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RESEARCH

Challenges in implementing digital democratic innovations in traditional political parties: The case of the Italian Democratic Party

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Abstract

Scholars have proposed integrating deliberative democracy processes and new technologies within party structures to address the legitimacy crisis of political parties. However, for established political groups, this is not an easy road to take. The paper delves into these issues by presenting the case study of Agorà Democratiche within the Italian Democratic Party (PD), the major center-left party in Italy. Agorà aimed to engage party members and like-minded citizens in shaping the party's agenda through deliberative assemblies. This adoption by Agorà introduced a new form of political participation that led thousands of citizens to voice their opinions. However, it encountered several challenges. The paper argues that democratic innovations do not always yield the desired outcomes for political parties. Participatory and deliberative processes might be hard to implement in established political groups that are accustomed to old political schemas. More specifically, I pinpoint four main obstacles encountered by Agorà Democratiche: the 'culture of verticality' within the party, an unfavorable external context, the lack of institutionalization of the programme, and the ambiguous role played by technology. If not handled carefully, new technologies and deliberative processes can worsen the existing crisis within political parties by falling short of expectations and further undermining the organization's credibility.

Keywords: democratic innovations; digital politics; political parties; deliberative democracy; digital participation

Introduction

To address the ongoing crisis in political parties, scholars have proposed integrating deliberative processes, democratic innovations, and new technologies within party structures (Wolkenstein 2016; Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017). Following this rationale, some parties in recent years have been founded on this basis, such as Podemos in Spain, the Five Star Movement in Italy, and Pirate Parties (Gerbaudo 2018). It is easier for new parties to build themselves from the ground up with this approach. However, the same is not true for 'traditional' parties. Indeed, there are few examples, in the European context and beyond, of traditional political parties structurally adopting democratic innovations beyond the simple selection of candidates through primary elections and aiming at a genuine democratization of internal processes. Structural, organizational, and political differences between newer and traditional parties make the implementation of democratic innovations more challenging for the latter. Structurally, traditional parties often have more stable and older membership bases, which can increase resistance to innovation. From an organizational

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perspective, these parties are typically characterized by highly hierarchical structures (Muirhead 2010), whereas newer parties introduced more fluid and horizontal forms of participation. As a result, they may be more open to democratic innovations and deliberative practices. Politically, traditional parties tend to represent broader and more heterogeneous constituencies, leading to tradeoffs that smaller, more ideologically cohesive parties can often avoid.[1]

These differences help to clarify why traditional parties often struggle to adopt digital democratic innovations, making the case of Agorà Democratiche[2] particularly interesting. Launched in July 2021, Agorà Democratiche aimed to engage the Italian Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) members and like-minded citizens in shaping the party's political agenda. This consisted of assemblies organized by party members or simple citizens, in-person or online, allowing anyone aligned with progressive values to participate. However, the project stopped because of early political elections in 2022, the subsequent defeat of the Democratic Party, and the change in its leadership. Before these events, though, the adoption of Agorà Democratiche encountered several challenges: limited participation from the party base, a difficulty in connecting with some sectors of civil society, and the incapacity to function as a genuine forum for thoughtful discussion.

The paper investigates the root causes of these pitfalls by attempting to answer the following research question: How do traditional political parties engage with digital democratic innovations, and what factors hinder their successful implementation? While focused on a single case study with limited generalizability, the paper could be the basis for further research by generating hypotheses on how democratic innovations fail to succeed in political parties. This paper argues that democratic innovations do not always yield the desired outcomes for political parties. Participatory and deliberative processes might be complex to implement in established political groups that are characterized by what I call a 'culture of verticality'. Further barriers encountered in the process include a complex external political and cultural context, the need for more investment in the institutionalization of the process, and the ambiguous role played by digital technology. Eventually, if not handled carefully, new technologies and deliberative processes can worsen the existing crisis within political parties by falling short of expectations and further undermining the organization's credibility.

Literature review

Overall, scholars have devoted little attention to democratic innovations within political parties (Barberà and Rodríguez-Teruel 2020). While some have explored how newly established digital parties use technology to foster participation (Boyd 2008; Gerbaudo 2018), the number of works on mainstream parties is lower. Deliberative practices are, in fact, more easily implemented by new parties (Gad 2020; Vodová and Voda 2020) that often make transparency and direct participation core values of their political positions.

