3 Water Commons

Global movements and the Italian campaign against water privatization

The Italian referendum campaign that opposed the privatization of water services in 2011 was part of a broader, long-lasting process, which pitted two distinct and conflicting paradigms against each other: a market-oriented, neoliberal view on essential resources and services, and an anti-neoliberal view, which considers water as a public good, as a human right, or as part of the commons.

The Italian referendum campaign that I observed is nested in mobilizations that are broader in three ways. Firstly, the referendum campaign is part of a struggle that is more extended in time: a national, single-issue mobilization on water that emerged in 2003, mainly as an Italian ramification of the European Social Forum. Secondly, this long-lasting Italian action is part of a global effort to contrast international processes of water privatization. In particular, the Italian activists developed strong connections with similar struggles in South America and in other European countries, and they participated in well-structured international processes, such as the Alternative World Water Forums or the campaign to convince the United Nations to declare water as a human right. Thirdly, the activists considered water privatization as an extreme example of neoliberal, market-oriented policy. The core of FIMA frequently linked the issue of water privatization to more generic themes, and, in particular, to the privatization of other public services, to the increased influence of the financial sector on the economy and society, to the impact of large-scale water-related projects on local communities.

In this chapter, I describe in detail the successful national referendum campaign that pitted the Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l’Acqua (hereafter FIMA) against the main Italian parties during the spring of 2011. This referendum campaign proved to be one of the most surprising and relevant events in terms of communication and politics in Italy during the last decades, mainly thanks to the very large number of activists that the proposers succeeded in mobilizing, and to the experimentation of new combinations of online and face-to-face campaigning strategies. However, it is impossible to understand the political innovations experimented with during this campaign without broadening the perspective both on the international processes that emerged from the opposition to water privatization attempts,
and on the long-lasting Italian mobilizations that anticipated the emergence of the 2011 referendum. My description, therefore, starts from this broader geographical, historical, and political context.

During the last 20 years, local administrations, states, corporations and intergovernmental organizations have attempted several times to introduce private investments and models based on private intervention into the distribution and management of water, both in Western countries and in the Global South. During the 1990s in particular, these actors often presented the collaboration with private capital and a market-based model as a solution to numerous perceived critical aspects of water management.

Some recurrent concepts guided this perspective. First, the idea that ‘water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good’ (Dublin Principles 1992: Principle 4). Second, the notion that politicians and public enterprises were following goals that differed from the principle of economic efficiency, and therefore tended to fix low prices (see e.g. Savedoff and Spiller 1999). Third, the idea that a profit mechanism could attract private sector investments in the water sector, raising in this way the quality of the service. These ideas went relatively unchallenged for about ten years; gradually, they gave life to policies thanks to significant support from the liberal parties in many Western countries, and to international loan clauses in developing countries.

However, the particular symbolic value of water, its importance for human life and agriculture, and the fears connected with a private and profit-oriented management of this resource led to strong reactions from numerous sectors of society, which organized forms of resistance that in some cases proved to be effective. At the local level, communities as diverse as Cochabamba (Bolivia), Aprilia (Italy), Paris and Berlin opposed water privatization at different moments, adopting a large spectrum of forms of protest, including referendums, unilateral reduction of bills, actions taken by local institutions and – in the crucial case of Cochabamba – successful urban guerrilla action.

These local struggles contributed to developing and diffusing alternative views on water. In particular, activists started to elaborate a complex theoretical framework that proposed considering water as a common good, in this way creating an alternative not only to the neoliberal water policies, but also to the previous public model of water management. Moreover, the issue of water led to the creation of connections between numerous social movement organizations, at different levels. For instance, water became one of the most important themes discussed in social movement processes that already existed, such as the European Social Forum, helping at the same
time to create new national, continental and global networks that opposed water privatization and neoliberal policies in other sectors.

I have structured this chapter to demonstrate how the Italian campaign is part of this general framework, although at the same time developing its peculiarities through time and through continuous dialectical relations with the national context and its political actors.

The sections of this chapter move, therefore, from the broad scale of action to the particular case under study. In the first section, I dedicate my attention to the global struggles around the issue of water, aiming at understanding how the opposed paradigms of private management and of water commons emerged and came into conflict in numerous geographical contexts. I will first describe these different paradigms and their evolution through time. Secondly, I briefly present some of the most important international contexts that influenced the Italian case in a more profound way, focusing on Latin America and the rest of Europe. In particular, the mainstream neoliberal solutions and the alternative models of water management gave life through the years to two opposite international processes. Following the model of the World Social Forum, which first emerged to contrast the World Economic Forum meetings, the water activists gave life to a series of events labelled ‘Alternative World Water Forums’, which aimed at delegitimizing the meetings of the private-oriented World Water Forum.

The second section of this chapter examines the evolution through time of the Italian water struggle, and of the network of organizations that is working on the issue of water privatization. This evolution strongly depends, in a kind of dialectical opposition, on the continuous privatization attempts that Italian political and economic forces have proposed in recent years. Therefore, I first discuss these legal attempts to privatize or change the forms of water distribution and sewage services, presenting in this way the external framework within which FIMA emerged. Secondly, I describe the rise of FIMA, and its links with earlier or contemporaneous social movement processes, such as the European Social Forum.

The third section presents the main object of my research, the Italian referendum campaign centred on the issue of water privatization. In the first part of this section, I describe the political context and the policies that convinced FIMA activists to engage in a difficult and long-lasting referendum campaign for public water. The second part of the section presents a timeline of the campaign: from November 2009 to June 2011, I observed four phases of mobilization, distinguishing moments of mass participation as well as moments of less diffuse activity.
In the fourth and final section, I trace the system of alliances, collaborations, and conflicts that the organizations involved in the campaign created entering into relations with other actors. The referendum promoters established connections that in numerous cases evolved during the campaign, giving life to new and unexpected forms of cooperation or – less frequently – tensions. I focus attention on the relationship between FIMA and three different actors. First of all, the referendum promoters interacted with the main political parties, which in numerous cases gradually became willing to offer external, conditional support to the campaign. Second, the activists of the Forum increasingly collaborated with groups that were proposing two additional referendums, held on the same dates as the water ones. Third, I describe the role of some mainstream media during the referendum, and their positions towards the campaign. On these media, and, in particular, on the national televisions and in the main newspapers, activists and opponents entered in conflict, but also performed and reinterpreted part of the campaign.

3.1 The Global Context

Water marketization or water as a common good: two paradigms

The mobilization around the issue of water, on a global scale, constitutes one side of a vehement conflict between two models. The first of these models sees water as a commodity, which the market should contribute to distribute in an efficient way. The second model emerged as a reaction to the expansion of the first one, and it considers water to be a human right and as part of the commons.

The fierce debate in which these two frameworks and the policies connected with them take opposing sides is complex and multifaceted, and started at least 20 years ago. Furthermore, it concerns numerous fields of research, from law to economics, and connected themes, such as environmentalism, human rights and globalization. In this section, I give a short overview of these two models, focusing on how they emerged and came into in conflict.²⁰

As numerous authors connected with the public water positions stress (e.g. Petrella 2001: 71; Public Citizen 2003; Altamore 2006: 20), the pressure to privatize or to include private participation in the distribution of water is relatively recent. At least until the 1970s, modern capitalist states conceived of water management as a public service, instead of as an economic good, mainly due to its relevance for human life, to its importance for public health, and to the fact that water distribution is a natural monopoly. The private, market-based paradigm has slowly emerged over the last 30 years: even though France was, and still is, the country where private participation in water management developed, it is possible to link this evolution with ideas that emerged during the Thatcher and Reagan era, and with the privatization of other sectors (Liotard 2009: 123).

