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The other side of platform politics. Law-making and online participatory democracy in the Five Star Movement

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Abstract

Between 2013 and 2021, the Italian Five Star Movement implemented an advanced tool, Lex Eletti, to enhance citizens' online participation in law-making. Elected representatives had to present their draft bills on the party's platform before introducing them in Parliament, allowing ordinary party members to discuss them and suggest modifications. This paper investigates the impact of the Lex Eletti platform on participatory democracy in law-making using text analysis and sentence embeddings to compare draft bills and their parliamentary counterparts. Our analysis of a comprehensive dataset, also including statistics about MPs' and party members' online interactions and MPs' legislative activity in Parliament, reveals that the platform had minimal impact: only a few MPs engaged with it, and user attention for bills on Lex Eletti decreased over time. Interaction between platform users and MPs was also limited. Most bills reached Parliament with little to no modifications, irrespective of platform engagement levels. The Five Star Movement's attempt to foster democratic participation through this platform did not significantly affect law-making activity.

KEYWORDS

Digital politics, Parliaments, Political Participation, Social Media, Transformer Models

Zusammenfassung

Zwischen 2013 und 2021 nutzte die italienische Fünf-Sterne-Bewegung ein Online-Tool, Lex Eletti, um die Beteiligung der Bürger an der Gesetzgebung zu stärken.

Gewählte Vertreter mussten dort ihre Gesetzesentwürfe präsentieren, bevor sie sie im Parlament einbrachten, was es den Parteimitgliedern ermöglichte, diese zu diskutieren und Änderungen vorzuschlagen. Dieser Artikel nutzt Textanalysen und *sentence embeddings*, um Gesetzesentwürfe und deren letztendlichen Gesetzestext zu vergleichen und so den Einfluss von Lex Eletti auf die Gesetzgebung zu untersuchen. Unsere Analyse eines umfassenden Datensatzes, einschliesslich Statistiken über die Online-Interaktionen von Abgeordneten und Parteimitgliedern sowie die legislative Tätigkeit der Abgeordneten im Parlament, zeigt, dass Lex Eletti nur minimale Auswirkungen hatte: Nur wenige Abgeordnete nutzten die Plattform, und die Aufmerksamkeit der Nutzenden für neue Gesetzesentwürfe auf Lex Eletti nahm im Laufe der Zeit ab. Die Interaktion zwischen Nutzenden und Abgeordneten war ebenfalls begrenzt. Die meisten Gesetzesentwürfe erreichten das Parlament mit wenigen bis keinen Änderungen, unabhängig von der Interaktion auf der Plattform. Der Versuch der Fünf-Sterne-Bewegung, die demokratische Beteiligung durch diese Plattform zu fördern, hatte keinen signifikanten Einfluss auf die gesetzgeberische Tätigkeit.

Résumé

Entre 2013 et 2021, le Mouvement 5 Étoiles italien a mis en place la plateforme Lex Eletti pour renforcer la participation en ligne des citoyens à l'élaboration des lois. Ses élus devaient présenter leurs propositions de loi sur la plateforme avant de les soumettre au Parlement, permettant aux adhérents de les discuter et modifier. Cet article examine l'impact de Lex Eletti sur la production législative en utilisant l'analyse textuelle et les *sentence embeddings* pour comparer les propositions de loi initiales et leurs versions parlementaires. Notre analyse, incluant des statistiques sur les interactions en ligne entre députés et adhérents et sur l'activité législative des députés, révèle que la plateforme a eu un impact minimal: peu de députés y ont participé, l'attention des utilisateurs a diminué avec le temps et l'interaction entre les deux a été limitée. La plupart des propositions de loi sont arrivées au Parlement avec peu ou pas de modifications. La tentative du Mouvement 5 Étoiles de promouvoir la participation démocratique en ligne n'a pas significativement affecté l'activité législative.

Riassunto

Tra il 2013 e il 2021, il Movimento 5 Stelle ha implementato la piattaforma online Lex Eletti per rafforzare la partecipazione online dei cittadini e delle cittadine nell'elaborazione delle leggi. La piattaforma permetteva agli

iscritti di discutere e suggerire modifiche alle proposte di legge prima della loro presentazione in parlamento. Questo articolo esamina l'impatto di Lex Eletti nell'elaborazione delle leggi utilizzando l'analisi del testo e le "sentence embeddings" per confrontare i disegni di legge sulla piattaforma e in parlamento. La nostra analisi, che include anche statistiche sulle interazioni online dei parlamentari e degli utenti e sull'attività legislativa dei parlamentari, rivela che la piattaforma ha avuto un impatto minimo: pochi parlamentari vi hanno partecipato e l'attenzione degli utenti per le proposte di legge è diminuita nel tempo. Anche l'interazione tra gli utenti e i parlamentari è stata limitata. La maggior parte dei disegni di legge è arrivata in Parlamento con poche o nessuna modifica. Il tentativo del Movimento 5 Stelle di promuovere la partecipazione democratica attraverso Lex Eletti non ha quindi influenzato significativamente l'attività legislativa.

INTRODUCTION

Criticisms of representative democracy are as old as representative democracy itself. When compared to the democratic ideal, representative democracy is described as limiting the "power of the people" to the selection of rulers once every four or five years, thus betraying the original meaning of democracy itself and, *de facto*, perpetrating the idea of a society governed by an elite, where ordinary people only play a negligible role in defining the community's political goals and priorities (Dahl, 1989). In recent decades, however, new technologies have provided means to implement decision-making processes that extend beyond the local scale and involve greater citizen engagement. The internet has made remote discussion and voting feasible, and the possibilities offered by this technology have increasingly attracted parties. Participatory forms of democracy that were once relegated to local community experience now have an opportunity to be replicated on a large scale. Following the pioneering experiments of the Pirate Parties, other new and old parties have adopted platforms for managing several internal tasks (Barberà et al., 2021). Among them, the Rousseau platform of the Italian Five Star Movement (FSM) is one of the most ambitious digital tools in the European landscape and beyond.

Digital participatory tools have been extensively studied in recent years (Barberà et al., 2021; Deseriis & Vittori, 2019; Dommett, Fitzpatrick, et al., 2020; Gerbaudo, 2019), with a focus on the recruitment of members (e.g. Gibson et al., 2017), the selection of candidates (Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020), the setting of policy priorities (Tormey & Feenstra, 2015), the organisation of the electoral campaign (Dommett, Kefford, et al., 2020; Lilleker et al., 2011; Vaccari, 2013), internal communications with members and voters (Oross & Tap, 2023) or, more generally, the innovations brought by digital technologies for intraparty democracy (Dommett et al., 2021; García Lupato & Meloni, 2023; Gerbaudo, 2021). However, the tools connecting elected representatives to the activists and ordinary members have received limited attention (Fitzpatrick, 2021, p. 35).