The attempt to foster more democracy in mainstream parties has often been studied through the lens of intraparty democracy (IDP) (Cross and Katz 2013; Rahat and Shapira 2017). IDP took two main forms: (1) direct involvement in the selection and nomination processes of party officials and (2) the definition of some party policies or the party's manifesto (Ignazi 2020). The bulk of initiatives fall under the first category. Democratic innovations in mainstream political parties have often consisted of vote-centric innovations, such as primary ballots (Gherghina 2013; Sandri, Seddone and Venturino 2015). However, the extent to which party primaries enhance power-sharing is debatable, since leaders often retain ultimate control over candidate selection: in

[1]For instance, a small Pirate Party might more easily adopt a radical proposal emerging from a participatory process, given its relatively narrow base, whereas this would be far more difficult for larger parties with expansive constituencies and potential governing responsibilities.

[2]In this paper, I use the Italian terms 'Agorà' and 'Agorà Democratiche' interchangeably to refer to the overall participatory process. The terms 'agora' and 'agoras' refer to the assemblies included in the process.

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many cases, the democratization of the process has been more formal than real (Hopkin 2001). Beyond plebiscitary modes of IPD, there are cases in which deliberative processes shape the party's political positions (Rodriguez-Teruel and Barberà 2024). Examples include the UK Labour Party's *Your Britain* and Australia's Social Democratic Party initiative (Gauja 2015). While experiments with deliberative platforms can help make parties more inclusive (Teorell 1999), other examples show that the process is not that easy and that embracing deliberation and promoting IPD alone may not be sufficient to (re)connect a party with its electoral base (Barberà and Rodríguez-Teruel 2020; Gherghina and Stoiciu 2020).

Scholars have recently developed broader theoretical frameworks to analyze deliberative practices and democratic innovations within political parties, highlighting the complex challenges and tradeoffs these organizations face. Rodriguez-Teruel and Barberà (2024) introduce a conceptual framework based on the interplay between representation, deliberation, and plebiscitarianism. Gherghina, Soare and Jacquet (2023) argue that deliberative initiatives in political parties tend to pursue either strategic goals – linked to vote-, office-, or policy-seeking – or normative aims rooted in the party's civic function as a space for participation, representation, and political socialization.

Building on Gherghina's (2024) typology of the three main theoretical approaches to deliberative initiatives within political parties, this paper adopts the second perspective, focusing on uncovering the causal mechanisms that explain how democratic innovations function and why they face specific challenges or ultimately fail. Implementing democratic and deliberative innovations presents numerous challenges. Traditionally, scholars have been skeptical about the deliberative potential of political parties, given their hierarchical structure and inherent focus on electoral competition (Chambers 2003). Recent empirical research further underscores the difficulties parties face in adopting democratic innovations, particularly when managing the pragmatic concerns of electoral politics (Junius, Caluwaerts and Erzeel 2024). Additional challenges include the risk of instrumentalizing deliberative tools to bypass traditional barriers to party reform (Rangoni, Legein, Talukder et al. 2024) and problems arising from internal polarization (Parvu and Miscoiu 2024).

In addition to these party-specific challenges, it is essential to consider the broader difficulties associated with implementing digital democratic innovations more generally. The most frequent problem with these initiatives is the difficulty in achieving strong participation in numbers and, more substantively, in the outcomes they produce (Davies and Procter 2020). Problems often emerge in terms of political effectiveness and in terms of dissemination among the citizens. From the demand side, scholars mentioned the digital divide and lack of understanding of citizens' motivation to participate as the main barriers to scaling up participatory platforms. From the supply side, scholars often see a certain reluctance of public institutions to share agenda-setting and decision-making powers (Le Blanc 2020).

Methodology

An in-depth analysis is needed to understand why the Agorà process led to its particular outcome. Therefore, the research question requires a qualitative approach to explore this case study. I understand a case study as 'a research strategy based on the in-depth empirical investigation of one, or a small number, of phenomena in order to explore the configuration of each case and to elucidate features of a larger class of (similar) phenomena, by developing and evaluating theoretical explanations' (Vennesson 2008, p. 226). The nature of the research question, aimed at exploring a new phenomenon in depth and generating a hypothesis to be tested, is coherent with this research method (Gerring 2009). The choice for this case is based on its unique nature, which exemplifies an attempt to integrate deliberative democratic innovations into a traditional political party. The selection is further justified by the well-defined temporal and spatial boundaries (Gerring 2009) of Agorà Democratiche, which had a distinct beginning and end. Additionally, the significance of this case is highlighted by the fact that the Democratic Party is Italy's main center-left party.