Ballance and Taylor (2005) describe these processes as a series of modifications regarding public services, and monopolies in particular. The authors define these new tendencies as:

Radical changes in the approach to public policy for infrastructure industries worldwide. Issues of natural monopoly, competition, regulation and the appropriate role for public and private sectors have been rethought leading to extensive industry restructuring and privatization, and often the establishment of new regulatory agencies. (Ibid.: 34)

To summarize briefly, the supporters of the privatization of water services (which is a framework that institutions and states apply in different ways) conceive of states and local authorities as unable to plan efficient investment in the water sector mainly due to two factors. First, they assume that public actors follow goals that are not economic, but political: administrators are, according to this view, privileging electoral consensus over the efficiency of the system. Therefore, public authorities are described as supporting a rise in the number of workers and in their salaries, at the same time fixing prices at a level that is too low and unsustainable (Savedoff and Spiller 1999: 1-31). The supporters of privatization have proposed, therefore, to increase the prices of water and to reduce the number of employees: according to this view, only full-cost tariffs can produce investments in the water services, efficient networks of distribution, and effective sanitation systems (Cosgrove and Rijsberman 2000: 31). Second, the supporters of the role of the private investments have depicted the public sector, in particular in countries in the South, as an actor that does not have the capital needed to plan necessary investments in the water systems. They present, therefore, the intervention of private actors as a way of solving water scarcity crises.
As a corollary, the idea of ‘market environmentalism’ (Bakker 2007: 39-40) or ‘green neoliberalism’ (Goldman 2006) emerged, too: here, the idea that water is a scarce resource with an economic value (Dublin Principles 1992) is seen as a better approach to protecting it. This view, which combines efficiency, industrialization, private investments, and the role of the market in the water sector, met with a large consensus during the 1990s, among both states and intergovernmental institutions. In particular, activists have pointed to the World Bank as the main actor that pushed (through its loan mechanism) for privatization or public-private partnerships in numerous countries (Shiva 2003; Food and Water Watch 2009; Petrella 2001).

Harris et al. (2013) interestingly describe the ‘pro-private’ framework as focused on three hegemonic concepts: the ideas of scarcity, market/privatization, and participation. Moreover, they observed that activists are creating a counter-hegemonic framework, elaborated through struggles, during forums, and in political manifestos. The most visible alternative perspective emerged within the global justice movement and the Social Forum process, in connection with numerous local struggles against the privatization of water services.

In the activists’ view, privatization and the commercialization of water are an extreme case of neoliberal policies: they are seen as not only unable to provide water for all in a fair way, but as policies that can artificially create scarcity, expropriate resources from local communities in favour of corporations, and divert the use of water from essential purposes. In particular, activists contest that private investors act in a natural monopoly, and tend therefore to accumulate profits without the need to make investments in the service. Moreover, they stress the fact that the privatization of water services attracts just a few giant multinational corporations, which increasingly control this market and invest only in urban, economically prosperous contexts.

More specifically, activists have focused their criticism on three very powerful arguments. First, the fact that attempts to privatize water distribution have resulted in failure in many cases (Liotard 2009; Public Citizen 2003): private participation, they show, did not increase the quality and investments in the sector, but actually resulted in higher tariffs and exclusion from the service. Second, they assert that apparently neutral international organizations (such as the World Bank) and multi-stakeholder organizations (primarily, the World Water Council) had a relationship with or were even controlled by corporations active in the sector (Petrella 2001; Shiva 2003; Altamore 2006). The third argument is based on the idea that the privatization promoters consider this policy as good for ideological reasons, starting
from the neoliberal assumption that ‘inherently greater efficiency of private competitive markets is an established fact’ (Liotard 2009: 123).

At the same time, water activists participating in local and global water struggles have developed their own model and ideas on how to manage water, which does not coincide with the state-based model that the privatization promoters criticize. In particular, they have developed a proposal that goes beyond the traditional, uncontrolled public management model, and instead considers water as commons (Ciervo 2010: 12; Petrella 2001; Shiva 2003). This choice owes much to the research insights of authors such as Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom 1990; Ostrom and Keohane 1995) who criticize the ‘classic’ economic idea of the tragedy of the commons. Moving from this basis, the water activists maintain that citizens can promote a more efficient and green use of water than the one based on privatization and market-driven solutions. In the activists’ view, the control over prices, decisions of the local authorities, environmental issues, and problems of corruption should rely, therefore, on citizen participation. Water activists thus strongly link the issue of water management with the idea of participatory democracy, conceived both as a tool for opposing privatization attempts, and as a prefigurative model that they attempt to apply in local contexts.

Even though these political and economic concepts constitute the core of the activists’ proposals, other cultural elements distinguish their view from that of the supporters of privatization. One of these elements is the opposition (in most organizations) to large-scale, purely industrial models of water management. These organizations oppose large dams, the artificialization of rivers, and intensive use of water in agriculture not only because such projects are inherently related to the use of private capital and private investment, but also because they are too anthropocentric, and based only on the needs of urban populations. The public water coalitions gave life to a more holistic and ecological view, which perceives humans as part of their environment (Shiva 2003; Gutiérrez Aguilar et al. 2008). In particular, the Bolivian experience and other water mobilizations from the Global South contributed to the emergence of this last perspective.

Struggle and political processes at the international level

The attempts to privatize water resources are part of processes that mainly happen on a global scale: a small number of corporations that invest in this sector interact with cities, states, and intergovernmental organizations, giving life to privatization experiments in every continent. Similarly, social movement organizations have activated numerous different channels
through which they oppose these attempts, and to broader market-led solutions in the management of water resources. Initially, the activists involved in these experiences mainly faced institutions and corporations at the local level. Gradually, these experiences created connections among themselves, with broader movement networks that opposed neoliberal politics, and, in particular, with the Social Forum process. International trade unions and public service-related networks, environmental groups, organizations active in other water-related issues (construction of big dams, agriculture, fair land use), and networks defending the rights of indigenous communities began to constitute the basis for a long-lasting, global, single-issue mobilization.

In this section, I limit my focus for reason of spaces to two geographical areas that are particularly relevant for understanding the Italian case: Europe and Latin America. Furthermore, I describe the Alternative World Water Forum, one of the main international processes that opposes the penetration of the private paradigm within international institutions.21

*Latin America: the Cochabamba case*

Latin America is probably the area where attempts to privatize water have encountered the strongest resistance, and met their first failures. In particular, the continent hosted what can be seen as the most visible failure of a privatization attempt and the main turning point (Gutiérrez Aguilar *et al.* 2008: 18) for global mobilization on this issue, the Cochabamba Water War (Ciervo 2010; Martinelli 2011; Kohl and Farthing 2006; Assies 2003; Shiva 2003; *Public Citizen* 2003). This event proved to be crucial for the Italian campaigns on water, due to the frequent direct contacts between Italian and Bolivian organizations and activists, and to the influence that the Cochabamba experience had on the symbolic repertoire of the Italian actors.

To summarize briefly, the privatization of water distribution in Cochabamba mainly followed the suggestions of the World Bank to the Bolivian government, suggestions that quickly became policies due to the conditions attached to World Bank loans. Furthermore, both the privatization attempt and the protests in the city came immediately after the introduction of the water law, *Ley 2029* (1999), which paved the way for a marketization

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21 Water activism has proved to be crucial in another high-level process: on 28 July 2010, the United Nations declared that water is a human right, in a resolution approved with 122 positive votes (Res A/RES/64/292). However, I do not focus in this book on the complex process that preceded and permitted this key vote (but see e.g. Petrella 2001; Bakker 2007).
of the Bolivian water systems. In particular, Kohl and Farthing (2006) observe that this law granted two rights to the concession holders, which had a strong impact on the mobilization. First of all, it gave ‘exclusive rights within a given area, forcing all water users to enter contracts with the concession holder’ (Assies 2003: 17, cited in Kohl and Farthing 2006: 163). In other words, it prohibited the use of alternative systems, such as direct rain collection, and ‘privatized the use of natural springs managed by the regantes, the farmers who traditionally oversee water collection in the Andes’ (Gutiérrez Aguilar et al. 2008: 18). Second, it created a national organ that ‘could bypass local governments and water consumers’ (Kohl and Farthing 2006: 163), allowing concessions to be defined at the state level, behind closed doors.

