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Introduction

The paper explores in detail the fundamental aspects that make up the broad definition of e-democracy. The digitalization of democratic infrastructures is a phenomenon dating back before the beginning of the twenty-first century; it actually started with the creation of the World Wide Web, in the 1990s, alongside the changes of the public sphere. Indeed, it was marked by the transition from the public sphere of the mass society to the one of the network society, which are very different in character, given the blurring lines between the private, public and political spaces of the latter. In Part I, the paper first aims to describe the characteristics of e-democracy, and then the dimensions in which may best find its applicability. It will be discovered how, in fact, e-democracy encompasses a wide range of practices, of which only a few are actually popular and already implemented. Then, there are tackled the three underpinning risks arising from an incorrect implementation of e-democracy instruments, that regard online security and disinformation, and populist misuse of such tools for their personal gain. Finally, there will be explored the wider discussion on the changes of the public sphere and how information flows and is reformulated in the new digital spaces. Instead, Part II of the paper focuses on the Italian landscape and its public institutions' challenges toward the implementation of the new information and communication technologies to improve the relationship with its citizens. There will also be explored the approach to e-democracy through the establishment of the digital platform by the hand of the Five Star Movement, and then why people have often looked at such technologies with hostility, perhaps out of fear of the possible risks associated with data protection and, more generally, online security. This adversity, however, has diverted the necessary attention to the new trends of digital democracy that are actually functional for the improvement of the quality of public debate and, consequently, of political decisions. There will also be discussion of the recent experiences of signature online collection for the referendum questions, which was a novelty for the Italian citizens, while including the potential issues stemming from it. In general, however, e-democracy practices can be used to increase citizen participation through public institutions, thanks to the implementation of consultation procedures or even online voting on specific issues, aimed not at further dividing and polarizing the public opinion, but rather to bring together the more or less shared opinions under the principle of plurality of democratic regimes.

Part I

Network society, e-democracy and political participation in the digital era

The dichotomy of Internet-democracy describes the relationship between the potentially limitless virtual space dominating our lives and the democratic institutions guaranteeing our rights to representation and participation. The relationship between the Internet and democracy dates back to the last decade of the twentieth century, when the World Wide Web was created, revolutionizing how people, societies, and political entities would interact. It is in 1991 that Tim Berners-Lee created the World Wide Web, subsequently, two years later, renouncing to the intellectual property and rendering the Web a public good – the World Wide Web became a public good, accessible to anyone and everywhere. Throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century the Internet rapidly spread, and became a mass good, rendering virtual interaction and accessibility to an increasing number of online services easier and easier. Communication and information exchange now travels in real time and horizontally, making it possible to have access to massively shared amount of information. Our society is built upon new paradigms, rendered both possible and necessary by the changes brought upon us by the digital transformation. The information age¹, which is to date back to the last half of the twentieth century and was characterized first by the unprecedented spread of telecommunications within Western societies, called for new and more intricate processes to understand how contemporary society works and what are the new means at its disposal. As Castells put it, “new information technologies allow for the formation of new forms of social organization and social interaction along electronically based information networks.”² The network society functions upon layered levels which intersect and influence each other, and for which there is no old scholastic method applicable to study the infinite interactions between people and across countries. The network society is “made of up networks³”, connected and reciprocally influenced, and that increasingly live within a decentralized virtual reality. It is here that people, citizens, voters, collect information - too

¹ The Information Age is to be historically placed in the mid-twentieth century, and its beginning is attributable to the technological development of the media. The Information Age is to be considered the fourth revolution, characterized by unprecedentedly rapid and abrupt changes, which heavily influenced Western societies in their ways of gathering and managing information, now flowing in increased speed through mass media technology.

² Castells Manuel, *Toward a Sociology of the Network Society*, Contemporary Sociology, Vol. 29, n. 5, Sept. 2000

³ Ibidem

often non-verifiable - of any kind, of personal and public interest. Society is now ruled by an interdependent mechanism, both online and in real life, but for which a neat distinction would be obsolete and incorrect: offline actions are heavily influenced by online interactions in more or less restricted groups of individuals who recognize themselves as part of an extensive community without boundaries. The web has become the space in which citizens influence policy-making, where potential voters become agenda-setters, on which political parties have started to rely. Boundaries between the private and the public have faded and the two spheres, once having highly protective barriers, live upon an interdependent mechanism: today the latter needs the former in order to gain individuals' trust and loyalty. On the other hand, citizens feel the increasing need for inclusiveness in the political agenda, to be empowered to take decisions that would somehow attain to their political objectives. Thus, there is a shift in the balance of power, that, with the given democratic instruments, would lean favorably towards the public opinion and against the national legislator, wherever the latter shall encounter difficulties or empasses in law and policy making. Civic inclusiveness has been rendered possible by the online presence of political parties and social movements, who experienced - and still do - a massive increase in online engagement, which, however, does not automatically translate into a physical one during electoral appointments. It is nonetheless undeniable that they have been able to establish a closer relationship with their electorate, who despite engaging passively through a mobile screen, have a daily reminder to whom and what cause they are emotionally tied and therefore continue to support.

1. Characteristics and dimension of e-democracy

E-democracy can be intended as a pyramidal set of types of participation, from the lowest degree of civic engagement to the highest: e-government portal, e-discussion, e-participation, e-voting and e-election⁴. E-democracy therefore is the whole of many and interconnected ways, with increasingly wider extent of citizens' involvement when moving upwards, to enhance democratic procedures in the digital era, which in turn is rendered possible by the advanced development of information and communication technology⁵. E-democracy is a

⁴ Meier A., Terán L., *eDemocracy & eGovernment*, Progress in IS, Chapter 8, Springer, 2019

⁵ Information and communication technology (ICT) is an extensive term which explains the integration of unified communications with telecommunication technologies and computers, that enables users to access, store, transmit, and understand information.

complex set which includes a variety of instruments aimed to increase personal involvement of citizens used by public administrations, governments, and political parties, each of whom pursuing different objectives with the implementation of e-democratic tools. For example, government will want to increase online participation for policy making and thus to acquire greater approval by the citizens; instead, political parties will be more likely to use i-voting or e-election instruments to present their policy proposal and for the party's primary elections. Within the democratic structures, e-democracy is able to increase participation, to facilitate electoral participatory processes, as well as an instrument to speed up and smooth these processes, allowing for greater attendance of the citizens both in decision and policy making and in electoral appointments.