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Previous research on democratic innovations in political parties also relied on the case study methodology (Hopkin 2001; Barberà and Rodríguez-Teruel 2020; Gherghina and Stoiciu 2020). Following other works in democratic innovations, this research relies on semistructured interviews as a primary strategy for collecting data (Funes, Talpin and Rull 2015; Magnusson and Marececk 2015). I conducted élite interviews with the six people among the staff managing the process at the national level with secretary Enrico Letta. Interviewing the staff was crucial, as they were the only ones with a comprehensive understanding of the entire process, especially the problems they faced. Furthermore, I interviewed eight individuals, including organizers of individual agoras and regular participants, who were recommended by Letta's staff using a snowball sampling strategy. The interviews lasted between 15 minutes and 44 seconds, and 1 hour, 21 minutes, and 2 seconds. Interviews with the staff members lasted far longer than those conducted with participants and organizers. All interviews were held in Italian.

Given the nature of semistructured interviews, there was only a general guideline. The format varied depending on whether the interviewee was a staff member, participant, or organizer. With staff members, the interview protocol was organized into three thematic sections. The first explored the genesis and operational structure of the agora, including questions on their intended purpose, organizational model, key actors involved (at the national and local levels), and quantitative metrics. The second section focused on the objectives of the initiative and the challenges encountered. Interviewees were asked to reflect on the extent to which initial goals – such as fostering grassroots participation, engaging external stakeholders, and enabling deliberative discussions – had been achieved, and to identify barriers to success. The final part of the interview invited broader evaluations of the process. With participants and organizers, the interview protocol followed three main areas. First, respondents were asked about their views on political participation within the Democratic Party. Second, the interviews addressed the specific agoras they attended, probing participants' overall evaluations of the initiative, the goals it aimed to achieve, the limitations it encountered, and their direct involvement as organizers or attendees. Finally, the interviews explored whether the overall initiative succeeded in its goals of openness and bottom-up participation.

In addition to interviews, I collected internal party documents summarizing the process results and pictures of single agoras on the Agorà Democratiche social media pages on Facebook and Instagram. Unfortunately, the website with the Agorà platform was shut down, so it was not available for data collection. I then analyze the data collected (interviews, documents, and pictures) through thematic analysis. As Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested, thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The primary goal of thematic analysis is to identify the predominant themes within the text and understand their meaning and contextual relevance within the research domain. More specifically, I followed the stages identified by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87): 'Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data; Phase 2: Generating initial codes; Phase 3: Searching for themes; Phase 4: Reviewing themes; Phase 5: Defining and naming themes; and Phase 6: Producing the report'. The analysis of interviews and other contents produced 95 codes. I then reanalyzed the codes and clustered them into nine themes: 'positive elements', 'origins of Agorà', 'goals of Agorà', 'factors determining the success of agoras', 'limitations of Agorà', 'technology', 'external context', 'internal party structure and culture', and 'lack of institutionalization'. As I will examine in greater detail in the section, 'Four obstacles on the road to implementing digital democratic innovations', the last four themes represent the main reasons why Agorà did not achieve the hoped-for success.

How Agorà Democratiche worked

The user journey on Agorà Democratiche began with registering on an online platform, www.agorademocratiche.it, which required a minimum donation of one euro through online payment. Registration allowed individuals to organize meetings and use the platform to propose ideas, vote,

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and comment. After registration, the first step was participating in or organizing an agora focused on one of two main macrothemes: 'For the Italy We Want' and 'For the Democracy We Want'. The former addressed public policy issues such as employment, environment, and healthcare, while the latter focused on political aspects such as party structure, institutional reforms, and the European Union. To kick off an agora, a minimum of 20 participants was initially required, including at least 10 members of the Democratic Party and ten nonmembers. After recognizing the challenge of meeting these quotas, organizers lowered the threshold to five party members and five nonmembers. Each agora was uploaded on the platform and approved by the organizing committee. After approval, on the designated day, the meeting would take place. Agoras could be conducted online, in person, or in a hybrid format.

The number of participants in the meetings varied from small gatherings of 15–20 people to larger, conference-like events that attracted around 100 attendees. However, according to interviewees, most meetings involved groups of approximately 20–25 participants. The events were held online and in hybrid formats, using party branch offices, public venues, or symbolically significant locations – for example, the agora organized by the Young Democrats of Lazio at Monk, a cultural center in Rome popular among younger generations, as reported by interviewee 5.