The national government privatized the water of Cochabamba on 3 September 1999, about two months before the introduction of Ley 2029. Water management passed into the hands of the consortium Aguas del Tunari, which included – among others – the American corporation Bechtel, the British International Water Limited, the Italian Edison, and the Spanish Abengoa (Altamore 2006: 29). Aguas del Tunari immediately met with a strong reaction in the area. In particular, Gutiérrez Aguilar et al. (2008: 35-40) identify three kinds of actors, coalesced in the local network La Coordinadora, who initiated the protest. These actors were the regantes, organized farmers who were already opposing in the previous year to local attempts to reorganize the water system; the Federation de los Fabriles, the local branch of a trade union of factory workers; and numerous environmental organizations and professional orders, united, in particular, in the Committee of Water Defence.

After months of massive and increasingly radical protests, and of violent reactions from local authorities, culminating in six days of urban guerrilla action from 4 to 10 April 2000, the Coordinadora succeeded in ending the privatization experiment, blocking at the same time Ley 2029. Through this struggle, activists showed the world the level of violence that a privatization attempt could reach, and pushed the issue of water to the global level (Assies 2003; Ciervo 2010; Kohl and Farthing 2006).

The echoes of this victory contributed to the creation of a political alternative to water privatization attempts in other Latin American countries. In Argentina, the private concession of the city of Buenos Aires was revoked in 2006. In 2004, the Uruguayan citizens approved with a referendum a constitutional reform that impeded private participation in water services.
Similarly, Bolivia and Ecuador introduced the right to water in their constitutions, while Colombian citizens asked for a referendum on this issue in 2010 (Gutiérrez Aguilar et al. 2008: 121).

Europe

While in Latin America an umbrella organization called Red Vida (Life Network) connects the actions on the water issue through numerous national contexts, constituting a well-established network since 2003, in Europe the initiatives against the privatization of water mainly emerged, for many years, on the local level. While in Italy the water mobilization relatively quickly passed from a region (Tuscany) to the national scale, connecting numerous territorial instances, this pattern remained somewhat uncommon in the rest of the continent. In France, for instance, the main conflict between the private/commons paradigms regarded single cities, and, in particular, Paris. In the French capital, the private giants GDF Suez and Veolia were controlling water distribution and sewage, the former on the left bank and the latter on the right bank of the River Seine. Through traditional forms of political pressure, the mayor and other institutional actors succeeded in ending the concessions to these private companies, promoting a completely public management of water as an alternative. In November 2008, the municipality decided to create a public, citizen-controlled water administration, named Eau de Paris: this change had a strong symbolic impact on other contexts, including the Italian one, mainly because both Veolia and GDF Suez are French corporations based in Paris (Pigeon 2012).

In Germany, activists similarly achieved in 2010 the end of private participation in the water management of Berlin, in this case through a local referendum. In Spain, a strong coalition of trade unions, traditional left-oriented organizations, and new groups linked to the 15-M protests fiercely opposed to the privatization of the Madrid water company Canal de Isabel II.

The European movements attempted to create a European Network for Water on two occasions: firstly, without success, during the European Social Forum in Malmö (2008); secondly, during a meeting organized in Naples in December 2011 and at the Alternative World Water Forum of Marseille in March 2012. During the last year, a European water coalition has finally emerged: 9 organizers and 140 networks have adopted for the first time a new tool for direct democracy, the European Citizens’ Initiative, to promote the implementation of the Right to Water at the European level. On 23 September 2013, the promoters of this initiative presented 1,857,605
signatures of support to the European institutions, revitalizing the debate on water management at the European level.

The World Water Forums and the emergence of the Alternative World Water Forums

During the first wave of privatization attempts, the market-oriented proposals for water and its management appeared as neutral solutions, which most international institutions naturally accepted as valid. One of the main aims of the movements opposed to this discourse was, therefore, to propose an alternative view towards water, and to portray commonly accepted solutions in a different light, presenting them instead as openly neoliberal policies.

The anti-privatization networks attempted to achieve this result by following a strategy that strongly drew from the previous experiences of the Social Forums. The water activists identified the international political processes where corporations and institutions were interacting and developing water-related proposals, and started to oppose these processes by building a parallel series of counter-events.

One of the political events that the activists pointed to as a source of neoliberal discourse on water is the World Water Forum, a meeting that has taken place about every three years since 1997, and is currently on its seventh round. The World Water Council, an international umbrella organization that groups water corporations, institutions and organizations, is the main organizer of these forums, which also host private, institutional and social actors to discuss water-related policies. The World Water Forum hosts informal ministerial meetings that have produced certain political documents supporting the participation of the private sector in water distribution, such as the so-called ‘Bonn Keys’ (2001). In particular, authors describe the Council as ‘a think-tank’, or ‘a curious amalgam of business-based NGOs and large corporations’ (Morgan 2011: 6).

National and continental networks of organizations reacted to this process by creating the Alternative World Water Forums, initiated in 2003 and reaching its fifth round in 2012. Starting from the third round, in 2006, the activists organized the alternative forums in the same city that hosted the World Water Forum, with the aim of presenting themselves as a different possibility, opposed to what they recognized as a process entirely guided by multinational corporations and private capital. This strategy proved to be highly successful in 2009, during the fifth round of the World Water Forum hosted in Istanbul. On this occasion, an important gap started to emerge between the World Water Forum proposals and the views of the United Nations on water. In particular, the delegate of the United Nations, Maude
Barlow, a core activist in a Canadian network opposing to water privatization, read during the event a very critical statement from the president of the General Assembly of the United Nations. Among other things, the president of the 63rd General Assembly directly criticized both the notion of water as an economic good, and the structure of the World Water Forum:

We must challenge the notion that water is a commodity to be bought and sold on the open market. [...] The World Water Forum is currently structured in a way that precludes partnerships with the advocates of the principles mentioned above. The Forum’s orientation is profoundly influenced by private water companies. This is evident by the fact that both the president of the World Water Council and the alternate president are deeply involved with provision of private, for-profit, water services. (President of the General Assembly of the United Nations 2009)

The Alternative World Water Forums never limited its activities to the initiatives that could be undertaken for opposing the World Water Forum process. Instead, these meetings became a place to elaborate and diffuse a new water paradigm, based on the ‘water commons’ principles, to discuss policies, and build partnerships. Furthermore, the alternative forums enabled activists to connect with other struggles, spreading common issues and symbolic elements. During the Alternative Forum of Marseille 2012, for instance, water activists coming from indigenous contexts were able to describe their alternative models of water management. Trade unions from the public sector discussed new models of public-public partnership, in opposition to the public-private ones. Activists shared and watched dozens of documentaries and films on water conflicts, contributing in this way to build a common cultural background. Networks that oppose the construction of large dams in countries of the Global South were able to interact with European organizations, centred in the countries where the corporations planning the dams were based.

3.2 Acqua Bene Comune: the growth of the Italian water coalition

The political and legal context: attempts to privatize water in Italy

Following a trend that has characterized numerous national contexts since the 1990s, in Italy various governments have slowly attempted to transform
the distribution and sanitation of water from an entirely public municipal system, to a private or partially private service.²³

Among the numerous national and regional laws that contributed to this change, two authors involved in the Italian water movements, Margherita Ciervo (2010) and Luca Martinelli (2011), have pointed to three crucial legal steps in this process. They are the reform of the water system included in the so-called *Legge Galli* of 1994,²⁴ Article 23-bis of Law 133/2008, and the modifications to this last article included in the so-called *Decreto Ronchi*.²⁵

The legislators introduced the first law as a complete reform of the water system, in a context where the movements against water privatization had not yet emerged and the issue was not, therefore, a conflictual one. In contrast, the other two legal interventions arrived almost fifteen years later, in order to sustain private investments in the water sector, and to directly oppose water mobilizations that were already beginning to demonstrate their strength.

The so-called *Legge Galli* introduced a complete reform of the legal principles regarding water management, which previously had been regulated through a chaotic and large number of laws. In particular, the *Legge Galli* introduced the concept of the Integrated Water Service, incorporating water distribution, sanitation, water waste and pollution treatments into a single legal and administrative system. Inspired by both market and environmental principles, the law contributed to delineating the future privatization attempts in three ways. Firstly, it reduced the number of administrations dealing with water from about 8,000 municipalities to fewer than a hundred authorities, known as the *Autorità d'Ambito Territoriale Ottimale* (Optimized Territorial District Authority, hereafter AATO).