Today, the people, the citizens, rely on their technological devices for their work and spare time. Such an increasing reliability on online platforms both by political parties and movements for the past two decades has inevitably shaped new forms of participation within the democratic infrastructure. Digital involvement has become complementary to the democratic tools of participation, which may vary depending on the type envisaged by national constitutions - from representative to participatory and to deliberative democracy. In the former, citizens delegate their power through voting to representatives charged with legislative policy-making powers to ensure good government of the State and fair representation of the people. Participatory democracy allows citizens to be involved in policy making as consultants, not decision-makers, to government activity. Lastly, deliberative democracy entails the participation of the citizens as decision-makers on an equal pair with the legislator. Here the people enjoy decisional power that can be finally translated into public policy by the government, and "political perspectives are not predetermined by the interests of the subjects, rather they change during the deliberative process"⁶. Even though democracies inevitably allow for digital democratic innovations, "the constitutive dimension of the forms of e-democracy does not reside only in its technological implementation, but rather in the very adoption of a more deliberative democracy"⁷. This implies a stronger democratic structure in its responsiveness; in other words, deliberative democracy entails the

⁶ De Blasio Emiliana, *E-Democracy*, Mondadori, 2019

⁷ De Blasio Emiliana, *E-Democracy*, Chapter 2, Mondadori, 2019

capability to begin endogenous processes for change, which are carried out horizontally in tandem by the citizens and government. In this context, it is difficult not to imagine the application of technological innovations for democratic purposes.

2. E-democracy, e-government, and e-participation: specifics and commonalities

Clearly, online engagement resulted as a precious innovation to the increase of decisional involvement of the citizens as policy-makers. It is indeed within this scope that e-democracy flourished as an “horizontal process that should guarantee the adoption of deliberative and participatory forms⁸”. There is, however, a difference to be signaled between e-democracy and e-government, sometimes erroneously spelled out as synonyms, or better, juxtaposed on the same level, whilst the former includes the latter but not the other way around. E-government is, as a matter of fact, a means through which online participative or deliberative processes of e-democracy are rendered possible. When talking of e-government, there is an additional element to consider as complementary to the whole picture in which the citizens’ online active role is key: e-participation. To a broader extent, e-participation is to be considered both as a means for public service delivery and as a form of influence for the policy-making process. This extended meaning to e-participation sets at its core citizens’ interaction with government literature and their ability to increase their participation in government. There are three models of e-participation proposed by Reddick⁹ (2011) going from the lowest to the highest form of online participation: managerial, consultative, and participatory. The managerial model has as an objective the efficiency of service delivery to citizens, here considered more as customers rather than active participants. Services provided by the government aim to respond to citizens’ requests and desires, but remain limited to a unidirectional flow of information which can be found online. Thus, the flow results to be top-down, from government to the citizens and not the other way around; they have the opportunity to receive information from the government but are not able to change anything about the service delivery process. The consultative model meets halfway: information and communication technologies (ICT) here serve as means to the efficient improvement of public policy. Thus, government aims to create “better policy decisions with citizens input”

⁸ Sorice Michele, *I Media e la Democrazia*, Carocci, 2014

⁹ Reddick Christopher G., *Citizen interaction and e-government: Evidence for the managerial, consultative, and participatory models* in “Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy”, Volume 5, File 2, 2011

and citizens have the power to shape policy. Interaction between government and citizens is bidirectional, but flow of information holds its top-down approach. Lastly, the participatory model implies the greatest degree of e-participation. First of, technologies include a wider range of services and not only provided by the government, but rather constitute a powerful means for democratic innovation, through which citizens not only can influence policy making but become directly involved in government by accessing i-voting¹⁰ platforms, online opinion pollings and meetings. Thus, as could be intended, flow of information becomes multidirectional, moving horizontally between citizens and government, not unilaterally coordinating information top-down, but rather susceptible and open to opinions, suggestions, and decisions by the citizens.

By drawing the models, problems dealing with inclusiveness arise as well. First of which results in the digital divide. Even though Reddick conducted the analysis on the United States' population, the phenomenon can be vividly seen - if not more apparent - in Italy as well: according to the Istat census of 2021¹¹, the Italian population accounts for over 59 million resident people over 50, while slightly over 955 thousand resident people between 18 and 49 years old. More in detail, the digital divide refers to the gap among the population, between those having access to the Internet and online services and those who don't. The gap is the result of the combination of demographic factors, most notably age and place of residence (urban versus rural areas, in which Internet connection is provided with technical difficulties), and of income. Taking into account Italian demographics, there would be an extremely large segment of the population who would not participate in any of the e-government models previously proposed. And this leads to another subsequent issue to be tackled if governments wish to enhance online flow of information for a more active citizenship and move towards a hybrid and more efficient form of democracy. If greater demand for e-government will influence the amount of citizen e-participation, then the Italian government would not be pressured to increase online participation, and citizens would not feel the need to be included in e-participation processes, which would go to their advantage,

¹⁰ I-voting is not to be mistaken with e-voting. These are two different processes implying substantial characteristic differences. E-voting stands for in presence voting procedures via electronic devices, whilst i-voting properly refers to online voting by accessing personal devices.

¹¹ For further details, the following webpage can be consulted: <https://www.istat.it/it/popolazione-e-famiglie?dati>

for it would allow them to actively take part in policy making. Given that the majority of the Italian population is over 50 years old and has low familiarity with information and communication technologies, the consequence is a very low interest in technological changes both by the government and by the citizens' demand for online services. As a matter of fact, up to date, Italian e-government model could be considered at maximum managerial: citizens have the possibility to consult online information on governmental and institutional updates, pay online taxes or fines, or fill up modules for a variety of services, which however are still not sufficiently broad. Most importantly though, there is the large amount of people who do not have access, either for lack of technical means or skills, to online services and therefore physical bureaus services are still at large provided. Italy is thus far from a digital transition that would districate and smooth the bureaucratic stillness on the one hand, and increase inclusiveness of active citizens in government on the other.

3. Online risks and prevention

There are three lines moving on the same dimension - namely, the web - and which often intersect and influence each other, that constitute a threat to the safe and unbiased development of online democratic innovations. First, there is the question of security and technological reliability; secondly, that of disinformation; thirdly, the misuse and instrumentalization of online voting and consultative platforms by populist parties. It is important to address these issues so as to understand how to create a safer online space protecting rather than undermining the features of liberal democracies.