This gap in the literature reflects the limited impact of digital tools on the legislative function of parties. Unlike other areas of party activity, where digitalisation has provided alternative avenues for participation or even enabled the conceptualisation of new modes of direct or deliberative democracy (Gherghina et al., 2023), the work of parties within representative institutions has largely remained unaffected by the digital revolution. In this

context, the Lex Eletti[1] section of the Rousseau platform stands out as an advanced experiment connecting ordinary party members to the legislative work of elected representatives. Through Lex Eletti, MPs were required to present their legislative initiatives before submitting them to Parliament. Registered members could read the proposed bill and, within a specified period (a couple of months), post their comments, suggesting improvements, offering criticisms, or simply expressing their support. The MP then had the opportunity to respond to the comments and potentially revise the text of the bill before formally presenting it in Parliament.

In this article, we scrutinise the affordances and effective use of Lex Eletti by both MPs and ordinary party members. The FSM is an interesting case in itself, given its significance within the Italian political landscape. Moreover, it offers a unique vantage point for observing the potential and limitations of online platforms in law-making activities. To our knowledge, Lex Eletti is the most advanced digital tool ever used to connect party members with MPs in their legislative work. In this sense, the FSM can be considered an "extreme" case of digitalisation (Gerring, 2009), as it has advanced the digitalisation process in legislative activity further than any other party.

Shedding light on the participatory premises and practical workings of Lex Eletti provides insight into whether and how digital platforms can address the shortcomings of representative democracy, particularly the scrutiny over the work of elected representatives. This relates to the growing literature on digital aids to improve intra-party democracy, as we will detail in the following section. Specifically, we aim to analyse the success of the FSM's digital platform in terms of *inclusiveness* and *effectiveness*. Inclusiveness refers to the platform's ability to involve a significant number of party members in the legislative drafting process, but also, as a necessary precondition, the acceptance of the platform as a standard tool of work for MPs (if MPs do not use the platform in the first place, party members cannot contribute to legislative activity). Effectiveness, on the other hand, pertains to the extent to which the platform's use by both MPs and members results in substantial transformations of bills (the platform is effective only if MPs consider the inputs from party members). To achieve this goal, we have collected an extensive dataset covering the period from 2013 to 2020 (Tronconi & Bailo, 2024). Our data include information on all the 516 bills presented on Rousseau by the legislators of the FSM, the comments received, and the use MPs have done of these proposed amendments in their subsequent parliamentary activity. Our analysis will show that the platform had minimal impact on both inclusiveness and effectiveness.

The following section will review the idea of participatory democracy and its implementation in party platforms, highlighting the scarcity of research on the specific field of legislative activity. We then move to justify our case selection and discuss the empirical research strategy. In the following section we present the Lex Eletti online tool and place it within the participatory democratic vision of the Five Star Movement. We then move to the findings of our empirical investigation on the actual use and effectiveness of Lex Eletti before some conclusive remarks.

ONLINE INTRA-PARTY PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

In recent years, the distrust in representative institutions and professional politicians, the atrophy of ordinary citizens' political engagement, and the pervasive power of organised interests in political decision-making have prompted academics and activists alike to reconsider the traditional forms of political participation. Borrowing from Benjamin Barber (1984), a "strong democracy"

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[1]The name "Lex Eletti" brings together the Latin word for *law* and the Italian word for *elected* (meaning elected representatives).

is one in which citizens are not merely voters who periodically evaluate rulers' performance, as the Schumpeterian vision of liberal democracy suggests. In this context, participatory democracy has emerged as an increasingly popular solution to reduce the distance between rulers and the ruled. Originating in the sixties in the United States and prominently theorised by Carole Pateman (1970), participatory democracy has gained new and widespread recognition thanks to the anti-globalisation movements at the beginning of the XXI century.[2] Participatory democracy has been defined in many, sometimes contrasting, ways. Generally, it refers to the idea that citizens should take direct action in deciding on relevant political issues. While this was initially thought to happen *in place of* delegating representatives to make such political decisions, it is now often proposed as a set of activities happening *besides* representative democracy. Consequentially, political parties, which in principle should be replaced by participatory practices, have instead become fertile ground for their diffusion (Gherghina et al., 2020).

As the main drivers of political representation in modern democracies, parties are often blamed for the decline in trust in democratic institutions. Indeed, parties consistently display the lowest confidence levels among citizens of most consolidated democracies (Ignazi, 2021). Countless opinion surveys have shown a decline in trust, and parties have constantly been losing members (Van Biezen et al., 2012) and voters (Blais, 2009) in the last decades, at least in the main Western European democracies. Since the eighties at least, discontent with political parties has gone hand in hand with their evolution from agents of civil societies to agents of the state (Katz & Mair, 1995; Mair, 2013). To reverse this negative trend, parties have recently tried to exploit technological innovations to "bring participation back in". This effort has followed several lines of action. In the first place, parties have tried to connect with citizens in innovative ways. Many parties have implemented new "multi-speed" types of membership, transforming the rigid distinction between outsiders and insiders (i.e. party members) into a fluid organisational border (Scarrow, 2015), where external supporters sometimes enjoy privileges that were once reserved for members. Second, the need to reinforce the linkage between voters and activists on the one side and the leadership on the other has brought the diffusion of innovative candidates and leader selection methods, such as primaries and the direct election of the party secretaries (Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Pilet & Cross, 2014; Sandri et al., 2015). Third, parties have sought to legitimise their actions, giving their members more say in important decisions, for instance, holding internal referenda on coalition agreements or policy issues (Deseriis & Vittori, 2019; Gherghina et al., 2020, 2023).

The development of digital technology has been a crucial element in spreading practices aimed to revitalise the role of members within party organisations. The concept of "digital party" has evolved in the literature along with the evolution of technology itself. Helen Margetts (2006) is among the first to describe an emerging model of what she calls "cyber party", defined as parties that "use web-based technologies to strengthen the relationship between voters and party, rather than traditional notions of membership" (p. 531). Bennett et al. (2018) speak instead of "connective parties", defined as "organisations in which technology platforms and affordances are indistinguishable from, and replace, key components of brick and mortar organisation and intra-party functions" (p. 1666). Paolo Gerbaudo (2019) makes a further step, positing that the use of digital technology goes beyond an organisational transformation and represents instead a cultural shift: "What defines the digital party as a new party type is not simply the embracing of digital technology but the purpose of democratisation which digital technology is called to fulfil" (Gerbaudo, 2019, p. 14). Digital parties make the participation of ordinary members in relevant internal decisions an identity trait and a point of distinction vis-à-vis traditional or mainstream parties. They also often claim that online platforms enable parties to redefine the concept of intra-party democracy, transforming rank-and-file members from passive observers of decisions taken "from above" into active participants and decision-makers on their own. This brings us to

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[2]This is not the place for a systematic analysis of the concept of "participatory democracy" and its genealogy. For a discussion of the history of this and the related concept of "deliberative democracy", see Floridia (2014).

the intersection between a participatory (or deliberative) vision of democracy and adopting online platforms as organisational tools. The specific vision of democracy that digital parties aim to achieve is not representative. They adopt a "participationist" view of democracy instead, that is, a "radical democratic creed" where "participation is (…) framed as the normative criteria of a good politics, making legitimate only those processes that actively engage ordinary citizens while being suspicious of top-down interventions" (Gerbaudo, 2019, p. 81).

