

## Political Party in audience democracy

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Nowadays in Italy many people are wondering if it is possible to have a representative democracy without political parties. In fact parties are on trial for a long time since when, at the beginning of the nineties, were affected by a severe crisis of legitimacy mainly due to the countless cases of corruption and illegal financing of the most important government parties. Current situation against political parties, however, seems to show that there is a deeper criticism against a fundamental institution of representative democracy.

The main consequence of the crisis of the traditional party-system can be perfectly summarized in the success of Berlusconi's movement Forza Italia in the election of 1994 in which the combination of media, charismatic leadership and personal economical power, allowed the surfacing of a new political party typology that can be defined as «*personal party*» (Calise, 2010)

That was the context in which the transition from «*party democracy*» to «audience democracy» (Manin, 1997) developed in Italy. It was a transition that doesn't consist in a complete disappearance of political parties but just in the metamorphosis of their main features. It was in fact a general systemic crisis in which two fundamental elements of the new phase emerged. On one hand the ever more important role of media, especially television, in the representation of political events, on the other hand the central role of «democratic

price» (Fabbrini, 1999) both in the executive branch of political power both in the relationship with his own party.

«Moreover, changes in system of mass communication, most particularly the rise of television as the most widely used source of political information, enhance the conditions that allow, or indeed compel, parties to make universal appeals directly to voters, rather than communicating principally to and through their core supporters» (Katz & Mair, 1995. p 13).

As a direct result, to make difference between different leaders, in a contest of a permanent electoral campaign, was not program and not even ideological differences between the competitors but their personality, their visionary speeches, or -last but not least- their charisma in the Weber's thought.

In fact in the «*audience democracy*», election campaign become more focused on the candidate as single person and particularly on his emotional capacities and less on ideological world-views. «Election are properly choices between teams of leaders rather than contest among closed social groupings of fixed ideology [...] in this new conception of democracy, party oligarchy actually becomes a virtue rather than a vice». (*ivi*. p.14)

Politics, especially in Italy, it becomes more focus on single leaders and their capacity to approach directly peoples stepping over the traditional role of political parties in a phenomenon better known as *personalization*. Voters tend to choose for a person rather than for a party and they tend to engage with him a personal confidence

relationship. But, differently from *personalization* which have characterized *parliamentarism*, confidence in the «audience democracy» is not more based on a direct knowledge between representatives and represented, but on his television narrative. People think to know those leaders especially because television transmit a part of their private lives.

«With the development of the mass media, party leaders began to enjoy a capacity to appeal -directly- to the electorate at large, an electorate made up of voters who were learning to to behave more like consumers than active participants». (*ivi.* p.7)

Therefore, to be thrown into crisis is the intermediation function between political power and civil society, traditionally preserved by party-system. «The political mass-party was the forum in which the political interest of the social group it represented was articulated» (*ivi.* p.10)

To suffer firstly were the numbers of strong voters. The voting process in fact became more untied from logic of membership «making it less easy to identify separate sector of the electorate and to assume long-term interests». (*ivi.* p. 7) Moreover the amelioration of social condition, «increased mobility and the development of mass media all served to reduce the distinctiveness of experience of once well-defined social constituencies». (*Ibid.*)

The traditional social cleavages were no longer able to represent modern society and, as a direct consequence, the parties who had

incarnated, were increasingly marginalized. Moreover, if on one hand parties and intermediate groups in general progressively declined in their role of social mediation; on the other hand they increased significantly their role in the state-machine. «No longer simple brokers between civil society and the state, the parties now become absorbed by the state [...] as an institutionalized structured of support». (ibid)

With the decline of mass party «the mobilitation of voters was no longer emphasized, and nor, indeed was their conversion, in that both process assumed a capacity to engender affective loyalty; rather, voters were believed to have become free floating and uncommitted, available to, and also susceptible to, any and all of the competing parties» (*ivi.* p. 12)

In this general contest the leader as an outsider of traditional system, thanks to the possibilities offered him by the media and taking charge of representing the excluded, became quickly the key figure of this transition.

One of the most important feature of the mass party was the strong maintenance of a coherent political culture preserved by internal and ideological media. The press and propaganda office prevent, with his work, that other media could influence party members and try to set up steadily internal instrument of fact simplification.

However, with the diffusion of electronic media and particularly television on one hand and the growing phenomenon of

disintermediation on the other, the traditional ideological narrative set up by mass party were no longer possible.

Moreover television starts to become the authentic place of political reality representation and, according to that, visual image and his aesthetic ideal start to play a key role in the political contest. In the «audience democracy» everything is potentially under the watchful eye of the cameras. This implies a more difficult approach to political mediation which became increasingly impracticable.

In fact if traditional cleavage progressively lose their importance the political conflict between leaders need to be simply recognizable by audiences. If political confrontation is observable, the stakeholders will be more interested to speak with audience than each other. Furthermore the central role gained by visual image tend to block political comprehension. In fact if is possible discuss about personal tastes it is very difficult, or even impossible, to argue about them. Personal taste about visual image are definitely subjective.

The political process can now be easily compared to the metaphor of a theatrical performance in which political leaders are the actors that across the stage (media system) try to convince the stalls with their political performance. According to that citizens are considerate like a passive audience that could be activated by several repetitive and very simple political message, then an active part in the democratic political precess. Furthermore, according to the main rules of dramatization and simplification set up by political news broadcasting, the complexity of the decision-making process

remains in the backstage not viewed and neither controlled by public opinion.

However the development of the network and specially the diffusion of social media, permit to skip another fundamental step of mediation made up by the traditional media system. In fact the network does not simply give information up on a vertical way, but also permit an interactive communication between users. Moreover, that system transmit to the actors an immediate practical meaning regarding their action. In fact If votes are dissipate in a great multitude, a click on a mouse or on a keyboard «seems to give an immediate reaction». (Urbinati, 2013).

But one of the most important effect of the development of Internet consist in the destruction of a link that always seemed unbreakable: the link between participation and his required physical presence. Before Internet this link can only be overcome by a deferred representation, but now becomes theoretically possible participate (not just watch a TV) from different places contemporaneously.

Therefore to suffer a crisis of historic proportions because of digital revolution are not only parties but, more in general, all the forms which representation has taken.

Nevertheless it would be wrong to think that in the «*audience democracy*» political parties are gone. In fact, along this transition, political parties did not disappear, on the contrary, in some cases they have increased their power such as about the selection of

candidates for parliamentary elections or even about group management in the Chamber.

In conclusion political parties have changed by adapting their structures to the new environmental conditions. The end of the «party democracy» has meant the decline of a particular type that the party has taken during his history that seems far away from the end.

## References

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