Security risks at large concern electronic and online voting, which, as previously mentioned, are not one of the same. Firstly, tighter control should be imposed over online voting platforms. The software should be open source, but it is not unlikely that public administrations and political parties have relied on proprietary systems. An open source software is designed to be publicly accessible and it developed through a decentralized and cooperative approach: anyone can have access and it can be modified or tailored according to their specific necessities. On the other hand, proprietary, or closed source, software is released under a license whose copyright is the organization or individual who created it. Often, the owners of the copyright are skeptical or even refuse to publish the source code. In

Italy, the Five Stars Movement, born in 2009 as an anti-establishment movement countering it by promoting direct democracy, relies on the correlated online platform to the Movement website Rousseau, which is in fact a proprietary software. It is released by the Rousseau Association, who has the objective to ensure participation of the members to the online consultative processes and voting in order to find political candidates, as written in the Statute¹². On Rousseau it is also possible to propose a legislative bill, which will be presented by the Movement's "spokesmen"¹³ to the Parliament. Anyone can have access to it, but only its members are allowed to actively participate. In this case, the problem resides in the fact that in case of malfunctioning, only specific and specialized individuals or groups can carry on control protocols. Hence, citizens or members are left out of such a process, and are denied the possibility to access nor understand the closed source, where their data is. Moreover, Rousseau's structure has proved its weakness when hacked in 2018, when the hacker published sensitive data of the Movement politicians holding cabinet positions at national and local levels¹⁴. Furthermore, the hacker claimed to have full access to the system's dataset, from which personal information, donations, and investments of the members are at risk. Even though Rousseau is an example of technological adoption by a political movement, the question whether to rely on even the most sophisticated technologies can be extended to, and addressed by, governments and public administrations as well, who, in Italy often rely on proprietary softwares. Despite higher protection protocols, those would not be sufficient to prevent online voting from hacker attacks, which would inevitably and easily tamper the electoral outcome. But the risk also extends beyond voting procedures, as public administrations' websites and softwares may be subject to cyber attacks, leading to stolen and leaked data¹⁵. Finally, to what concerns i-voting, there arises the question of privacy. Article 48 of the Italian Constitution recites: "The vote is personal and equal, free

¹² For further information, the Five Stars Movement website can be consulted:

<https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/trasparenza-rousseau>

¹³ The Movement's elected Members of Parliament are known to be spokesmen rather than representatives of their voters, as the Five Star Movement wished to reshape the idea of Italian representative democracy within the anti-establishment rhetoric perpetrated by the Movement. Thus, their elected Members of Parliament would only be a medium for the people's wills and concerns brought before the Parliament.

¹⁴ As reported by Agi, three Ministers were subject to their personal data leak: former Economic Development Minister Luigi Di Maio, former Justice Minister Alfonso Bonafede, former Transport Minister Danilo Toninelli, and former Rome Mayor Virginia Raggi. *L'attacco hacker a Rousseau ha raggiunto un nuovo livello. E ora ha un obiettivo preciso*, Rociola A., Agi.it, 2018

¹⁵ On July 30, 2021, Italian Region Lazio's data center was subject to ransomware. Unfortunately, the regional digital infrastructure was not strengthened. Nonetheless, the event poses the security issue of public administration technologies and the need for improvement and online data protection.

and secret". The assurance of the secrecy of the vote may be however endangered by online technological requirements. However, online voting necessarily requires either an electronic identification card or token, which in Italy comes in the form of the SPID (Sistema Pubblico di Identità Digitale). The use of such technology makes it actually possible to trace back to the voter's identity, which is openly in contrast with the Italian constitutional safeguard of the voters' privacy. In September 2021, two digital signatures collections to propose two referendums were held. Here, over a million people have easily accessed the online platforms through their Spid and signed, disregarding any possible privacy breach and thus unconsciously exposing themselves and their rights on the web.

Disinformation, misinformation and fake news have been known to influence the public opinion and to foster populist rhetoric both online and in concrete. However, for the sake of the paper, the focus will be on how these are intertwined with the citizens' online experience. First, it shall be assessed the difference between these phenomena, then the effects and influence that have on the citizens in their choices expressed on the web. Disinformation and misinformation fall within the scope of information disorders and are not one of the same: the former refers to manipulated and fabricated content, whilst the latter to misleading content. Disinformation is the outcome of intentional actions to purposely redirect part of the public opinion having online access in a false context; misinformation is the result of the sharing of partial knowledge more or less intentionally used to legitimize one side of the discussion and therefore increase polarization. Fake news may be considered as the byproduct of information disorders and their spread is facilitated by the speedness of flow of information of the new media. Despite the distance from the enforcement of regulatory measures for the new media by the Italian legislator, users can, individually or collectively, grow the ability of critical analysis and evaluation of the media content or even use the new media for fruitful debates, learning, and generating of verifiable content. Nonetheless, the easiness and oversimplification characterizing the spread of news and information - spanning from political to justice to economic matters - allow for a frivolous and minimized understanding by the citizens of the public system. This negatively affects the electoral or consultative outcomes performed by way of i-voting. For instance, the signature collection for the abrogative referendum proposal on cannabis depenalization for private purposes held in

September 2021, reached the minimum requirement of five hundred thousands signatories in precisely one week from its launch. The referendum request was also the object of a massive re-sharing on social media platforms, increasing the audience of possible signatories. This plainly highlights how people effortlessly access online voting, unfortunately without precedent proper learning on the subject matter, which should be the number one priority of the promoters, be it for a referendum proposal or a political movement or party, and which instead is left to the unregulated new media content generation and sharing.

Finally, there needs to be tackled the use of democratic innovation tools by populist parties. It is not uncommon that parties and movements born in the last two decades took advantage of the massive increase of new media users to gain support. The new communication technologies have helped political parties to engage in an oversimplified rhetoric horizontally with their potential electorate, reaching people who would normally be politically indifferent. Today, parties, movements, and even protesters through informal communication channels - mostly social media - are able to reach out to a broader base of citizens from different socioeconomic status and having contrasting political ideas but who may converge on that one battle promoted online. However, the online activity goes well beyond: populist parties and movements have exploited the very own instruments of e-democracy to validate their political agenda which is typically opposed to that of the elites' within parliaments. Through online platforms, parties and movements are able to appeal to their members for consultations and primary elections to choose candidates for following political appointments. But most importantly, they can submit to their members' vote a legislative bill proposal, which is then presented to Parliament. It is here that e-democracy elements are instrumentalized to push forward populist proposals being validated by a portion of the electorate, and that e-democracy innovations in representative democracies are used to diminish Parliament's legislative powers. Thus, here lies the risk of e-democracy being considered as a "tool to depoliticize decision-making processes¹⁶". Usually, processes of e-democracy are used to enhance participation within the constitutional limits set by liberal democracies; instead, given the lack of stricter governmental controls up to date, their use has been distorted by

¹⁶ De Blasio E., Sorice M., *Populism among technology, e-democracy and the depoliticization process*, Revista Internacional de Sociología, 2018

populists, who aim to overturn the founding system of democracies. Through online procedures of e-government or i-voting it is as a matter of fact possible to weaken parliamentary powers while strengthening their agenda-setting and decision-making powers, sometimes even bypassing parliamentary discussions and legislative procedures as citizens' validation may be considered of utmost importance. This seriously jeopardizes the democratic structure within which technological innovation should flourish, and sets out the necessity to oversee and regulate parties' and movements' actions perpetrated online. The Five Stars Movement in Italy set itself as the promoter of direct democracy, within the anti-establishment rhetoric according to which the political elite had been unable to fairly and efficiently represent the Italian electorate. In 2012, the first online voting was performed on the Movement's guarantor website¹⁷ for the members to choose the Movement's candidates for the following political elections of 2013. Many are the examples among the 334 votings during the years, but one evidently goes against one prerogative of the Parliament as established by the Constitution: in 2015, members were called to vote to choose the candidate to the Presidency of the Republic. According to Article 83 of the Italian Constitution, "The President shall be elected by the Parliament in joint session." Letting the members decide who the Movement's spokesmen should vote for as Chief of State implies a reduction of power of the Members of Parliament, leading the way to a de facto presidentialism. The event describes the incompatibility of populist actions today facilitated by online procedures with the endurance of representative democracies, as is Italy.