The Pirate Parties have pioneered this organisational and cultural transition. Their primary digital tool, the user-friendly platform LiquidFeedback, allows users to make decisions through successive stages of online discussion and voting (Jääsaari & Šárovec, 2021). The deliberative aspects of decision-making are also central to the Danish party Alternativet (The Alternative). This party was established in 2013, proposing a new political culture where the main decisions are expected to be taken with bottom-up processes. They emphasise, for instance, the moment of debate over voting, the act of listening to the ideas and proposals of fellow partisans with sincere curiosity, and the importance of providing justifications for one's arguments. Guided by these principles, public workshops are held online and offline nationwide to develop a coherent political program (Gad, 2020). Other new parties, most prominently the Spanish Podemos and the Italian FSM, have gone further on the path of exploiting the democratic possibilities of digital tools. The online platforms they developed were supposed to be where all the main decisions are taken: from recruitment of members to leadership selection, from policy priorities to pre and post-electoral alliances. For each decision, online platforms are supposed to host both the stages of discussion and deliberation (Biancalana & Vittori, 2021; Deseriis & Vittori, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2021; Vittori, 2017). Mainstream parties have sometimes followed new parties in adopting digital decision-making tools to complement their traditional offline procedures (Díaz-Montiel, 2021; García Lupato & Meloni, 2023; Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020).

It is difficult to summarise the political consequences of numerous and different experiences of migration of the party's organisational tasks into the digital realm. However, a common trend has emerged in the literature, from an initial moment of optimism, when the democratic potential of digital innovations was underscored (Bimber, 1998; Diamond, 2010), to prevailing pessimistic views. According to the latter perspective, digital platforms are now increasingly seen as problematic for implementing participatory or deliberative practices. Gerbaudo (2021) states that in the case of Podemos and the FSM, online platforms have allowed for a "medium degree of inclusiveness, a strong degree of centralisation and low forms of institutionalisation" (p. 739). First, authentic grassroots deliberation has attracted limited participation. Second, platforms allow leaders to steer the participatory process, controlling the timing while framing the forms of consultations, thus limiting the room for manoeuvre for internal dissent. Third, the lack of transparent and institutionalised procedures for managing online discussion and voting leaves space for arbitrary decisions and, in extreme cases, the reversal of members' choices. In the same direction, Deseriis and Vittori (2019) state that "if we were to measure the internal democracy of Podemos and 5SM [FSM] by the sheer number of consultations held on their [online platforms], the two parties would be the most democratic parties in their countries. Yet, […] it is the leadership of each party, not the ordinary members, that typically determines the subject, format, and timing of internal consultations" (p. 5699) (see also: von Nostitz & Sandri, 2021). In short, according to these authors, online platforms help legitimise top-down decisions more often than building bottom-up deliberations. García Lupato and Meloni (2023) reach similar conclusions: "[digital] technologies can harm democratic processes by further empowering party leadership, reducing delegative institutions and restricting representation of minority and opposition groups within parties" (p. 39), in short, transforming participatory promises into plebiscitary outcomes. After investigating the (online and offline) deliberative practices implemented by four European parties, Gherghina et al. (2020) provide a

more nuanced picture, indicating that while increased participation positively impacts civic skills and participants' political knowledge, limitations on the effectiveness and legitimacy of decision-making through deliberative processes persist.

These predominantly negative conclusions have been drawn from examining various aspects of party digitalisation, including online voting and the involvement of ordinary members in setting the party agenda and coalition behaviour. However, to our best knowledge, no research has yet explored the participation of party members in lawmakers' work. We investigate this issue in the following pages, following a description of our data and methods and a summary of the evolution and functioning of the FSM digital platform.

CASE AND DATA SELECTION

We propose the FSM as a case study because we consider the early Movement an insightful example of the potential and limitations of digital technologies applied to political parties. The FSM has pioneered extensive use of digital platforms for internal matters. The FSM used Internet technologies to link the party with its voters to mediate internal party functions such as deliberation and leadership selection. But they also play a role in shaping its identity, with an Internet address remaining on the party's electoral symbol until 2021 (*beppegrillo.it* and then *blogdellestelle.it*), deliberately blurring the boundaries between the organisation and the web. In this sense, the FSM platform represents an "extreme" case (Gerring, 2009) of digitalisation, bringing it into territories that remain unexplored for other (digital or mainstream) parties. The specific section of the Rousseau platform that is under scrutiny in this article (Lex Eletti) represents a unique case of online participatory legislative drafting. By their nature, extreme cases are not representative of the class of objects to which they belong (digital parties, in our case). As such, extreme case analyses are exploratory in nature (Gerring, 2009, p. 654). They do not aim to immediately produce general findings but are useful to chart the territory on a phenomenon that is relevant but would otherwise remain unexplored. Online involvement of citizens in the legislative work of MPs is indeed a relevant phenomenon and a democratic innovation that deserves to be carefully observed taking into account its opportunities and limitations.

As for the time frame of our study, between 2013, when its MPs entered Parliament for the first time, and 2020, the final year that we analyse, the FSM has covered both the role of the main opposition party (2013–2018) and the role of the main government coalition partner (2018–2020), first with the right-wing League (2018–19) and then with centre-left Democratic Party (2019–20). This variation, quite unusual for a digital party, allows us to test whether government responsibilities affect the use of digital technologies for internal deliberation.

In the empirical analyses of this study, we rely on two data sources merged into a single dataset (Tronconi & Bailo, 2024). The first source is a list of all the draft bills presented on Lex Eletti by the MPs of the FSM between 2013 and 2020. This covers the 2013–16 period when Lex Eletti was part of the blog *beppegrillo.it*, and the 2016–21 period when it was a section of the Rousseau platform. Already in 2020, the use of Lex Eletti by MPs was minimal, as the tensions between the party and Casaleggio Associati were manifest.[3] They culminated a few months later in the official breakup of the FSM from the online platform. We

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[3]Casaleggio Associati is the company established and run by Gianroberto Casaleggio, co-founder and co-leader of the FSM together with Beppe Grillo. As a company specialized in web-marketing, it had a prominent role in running the internal affairs of the party since the launch of the blog *beppegrillo.it* and later on running the online platform Rousseau. After Gianroberto's death in 2016, his son Davide took the lead of the company, and consequently of Rousseau, becoming, *de facto*, the co-leader of the party.

