**Title: A program written by the citizens? Agenda-setters and veto players in drafting the 2018 electoral manifesto of the Five Star Movement**

**Abstract**

Bottom-up policy development is integral to the concept of direct democracy and has been advertised by parties advocating this ideal as a “revolution”. However, as electoral manifestos are complex documents that embrace a wide range of policy areas, many of which require professional expertise, such processes typically involve external advisors or party politicians specialized on a narrow policy field. Thus, the task of writing the program is shared among several stakeholders, who are involved in different stages of the process with different competences and responsibilities. This raises the question of to what extent “citizens”, i.e. party activists can serve as agenda-setters in this process, and whether they can block proposals they oppose from the manifesto. The paper aims to contribute to the agenda-setting literature by exploring this puzzle through the case of the 2018 electoral program of the Italian Five Star Movement (M5S), which was “written by the citizens”, and ratified in several membership ballots. A detailed analysis of the policy development process is used to determine the distribution of agenda-setting capacities and veto powers in the construction of M5S’ electoral program, which is contrasted with elite narratives gained from qualitative interviews with party representatives, and the findings of an online membership survey (n=187) conducted by the author. The preliminary findings suggest that although party members’ contribution to determining the agenda is negligible, some of the membership ballots granted them a substantial share of veto power through the potential rejection of expert proposals. At the same time, the data indicate that few of them used this opportunity, which degraded membership ballots into a mere approval of top-down proposals. The adverse effects of this system were further aggravated by the absence of a quorum, and of any mechanism to incorporate members’ feedback into policy proposals endorsed by the party. The paper also considers the feasibility of alternative arrangements, concluding that the process implemented by the Five Star Movement empowered members to a considerable extent given external constraints, however, the labels adopted from the terminology of direct democracy are exaggerated and unjustifiable.

**Keywords:** direct democracy, policy development, manifestos, Five Star Movement, party membership