While the water activists generally considered this part of the reform as positive, the AATOS tended to follow the boundaries of the local water basins, facilitating in this way a large-scale, industrial management of water distribution that generally requires similarly large investment (see

²³ This section should be considered as an introduction to a topic that is mainly of interest to legal scholars. For a more detailed account, I refer the reader to other works (Altamore 2006; Martinelli 2011; Ciervo 2010; Oddi 2008; Canitano et al. 2008), which I adopted as my main sources for this overview.


²⁵ The expression *Decreto Ronchi* refers to Article 15 of Decree 135/09, converted into Law 166/2009. In Italy, journalists and activists tend to identify controversial laws with a simplified label, starting from the name of the law proposers. I decided to adopt these simplified labels, when available, because they are much more widespread in public opinion than the corresponding legal terms.
Secondly, the reform openly permitted different models to commission the actor responsible for the water management, without excluding private companies. In particular, the public administrators could directly assign this service to a public company, or they could commission an external actor – public or private – through a call for tenders. Thirdly, this law introduced in Italy the full-cost principle in water management, including in this cost not only the expenses for increasing the quality of water and reduce after-use pollution, but also the so-called financial remuneration of the invested capital. This last label indicates an extra cost (at least an additional fixed 7 per cent in the bills) that local water companies had the right to charge to the consumers. The legislators, in this way, introduced an economic modification in the water sector, determining a fixed and granted profit in order to stimulate investments.

In practical terms, the modifications that the *Legge Galli* introduced contributed to produce two effects. Firstly, this law permitted the birth of numerous large companies that started to provide water services in the main Italian urban areas. Even if some of these companies were entirely public, they were present on the stock market, and merged several times with other similar companies or with other groups related to urban services. According to the activists, the resulting groups – usually called ‘multi-utilities’ – slowly became difficult to control for both the public authorities and for the citizens of the area. Secondly, this law facilitated the entry into the Italian market of very large multinational corporations specialized in the water sector. In particular, the French corporations Veolia/Vivendi and GDF Suez participated in the water distribution of numerous Italian cities, often adopting local Italian multi-utilities as a sort of ‘Trojan horse’ to enter into the national market). The mobilizations against water privatization and the rise of the Italian Forum of Water Movements emerged with the aim of opposing both this legal framework and the resulting penetration of private capital and private management in the water sector.

A second wave of legal proceedings regarding the water service and its privatization arrived almost fifteen years later, firstly through Article 23-bis of Law 133/2008, and then through the modifications to this article included in the *Decreto Ronchi* (Article 15, Law 166/2009). These two connected legislative interventions arrived in a context in which the water movements were

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27 See e.g. Oddi (2008: 260) and Ciervo (2010: 99) for a description of these transactions.
already very active on a national scale, and were already proposing a citizens’ initiative campaign to introduce a law based on the ‘water as a common good’ principle. During the previous two years, these movements had made serious objections to the parliament, putting pressure on the centre-left majority to stop privatization attempts, and to support their alternative view regarding this resource.

Article 23-bis and the Decreto Ronchi intervened during a very different phase: in April 2008, Berlusconi led his right-wing coalition to victory, giving him the opportunity to become prime minister for the fourth time, easily controlling the two chambers of parliament. Furthermore, none of the left-oriented and Green parties was present in the parliament, and the main opposition party – the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party) – was divided regarding the water issue, with many of its top members openly supporting neoliberal or industrial management of this resource. Therefore, Berlusconi’s coalition decided to encourage the entrance of private actors in the water services, building a legal framework to support this idea. The advocates of privatization perceived these new laws as necessary, especially considering the rising opposition that their attempts were encountering among society, as well as the fact that most aatos were still opting for the public management of water (Martinelli 2011).

To summarize briefly, Article 23-bis and the Decreto Ronchi, respectively, proposed a call for tenders as the normal procedure to selecting which actor could better manage the local water sector, and required the participants in these calls to have at least 40 per cent of their stock in the hands of private investors. Furthermore, the Decreto Ronchi stipulated that the in-house, public water services should end their activities before 31 December 2011. In order to justify this procedure – a de facto forced privatization – the legislators always referred in the text to the entire set of public local services, and claimed that these modifications were explicitly included in a European Union directive.

As can easily be understood, the water activists immediately perceived these two articles, and, in particular, the one of the Decreto Ronchi, as an attempt of the government to ensure that it would win the conflicts over water privatization, imposing the private management – or the mixed private-public management – as the only possible framework. Furthermore, by imposing a well-defined deadline at the end of 2011, the right-wing majority forced the water activists to immediately act against these laws and oppose their implementation.

Starting from this context, the Italian Forum of Water Movements decided to directly oppose this legal framework, choosing the most important
instrument of direct democracy in Italy, the national referendum, as a tool to abolish the 7 per cent fixed quota dedicated for repaying the invested capital, and the compulsory calls for tenders included in the *Decreto Ronchi* and in previous legislation.

**The evolution of the Italian Forum of Water Movements**

In Italy, about ten years of mobilization on various scales preceded the victory of the water referendum campaign. This mobilization, of a very long duration for an action on a single issue, coincided to a great extent with the creation and development of the *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l’Acqua*. Acting as an umbrella group and as an autonomous political organization, the FIMA process stimulated the building of connections between the local water struggles and other, very different kinds of organizations, the promotion of initiatives on water on a national scale, and the transformation of the water issue into one of the main topics on the Italian political agenda.

As the name of this network suggests, the Forum of Water Movements directly descends from the World Social Forum. Within this broader process, activists already saw the water issue as a particularly relevant one. This is especially true for the Italian activists involved in the World Social Forum, who strongly contributed to getting the water theme on the agenda and supported the creation of global networks of water-related movements. In particular, Riccardo Petrella, one of the founders of the Italian branch of the organization *Comitato Istituzionale per il Contratto Mondiale dell’Acqua* (Committee for the Institution of the World Water Contract) was very active on this issue. Among other things, he launched a Water Manifesto (Petrella 2001), and organized the main seminar on water as a common good during the second Porto Alegre Social Forum.

In particular, FIMA has its roots in two international meetings, which were held in Florence in 2002 and 2003. One of these gatherings was the first European Social Forum. During the event – held in November 2002 – Florence hosted about 60,000 delegates over three days, and a group of activists decided to create an internal platform dedicated to water. Starting from this experience, some international organizations and Italian networks promoted the second event, the first Alternative World Water Forum, entirely dedicated to water and held on 21 and 22 March 2003 in Florence. The main aim of this Forum was to act on a global scale, in order to oppose private water corporations’ control over the World Water Forums. A first nucleus of core Italian water activists emerged from this experience: these activists were very central in the Italian movements connected with the Social
Forum process; furthermore, some of them were members of powerful Italian organizations or networks. These actors mobilized by starting from the assumption that through water, they could present to the rest of the society the ideas of participatory democracy, commons, alternatives to privatization and, in general, a new social paradigm opposed to the dominant neoliberal one.

Different kinds of organizations were part of this initial core, testifying to both the internal differences among the actors that participated in the Social Forums in Italy and the number of actors interested in the water issue. These included organizations dealing with alternative views on the economy, cultural organizations linked to the Italian leftist milieu, environmentalist networks, organizations already focusing on the water issue, associations for consumer rights, groups dedicated to different agriculture models, and a Catholic, eco-pacifist network. Over the following years, most of the organizations and numerous activists who organized the event maintained a central position within FIMA and in the various waves of water mobilizations.