8 | SPSR Swiss Political Science Review
Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft
Revue Suisse de Science Politique
Rivista Svizzera di Scienza Politica

THE OTHER SIDE OF PLATFORM POLITICS

cover the whole period of this experience of participatory democracy, summing up to 516 bills presented online. It is worth underlining that we refer here to *private* members' bills. The Rousseau platform was never meant to host government-initiated legislation. As we argue in the following pages, this is a significant limitation in a country where most private members' bills have little chance of successfully completing the legislative path. For each bill, we gathered information on the proponent's name, the number of comments from platform users, and the number of interactions between users and the proponent MP. We also downloaded the full text of the proposed bill and a short description, which was available on the website.

The second source of data is the web archive of the Italian Parliament. Here, we gathered comprehensive information on the bills presented by the representatives of the FSM in the two branches of the Italian Parliament (Senate and Chamber of Deputies) during two legislative terms covering the 2013–2020 period. This time frame allows us to cover all the draft bills presented in Lex Eletti until its shutdown. Our variables include the proposer(s) of legislation and their party, the title of the bill, and its status in the legislative process (final status for the 17th legislative term and status by the end of 2020 for the 18th legislative term, which would only end in 2022). The full text of each parliamentary bill was also downloaded. Over this period, FSM's MPs (either as first sponsor or co-sponsor) presented 1944 bills in Parliament. It is already evident that only a fraction of the parliamentary work of MPs passed through Rousseau before landing in the Senate or Chamber of Deputies. We will come back to this finding later.

The combination of these two datasets allows us to infer the effects of the online participatory tool on the legislative activity of the FSM. In particular, we can compare each bill, as proposed on Rousseau, with its counterpart presented in Parliament. In other words, by comparing the texts of the bills in these successive stages, we can directly answer the question of the effects of the participatory process (on the online platform) on the legislative activity (in Parliament).

EMPIRICAL APPROACH

According to the Movement's internal rules, since the launch of Lex Eletti, all bills presented in Parliament should have first been posted on the platform to gather comments and suggestions from members. After that, MPs should have explained if and how they amended their original proposal, and only at this point would the bill be presented in Parliament and start its legislative process, eventually being approved into law. As discussed in the introduction, we analyse the inclusiveness of Lex Eletti from both the MPs' and the members' perspectives, as well as its overall effectiveness. The empirical objective of our data analysis is then threefold. First, we determine if the Lex Eletti has been consistently used by MPs, which is in line with the internal rules of the Movement. We do this by measuring the variation over time in the proportion of bills presented by the FSM in Parliament that were previously posted on Lex Eletti. Second, we determine the engagement on the Lex Eletti platform by measuring the variation in the average number of comments per bill posted by members over time and the average number of interactions of MPs with these comments. Third, as we explain in more detail next, we estimate the effect of the Lex Eletti platform on the law-making process by comparing the documents presented online for discussion with those presented to Parliament *after* the discussion.

Pairs of documents are compared by encoding them into sentence embeddings. Sentence (and word) embeddings, which have recently been applied to the analysis of political texts (Widmann & Wich, 2023) and parliamentary documents (Rheault & Cochrane, 2020), offer one critical advantage over more traditional bag-of-words approaches to text analysis, as seen, for example, in the work of Pedrazzani and Zucchini (2013) on the Italian legislative process: the capacity to capture the "meaning" of text in relation to its context (Rudkowsky et al., 2018).

TRONCONI and BAILO

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9

We used a BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers) sentence embeddings model pre-trained on a multilingual corpus to encode the sentence embeddings (Federici, 2022). Embeddings are numerical vectors, each describing a sentence, and their distance or similarity can be measured by calculating a cosine similarity score for each pair of sentences, the most common measure of similarity between two numerical vectors.

More specifically, our text analysis followed these steps. First, texts were pre-processed to remove stop words and other recurrent expressions, such as the numbering of the documents' sections. Second, the texts were split (or *tokenised*) into sentences, our unit of analysis for the comparison. Third, we dropped all sentences that resulted in three or fewer words. Fourth, we encoded all the remaining sentences into embeddings using the "SentenceTransformers" framework developed in Python (Reimers & Gurevych, 2019) and the abovementioned pre-trained model. Given the constraints imposed by the pre-trained model, sentences with more than 512 words (only 0.23% and 0.14% of sentences found in the Lex Eletti and Parliamentary corpora, respectively) were truncated. Fifth, we computed the cosine similarity between each sentence embedding encoded from the Lex Eletti document and all the sentence embeddings encoded from the corresponding parliamentary document (a few random examples are provided in the Online Appendix). For each sentence in the documents submitted to Lex Eletti, this returned a vector of distances to all the sentences found in the corresponding parliamentary document, with the highest value in the vector identifying the most similar sentence. Finally, we computed a document-level similarity score for each pair of Lex Eletti and parliamentary documents as the average of the highest similarity scores calculated at the sentence level.

We used this document-level pair-wise similarity score to quantify the consequentiality of the activity of the Rousseau community in the bills' revision. Operationalising the comparison through sentence embeddings instead of a bag-of-words approach improves the effectiveness of the analysis as, importantly, it avoids disregarding the ordering of the words and is less sensitive to word substitutions when the sentence's meaning is maintained. Using a measure of the difference between documents as an estimate of the impact of the preliminary revision of the documents by the online community of FSM has some limits. Quantitative text analysis might underestimate the effectiveness of consequential but limited interventions to the text (e.g. the introduction of negative adverbs or the variation of numerical quantities). In other words, the cosine similarity score between sentences should be intended to capture the volume of changes, not the quality or the consequentiality of changes. Given the technical sophistication and highly specialised nature of most pieces of legislation, it would be impossible to *qualitatively* assess the degree of change of each bill, especially on hundreds of documents (thousands of sentences). Considering these constraints, our method represents the best possible option for understanding the *average* impact of online contributions on legislative activity.

LEX ELETTI WITHIN THE PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRATIC VISION OF THE FIVE STAR MOVEMENT

The FSM was officially created in 2009, although it had been informally active before that, presenting lists in local elections with the name of *Amici di Beppe Grillo* (friends of Beppe Grillo). At its first nationwide electoral participation in 2013, the Movement obtained an astounding 25.6 per cent of the vote, which has no parallels in post-1945 Europe for a party at its first participation in a general election. Five years later, the FSM further increased that result, rising to 32.7 per cent and becoming the most-voted party in the 2018 general election. After the 2018 election, the Movement formed a national coalition government with the right-wing League. In 2019, it formed a different coalition with the centre-left Democratic Party, which, in 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, was enlarged to include all the major parties to support the technocratic cabinet led by Mario Draghi. The FSM's

unusual traits have been extensively analysed elsewhere relative to the organisational innovations (Passarelli et al., 2017; e.g. Vignati, 2015; Vittori, 2020), ideological positioning (e.g. Colloca & Corbetta, 2015; Mosca & Tronconi, 2019), electoral base (Pedrazzani & Pinto, 2015), and candidate selection (Caiani et al., 2021). Here, we will narrow our focus to the adoption of digital tools for participatory law-making. It is in this field that the Rousseau platform represents a unique experiment.