4. The transformation of the public sphere

The discussion on e-democracy and everything that comes with it - from e-government to e-elections - necessarily fits within the wider scope of the development of the public sphere in the network society. The shift from mass to network society is marked by the introduction and spread of new media technologies. The second half of the twentieth century was characterized by the flourishing of mass media. These broadcasting infrastructures increased their reachability to civil society and functioned as the new intermediaries between the

¹⁷ Until 2016 consultative and decisional voting procedures were carried out through the Movement's guarantor Giuseppe Grillo website (www.beppegrillo.it). In 2016 the Rousseau Association was founded by Gianroberto Casaleggio and Davide Casaleggio and with which an operative system was created to perform online voting linked to the Movement's website.

political sphere and the social and private places. As a matter of fact, there can be identified three societal spaces, which were then connected, though not overlapped, by hand of the mass media: public, social, and private spaces, to which a scale of public and private affairs is to be juxtaposed - a scale going from government, to civil society, to private sphere. The definition proposed by van Dijk illustrates how the public sphere lies between the government and civil society, “between the macro and micro levels of public and private affairs.¹⁸”

To understand the blurring of the old structures building up the public sphere of the mass era, a focus on the latter is in order. First, the public sphere can be imagined as “an intermediary system of communication between formally organized and informal face-to-face deliberations in arenas at both the top and the bottom of political system.¹⁹” Here, mass media therefore operate as channels for flow of messages - from news to educational and entertaining programs - having as their objective the creation of opinions. The underlying idea is to go well beyond the aim to inform and convince the electorate in view of the following electoral rendez-vous; the generation and changes of opinions must remain constant and must reach out to the general public in their daily life, as through mass communication technology. According to Habermas²⁰, the public sphere retains its reflexive character. Everyone involved can revisit the public opinions acquired through the media and then can respond in accordance with their own considerations. Even though not everyone can actively participate in the formulation of opinions, the electorate can respond through indirect means - such as polls, absention, positive or negative feedback during elections - that however show the reflexive trait of the public sphere. Now, the question of whom are the active participants in the public sphere needs to be addressed. Habermas identified two types of actors, the professionals of the media system and politicians who are at the center of the political system. While the former are co-authors together with politicians of public opinions, the latter are the addressees as well, as they get the responses formulated by the electorate as shown by the reflexivity of the system. Alongside these two fundamental types for the existence of a public sphere, there are lobbyists, advocates, experts, moral entrepreneurs, and intellectuals. The

¹⁸ van Dijk J., Kenneth L. Hacker, *Internet and Democracy in the Network Society*, Chapter 4, Routledge, 2018

¹⁹ Habermas J., *Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research*, in *Communication Theory*, 16, 4, 2006

²⁰ *Ibidem*

presence of these types of actors highlights the exclusive character of the public sphere. Hence, those who carry on political communication are considered to be part of an elite. Political communication process here is simple: the politicians and the media professionals send the message, which is then received by the people, who in turn reformulate it in their own terms, which finally translates into their response, which could be positive, negative or even indifferent. The linearity of the model is the result of a balance in the power structure of the public sphere. In the mass society, the media constituted another source of power, together with political, social and economic powers. Mass communication media deal with political communication, they become the agents of the political message, and thus constitute the fundamental ring tying the political sphere to civil society. In this sense, the mass media stand in a position of strength and are able to exert their power on both the political and the private spheres. It follows that, hierarchically, agents of civil society occupy the lowest place compared to that of the so-considered elite guiding the public sphere. Overall, the creators of public opinions are few compared to the audience to whom they refer, who nonetheless is not passively involved as a listener, but responds through the democratic means at their disposal.

Obviously, the simplicity of the model cannot be replicated in the network society, and even less in what is known to be its consecutive development, the connective society. In this relatively new societal context, the public sphere is conceived as “a spatial structure of the public, private and social spaces in society linked by networks.²¹” Networks that today interconnect with one another, overlapping private and public spaces and blurring the definite lines drawn in the mass society. What distinguishes the networked public sphere to that of the mass society is the establishment of online social networks complementing the offline ones. Online social networking has been rendered possible by way of the evolution of the World Wide Web, in which collective spaces have developed - blogs, forums, social media groups and chats. Furthermore, the interconnectivity has enabled social and civil groups and movements to virtually cross national borders and increase their consensus transnationally, thus carrying on collective protests and claims more or less equally agreed by the activists and supporters. In general, the new public sphere may be considered as comprising of a set of new public spaces which have undergone substantial change since the past century. Today,

²¹ van Dijk J., Kenneth L. Hacker, *Internet and Democracy in the Network Society*, Chapter 4, Routledge, 2018

the public space is composed of many online and offline spaces which are different but often overlapping; public space does not refer to the national and local, but retains a global character as well; finally, the fine line between the private and the public is faded, due to the individualization in the public space. These are the three characteristics for the reconstruction of the public sphere, and entail the participation of individuals from the private spaces to the public discussions. In fact, whether in the mass society people from the civil society hardly participated in the creation of public opinions, in the network society the walls are being broken down. The political sphere is now highly influenced by the opinions formed by the individuals or groups of individuals online; it is actually evident how politicians and political parties have changed their communication, now mostly directed to an online public and simplified for an extensive reachibility. Social media have become the prime public space in which opinions are formed, and in which traditional media have adapted as well, becoming almost au pair actors to private users. The multitude of online and offline public spaces consequently creates a more fragmented public sphere which is now easily accessible by anyone possessing an electronic device and a minimum interest in sociopolitical issues. The merge of public and private spaces is characterized by network individualization and networking, which is enhanced by social media spaces. Here, private matters and opinions are being exposed and find validation by other individuals online. This phenomenon rarely leads to the creation of a collective movement; rather, it increases the chances for the development of enclosed groups of individuals gathering online and seeking legitimization for their ideas on public matters. Network individualism is also characterized by personal and emotional aspects, which now form part of and bias public discussion.