Nevertheless, the campaign on water privatization quickly evolved into a process that was largely autonomous from that of the Social Forum. Starting from the Alternative World Water Forum of Florence, numerous local organizations involved in this event decided to coalesce into a stable regional network dedicated to water, initially called the Tavolo Toscano dell’Acqua (Tuscany Water Panel). This network – by now called the Forum Toscano dei Movimenti per l’Acqua (Tuscan Forum of Water Movements) – presented and launched a first large-scale campaign in summer 2004, during two regional Social Forum events held in the towns of Stia and Piombino (Corriere Etrusco 2004). The campaign was a regional citizens’ initiative, which aimed at supporting the introduction of a regional law for a different form of water management in Tuscany. Actually, the issue of water was a particularly relevant theme in this region, which hosted the first Italian cases of water privatization, following a private-public partnership model that the centre-left party Democratici di Sinistra had strongly encouraged.

According to the programme of the first Alternative World Water Forum, for instance, the following Italian actors contributed to give life to this event: CEVI, ARCI, ATTAC Italia, Comitato Italiano Per il Contratto Mondiale dell’Acqua, ADUSBEF, Altragricoltura, Forum Sociale Firenze, Tavolo nazionale contro la privatizzazione, Forum Ambientalista, Legambiente, WWF Italia, Rete Lilliput, Associazione Consumatori Utenti, Associazione culturale Punto Rosso, Tavolo nazionale contro la privatizzazione, Campagna contro la Banca mondiale, Cantiersocialis-Carta, SlowFood, AMREF (1st Alternative Water Forum 2003). For the acronyms, see the ‘list of abbreviations’ in the preface of this book.
Between February and August 2005, the *Forum Toscano dei Movimenti per l’Acqua* rapidly gained the support of numerous local administrators, workers in the water sectors, political parties and other organizations, which helped to spread the campaign and to quickly collect 42,932 signatures supporting the regional law proposal. Even if the law was finally dismissed with the negative vote of the main centre-left and right-wing parties in November 2006 (*Acqua Bene Comune Toscana* 2006), the activists regarded the *Forum Toscano* and the citizens’ initiative as a successful experiment in mobilization, and the water issue as one able to gather an unexpected level of support from citizens and organized social actors. Therefore, this campaign constituted a model that the activists decided to replay on a national scale, following very similar steps.

As its name attests, the Italian Forum of Water Movements recognizes its roots as lying in the Tuscan Forum of Water Movements. The activists started to conceive of and organize *FIMA* with five national meetings, held between July 2005 and January 2006 in five cities in central and southern Italy (Cecina, Florence, Roma, Napoli and Pescara). During these meetings, numerous types of actors interacted: delegates coming from the experience of Tuscany, representatives of organizations involved in the aforementioned Social Forums of Florence, activists from local committees formed to deal with water privatization conflicts. At this stage, delegates of sympathetic political parties were also present and active, sometimes with key roles. In this preliminary phase, around a hundred core activists decided how to frame the main sub-issues of the Forum, and produced a map of the Italian conflicts over water, also trying to involve the local actors in the constitution of *FIMA*.

The Italian Forum was officially born at a three-day event, held in Rome between 10 and 12 March 2006. In numerous seminars, organizations jointly framed the water controversies, and decided to connect the various local struggles regarding water privatization into a national, joint initiative. From this moment, *FIMA* became an actor on the Italian political scene: it acted in the name of numerous organizations and territorial networks, and it formed complex dialectic relationships with these local contexts, with other national political actors, and with the Italian institutions and legal system.

Before embarking upon the complex referendum campaign that is the main object of this research, the main national action undertaken by the Forum was a citizens’ initiative, which followed the successful experimental strategy in Tuscany and demonstrated *FIMA*’s great ability to mobilize thousands of citizens on a national scale. Numerous delegates collectively discussed the text of this legislative proposal (*Acqua Bene Comune* 2006),
reaching a definitive document in October 2006. In the first seven months of 2007, FIMA and a growing coalition of organized actors started to collect signatures to support the initiative, finally reaching 406,626 signatures. From this point on, the Forum and its local branches began to support the legal proposal in two ways, in both parliament and the regions. In the parliament, they both presented the initiative to various commissions, and asked the left and green parties supporting the campaign to represent the Forum’s ideas within the institutions. In the local territories, they launched a first national demonstration for water on 1 December 2007, a second Italian Forum of Water Movements in November 2008, and undertook numerous other local protest initiatives (*Acqua Bene Comune* 2010).

This citizens’ proposal did not succeed in changing the legislative framework on water. Initially, the parliament reacted to the mobilizations and petition by approving a one-year suspension of new water privatizations. This notwithstanding, on 6 August 2008 the newly elected parliament, with a large centre-right majority and a complete absence of the radical left and green parties, approved the already presented Article 23-bis of Law 133/08, which strongly encouraged privatization attempts. Finally, the citizens’ initiative started to be discussed in the parliament on 29 January 2009, but the two chambers definitely decided to follow an opposite direction, promoting a framework that supported the extensive privatization of water-management services through the so-called *Decreto Ronchi*.

The creation of FIMA and the long-lasting petition campaign of 2008 gave the organizations working on the water issue the opportunity to experiment with initiatives for direct democracy. Moreover, it enabled the activists to observe the high level of consensus supporting their campaigns, creating deep roots for the FIMA network in the Italian regions. Trade unions, local administrations, and volunteers from the organizations or the local branches of numerous political parties developed forms of rapid collaboration that they later adopted in the 2011 referendum. Furthermore, the constitution of FIMA and its campaigns enabled this network of organizations to engage in a widespread and direct communication with the citizens, and to represent for many of them a model of political activism perceived as different from the one of the main political parties.

To conclude, the long process that started at the Florence Forums and eventually led to the water referendum campaign profoundly transformed the social movement actors who promoted these actions. Even though this transformation has numerous dimensions, one is in my opinion particularly relevant: that numerous activists gradually transformed a single, very practical issue into a theme that was able to produce a partially independent
element of identity. Within the broader social movement networks that sustained this campaign, a large group of ‘water people’ created flags, websites, songs and documentaries. In this process, the continuous contacts with external citizens surely influenced this transformation, because it encouraged the water activists to simplify their proposals, and to present themselves as a unified, immediately recognizable political actor.

### 3.3 The 2011 Referendum Campaign against Water Privatization in Italy

**Obstacles and facilitating factors in the choice to held a referendum**

The Italian referendum campaign on the issue of water privatization was a process that involved from 2009 to 2011 different kinds of political actors and millions of Italian citizens and voters, deeply affecting the evolution of the Italian politics in the following years. The idea of proposing three national referendums emerged within FIMA at the end of 2009, with the aim of legally challenging the attempts to privatize water-management services in Italy, and of promoting the idea that water is a common good.

The referendum proposal openly attempted to change the entire legislation regarding water, and to definitely abolish the legal principles that permitted different forms of water privatization since 1994. However, the campaign was mainly born in order to oppose a single legislative act, the aforementioned Decreto Ronchi, which the activists perceived as a definitive decision of the government to openly support the private water paradigm. As I explained in the previous section, when the parliament approved this decree there was already in Italy a large coalition of social movement actors gathered around the water theme, and this coalition was ready to react to the government decision.

However, the Italian Forum of Water Movements and the organizations supporting it proved to be very ambitious in choosing to start a referendum campaign as their way of opposing the new law. In 2009, numerous political parties and most of the media saw the referendum – the most important instrument of direct democracy that the Italian constitution permits – as an ineffective tool. Since in Italy a national referendum requires a minimum quota of voters (50 per cent plus one of the citizens with the right to vote, the *quorum*) to be valid, and the participation in elections has declined during the last decades, in 2009 most political actors considered the referendum campaigns as almost impossible to win. During the fifteen years that
preceded the water campaign, none of the referendums that parties and civil society actors proposed had been able to reach the legal limit of the *quorum*.

Furthermore, the Italian political forces that had opposed these previous referendums elaborated a very effective strategy to make the consultations fail, using the *quorum* limit to their advantage. Instead of promoting a parallel campaign for a negative vote, they invited their supporters to abstain from voting in the referendum, and they attempted to divert the attention of the media from the consultation. Since these strategies enabled the ‘no’ supporters to group together the normal rate of non-voters, the percentage of citizens boycotting the referendum, and the population who lacked information due to scarce media coverage, they proved to be successful numerous times. Consequently, these practices slowly tended to discourage political actors from asking for a referendum.