Reliance on digital tools is a feature that characterised the FSM from the beginning (Mosca et al., 2015). Grillo's movement originated on the web in the form of a personal blog. Managed by the web marketing entrepreneur Gianroberto Casaleggio, *beppegrillo.it* was opened in January 2005 and soon became one of Italy's most influential online sources of information. According to The Observer, the blog was the ninth most powerful blog in the world (Aldred et al., 2008).

From being an ideal extension of Grillo's comedy shows in theatres, the blog soon became a tool to propose a new form of online democracy, empowering ordinary citizens and eliminating intermediating actors. According to Grillo and Casaleggio, the internet allows the bypass of the intermediation of news professionals who are aligned with or subservient to political elites.: "People can now keep themselves informed, at all times and from different sources, about the issues that concern them: energy, water, health care and the government; and they can express their opinions without going through the filters of the party mandarins and newspaper editors. We are moving away from giving the politicians *carte blanche* and towards the participation of citizens" (Grillo, 2006).

From 2012 onwards, the blog was also used to vote for internal party issues. In December 2012, members voted, for the first time, to select candidates for the upcoming 2013 parliamentary election. In the following years, they were called to vote on many different issues, ranging from the selection of the party's candidate to the office of President of the Republic, the expulsion of senators, and the decision on the party's preferred electoral system to be proposed in Parliament. From late October 2013 onwards, a section of the blog was devoted to discussing draft bills, which will be presented later in Parliament (Mosca, 2020). This feature was then implemented through the Rousseau platform in April 2016. Launched in 2016, days after the passing of Gianroberto Casaleggio, the Rousseau platform was not part of the blog's website. It included several functions beyond the ability to hold votes. Sections were dedicated to legal assistance of members and elected officials facing lawsuits for their political activity, fundraising, e-learning tools for local representatives, and reporting of members violating internal rules.

The section of the platform we analyse is Lex Eletti. In Lex Eletti, MPs were asked to post their bills before officially presenting them in Parliament.[4] Users could then comment on the bill, propose improvements and express their criticism or support. After two months, MPs were supposed to gather these suggestions, amend the text accordingly and present it to Parliament. The design and features of Lex eletti were quite basic: comments appeared in chronological order, with no possibility of grouping them in threads or "upvoting" them. Comments from the MP were coloured differently, but it was impossible to post direct replies to the posts of MPs or other users. Lex Eletti was presented as a tool to allow the public - the users of the Rousseau platform - to draft legislation, tightening the linkage between lawmakers and their voters, who could be actively involved in shaping the party's activity in Parliament.

In the intention of its proposer, the platform achieved two analytically distinct goals. First, it harvested the community's collective intelligence and offered it to the MPs to improve the quality of decision-making. Casaleggio and Grillo (2011) expressed this view with the usual

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[4]Similar sections existed for the European Parliament as well as for regional assemblies. Here we focus on the national Parliament only.

emphatic tones: "The internet creates communities; among these, the largest one is humanity, which until now has never had the capacity to connect all its members, so to share and decide its own destiny in real-time. We are fortunate to have participated in a permanent shift in our history, of which we are both witnesses and actors. The internet redefines the relationship between citizens and the state; the citizen becomes the state" (p. 188). Second, it enhanced the accountability of elected representatives. MPs are requested to make their work within the institutions public and to have it closely scrutinised by ordinary citizens. In line with the idea of "monitory democracy" (Keane, 2011), Lex Eletti is where citizens act as the watchdog of rulers, ensuring that they fairly represent citizens' interests.

Davide Casaleggio, son of Gianroberto and chairperson of Casaleggio Associati since his father's death in 2016, while presenting this tool in 2019 in a video from the official YouTube channel of the Rousseau Association, said that:

[o]nce elected, the members of the FSM Parliament are obliged to discuss online what they are doing directly with the people who use Rousseau. Within this application, named Lex ("law" in Latin), we have 250 laws that are currently discussed with over 80,000 comments, integrations and amendments posted by the people who are part of the FSM. This is an example of how the FSM presents laws in Parliament. We don't delegate participation. We get people to participate in the law-making (D. Casaleggio, 2019).

Soon after the release of the platform, Danilo Toninelli, an MP of the FSM and a minister between 2018 and 2019, would describe Rousseau, and specifically Lex Eletti, as "Our method: the method of those who believe that citizens, even from outside [institutions], can have their ideas turned into state laws. […] The method is: 'citizens decide'." (Toninelli, 2017).

To be sure, Lex Eletti is not a tool of *direct* democracy, as it revolves around the work of elected officials in Parliament. At least in principle, it borrows elements from *deliberative* democracy, which "is founded on argumentative exchanges, reciprocal reason-giving, and on public debates that *precede* decisions", (Floridia, 2014, p. 305, emphasis in the original) and from participatory democracy, "founded on the *direct action* of citizens who exercise some power and decide issues affecting their lives" (*ibidem*).

Still, to what extent are those high expectations met? Was Lex eletti really able to transform ordinary citizens and elected representatives into active law-making participants? And how effective was this participation in transforming the content of legislative initiatives? In other words, how inclusive was this tool with regard to MPs and ordinary party members? And how effective? We answer these questions in the following sections, starting with the participation of MPs.

INCLUSIVENESS: WAS LEX ELETTI CONSISTENTLY USED BY MPS OVER TIME?

Table 1 presents an overview of how Lex Eletti has been used by the elected representatives of the FSM. Notably, only a fraction of bills presented in Parliament were previously presented and discussed on Lex Eletti. Since introducing a dedicated section of the Rousseau online platform, about three bills out of four have bypassed it, as their sponsors directly proposed them in Parliament (third column). In the 17th legislature (2013–18), the percentage of bills first discussed in Lex Eletti was slightly higher (29.7%), dropping to 24% in the following term.

Table 1 reveals another interesting phenomenon, which we refer to as "lost bills" (columns four and five). Some 12% of bills never landed in Parliament after being proposed and discussed on Lex Eletti.