The old assumption of a self-regulating media system no longer holds up in the network society. Previously, as explained by Habermas, the media system retained its functional independence from both the political and the economic spheres and acted “in accordance with its own normative code.²²” There was tacitly recognized an informal hierarchical relationship between the media and the opinion leaders, the latter enjoying privileged access to the former. Instead, today the two characteristics of the new public sphere, extreme connectivity and

²² Habermas J., *Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research*, in *Communication Theory*, 16, 4, 2006

speedness, render such functional independence between the parties making up the public sphere obsolete. Now, traditional and new media are linked to the public, private and social spaces all at once. The extreme connectivity and the speed at which messages are sent out to the public spaces allows for an unprecedented high levels of reachability of users from the civil society, who become more and more engaged in the public discussion, by not only responding to the inputs, but also by contributing to the creation of these themselves. In this scenario, not only political communication but the whole system of politics becomes more unstable and subject to external inputs that influence the agenda setting. Unfortunately, this may translate into short-term goals to gain the most support from a more emotional and fluctuating electorate.

Finally, in the discussion of the digitalization of the public sphere must be included the so-called process of platformization. Today, it is possible for users not yet engaged in social or political issues to enter the public debate through digital platforms, created by civic movements as well as political parties. The emergence of online platforms leads to the abolition of the old barriers that held together the various scales engaged in the public sphere. Apparently, there need not to have recourse to intermediaries between the political sphere and civil society; rather, political parties now wish to establish a direct relationship with their potential electorate, bypassing the traditional mediation structures of the mass society's public sphere, thus entering the stage of what is known as the post-public sphere. The new setting results fragmented and unable to give rise to collectively organized discussions whilst favoring polarization in the public spaces. In this way, the public sphere becomes a "space for legitimizing the single thought instead of a place symbolic of discussion and debate."²³ In this situation, populist political communication is also favored. Populist parties and movements have the tendency to eliminate any intermediate body between them and their electorate, and therefore try to build up their consensus through a distorted implementation of direct democracy. The digital transformation only increased their possibility to reach out to an even broader audience through the establishment of online platforms. However, despite the risks associated with the digitalization of the public sphere, there needs to be embraced the

²³ De Blasio E., Kneuer M., Schünemann W.J., Sorice M., *The Ongoing Transformation of the Digital Public Sphere: Basic Considerations on a Moving Target*, Media and Communication, Volume 8, Issue 4, Pages 1–5, 2020

possibilities offered by it as well. Undoubtedly, digital public spaces have made it possible for more citizens to enter the public sphere by being able to be co-authors of public opinions, and such plurality of voices is to be encouraged. Nonetheless, it remains a priority to establish new, more dynamic and adaptive rules for the new digital environment.

Part II

An Italian perspective: the Italian challenges toward digitalization

The Italian public space has experienced turbulent change since the establishment of the Five Star Movement in 2009, who proposed itself as the promoter of direct democracy, by way of implementation of e-democracy instruments. When first introduced, it was welcomed as a novelty by the civil society; less by the political sphere, where concerns for the stability of political representation were expressed. Since the beginning, the Movement had set itself as an anti-establishment force, in a period when political trust was seriously diminished due to the international financial crisis that started in 2008 and had its effects in Europe between 2009 and 2012. In Italy, the Government, in charge from 2008 and headed by center-right Popolo della Libertà party's (at present, Forza Italia) leader Silvio Berlusconi, imploded in a government crisis in 2011 over the voting of the European directives of the Six Pack regarding the stability pact. The crisis led the way to the appointment by the President of the Republic of life senator Mario Monti as Head of Government, a de facto commissioner of the government by the European Union. Mario Monti was in fact called to ensure the correct implementation of the stability pact measures concerning stricter controls over budgetary public policies. In this setting, distrust and disappointment by the electorate grew bigger as well as anti-European sentiment, held responsible by the public opinion to impose restrictions over Italian political sovereignty. The Movement thus was founded on the premises of anti-establishment and Euro-skepticism, surfing the wave of disillusionment of the Italian electorate during the second decade of the new century. Its founders, the entrepreneur Gianroberto Casaleggio and the comedian Giuseppe Grillo, vigorously promoted direct democracy, willing to bypass the political elite that proved its inability to represent and protect their electorate. The innovation lay in the recourse of e-democratic tools through the online platform associated with the Movement then accessible to its members. In 2012 the Rousseau Association was founded by Gianroberto Casaleggio and his son, Davide

Casaleggio who is currently the President of the Association, of which prime aim is “to promote the development of digital democracy²⁴”, as can be read in the Statute. The first online consultations regarded the choice of political candidates who would run in the administrative elections between 2010 and 2012, and to the general election of 2013. This sort of primary elections of the Movement constituted something new, that no other party had done before: anyone from the civil society could run by way of a spontaneous candidacy. The campaign was run on the Movement website: candidates could convince the members of the Movement by presenting themselves through a self-promoting video, which was sent, approved and uploaded on the Movement website. The response by the voters was positive: the idea of having the right to directly choose whom would be best suitable for the position pulled them closer to the Movement, which became the new beacon for many in a period of disillusionment and subsequent disengagement of the electorate. While the other established parties were experiencing a declining consensus, the Movement was on the rise; a rise that was facilitated by the massive recourse to digital democratic means, however used not as tools enhancing the democratic discourse within the premises of representative democracy, but rather to go against it, aiming at a complete reformation of the Italian constitutional system.

1. The road to a more active citizenship: a bottom-up phenomenon

However, despite the many critiques moved against the Movement and its partial incompatibility with the Italian democratic system, it clearly constituted the first step toward the digitalization of the Italian political sphere, which is still deemed problematic by other actors in the sphere, who wish to maintain the established customary procedures, disregarding the potential of the digital world. The people have proved their eagerness to be included in the political discussion by showing their approval for digitalized instruments of participation. This tendency was confirmed with the signatures collections for the request of three abrogative referendums that occurred in September 2021. The procedure was fully digitalized: Italian citizens were able to sign online by way of accessing an online platform

