direct, personal contact […] it is not possible to talk via Facebook, it is not possible to send an email […] You need to look in the eyes of the person you are talking with" (F. M., 31 years old, Perugia)

20. "The committee doesn't meet in here anymore. They went away because many of them weren't PD members, and they asked to change base, because they didn't want to be perceived as an association belonging to the party. They now meet near to the Church, the priest gave them a small room for their activities" (R. M., 67 years old, Rome)

21. There may be a distortion and overrepresentation caused by the selection criteria of the branches chosen for the fieldwork: the provincial head of the local party organisation was asked, in each city, to recommend the "best" branch in terms of quantity and quality (heterogeneity, effectiveness, assiduity) of participation. It is thus clear that these party branches are animated by a socially and culturally dynamic middle-class, who sometimes succeeded in avoiding the worst effects of the economic crisis.

22. Quoted in Botella (1989: 3) and Raniolo (2002: 98).

23. Quoted in Crouch (2000: 135).

24. For an overview of the causes of the decline of party membership, see Seyd and Whiteley (2004).

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