In addition, the water referendum proposers chose an even more difficult path, because they decided to refuse the presence of political parties within the committee of promoters: while some parties immediately backed the consultation, they had the right to participate only through an external committee of support, or relying on the independent involvement of their militants.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, numerous aspects can explain why FIMA decided to ask for a referendum. Among them, I believe that two ‘external’ factors, related to the Italian political spectrum, and an ‘internal’ one, related to the characteristics of the movement, were particularly relevant. As regards the political situation, in 2009 numerous well-organized parties, which were openly encouraging the FIMA actions, for the first time were not present in the Italian parliament (in particular, *Rifondazione Comunista*, the Federation of the Greens, and *Sinistra Ecologia Libertà*), or had not yet participated in a national political election (the *Movimento 5 Stelle*, or Five Star Movement). At the same time, the ambiguous positions of the two main centre-left parties regarding the water issue, the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party, hereafter PD) and the *Italia dei Valori*, determined an almost complete absence of wholly sympathetic and supportive forces able to back the FIMA actions in parliament. This lack of stable channels of communication with the institutions, combined with the high level of organization of the Forum and of the parties sustaining it, contributes to explain why the FIMA actor decided to rely on a risky and difficult referendum campaign to oppose the privatization of water. As regards the characteristics of the mobilization, the Forum had already demonstrated on numerous occasions its capacity to coordinate wide sectors
of society in order to facilitate their access to the tools of direct democracy. It had collected incredibly large numbers of signatures during the previous years, and the activists had already accumulated the necessary knowledge to launch a national legal process to sustain their projects and proposals.

The evolution of the referendum campaign through time

Even though numerous organizations are still active in demanding a complete implementation of the vote results, the Italian referendum campaign against the privatization of water lasted for approximately eighteen months, from November 2009 to the days of the vote, in June 2011. It is possible to distinguish within this period two main phases of mass mobilization, when activists attempted to convince as many citizens as possible to call for the referendum or to vote, and two phases of preparation, when only the core organizers continued to sustain the issue, and carried out the necessary legal steps to support the referendum call.

Using Google Trends, a rough but helpful tool that shows how many web users searched for certain keywords in a given period, it is possible to build a reliable timeline of the events. In particular, I performed a Google Trends search using this tool for two sets of keywords. The first, acqua bene comune, is the most widespread slogan of the water activists, and can indicate, therefore, how many users were looking for information on the

Figure 3.1 Frequency of the terms [acqua bene comune] and [privatizzazione acqua] in Google Trends

water groups and organizations; the second, privatizzazione acqua (water privatization), can indicate the level of attention, and of concern, over possible privatization attempts. Figure 3.1 shows the resulting timelines, including the years that preceded the referendums. As can be seen, the acqua bene comune graph (dotted line) well indicates the phases of intense mobilization. It has three peaks: the first, during spring 2007, corresponds to the citizens’ initiative campaign described in the previous section; the second, in spring 2010, indicates the collection of signatures that preceded the referendum; the third, in spring 2011, represents the campaign that preceded the vote. The continuous line that indicates the keywords privatizzazione acqua tends to follow a similar path, but in some cases, this indicator of the general awareness regarding water privatization is higher than the one relating to the water coalition. In other words, this suggests that web users were looking for information on the issue, instead of looking for the actors working on the issue. The very high peak of searches for privatizzazione acqua in December 2009/January 2010, in particular, seems to suggest that web users quickly reacted, with intense interest, to the privatization attempts included in the Decreto Ronchi.

November 2009/March 2010: preparing the field
During the first four months of the campaign – from November 2009 to March/April 2010 – only the most important organizations and activists involved in the Italian Forum of Water Movements started to mobilize. During these months, they planned the structure of the referendum campaign, started to prepare their strategies of action, and defined their alliances and relationships with other institutional or non-institutional political actors. The Forum activists chose to propose three different referendum questions to the voters. The first asked the abolition of Article 23-bis of Law 133/2008, as amended by the Decreto Ronchi. In this way, activists could stop the imminent project of forced privatization that Berlusconi's government had in mind. The second question asked for the amendment of a law that indicated private actors or public companies listed on the stock market as the main actors in the water sector: the activists indicated this amendment as a way of supporting the role of public administrations in water management, instead. The third question aimed at removing from the water tariffs the 7 per cent quota dedicated to the financial ‘remuneration of the invested

29 The modification refers to Article 150 of Legislative Decree n. 152/2006 (the so-called ‘decreto ambientale’ or ‘Codice dell’Ambiente’).
capital’, the fixed profit that legislators had conceived as economic leverage to attract private investments to the sector.\textsuperscript{30}

During this phase, moreover, the water committees took the decision to request the political parties to take a ‘step back’, inviting them to participate in the campaign only as external supporters. Furthermore, the activists decided to concentrate their efforts only on the theme of water, rejecting the idea of enlarging the coalition of the proposers to include other, unconnected referendum questions in the campaign. These two choices opened up a serious conflict between FIMA and the party Italia dei Valori, which initially was relatively sympathetic towards the referendum initiative. This party, and, in particular, its leader Antonio Di Pietro, refused in March/April 2010 to support the referendum and to be part of the external committee of supporters. Furthermore, it chose to start a contemporaneous yet different referendum campaign, opposing three subjects: the reintroduction of nuclear power, the forced privatization of water (focusing on different aspects of the issue), and the so-called legittimo impedimento (legitimate impediment), a particular prerogative of government ministers that allowed them to avoid criminal prosecution while in power.

\textit{March/July 2010: collecting 1,400,000 signatures}

During the second phase of the campaign, the activists started a period of four months of intensive mobilization, from March to July 2010. This phase begun with a demonstration in Rome on 20 March, two days before World Water Day, to launch the referendum campaign in the media. Nonetheless, the period of mass mobilization started one month later, when the activists started to coordinate at the local level in order to collect the large number of signatures that is required in Italy to call for a referendum. The collection of signatures was, therefore, the main practical purpose of the referendum proposers during these months.

The threshold fixed the Italian law requires at least 500,000 signatures to call for a referendum. However, the organizations involved in the Forum were able to collect and validate 1,402,035 signatures, a record in the history of the Italian Republic. This phase of mobilization strongly reassured the organizations involved in the Forum of their capacities. In particular, the committee collected a very large number of signatures at the very beginning of the mobilization, during two days that are particularly relevant for the democratic and leftist Italian milieu: 25 April, the commemoration of the end of World War II, and 1 May, Labour Day. For the first time in

\textsuperscript{30} This third modification refers to Article 154, Legislative Decree n. 152/2006.
this campaign, FIMA experimented with forms of internal organization that were smartly combining tendencies towards centralization and tendencies towards decentralization of the actions. On the one hand, the signature collection required a highly coordinated bureaucratic effort at the national level, which a key militant of the most powerful Italian trade union (Confederazione Generale Italiana Lavoro, or CGIL) helped to organize. On the other hand, the local committees involved in the campaign had the opportunity to launch independent and very creative initiatives, sometimes elaborating their own strategies to inform and involve the citizens, or to coordinate the activists’ actions on different geographical scales. In some cases, the activists were able to group their independent initiatives giving life to diffuse national events, which they grouped under a shared brand: the most important example of this kind is H₂Ora, a series of highly different small events held at the same hour in different parts of Italy.  