²⁴ Rousseau Association’s Statute on *Trasparenza Rousseau*, Il Blog delle Stelle
<https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/trasparenza-rousseau>

through their digital identification known as Spid (Sistema di Identità Digitale). The three referendum questions concerned: the justice reform, promoted through a six-pack questions, regarding the Superior Council of the Judiciary, direct responsibility, equal assessment and separation of carriers of magistrates, limitations on pre-trial detention, abolition of Severino law decree; the depenalization of the cultivation of specific narcotic substances, among which cannabis, for personal purposes; the legalization of the euthanasia²⁵. The first questions were promoted by the Radicali Italiani, a liberal political movement, together with right-wing party Lega, who supports a guaranteeing spirit. The Radicals also were the primary promoters together with the Luca Coscioni Association of the question of legalization of the cultivation of narcotics, whilst the latter referendum question was proposed by the Luca Coscioni Association, who has carried on the battle for euthanasia since 2013. Up to date, following the constitutional procedure of abrogative referendums set out by Article 75 of the Italian Constitution, the Constitutional Court has approved only five of the questions on the justice reform, whilst has claimed inadmissible the other two. The voting is set between April 15th and June 15th, 2022. Although the questions were quite different from one another, the signature collections were highly participated. The signatures were collected in a hybrid manner: physically and online for the ones regarding the justice reforms and the legalization of euthanasia. Obviously, participation was higher than the traditional physical signature collection only, thanks to the immediacy typical of the internet. The minimum number of signatures required to request an abrogative referendum is set at five-hundred thousand; the collections for all the proposals have all extensively passed the threshold. It marked the readiness of the Italian citizens for a digital reform of the political and public spheres that cannot remain unheard.

With the exception of Lega, the other two promoters are political and social forces that carry out bottom-up activities. In the Italian constitutional system, the referendums - constitutional, abrogative and consultative - are the instrument of direct participation of citizens. Abrogative referendums however are typically promoted by both political and civic movements, which shows the bottom-up tendency toward increased active citizenship through direct democratic

²⁵ Further details on the promoters website: <https://www.referendumgiustiziagiusta.it>, <https://referendumcannabis.it>, <https://www.eutanasialegale.it>

tools. The referendum proposals have shown how these movements are actually the most active on digital platforms, countering the impasse in which Italian political parties are stuck. The Italian democratic model is what van Dijk considers legalist, which “is based on the separation of powers and on check and balances mechanisms, and is embedded in the representative model.²⁶” Typically, the representative model stems from what is known as pluralist democracy, which lays its basis on the dynamic dimension of the exchange between changeable minority forces. Here, however, elements of direct democracy can be found, mostly through active citizenship and civic engagement, as in the case of the promotion of the referendum questions. Thus, e-democracy not only fits within the general picture of direct democracy, but it results versatile and applicable in all good functioning democratic models, as an enhancing element for democratic inclusion. Not only it can function as a mere “technological container for voting collections” but can be properly used to facilitate the entrance in the online public spaces of those previously not interested in political matters. To this regard, the web enhances the chance to develop political discussions in spaces that are not traditionally political, and where normally politically disengaged citizens enter the debate. Indeed, it must be pointed out that many citizens usually not engaged in the political debate, have signed for the approval of the referendums regarding social subject matters of euthanasia and the personal cultivation of narcotics. Thus, the Internet not only is a research tool, but can become a “place of civic engagement where new forms of political participation and new modes of active citizenship may be experienced.²⁷”

2. The side effects: partial knowledge and participationism

The picture would not be complete if the problems of online information weren't tackled. The great number of citizens who participated in the online signature collection poses the question of whether they have been fully and properly informed of the subject matter at hand. The simplicity of online procedures allowed for a broader audience to actively enter the debate: precisely in a week, between September the 11th and the 18th, 2021, the referendum proposal on the depenalization of the cultivation of cannabis for personal use reached the quorum of five-hundred thousand signatures. Since the question was launched, the news had been the

²⁶ De Blasio Emiliana, *E-Democracy*, Chapter 3, Mondadori, 2009

²⁷ Ibidem

object of a massive sharing by users on social media, who easily accessed the website through their digital identification. The rapidity at which the news was spread in the new public space as are the social media, however, does not really allow for a thorough analysis of the matter. This has the effect of favoring quantity, while disregarding quality. If, on the one hand, citizens have shown their propensity toward higher levels of inclusivity in the political debate, on the other they must be fully informed before accessing online consultations or votings. As later stated by the Italian Constitutional Court on February 16th, 2022, the question for the abrogation of the Italian law²⁸ prohibiting the cultivation of narcotics, did not only concern the depenalization of cannabis. The law at concern redirects to a Table (Table 1) where narcotics other than THC are listed²⁹. However, the official website of the promoters, “referendumcannabis.it”, through which it was possible to sign, hints otherwise. Then, a clearer explanation of the Articles of the law that would be abrogated can be found. However, in the frenetic space of the Internet, not every user spends more time educating themselves, posing a serious threat to informed participation, and thus to the good functioning of the democratic system. On the one hand, the Internet’s net-neutrality - describing an autonomous and free space - allows for the full exploitation of the potential of e-democracy; however, on the other hand, it may constitute a risk if no control is exerted over the correct flow of information. In this sense, the legislator needs to enter the new public space by way of regulating it, as the tightness of the Italian democratic system may be in danger, given the partial knowledge of its citizens who today rely more and more on social media for the acquisition of information.

When talking about the implementation of e-democracy, there needs to be addressed the issues as well that could eventually diminish its democratic character to the advantage of the participationist rhetoric, according to which the discussion on the importance of participation overwhelms the actual political discussion to which citizens are called to enter. It is in this perspective that “e-democracy may reduce itself to an instrument of plebiscitary legitimization of the power through the vote³⁰.” The unprecedented number of signatories for

²⁸ *Testo unico in materia di disciplina degli stupefacenti e sostanze psicotrope*, DpR 309/90

²⁹ For further examination on the matter, Pagella Politica’s article may be consulted:

<https://pagellapolitica.it/blog/show/1214/non-solo-cannabis-ma-anche-oppio-e-coca-cosa-propone-davvero-il-referendum>

³⁰ De Blasio Emiliana, *E-Democracy*, Chapter 3, Mondadori, 2009

the online referendum proposals may distort the real objective of the referendum, an instrument of direct democracy being regulated by a constitutional procedure; it may legitimize the forces that have promoted the questions, later being rejected by the Constitutional Court, to pursue their battle as going against the very procedures set out by the Constitution. This could result in increased mistrust in the political system by the citizens in favor of growing online participation where the rules seem not to apply, thus where platform parties and movements gain more and more legitimization, feeling entitled to counteract any action or decision by the Parliament or the judiciary as well. In this sense, e-democracy would not be useful to the improvement of the system, but rather would decrease the tangible participation of citizens, who would not be involved in decision or policy making processes, but would only take part in online consultations that eventually do not find concrete application.