They are the two sides of the same imperfect match between the work of MPs in Parliament and their ability to stay accountable to their party supporters. The stated goal of Lex eletti was to allow ordinary citizens to participate in legislation drafting. This only happened in a minority of

cases, as for about 74% of bills presented in Parliament, Rousseau users were not called to intervene in the work of their representatives. In another 12% of cases, the input coming from platform users was ultimately lost, as the legislation was never submitted to Parliament.

It is worth noticing that out of 516 bills presented on Lex Eletti, only 20 became law, eight in the 17th and twelve in the 18th legislative term, corresponding to a success rate of 3.9% (3.1% in the 17th and 4.6% in the 18th legislative term). This is not surprising. In parliamentary democracies, the cabinet controls most of the parliamentary agenda (Mattson, 1995; Saiegh, 2014). MPs may initiate bills and often do so, but the success of such "private member" bills (i.e. bills that are not government-initiated) is usually very low as most of the successful legislation is introduced by the cabinet. While this is well known among observers of legislative politics, it might be upsetting for many ordinary citizens, as they contradict the widespread notion that the functions of the cabinet and Parliament should be separated, with the cabinet simply executing legislative decisions introduced and passed in Parliament.

If we move to a chronological analysis of the use of Lex Eletti, a trend emerges. Figure 1 displays the monthly average of the number of bills presented on Lex Eletti over the total number of bills presented in Parliament by the Movement.

After an initial period of understandable adaptation, in the first months of 2014, the percentage of bills passing through Lex Eletti started to rise and continued to do so until late 2017 and the end of the Legislature, which terminated on 28 December 2017. From an average of

TABLE 1   Bills presented in Parliament and bills presented on Lex Eletti by MPs of the Five Star Movement in the 17th (2013–2018) and 18th (2018–2020) legislative terms.

		Bills in Parliament	Bills on Lex Eletti	% of bills on Lex Eletti	«Lost bills"	% lost
2013–18	Chamber	545	183	33.6	18	9.8
	Senate	321	74	23.1	12	16.2
	Total	*866*	*257*	*29.7*	*30*	*11.7*
2018–20	Chamber	577	94	16.3	22	23.4
	Senate	501	165	32.9	11	6.7
	Total	*1078*	*259*	*24.0*	*33*	*12.7*
	Overall Total	1944	516	26.5	63	12.2
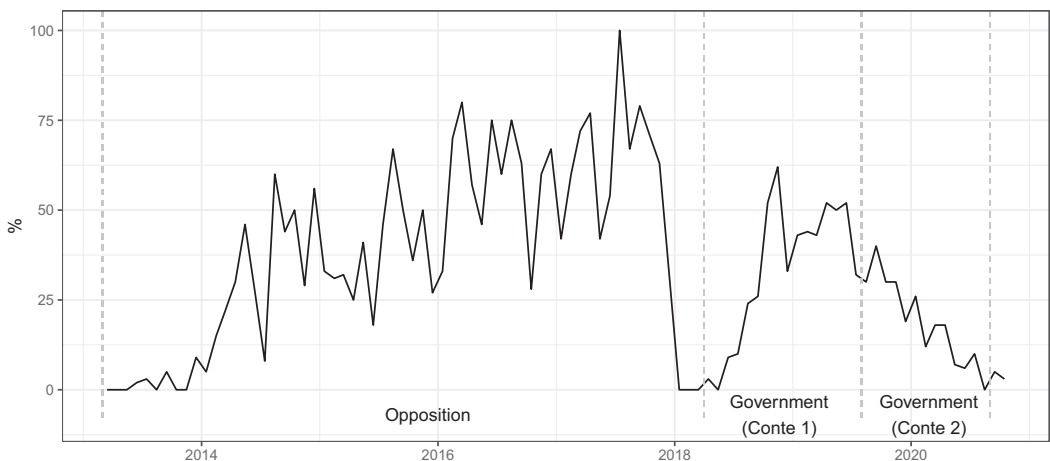
FIGURE 1   *Share of bills on Lex Eletti on the number of bills presented in Parliament. Monthly averages.*

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Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft
Revue Suisse de Science Politique
Rivista Svizzera di Scienza Politica

13

30–40%, the percentage of bills discussed online gradually reached 60–80% (and occasionally higher). This trend, though, was not maintained in the following legislative term, which saw the FSM acquiring a national governmental role for the first time. In the fall of 2018, thus a few months after the beginning of the Legislature and the formation of the first Conte cabinet, the use of Lex Eletti peaked at around 60%. From then on, the online platform was used progressively less, something that might be indicative of MPs' dissatisfaction with the tool. Increasing infighting within the Movement could partly explain this decline in use. One majoritarian faction of the party grew increasingly dissatisfied with the online platform's reliance on Rousseau and its owner, Davide Casaleggio (statutory norms imposed each MP to pay a substantive monthly fee for its maintenance). This conflict has multiple causes. Some are tied to the political evolution of the party during the 2018–2022 legislative term, while others are more deep-seated and fundamental. Among these fundamental reasons is the decreasing relevance of the digital platform as an organisational tool. Since 2013, the party has had significant parliamentary representation, which has shifted power towards the "party in office" holders and away from the "party on the ground" and its grassroots members. Secondly, the conflict stemmed from a leadership clash between Luigi Di Maio, the parliamentary leader (elected as Beppe Grillo's successor in 2017), and Davide Casaleggio, the owner of the Rousseau platform. This conflict concerned their respective influence on the party and their ideas: Casaleggio was seen as the custodian of the cyber-utopian ideals initially supported by his father, the party co-founder Gianroberto Casaleggio, while Di Maio was perceived as a pragmatic politician interested in building relationships with other political actors. Finally, the conflict erupted when the FSM deliberated whether to support the technocratic government led by Mario Draghi. The party eventually split, with about 30 MPs expelled for not voting to support the formation of Draghi's coalition government. Again, and reinforcing the previous point, this conflict was framed as a debate between an idealist group rallying around the original "revolutionary" message of the party and a pragmatist group more prone to find a compromise with other parties to maintain political relevance. When the conflict led to the final divorce between Rousseau and the party in April 2021 (cf. above), Lex Eletti had already ceased to be a tool for MPs to discuss legislation with ordinary party members.

INCLUSIVENESS: WAS THE INTERACTION BETWEEN MPS AND PARTY MEMBERS ON LEX ELETTI SUSTAINED OVER TIME?

Until now, we have observed the use of Lex Eletti from the point of view of the elected representatives. We now turn our attention to the interactions between representatives and party members. Allegedly, this was the ambitious goal of the platform: making the party *in public office* closer and more accountable to the party *on the ground*.

Figure 2 shows the frequency of use of the platform by members to post comments to draft bills and to what extent MPs engaged in discussion with them.