Agoras were designed to function as highly horizontal meetings, with contributions from nearly all participants and a maximum speaking time of about 5 min for each person. They aimed to provide a deliberative space for discussing and debating proposals. Following the debate, the organizer or another designated person was responsible for uploading up to five proposals from the meeting onto the platform. Subsequently, the process moved into the online participation phase. Once the proposals were uploaded, they could be voted on and commented on.

From the outset, the organizers detailed the project's outcome. Agorà Democratiche should have culminated in the Sassoli Camps, a national gathering moment where the party would have published the results. The commitment was that at least 50% of the top 100 proposals with the highest votes and comments on the platform would inform the agenda of the Democratic Party. This approach aimed to prevent Agorà from replacing internal political discussions, ensuring that the party and its leadership structures maintained their roles, moving away from a direct model of democracy. The process was planned to last a few months. However, it was extended *ad interim*. By July 2022, when a no-confidence vote against the Draghi government led to early elections, the process was abruptly interrupted with the start of the electoral campaign and was never resumed.

Overall, Agorà Democratiche recorded significant engagement. From September 2021 (the date of the first agora) to August 2022 (the date of the last agora), 682 meetings were held, involving approximately 100,000 participants –online and in person – according to the party's official report. However, a notable statistic is that, despite the high number of participants, only 24,000 registered on the platform. This suggests that many participants attended *Agorà Democratiche* –in person or online – without formally registering, thereby not adhering to the established participation procedures.

Success and downsides of Agorà Democratiche

All interviewees emphasized the importance of this participatory process. It represented a unique initiative in the Italian political landscape, which fostered increased participation and made individuals feel valued. Interviewee 8 claims:

> *Since I joined the Democratic Party, I have never had the opportunity to make my voice heard as strongly as during Agorà Democratiche, and especially to participate in such large initiatives and organize them, feeling like a key player.* (IN 8)

Agorà has proven particularly effective in fostering 'democratic affordances' such as organizing meetings, connecting with organizations outside the party, or discussing specific topics, activities

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that are often absent from the party's usual routine. Furthermore, these activities were not restricted to the Agorà process, but they could lay the ground for further participation. As one interviewee suggested:

> *Agorà [. . .] allowed people from all over Italy to connect and engage directly in discussions on selected topics or political issues. It was through this mechanism that we managed to reach those individuals who enabled us to continue working on the topic of organization within the PD.* (IN 12)

However, despite its goals, Agorà encountered several limitations, culminating in its incomplete conclusion because of the early elections in September 2022.

The first problem was the lack of meaningful involvement of people outside the party. On the one hand, Agorà provided an unprecedented opportunity for the Democratic Party to institutionalize relationships with external entities, by offering local party branches a concrete tool to create opportunities for dialog and engagement, structurally opening up to other actors. Interviewee 3 claims:

> *Various groups that had distanced themselves from the PD during Renzi's phase of disintermediation have reconnected with the party. [. . .] Agorà helped to open up the party during a very challenging period.* (IN 3)

On the other hand, it is essential to clarify the nature of this involvement: it was primarily engagement with elites – those already interested in political life, typically aligned with the Democratic Party or members of other left-wing-oriented organizations, as explained by IN 5. These individuals were often reached through the personal connections of the organizers or because they were part of organizations accustomed to engaging with political parties. While this was a step forward from the isolation of political parties, it still fell short of engaging broader civil society and the lay citizen, whom the Agorà process was theoretically designed to reach.

A second goal of Agorà Democratiche was to enhance the engagement of party members at the grassroots level. While some individual organizers emphasized the empowerment aspect of the participatory process, all staff members highlighted challenges faced by ordinary members in organizing an agora, and even more so for those outside the party. Interviewee 4 suggests:

> *It's not common for an individual member within the PD to take the initiative. There's almost a kind of self-inhibition at times. As a result, you inevitably needed a connection with the party structure to organize anything.* (IN 4)

Some interviewees (IN 3 and IN 7) explained how most agoras were organized by executives, parliamentarians, local leaders, and individuals already in positions of power who could influence party decisions. In theory, Agorà represented a significant shift in power dynamics within the PD, aiming for proposals to originate from grassroots discussions. However, the broader public (including party members) did not perceive the significance of the operation. As I showed, the platform registered only 24,000 members, compared with approximately 100,000 participants and around 320,000 (declared) party members. Apart from the partial failure to engage the grassroots, the most damaging aspect to popular control was the nonconclusion of the process itself. Because of early elections, the Sassoli Camps did not take place. Thus, the entire process essentially amounted to nothing.

