Internet and Democracy

Module 3- Tech-Policy Initiatives in Advanced Democracies

Five Star Movement (M5S)- Italy

- The Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy was founded by comedian Beppe Grillo and web strategist Gianroberto Casaleggio in 2009. It then became a political party that secured 25% votes in the General Election of 2013 in Italy. It was the second highest percentage of votes secured by a political party in that election. This party has challenged the existing patterns of political participation with the maximum possible use of digital communication technologies.

- The founding principle of this movement was to demand the establishment of direct democracy with the help of ICT. It believed that the collective intelligence made possible by the Internet can replace the representative democracy which has now become an instrument to serve the corporate powers.

- It started choosing its candidates for both Italian and European Parliamentary election through the system of online voting by the registered members of the party. The candidate for the President of the Republic was also chosen by online voting.

Five Star Movement (M5S)- Italy

- The members discuss the legislative proposals of the party to be submitted to the Parliament on the website and the approval or rejection is decided by the method of online voting.

- In a number of cases, the voting result has come in contrary to the position of leaders, for example the case of abolition of a law against immigrants but it has maintained the principle of final decision by the members of the party. The party decides its stand on all issues after online consultation and voting; and this has added new dimensions to the role of internet in politics.

- Natale (2014) has described the optics used by M5S as 'digital utopianism' as the party believes in the transparent, unified and coherent nature of the internet. The movement's online presence is mandatory to its structure with its headquarter on the web.

Five Star Movement (M5S)- Italy

The online tools for communication and mobilization used by M5S have allowed people to get involved in policy making processes. The party developed tools for debate and discussions, knowledge sharing, e-voting and e-learning as well. The name of the common platform on which these tools were made functional is called Rousseau who was a renowned French political philosopher.

It began with a blog to oppose representative democracy but later on the movement took call to participate in the elections in the offline world; but it decided to follow the practice of choosing the candidates through online voting by the registered and eligible members of the party. It adopted the method of crowdfunding to arrange finances for its functioning.

It made the process of political participation much easier as it only requires registration on its website to begin with. One must be of 18 years old to participate in voting activities and for that a scanned ID proof needs to be submitted. The leaders are however criticized for blackmailing movement voters by using administrative power to eliminate the users on certain grounds

Five Star Movement (M5S)- Italy

The party started gaining significant electoral success in all these years not just in the election of Italian Parliament but also in the regional elections along with elections for European Parliament. The number of registered users became much higher than then the number of registered members in the traditional political parties. The movement was however criticized for not giving adequate representation to different sociological categories, although it is not even the stated objective of the movement.

The users are allowed to both set the new agenda and participate in debate on the already existing agendas, thus the opportunity of participation and co-creation have been made available to the users. Users who have participated or voted in debates are notified by email about outputs and outcomes. The website also live streams the meeting of leaders with political allies and opponents. The movement has attempted to address the privacy concerns of the users by preventing the association from sharing personal information with third parties. The movement believes that the traditional party structure is going to abolish in the future outside Italy as well.

It was a techno-utopian project that began as a debate portal with online voting provisions but the M5S has successfully implemented the some provisions of direct democracy with the help of ICT. In the 2018 parliamentary elections, M5S won the largest share of the vote in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate and formed the government. The 2022 general election saw a strong decrease in support for the party, which scored 15% and was the third most voted party.

Pirate Party- Germany

- The key political goals of Pirate Party of Germany, founded in 2006, are direct democracy and digital communication and it emerged as a popular platform for citizens to challenge the existing patterns of political participation. The other issues of priority concern for this party were copyright, privacy and transparency.

- The internal functioning of party followed the principles of direct digital participation. It used new technologies extensively to enhance the engagement in debates on various aspects of policy making. It aimed to achieve equality between members and political elites in the decision making processes. It got first electoral representation in 2009 with a seat in European Parliament and later on its members got elected in some of the state legislative bodies.

- The party opened the channels to draft the party proposals together with the help of software based mechanism. It follows the system of liquid feedback through Internet-based participation and it became the most important factor in the initial electoral success of the party. Any registered member could start an initiative and if it got the support of 10% of the other registered users, it was opened for time bound online deliberation and discussion. The members could cast their votes or delegate someone else to cast their vote on the final proposal. The use of this tool later on declined because of various reasons related to legitimacy and relevance

Pirate Party- Germany

It faced some legal challenges because as per the law of Germany, the important decisions of the party have to be democratically taken in the party convention which cannot be held online. It means that the liquid feedback does not mandatorily influence the elected members of the party. This led to the decline of participation in online platform of the party.

People can also participate in the discussions without registering themselves formally but in order to take part in voting for decision making, they have to register themselves.

One can be the member of both Pirate Party and another political party at the same time but the person must be a German citizen above the age of 16 to become a member of the party. The party was quite active on social media platforms such as twitter and Facebook.

The people got interested in Pirate Party initially because of its stand on the issues of freedom and copyright on the Internet. It gained media attention because of its opposition to an Internet censorship law proposed in 2009 which caused the fear in citizens of potential restrictions on the use of the Internet

Pirate Party- Germany

The drop in the numbers of active users started in 2015 because of the rising questions on democratic nature of the system since super voters, who were delegated by the other members to vote for them, were influencing the agenda-setting to a great extent. The male dominance in the party was also being criticized by the members. The difference in the level of digital competence of the users also led to the decline in attraction towards the party.

The internal differences with enlarged membership on a number of issues made it more difficult to function as a political party. The informal structure among a small group of members started overruling the horizontal structure of the decision-making which went in contradiction with the principles of the party. It led to the emergence of a new kind of elitism within the party, which later on started getting reflected in the public perception as well. In the 2019 European Parliament election, the Pirate Party retained their MEP seat.

Huetlin (2016) argues that "Despite performing well at the polls in its heyday, the Pirate Party was never a party in the strictest sense. It was part performance art, part cult, part prank. The Pirate Party was a wild, rolling experiment based on the premise that democracy could be something different, something better."