In the first year of use (including the few bills proposed in the last days of 2013), each proposal received, on average, 261 comments. This number declined to 110 and 108 in the following years, dropping to only 24 comments per proposal in 2019 and close to zero in 2020. But the frequency of exchanges between regular users and MPs also declined. In the first year, the discussion thread under a proposal saw, on average, 14.5 replies from the proponents of the legislation. However, their engagement quickly declined in the following years and from 2018 onward, we observe almost no reply from MPs. The decline in online participation from both the top (MPs) and the bottom (members) is even more significant if one considers that the total number of users of the Rousseau platform (and hence, of the Lex Eletti section) considerably increased over time. According to figures diffused by the platform management on the blog,
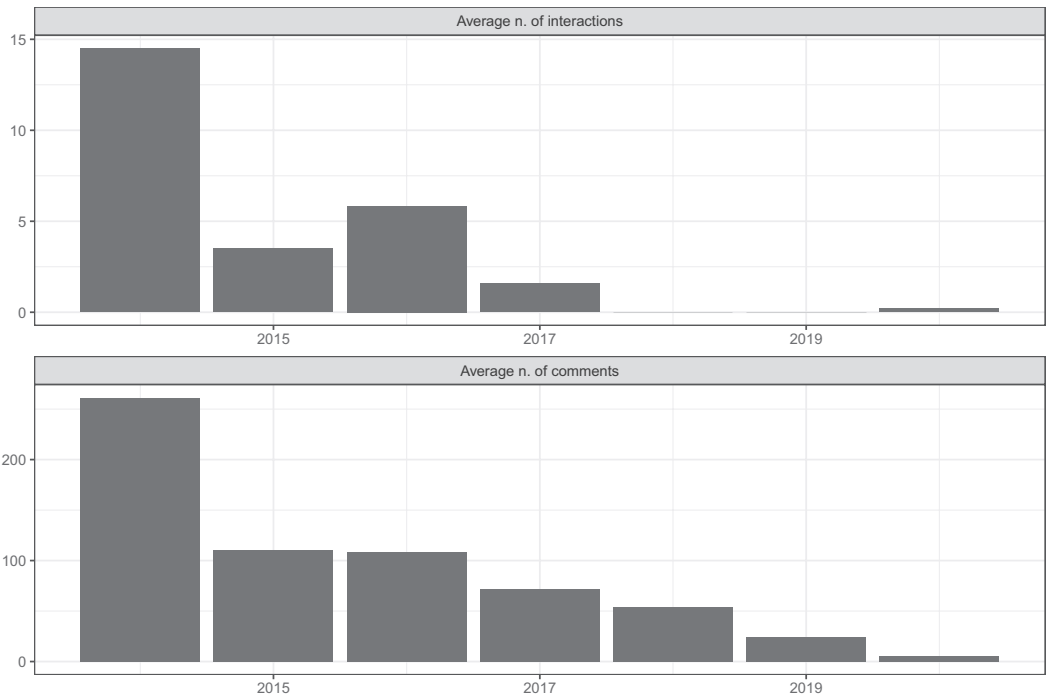
FIGURE 2   *Number of comments and interactions to draft bills on Lex Eletti.* Yearly averages.

there were 50,000 registered users in 2013, 135,000 in 2016, and 188,000 when the FSM severed its relationship with Rousseau in 2021. Overall, there was no interaction between members and MPs for 446 bill proposals out of 516 (86.4%).

In the next section, we consider the effect of the activity of rank-and-file members and MPs on Rousseau. To what extent has Lex Eletti affected the legislative work of the FSM?

EFFECTIVENESS: ARE DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED TO LEX ELETTI DIFFERENT FROM THE DOCUMENTS LATER SUBMITTED TO PARLIAMENT AFTER THE ONLINE DELIBERATION?

The document-level pair-wise similarity score for the 516 documents of Lex Eletti with their corresponding parliamentary document is indicated in Figure 3. The Lex Eletti documents have an average similarity score of 0.89 and a standard deviation of 0.08, while the least similar 5% of documents have a score between 0.52 and 0.72. This suggests a significant degree of pair-wise similarity across the two corpora. In Figure 3, we show the degree of change of each parliamentary bill as compared with the corresponding bill presented by Rousseau, finding that, on average, such document pairs are very similar.

Using the document-level similarity score as a dependent variable, we measure its association with a few variables of interest. Figure 4 shows the association between document pair-wise similarity with the date of publication and the number of comments received by the bills on Lex Eletti. We posit that a bill should change more if it attracted many comments on the platform and if it generated a significant interaction between party members and MPs, as
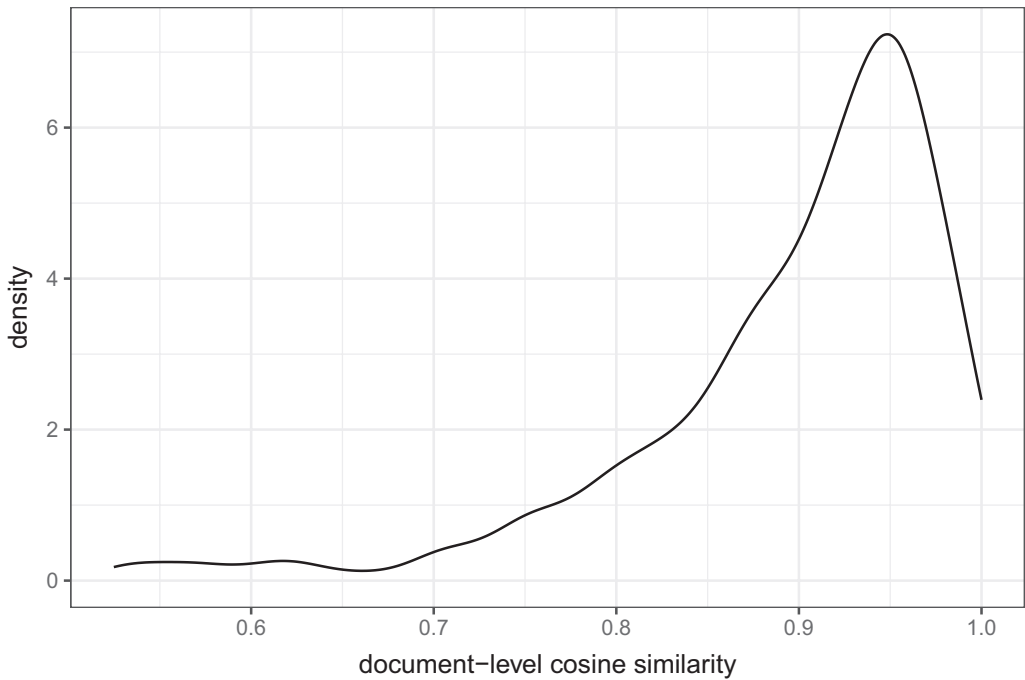
FIGURE 3 *Distribution of the mean similarity score of documents on Lex Eletti (n = 516).*
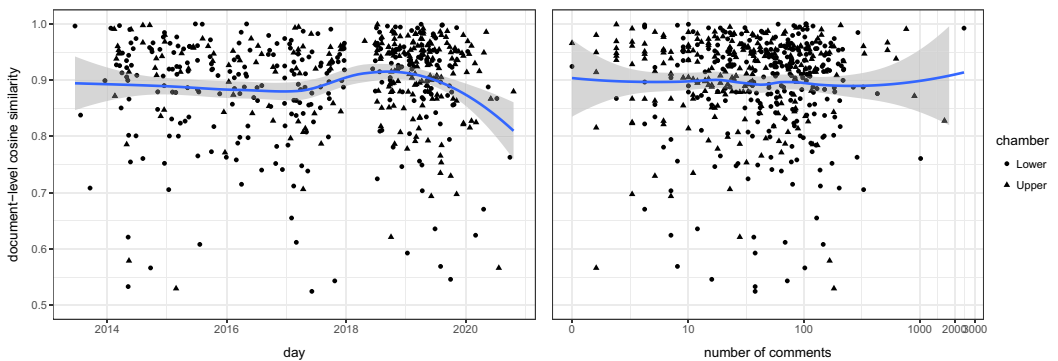