Agoras also aimed to generate proposals through moments of deliberative discussion. Unlike traditional seminar-style meetings often organized by party leaders with speakers and a passive audience, the staff designed agoras as inclusive gatherings where each participant had an equal opportunity to speak. As indicated by most interviewees (IN 1, IN 4, IN 5, IN 6, IN 10, IN 11, IN 12,

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and IN 14), the meetings often fell short of the deliberative ideal envisioned by the organizers. While there were some positive examples (such as the agora on disability issues organized by interviewees 8 and 13, or those focused on internal party reform led by interviewee 12), these cases were exceptions rather than the norm. Instead of emerging from open, informed discussions among participants, proposals were often absent or preformulated. Many meetings were traditionally structured, featuring speakers discussing specific topics, followed by a limited time for a question-and-answer session. Another alleged forum for deliberation was the online platform, which witnessed limited success. Apart from sporadic comments on proposals, there was minimal substantive debate or discussion online.

Four obstacles on the road to implementing digital democratic innovations

Why did Agorà Democratiche fail to become the process envisioned by the organizers? From the thematic analysis of the material collected, four fundamental obstacles emerge: the entrenched culture of verticality within the party, a hostile external political and cultural context, the lack of institutionalization of the process, and the ambiguous role played by technology.

The culture of verticality

In the analysis of the interviews, the theme with the highest number of codes was the one I categorized under issues related to the internal structure and culture of the party (17 codes). This included numerous codes pointing to a deeply rooted cultural problem concerning participation, such as 'skepticism among individuals', 'difficulty adapting to participatory methods', 'party culture problem', 'lack of habit of participation', 'cultural resistance', 'mental inability to open up and participate', and 'PD members didn't believe Agorà could work'. In addition, it encompassed codes referring to structural challenges in implementing participatory processes within the party, such as 'PD structural problem', 'PD leadership problem', 'participation viewed as instrumental', and 'internal power dynamics issue'. The prevalence of these codes led me to theorize that the primary, and perhaps most significant, reason behind the failure (or only partial success) of the Agorà Democratiche experiment lies in what I term the *culture of verticality*.

The culture of verticality is the name I gave to the widespread tendency among citizens, party members, and leaders to conceptualize the political world in a hierarchical/vertical way rather than in a horizontal manner, thereby creating a significant power asymmetry in the initiatives they organize or participate in and in what they consider fair, legitimate, or 'normal'. This implies a limitation in the way in which participation is thought or deemed possible. It was hard for agoras to thrive in this environment, since they offered a distinct, horizontal form of participation. In other words, I suggest that, behind the seemingly trivial reluctance to participate, reported in many interviews, lies a profoundly entrenched cultural mindset. In the words of interviewee 4:

> *There was a preconceived rejection. It wasn't about age; it was about a person's mindset – whether they considered it feasible or within the realm of possibility to do politics in this way.* (IN 4)

This suggests that the limitation is not only structural or design-related but also cultural and rooted in a particular worldview. The vertical nature of power relations in meetings, discussions, and interactions profoundly influences all political activities within the party and beyond, defining what is deemed normal and possible and what is not, and that explains why many interviewees mentioned encountering significant 'resistance' to the process. As interviewee 12 explicitly noted:

> *The political culture of parties does not leave much room for these things (ie involving the grassroots membership), which leads to a great deal of mistrust or, at the very least, inattention to this issue from everyone.* (IN 12)

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The culture of verticality manifests in several ways. For party leaders or MPs, this translated into a general aversion to the project, a lack of trust in the grassroots and participatory processes, or organizing agoras driven by factionalism and internal power struggles rather than being genuinely open and democratic, as noted by some interviewees. Ordinary members and activists also share this culture of verticality, though. It is particularly evident among older members who view politics as a top-down activity, where the typical initiative involves a panel of experts and an audience that passively listens. In this perspective, activities such as agoras where people are in a circle (so that everyone has the same position) or formats requiring active involvement from participants are odd, if not useless.