3. The digitalization of the Italian political sphere: from a bottom-up to a top-down approach

In Italy, innovations in the field of digitalization of the governmental and public administration infrastructures are yet to be concretized. Established political parties have long fought against the implementation of e-democracy for the engagement with their electorate. Only the Partito Democratico, the left-wing force leading the center-left coalition, has moved in this direction, through the introduction of the *Agorà Democratiche*. These are thematic meetings held both physically and remotely, through the online platform following a membership subscription. Through the initiative, the Democratic Party wishes to strengthen and not substitute representative democracy. Differently from the Rousseau platform, the party chose to rely on an open source software, Decidem, available for consultation online and which ensures transparency and traceability of the users' data. The difference is even expressly highlighted on the dedicated web page³¹. Finally, the meetings retain a decision-making character, and are constructed as virtual and physical spaces of discussion rather than mere consultative or voting procedures. This once again proves the skepticism of the political forces who find their roots in the representative model to lean toward the digitalization of the political sphere. This is partly due to the negative experience stemming

³¹ <https://decidim.agorademocratiche.it>

from the Five Star Movement, who mis-used e-democracy tools to the advantage of their populist agenda. It is however to be remarked how the Movement lost almost ten percent of its electorate, from 24 percent in the 2018 general elections to 14 percent in the current year weekly polls³² - because of its inconsistency in maintaining the positions expressed during the electoral campaigns, increasing the distrust of its members, who less and less took part in online consultations. This bad reaction by the electorate is probably one of the elements restraining the other political parties from engaging with their members and possible voters online. As for now, the traditional forms of participation are preferred, such as conventions and more or less formal meetings, where however there is very little room for members to actively participate in decisions.

Such rigidity toward digital innovation must also be contextualized. Italian political parties are experiencing low levels of consensus, due to the divide between the people's needs, both social and economic following the two-year pandemic struggle, and the political agenda, whose main focus is currently the implementation of the many reforms required to access the European funds of the Recovery Plan. The political discussion is reduced and the citizens are far from being actively involved in any political decision. Their engagement should depend on the ability of the political parties to listen to their needs and find new ways to make them enter the debate. This would be the time to digitalize the political sphere as well as the public spaces, where citizens would be able to formulate public opinions and thus would increase their influence on political and possibly governmental decisions. In the Italian representative model, it is a prerogative of the political parties to make this happen. In the new digital era, where more and more citizens engage in horizontal interactions with peers and where social and civic movements are often born, representation must not be limited to the mere general elections held to renew the Parliament every five years. The political parties have all the instruments provided by the new digital technologies needed to increase the level of inclusivity of their members.

³² The latest weekly poll of February the 11th, 2022 by Agi-Youtrend attested the Five Star Movement at 14.3%: <https://www.agi.it/politica/news/2022-02-17/supermedia-sondaggi-pd-fdi-lega-15662751/>

This would lead the way toward the expansion of such practices by the governmental institutions, establishing what the Italian system is still missing: a top-down approach which would enable the citizens to be part of the public system in a more active way. In Italy, citizens today are less and less engaged in politics because of the lack of trust placed in the political class that failed to fairly represent them. However, as previously seen with the referendum proposals wave, they also show their willingness to be heard on social matters; this shows how social struggles still find great support from the Italian civil society, who seeks new ways to carry them on. The citizens have proved to be able to organize themselves and among civic associations through the new technologies, as are the online signing platforms and the digital identification system provided by the Italian public administration. This underpins the difference between the adaptability of civil society and the hostility toward innovation of the political class; a divide that will eventually result in lower rates of consensus of the parties and in increased online participation in protest movements, increasing the cleavage between the so-called establishment and the people.

4. Rethinking the public institutions to enhance online citizenship

E-democracy not only concerns the digital transformation of the political sphere, but also encompasses the digitalization of the public administrations, which are crucial to deliver proper public services to the citizens. Italian public institutions seem to be at a stalemate, given their high level of bureaucratization and the difficulties encountered to skim the bureaucratic procedures. The possibility to access government and public institutions online, for consultation as well as to access public services, introduces new ways through which citizenship may be seen. It is only relatively recently, in 2015, that the Spid (Sistema Pubblico di Identità Digitale) was introduced as a new flexible means to access the public administration remotely. With the digital identity citizens are now able to, for instance, pay taxes or reserve an appointment at the public office they need to go to. This clearly facilitates the daily life of the citizens and makes the public system be more reliable to the eyes of the people. As a matter of fact, reliability is an important requirement for the good functioning of a democracy in all of its aspects, including its administrative infrastructure. In Italy, the governmental agency charged for the digitalization of the public administration is the Agency for the digitalization of Italy (Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale), which manages a variety of

public administration's online platforms, such as PagoPA (online payment to the Public Administration) and the online health systems. The Agency uses for all the online public administration platforms an open source software, which ensures the protection of the citizens' data, that in this way are of no one's property, as instead happens with proprietary softwares. To this regard, the triennial plan for the digital transformation is drafted. The latest was issued for the triennial 2020-2022, whose aim is indeed the "improvement of the quality of digital services which constitute the indispensable premise for the increase of their utilization by the users."³³ The integration by the public administrations of the new information and communication technologies allows for smoother administrative procedures and for an improved management of the public administration organization. The ability of public institutions to provide better online services increases the perception of the citizens of more reliable and efficient public institutions.

But ICT implementation should not be limited to the public administrations. Providing public institutions' online services is the first step toward a top-down implementation of e-democracy. Up to date, governmental institutions do not provide quite a wide range of online services to the citizens, if not of an informative character. For example, the Government's website provides daily updates, but it does not allow for any further online option. In a world where online traffic is higher and higher and information circulates mostly on the digital public spaces, governments should enter such spaces as active actors, thus not only delivering information and updates, but should also provide new methods of interaction with their citizens. This does not entail the undermining of the representative model on which the Italian democracy is built; rather, it entails new ways meant to let the citizens be aware of their citizenship status, as active participants and opinion makers in the political and thus public spheres. The call for their active engagement through consultations or even i-voting procedures on specific issues, that would not in any way substitute parliamentary legislative procedures, would make the citizens decrease their apathy and skepticism toward politics. The digital transformation is a challenge that the Italian institutions must see as an opportunity to regain the trust of the people in the State, unfortunately today seen as an inefficient and rusty machine. The new information and communication technologies are the

³³ Piano Triennale per l'Informatica nella Pubblica Amministrazione, Agid e Team Digitale, 2020-2022

means through which unlock the Italian potential for a renewed political sentiment as complementary to the traditional political representation method by the political parties.

Conclusions

Overall, e-democracy sets the basis for the improvement and enhancement of steady democratic regimes. Having seen the characteristics, the advantages and the possible risks, it is assertable how the former outweigh the latter. If properly implemented and regulated, e-democracy characterizes a means of support both from top-down and bottom-up forces. It is by no means a substitutive practice for the well established ones proper of democracies. E-democracy instruments actually result as quite versatile in their implementation, which works to the advantage of the governments who wish to engage more with their citizens, and for political parties and civic and social movements to enter the new digital public spaces and increase their decisional power in the political discussion. It is not possible to look the other way when talking of digitalization and innovative ways of participation. The risk would be to leave the digital public spaces unregulated and therefore more vulnerable to those forces, be it political or civic, that may implement such technologies to their advantage while abandoning the actual aim for which e-democracy was thought of. As thoroughly explained in the paper, populist forces have made use of digital platforms to validate their agenda which often was in contrast with governments. In this sense, the digital world may become a space of protest rather than being exploited as a means to bring the citizens closer to the public institutions.