August 2010/January 2011: waiting for the decision of the Constitutional Court

After the mobilization for the collection of signatures, the campaign entered a long phase of preparing for the vote; active participation of the activists at the local level and initiatives aiming at direct communication with sympathetic Italian citizens were less important in this period, which started in August 2010 and ended in January 2011. During this phase the referendum proposers mainly waited for a legal decision from the Italian Constitutional Court, the legal authority that has the power to accept, or dismiss as not constitutional or legal, referendum proposals. In order to prevent the numerous local privatization attempts that were already beginning, to maintain a certain level of action within the network, and to give continuity to its relationship with the citizens, the Italian Forum of Water Movements organized a short campaign at the beginning of December 2010, asking for a suspension of the decisions regarding water management. This campaign culminated in 20 coordinated demonstrations, simultaneously organized on a regional basis. In this way, FIMA could respond to the internal pressure exercised by numerous local committees and territorial organizations, too. These territorial actors were expressing a certain level of concern about the national focus that the water campaign was assuming. Since its first steps, FIMA assigned a fundamental, almost

31 The title of the diffused event ‘H₂Ora’ combines the chemical formula for water, H₂O, with the Italian word for ‘Hour’.
sovereign role to the local water committees, which constantly asked to counterbalance the national campaigns with initiatives centred on the local level (Cernison 2016).

This phase of apparent stasis ended with the decision of the Constitutional Court, which approved two of the referendums that the water committee proposed. At the same time, the Court accepted two of the referendum proposals of the Italia dei Valori party. The water campaign, therefore, had to share part of its political space and of its media visibility with two other contemporaneous campaigns, focused on nuclear energy and criminal procedure.

January-13 June 2011: preparing for the vote
The last phase of the referendum campaign was the one of intensive communication and mobilization preceding the vote. This phase grew into a sort of crescendo, which slowly activated very large sectors of the Italian society and of its media. From January to March 2011, the activists started to programme their strategies for the following months. In particular, they began to put an accent on the relevance of communication for their purpose of convincing at least 25,000,000 Italians to vote. Furthermore, they planned new websites, put pressure on the public broadcasting service in order to gain visibility, and involved local activists in the campaign, for instance, by allowing them to select the referendum logo through an online poll. Among the initiatives that gained more visibility, there was a new way to finance their activities: the secretariat of FIMA asked sympathizers to support the campaign through ‘temporary’ donations. Through a website, supporters could fix the amount of their contribution, and the referendum committee assured them that it would return the entire donation in case of victory.

On 26 March the referendum campaign officially opened with a demonstration, held in Rome. As in the previous year, the date was very close to World Water Day. After this demonstration, the activists started to concentrate their communication efforts on the web and in disparate offline activities, taking into account that the public TV broadcaster appeared less prone than expected to offer visibility to the referendum promoters. Furthermore, during March and April the water referendum committee slowly linked its struggle with those of the other referendum proposers, in particular, establishing links with the anti-nuclear committee, whose struggle gained importance after the Fukushima nuclear disaster.
Finally, the campaign reached its maximum peak between the second half of May and the last day of voting, 13 June 2011. During this last month, numerous factors helped to boost the referendum initiatives, and to pave the way to the success of the vote. Firstly, coalitions of left or centre-left parties won numerous local administration elections in May, in some cases with candidates coming from the milieu that supported the referendum. Secondly, the PD changed its official position and started to openly support the vote, probably seeing in it an opportunity to strongly attack Berlusconi and his government. Similarly, some local sections and leaders of the right-wing party Lega Nord declared their support for the vote, refusing to accept the political line of their party. Thirdly, the referendum campaign started to appear in the mainstream media, although in ways different from how the proposers were expecting. For instance, the newspaper La Repubblica, which had formerly opposed the referendums, started a media campaign asking the people to vote, under the generic slogan Io vado a votare (I’m going to vote).32 Similarly, the singer Adriano Celentano, a celebrity who is able to attract high audience levels on Italian television, openly supported the referendum during a popular political talk show. Nonetheless, other factors impeded the proposers’ aims. Among them were the still strong control of the government over the media and the difficulties in reaching and informing the vast communities of Italian voters resident abroad.

These phases all culminated on the days of the vote, 12 and 13 June. During these two days the activists used the web to bypass the compulsory ‘silence period’ that precedes the vote: they organized online further local propaganda actions, and national digital initiatives, for instance, collaborating on Twitter to monitor the voters turnout in various part of the country. The vote ended at 3:00 PM, 13 June. About 57 per cent of voters participated in the consultation, and 95 per cent of them voted according to suggestions the of the referendum proposers. Notwithstanding the marginal role of political parties in promoting the referendum, national television channels did not invite the representatives of the winning committees to their studios, but well-known party representatives. The nuclear and water committees instead celebrated victory with a joint party in a square in Rome, under the yellow and blue flags of the two campaigns.

32 La Repubblica supported the referendum adopting the slogan Io vado a votare (I’m going to vote), which does not specify any suggested position to voters and simply invites them to participate in the consultation.
3.4 Alliances and Conflicts during the Campaign

Relationships with other political actors

During the referendum campaign, the committee of promoters and the organizations involved in the mobilizations against water privatization entered in the political arena, relating in different ways with most of the national political and social actors. In many cases, these relationships evolved and changed during the campaign, enabling the promoters of the water referendum to enlarge their alliances, to use to their advantage some of the internal divisions among the referendum opponents, and to gain a new role – at least for a brief time – on the Italian political spectrum. In some cases, the advantages were bilateral: some parties, for instance, supported the referendum campaigns in order to establish a new link with their electorate, to avoid internal divisions, to oppose the government, or to support a cause that they perceived as a winning one.

In this section, I briefly present the relationship between the proposers of the water referendum campaign and three other kinds of political actors. First, I describe the complex links between the referendum promoters and the parties, with a particular focus on the pd and the Italia dei Valori, which were internally divided between supporters and adversaries of the referendum. Second, I depict the relationship of the water activists with the other referendum committees, which slowly succeeded in linking the struggle on water privatization with other issues. Third, I illustrate how the referendum campaign influenced different media outlets.

Political parties

When the referendum campaign was at its beginning, the Italian Forum of Water Movements appeared as a broad and growing coalition of organizations, which most Italian parties of the left tended to support. During the first demonstration that launched the referendum, on 20 March 2010, the entire spectrum of the internally fragmented Italian radical left was present, but the flags of the centre-left force Italia dei Valori were similarly easy to distinguish. The most important party of the Italian centre-left space, the PD, refused to participate in the demonstration, although numerous of its sections were already active within the local water committees, and in some cases local PD militants constituted the backbone of these local groups.

When the referendum proposers decided to prohibit the presence of political parties on the official referendum committee, and instead asked these parties to take a step back and to sustain the water struggle by forming
an external committee of support, the situation changed. While the main parties not present in the parliament (in particular, Rifondazione Comunista, Verdi, Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà, Movimento 5 Stelle) accepted this external role and continued to support the campaign, the two main centre-left forces distinguished their positions from that of the Forum organizations, and refused to support the referendums.

The leader of the *Italia dei Valori* party, Antonio Di Pietro, openly attached the choice of the organizations involved in the Forum, and his party thus started a contemporaneous referendum campaign, opening in this way a conflict with the water referendum proposers. The position of the *Italia dei Valori* changed slightly during the following phases of the campaign, and they gradually deciding to end this fragmentation and support the water referendum, too. In particular, Di Pietro started to nominate members to the water committees during his public interventions in spring 2011, and he openly recognized the extraordinary efforts of the referendum promoters in launching the campaign. While this party only partially shared the anti-neoliberal premises of most of the Forum organizations, their views regarding water tended to be compatible. Furthermore, Di Pietro and his party strongly wished to use the water issue as a way of promoting their own contemporaneous referendums, in particular, the question on the *legittimo impedimento*, a sort of ministerial immunity that Berlusconi and his allies had introduced during the previous years.

The position of the *PD* similarly evolved in the two years of the campaign and followed a path that is similar to the one of the *Italia dei Valori*. This notwithstanding, the evolution of the *PD* attitude was mainly the result of an internal dialectic, which opposed local leaders, sections and political areas within the party. At the end of April 2010, during the first phases of the campaign, *PD* leader Pierluigi Bersani declared that his party sympathized with the water movement and its campaign, but that the referendum was not the right legal instrument to obtain a change in water management. However, there was another reason that convinced Bersani to choose a similar diplomatic exit strategy. The *PD* – a party that was combining liberal and social democratic tendencies – was very divided on the issue of water privatization. On one side, numerous local leaders, the majority of the activists in 2011, part of the youth organization *Giovani Democratici*, and some regional sections were strongly in support of the idea of promoting water as a public or common good, and actively participated in the previous campaigns of the Forum. On the other side, other national and local leaders were involved in privatization experiments, and tended to support neoliberal initiatives in this and other fields. Some high-profile members of the *PD*
contributed to launching the initiative/website *Acqua Libera Tutti* (Free Water for All), which opposed the referendum and supported a solution based on private participation in the water sector.