> *Debating is not easy. Debating in an orderly way with the goal of reaching an outcome at the end is extremely difficult. In the local party sections, especially among the older members, we're used to single speeches lasting 30–40 minutes; so, asking for 5 minutes is tough if someone isn't used to it.* (IN 10)

In most areas of Italy, there is no culture of activism or organizing events. That is also true for party members, who should be politically active but often remain passive. As interviewee 7 explained:

> *In small towns, there is no dynamism, no culture of 'I'll organize an agora because I want to share an idea.' There is this laziness, a lack of a culture of getting involved, discussing, and participating.* (IN 7)

That is because the culture of verticality itself leads to passivity. Viewing political reality hierarchically, where some have power (the ability to act) and others do not, means always expecting someone else to take action, organize, and manage initiatives. This culture disempowers individuals, leading them to assume that someone higher up will handle things.

The pictures on the Agorà Democratiche Facebook and Instagram page reveal that most agoras had a typical seminar format. Although agoras were meant to avoid expert panels and be conducted in a circular arrangement with each participant speaking for no more than 5 min, this setup was rarely seen. This was often not because of a deliberate attempt to undermine the process but because the usual meeting format – the 'norm' – was different. The envisioned horizontality of Agorà Democratiche was so unconventional for many members and leaders that they frequently misunderstood it. Interviewee 11 suggests:

> *People included initiatives in the Agorà that weren't actually agoras, either because they didn't understand the purpose of the Agorà or because they were afraid to organize something of this kind.* (IN 11)

Notably, many of the most successful agoras – in terms of their horizontal organization, deliberative nature, and adherence to rules – were organized by younger generations. These groups tend to be less steeped in a hierarchical culture and more willing to depart from standard political organizational norms. In line with this point, the deliberative and horizontal features of agoras were more pronounced when an 'external force' was enforcing them, such as in meetings organized at the national level or facilitated by an experienced moderator. Interviewee 4 suggests that:

> *The elements that made some agoras work better than others were the design and the authority of those who enforced that design [. . .] The thing that could change everything was the moderator.* (IN 4)

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If the expected bottom-up participation was not spontaneously reached, top-down initiatives proved to be useful in fostering participation and really horizontal meetings. Thus, the involvement of a youthful organizing group or external oversight helped dismantle the mechanisms of vertical culture that, if left unchecked, would have resulted in more 'normal' and, thus, less democratic meetings.

An unfavorable external context

Another theme from the thematic analysis concerns the unfavorable political and cultural context outside the initiative. This includes codes such as 'lack of credibility', 'crisis of the Democratic Party', 'participation is not in fashion', 'absence of a faction aligned with Letta', and 'Democratic Party disconnected from civil society'. To better explain this aspect, it is important to recall that participatory processes do not arise in a vacuum: they are deeply influenced by the specific beliefs, values, and societal conditions prevailing at the time. For instance, initiatives like the *decidim* platform in Barcelona, emerging from the momentum of the 15M movement in Spain, benefited from a wave of enthusiasm that encouraged widespread participation (Borge, Balcells and Pedró-Solanet 2023). In contrast, if a participatory process lacks a supportive context or fails to resonate with prevailing attitudes in society, it may struggle to engage participants effectively (Gherghina and Stoicu 2020). That was the case for Agorà Democratiche.

Interviewee 7 explained to me that, when the process was launched, the Democratic Party had been in government for nearly a decade, except for 2018–2019. Citizens increasingly considered the PD entrenched, closed-off, and aligned with the establishment, making it little credible in proposing a participatory process to reshape its agenda. Moreover, Secretary Letta did not ascend through a direct election in party primaries, a process that typically involves building personal relationships and local networks nationwide. Interviewee 7 put that quite clearly:

> *We were coming from a period of decline, a difficult time during the pandemic, with a reduction in spaces for discussion, for reflection, and an emptying of the party. Enrico took over after a tumultuous leadership, so it was a challenging period for the Democratic Party.* (IN 7)

The national assembly of the party elected Mr. Letta as party chairman after the resignation of former secretary Nicola Zingaretti, who left his office polemically, lamenting internal struggles among party factions. Consequently, Letta lacked a strong base of supporters in various regions who could advocate for his policies and initiatives.