The changes in the public sphere impose a reflection on how to respond to the new stimuli produced simultaneously both horizontally and vertically among and along the scales of public and private affairs. Information does not flow on direct lines, but rather undergoes processes of reformulation by the many actors composing the new public sphere. Not addressing their needs means turning them away from the public institutions, which should have the capability to yield for more inclusive models of participation. The choice to rely on the new technologies implies complementing the already existing and more traditional procedures with new ways to increase active citizenship in the political dimension, and it is increasingly more important to do so in times when abstention, in Italy, almost reaches 50 percentage point. The dissatisfaction of the electorate does not only stem from their feeling of betrayal by the hand of political parties who did not comply with their electoral campaign

promises; rather, it stems from their feeling of exclusion from the public debate and thus their inability to express and form public opinions. In this context, in the paper it has been shown how the higher levels of participation in the referendum questions prove the willingness of the citizens to enter the public debate on their own terms. Finally, the risks connected to an increased digital implementation are real, and that is why it is fundamental not to avoid the concrete possibility of the digital transformation of public institutions. If the matter is properly addressed, regulatory measures are taken, thus creating a safer environment both for the governments and the citizens, whose data needs to be protected. A well functioning democracy inevitably has at its core the security of their people.

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Abstract

Il presente elaborato ha lo scopo di spiegare dettagliatamente gli aspetti fondamentali che compongono la vasta definizione di e-democracy, ovvero, la democrazia digitale. La digitalizzazione delle infrastrutture democratiche è un fenomeno risalente a prima dell'inizio del ventunesimo secolo, sebbene di e-democracy se ne sia cominciato a parlare in maniera più assidua negli ultimi due decenni, soprattutto in Italia, con l'avvento della prima piattaforma digitale del Movimento Cinque Stelle, Rousseau. Si è spesso guardato alle nuove tecnologie di informazione e comunicazione (le cosiddette ICT, information and communication technologies) con ostilità, forse per paura dei possibili rischi annessi in materia di protezione dei dati e, più in generale, di sicurezza online. Tale avversità, tuttavia, ha distolto l'attenzione necessaria ai nuovi trend di democrazia digitale che risultano essere in realtà funzionali per un miglioramento della qualità del dibattito pubblico e, di conseguenza, delle decisioni politiche. Infatti, le pratiche di e-democracy possono essere utilizzate per aumentare la partecipazione dei cittadini tramite le istituzioni pubbliche, grazie all'implementazione di procedure di consultazione o, addirittura, di votazioni online riguardo tematiche specifiche, volte non a dividere e polarizzare ulteriormente l'opinione pubblica, bensì a riunire sotto il principio di pluralità le opinioni più o meno condivise.

L'elaborato si divide in due parti, ulteriormente suddivise in capitoli: la Parte Prima, volta a spiegare in maniera teorica i fondamentali per comprendere meglio cos'è la democrazia digitale; la Parte Seconda, invece, ha come obiettivo quello di cercare soluzioni concrete per l'implementazione delle pratiche di democrazia digitale nel panorama pubblico italiano. Per quanto concerne la Parte Prima, nel primo capitolo è possibile ottenere una panoramica a 360 gradi delle dimensioni in cui l'e-democracy si può sviluppare: in contesti di democrazie solide e affermate, che possono essere di tipo deliberativo, partecipativo, e rappresentativo. Non è dunque detto che pratiche di democrazia digitale possano essere completamente sviluppate solamente nel quadro di democrazie deliberative, in cui i cittadini detengono il più alto livello di potere decisionale e sono attori attivi nei processi di policy-making. Segue poi, nel terzo capitolo una riflessione necessaria riguardo i rischi connessi all'implementazione di e-democracy. Nel capitolo ne sono individuati tre: di sicurezza online, del pericolo di disinformazione sul web, e dell'utilizzo distorto di pratiche digitali democratiche da parte di partiti e movimenti populistici. Rischi che, tuttavia, possono essere minimizzati grazie a una corretta attenzione al mondo digitale da parte delle autorità pubbliche. Infine, una giusta riflessione sul cambiamento della sfera pubblica, partendo dalle caratteristiche della società di

massa a quella della network society, per capire i nuovi movimenti dei flussi di informazioni e opinioni nel vasto mondo del web.

La Parte Seconda si concentra, invece, sulla possibile e auspicata implementazione di strumenti di democrazia digitale da parte sia delle istituzioni pubbliche sia dei movimenti e forze sociali dal basso in Italia. Qui, l'avversità alle pratiche digitali è sicuramente più sentita a causa, talvolta, dell'esperienza, considerata da molti negativa perché un affronto alla democrazia rappresentativa, del Movimento Cinque Stelle. Nel primo capitolo, si affronta il tema della partecipazione dal basso nel mondo del digitale, descrivendo la recente esperienza della raccolta firme digitale per i quesiti referendari conclusasi a fine settembre 2021. Riguardo a ciò, nel secondo capitolo, sono stati esposti sia i vantaggi che le criticità relative a tali procedure, e pertanto come massimizzare la sicurezza dei cittadini in tali pratiche, nuove e migliorabili. Gli ultimi due capitoli riguardano invece una possibile digitalizzazione prima della sfera politica e poi delle istituzioni pubbliche, tra cui le infrastrutture della pubblica amministrazione.

In conclusione, l'elaborato si pone a favore dell'implementazione di pratiche di democrazia digitale, in quanto strumento volto a favorire e non a sminuire il carattere delle democrazie liberali. Infatti, alcune esperienze negative non possono essere il parametro di misura per condannare qualsiasi innovazione tecnologica che possa incrementare la partecipazione dei cittadini nei processi di decisione e, addirittura, di policy. Se ben implementate e correttamente regolamentate, tali pratiche possono diventare anche in modelli di democrazia rappresentativa come l'Italia complementari a quelle più tradizionali di rappresentanza politica, soprattutto in periodi di forte astensione e scetticismo da parte dei cittadini nei confronti della classe politica. Inoltre, il maggiore coinvolgimento dei cittadini da parte delle istituzioni pubbliche, quindi tramite un approccio cosiddetto top-down, comporterebbe una diminuzione di una retorica di protesta, a vantaggio della costruzione di una discussione pubblica sicuramente meno divisiva e volta alla risoluzione piuttosto che al contrasto.