FIGURE 4 *Distribution of document-level similarity over time and per number of comments received on Lex Eletti (n = 516).*

indicated by a high number of responses to comments.[5] If Lex Eletti is a place where citizens can have their voice heard in the legislative process, the louder that voice, the higher the impact on the law-making process. Yet, from a visual inspection, there is clearly no correlation. The lack of any significant correlation between proxy variables for the level of engagement around a bill (i.e. the number of interactions of MPs and users) and the distance between the document

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[5]It should be noted that this is a conservative interpretation: in fact, we are thus assuming that *all* changes from Lex Eletti to Parliament are an effect of comments to the bill. This is not necessarily the case, as bills could change for reasons that are unrelated to the interactions taking place on the platform (e.g. some interest groups have asked for amendments; the MP has simply changed her mind on some aspects of the bill).

entering the platform and the document leaving the platform for Parliament is also confirmed by multivariate regression analyses (reported in Table 1 in the Online Appendix), in which we predict the variation in the document-level similarity score and whether a document is among the least similar documents using a range of independent variables. In short, the bills presented in Parliament present minimal variations from the documents presented to Lex Eletti. Moreover, these variations do not appear to be consistently related to the level of engagement on the platform.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we discussed the inclusiveness and effectiveness of the Rousseau platform as a tool to enhance a participatory form of democracy within the Five Star Movement. Specifically, our focus was on the Lex Eletti section of the platform, which, to the best of our knowledge, represents a unique experiment aimed at systematically involving citizens in the legislative process at the national level.

We initially explored the platform's utilisation from the perspectives of MPs and party members and the interactions between the two groups. Subsequently, we analysed the extent of changes in draft bills presented in Parliament compared to those presented on the platform as an indicator of the effectiveness of the process. In summary, our findings reveal a meagre outcome for Lex Eletti, particularly when contrasted with the high expectations set forth by the party leaders.

MPs engaged with the platform only in a minority of cases, with a mere 516 bills presented on the platform out of 1944 presented in Parliament. The bills showcased on Lex Eletti experienced a decline in user attention, which is evident from the sharp decrease in comments. The real interaction between platform users and MPs was minimal, involving just 13.6% of the 516 bills on Lex Eletti and a mere 3.6% of the 1,944 bills presented in Parliament. Consequently, the transition of draft bills from Lex Eletti to Parliament had limited impact, with most bills arriving in Parliament with little to no modifications and the extent of change mostly unrelated to the level of engagement on the platform. Notably, the acquisition of government responsibilities by the party did not affect this trend (neither positively nor negatively).

These findings resonate with a recent stream of literature dealing with instances of "digital intraparty democracy" (Deseriis & Vittori, 2019; García Lupato & Meloni, 2023; Gerbaudo, 2021). Where adopted, digital tools were not able to fulfil their promise to enhance participation and instead fostered a plebiscitary understanding of intraparty democracy (Ignazi, 2021). In line with such pessimistic views, Lex Eletti emerges as a largely disappointing experience. It was characterised by a cacophony of disparate comments, challenging to navigate due to platform architecture, and largely ignored by MPs while inhibiting discussions among party members through its design.

Part of the explanation for this lack of success lies in an underlying, unspoken fact: private members' bills predominantly represent symbolic activities. This is well-known to scholars and parliamentary experts but not apparent to the general public. In parliamentary systems, legislative activity primarily revolves around amending, voting, and passing legislation proposed by the government. Conversely, MPs initiate legislation mostly to show their dedication to representing their constituencies, with limited impact on policy outcomes. From this perspective, we can better understand the disappointment felt by party members upon realising how limited their contribution was to the law-making process.

Moreover, the substantial resources required for a productive engagement with platform users have been underestimated. Establishing a continuous dialogue with an online community of activists demands significant time and communication expertise, often incompatible with MPs' other institutional commitments. Having a dedicated staff to effectively manage

this task seems imperative. More generally, the successful involvement of ordinary citizens in the legislative drafting process hinges on parallel efforts to familiarise them with the specialised subjects of legislative pieces and the intricacies of parliamentary procedures.

Another explanation might lie in the distance between the immediacy of the user experience of digital platforms and the slowness and windingness of legislative procedures. While the act of upvoting a proposal or writing a short comment on it might be a matter of seconds, the process of turning a parliamentary bill into a piece of legislation usually takes months or years. This involves successive rounds of negotiations within the party (e.g. between party leaders and MPs) and institutions (e.g. between parliamentary groups, between MPs and the speaker, between Parliament and government). For a participatory process to be effective for law-making, showcasing a bill on a digital platform can, at best, be the initial step. However, this must be followed by a sustained and extended dialogue between MPs and party members that requires attention, time, and specialised political knowledge.

Lex Eletti represented a unique experiment, the sole digital tool connecting elected representatives and party members in drafting legislation within a national Parliament. Given the absence of comparable large-scale examples, it remains to be seen whether its disappointing results were inevitable or resulted from deficiencies in the platform's design and implementation. Equally, it is outside of the scope of this study to state what has driven the progressive abandonment of the experiment. Internal conflicts between different party factions likely caused fewer MPs to rely on and engage with the platform. From the grassroots perspective, it is harder to identify a primary reason for disengagement. It could be due to the inevitable decline of the novelty factor, disillusionment with the platform's implementation, or changes in the party's membership base, with older members being more interested in digital democracy than newer ones.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Code and data to replicate the analysis presented in this paper are available on the authors' dataverse (https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/95F881).

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20 | SPSR
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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.