Furthermore, the general political climate was unfavorable for participation, as the lowest electoral turnout in the history of Italian general elections in 2022 (63.85%) would have shown. As scholars noted, widespread distrust toward the political system and institutions presents significant challenges for participatory processes and democratic innovations (Flinders, Wood and Corbett 2019). This antipolitical climate leads to a prevailing sense of powerlessness and political alienation (Finifter 1970) among citizens and party members, further complicating efforts to engage them in initiatives such as Agorà Democratiche, as explicitly recognized by interviewees 8 and 4.

The context also encompasses the unique situation of the Democratic Party, as outlined by Floridia (2022), which faced several structural challenges that impeded its effective operation. These include a lack of a cohesive political culture, intense internal conflicts because of factional divisions acting as power blocs, ineffective use of existing participatory mechanisms such as thematic forums, and uncertainty in defining the roles of voters and party members. Additionally, the party needed to grapple with a decline in electoral support (from 12.4 million votes in 2008 to 5.3 million in 2022) and membership numbers. These problems were quite well (and bluntly) summarized by interviewee 5 when she said:

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> *It is often forgotten that Agorà was launched out of urgency, at a time when there were doubts about whether the Democratic Party would even survive. Zingaretti left the party saying he was disgusted by his own party leaders, who were focused on positions of power while people were dying during the COVID19 pandemic. A party like that should no longer exist. And yet, those same people were still there.* (IN 5)

Lack of time and failure to institutionalize the process

Another significant limitation was the lack of commitment to institutionalize the process. As scholars suggested, 'adoption is not enough', and democratic innovations thrive when they become integral to institutional practices (Weerakkody, Omar, El-Haddadeh et al. 2016; Randma-Liiv 2023). Codes related to this theme include: 'need for top-down guidance', 'need for continuity', 'issues with the phases of engagement and commitment', 'lack of time', and 'lack of training'.

Agorà Democratiche was a one-off initiative. Given the structural limits to participation and the prevailing culture of verticality within and outside the party, the agoras' success would have likely depended on their continuous operation, which could have been at least partially able to reshape the attitudes of party members against participation and horizontal initiatives. Time was one of the essential limits of Agorà since the process ended abruptly, and a more prolonged timeframe would have allowed for better internal training, a greater understanding of the platform, and a more extended experimentation phase to identify what was working and what was not. For interviewee 10:

> *The process needed a bit more time and training. If you had trained some key people, who would then have trained others in turn, it wouldn't have been so difficult.* (IN 10)

Similarly, for interviewee 3:

> *The Agorà model could have worked. There was difficulty with some older participants, but even they, after the second agora they attended, you could see that the mechanism was starting to work.* (IN 3)

The lack of time was not merely a concern raised by the organizers. The external technical team responsible for managing the platform informed interviewee 10 that it would have taken at least a year to properly develop the platform, including a minimum of 3 months dedicated to testing. Instead, development lasted 6 months, with only 2 weeks for testing.

Effective socialization is more likely when institutionalized participation mechanisms become routine forms of political engagement over time. Scholars of participatory democracy suggest that meaningful participation benefits from ongoing engagement and familiarity, with participation serving an essential educational role (Pateman 1970). In contexts where participation is often discouraged, because of antipolitical sentiment, centralization of power, and hierarchical structures and culture within political communities, investing in the institutionalization of participation processes may help to address these challenges. Therefore, institutionalization and socialization are strictly connected. As noted by interviewee 5, a critical issue for agoras was the inadequate socialization process. She suggests that:

> *From the very beginning, a strong commitment to the project was required, so only those who were already somewhat convinced and were merely looking for the right opportunity joined. The broader public, those who look at the Democratic Party with interest but remain skeptical, were not engaged in that instance.* (IN 5)

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Participants had to join the Agorà Democratiche project and register on the platform before fully engaging. Ideally, formal membership should have followed a socialization phase within the Agorà, involving attendance at meetings, participation in discussions, and voting on proposals. Asking for membership upfront risked acting as a barrier to participation, blurring the phases of engagement and membership.

The ambiguous role of technology

Technology played a pivotal yet ambiguous role, at the same time enabling and limiting participation. On the one hand, the entire process relied heavily on platforms such as Zoom for video calls, which facilitated nationwide participation as Italy emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic. The Agorà website also played a crucial role in maintaining coherence and credibility throughout the process, with no reported concerns regarding privacy or data use among interviewees. As interviewee 13 suggested:

> *I can say that the hybrid format definitely facilitated participation, as in our case, where we organized an agora with people from all over Italy. Had we decided to hold everything in person, it would have been difficult due to everyone's commitments and the large number of participants.* (IN 13)

The ambiguous role of technology was reflected in the presence of some positive codes associated with the use of the platform, such as 'necessary platform', 'good structure', and 'broadened participation'. However, these were followed by a more widespread occurrence of codes highlighting the challenges encountered in using the platform, including 'digital divide', 'limitations of physical presence', 'lack of immediacy', 'payment issues', 'lack of discussion', and 'confusion surrounding the platform'.

The main problem raised revolves around the platform's role as a new form of mediation for participation. Firstly, many viewed the platform's role as out of sync with the spontaneity expected from participants. An organizer noted that, out of 200 participants for her agora, only 60 registered on the platform (IN 2). She further explained that: '*Very few of our own people participated or voted. It wasn't immediate, and now people need immediate things*.' The online procedure was therefore often skipped, as participants did not see it as an added value but as a useless intermediary, to the point that interviewee 3 suggests that '*where the experiment failed, it was due to the platform*'. The Agorà platform relied on slower-paced discussions rather than the instantaneous exchanges needed for fluent participation. Today's demand for immediate interaction is so strong that a platform like Agorà Democratiche struggled to meet the public's expectations for participation and engagement. As a result, the platform sometimes hindered rather than encouraged participation. According to interviewee 5, referring to the lack of participation and discussion on the Agorà website:

> *Discussing on the Agorà platform was in no way interesting, so discussion could not happen. If we use the metaphor of the digital sphere as a place, agoras were like a loser bar where no one wanted to go. And you can't throw a great party in a place where it's clear no one wants to be.* (IN 5)

While the platform was essential for the project's overall operation, it failed to reach a critical mass where active participation and debate could have sparked a positive cycle and transformed it into a genuine participatory forum.

Secondly, despite its potential to enhance participation and connect diverse groups, the platform also excluded a substantial portion of the party because of digital literacy disparities, as interviewees 1, 3, 4, and 5 emphasized. Interviewee 3 claimed:

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> *The group of people who participated the most in the agoras has white hair. And this is the group that naturally struggles the most to engage with a tool like a digital platform. For them, digital tools are a barrier.* (IN 3)

While the staff tried to mitigate this with user-friendly tutorials and support for online registration and payments, many potential participants were deterred, mainly because of their age. Some longtime party activists struggled to embrace this type of participation. That is particularly relevant for a country like Italy, where digital skills are in short supply.[3]

Conclusion

This study contributes to the expanding field of research on democratic innovations within traditional political parties, focusing on the barriers involved in their implementation. Each of the main findings of this study gives rise to hypotheses that call for further testing, as well as directions for future research.

First, existing literature highlights the structural difficulties in implementing democratic innovations, primarily because of the hierarchical nature of political parties. My research confirms this finding but adds a further layer: a cultural obstacle rooted in individual mindsets and collective imaginaries. This dual dimension of verticality in power relations (structural/institutional and cultural/mental) needs further investigation. Future research could explore the extent to which this twofold hierarchy contributes to the challenges of implementing democratic innovations, and the tools that might help overcome it. Regarding the external context, I suggest that factors such as the broader political climate and the party's reputation and credibility significantly influence the success or failure of participatory initiatives. It is essential to recognize that deliberative initiatives are inherently social processes, deeply embedded in the wider political and temporal context in which they emerge, and future research should increasingly adopt this perspective.

On the issue of lacking institutionalization, my hypothesis is that one-off or 'one-shot' initiatives may struggle to gain traction, especially in the absence of a supportive external environment. Overcoming cultural and structural resistance within parties requires time, as well as more robust processes of institutionalization and training. Time and institutional development thus emerge as essential variables in the success of these processes (Gherghina 2024; Royo, Bellò, Torres et al. 2024). Concerning the role of technology, my research underscores its ambiguous nature: while it is indispensable for enabling participatory processes, it can also be exclusionary, particularly for large segments of the electorate. Future research could investigate how digital platforms might become more inclusive, identifying the conditions under which these tools successfully engage lay people and, conversely, the factors that lead to their failure.

Data availability statement. The data supporting this study are not publicly available because of privacy and ethical considerations. A full anonymization process was not feasible since the interviewees shared sensitive professional and political experiences during the interview. However, data can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Competing interests. The corresponding author states that there are no conflicts of interest.

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[3]According to the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) report, Italy ranks 25th out of 27 EU countries regarding human capital in the digital sector (DESI 2022).

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