Notwithstanding these divisions, the PD gradually accepted to support the campaign, starting, in particular, from its local branches. Numerous local sections and a regional one (Veneto) officially allied with the committee of the proposers, and, by the end, the entire party officially invited its voters to participate in the four referendums: without doubt, the work of the rank-and-file PD militants and the participation of the PD voters contributed to the success of the campaign. Nonetheless, immediately after the victory the party leaders readopted the ambiguous keywords that they had tended to use before. Their focus moved from the issue of water privatization, to a milder opposition to attempts of ‘forced privatization of water’.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the right-wing and secessionist party *Lega Nord* experienced one of its first internal divisions due the issue of water privatization, even though its deputies and senators had contributed in formulating the laws that the referendum promoters were attacking. During the petition campaign, the Forum activists were able to collect very large numbers of signatures in areas of northern Italy that *Lega Nord* controls politically. Probably for the first time since its creation, the electoral base of the party seemed to revolt against its leaders, deciding to participate in a campaign that they perceived as less political, and less left-oriented. Following this underground, internal dissonance, some weeks or days before the vote various *Lega Nord* leaders decided to declare their support for the referendum, opening an internal division with their national leader, Umberto Bossi.

*Other referendum committees*

When the party *Italia dei Valori* decided to promote three referendums contemporaneous with those proposed by the Italian Forum of Water Movements, this choice deeply disturbed the organizations and activists of the Forum. At the same time, the presence of these contemporaneous referendums started to appear at a certain point of the campaign as a clear opportunity to support the water struggle, to build alliances, and to increase the possibilities of winning. These two opposing tendencies determined a behaviour on the part of the water referendum committee towards the other referendum proposers that could appear as ambiguous and not well defined, but that very slowly moved from a strong opposition to a relative collaboration, and in some cases to an alliance.
For this tendency, I distinguish two separate phases. The decision of the Italian Constitutional Court to accept only four of the six proposed referendums, on 8 January 2011, provides the marker dividing these two phases. The court refused one of the referendum proposals of the Forum as well as the Italia dei Valori question on water, which the Forum activists perceived as too vague and evasive. This decision eliminated, therefore, a visible point of conflict between the party and the water referendum proposers. Furthermore, the referendum campaign entered into a period of intensive mobilization, during which the two types of referendum proposers shared the very difficult objective of communicating with a large population of voters. Finally, numerous local and national actors, not directly involved in the referendums committees, started to create initiatives of propaganda in support of the entire set of referendums, focusing in this way more on the vote than on the issues at stake.

During the phase that preceded the decision of the Constitutional Court, the Forum actors often perceived the Italia dei Valori and the referendum committees that it supported as being one of their main opponents, or at least as their direct competitors. Participating in the activities of the FIMA secretariat in 2010, I noticed, for instance, that the water activists tended to monitor the web communication strategies of this party, to intervene in a critical way on the Italia dei Valori Facebook pages dedicated to the referendums, and to delete the messages of the party supporters from their own social media pages. The water activists tended to express this conflict mainly by stressing two dimensions. On the one hand, they claimed that the Italia dei Valori was creating ambiguity among the citizens, who started to become confused about the two groups of proposers. On the other hand, the water activists also interpreted the conflict between FIMA and the Italia dei Valori under the lens of a larger political opposition between two models of political participation: party politics (characterized according to them by vertical structures and a certain distance from the citizens), and social movement activism.

The extraordinary amount of signatures that the water referendum committee was able to collect in 2010 partially confirmed the exceptional ability of the involved social movement organizations to enter into contact and interact with the rest of society. As a consequence, the Italian Forum of Water Movements acquired a greater status in the Italian political spectrum, and the centre-left parties started to consider the water issue as being crucial if they were to gain consensus.

During the second phase, the Italia dei Valori decided quite quickly to support the water referendums, in order also to promote their own consultations at the same time. The water committee adopted a different strategy,
and refused for several months to support, or even to talk about, the other referendums. While the media, the centre-left parties and numerous local committees started to simplify the political discourse by asking to the citizens to vote ‘Four Yeses’, FIMA continued its campaign with a symbol proposing ‘Two Yeses for Water as a Common Good’.

This notwithstanding, the water referendum committee gradually agreed to offer its external support for the referendum on nuclear power, and to increase the number of joint events with the no-nuclear groups. Among the factors that contributed to linking the nuclear and the water issues together, one of the most important was surely the fact that an increasing number of organizations started to jointly support both referendums. In particular, various green associations joined the anti-nuclear committee, giving to this referendum a meaning and an importance less related to the ideas of its initial political proposer. The same organizations were active in FIMA or in support of the water campaigns since the initial initiatives on this issue: due to these numerous links, it was impossible to maintain the two struggles as separate. As I explore in detail in Chapter 5, I am convinced that this process tended to start at the local level, where small groups of persons were involved in both campaigns at the same time.

Nothing similar happened with the committee proposing the referendum on the _legittimo impedimento_, an issue mainly linked with the legal controversies and the trials that involving Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. On the one hand, the water activists perceived this topic as too weak, too linked with the proposing party, and too much of a party-like way of engaging in politics. On the other hand, very few organizations were deeply engaged in this issue, limiting therefore the direct connections that facilitated the overlapping of the water and nuclear themes.

### Relationship with the mainstream media

_We won the referendum, not you!_

– The media relations agent of FIMA, addressing Bianca Berlinguer, former TG3 director, during the TV live broadcast that followed the referendum victory.

The mechanisms used by the media, the relationship with mainstream media such as national television stations and local newspapers, and the consequent strategies that the activists chose in order to communicate deeply influenced the development of the referendum campaign on the issue of water (see Mattoni 2012). Sometimes, both journalists and the political actors involved perceived this relationship as a conflictual one.
In the hours that followed the referendum victory, the press agent of the water referendum committee appeared on an interview during a live broadcast dedicated to the consultation. As he declared afterwards, this was the first opportunity for him to appear on national television. In order to react to what he perceived as censorship, he refused to answer to the interviewer’s questions, repeating instead the sentence ‘We won the referendum, not you!’ He clearly indicated with the word we the referendum organizers, the numerous social movement actors that participated in the campaign, and the involved citizens; with the word you, he probably referred to the national television, and to the centre-left politicians invited in studios. Similarly, on the day that followed the referendum victory, numerous journalists dedicated their articles to the ability of the activists to manage new communication strategies, to bypass the silence of the traditional media, and to easily impose their message by reinterpreting and attacking the communication efforts of their opponents.

Indeed, the referendum proposers had to find their way into a very closed media environment during the greater part of their campaign. Moreover, during the referendum the mainstream media system appeared deeply linked to the party system. This notwithstanding, it would be too simplistic to describe the communication during the referendum campaign as a struggle between silent and unreceptive mainstream media on one side, and direct, network-structured, web-based communication on the other side. In contrast, it is necessary to underline that the referendum promoters always tried, without success, to access the national newspapers and television stations, to participate in the main talk shows, and to appear in numerous forms in the local newspapers. Similarly, some media – in particular, some left-oriented national newspapers – finally decided to support the referendum, and actively participated in the campaign by presenting the activists’ initiatives, even if in an incomplete version.

Some examples will help me to present both the difficult relationship and the channels of access to the media during the referendum campaign. First of all, the relationship with the national broadcasting service (RAI – Radiotelevisione Italiana Spa, hereafter RAI) was deeply problematic during the entire campaign. In particular, the administrative council of the service waited much longer than expected to approve the electoral regulations that defines the criteria of access to television during the referendum campaign. The referendum proposers perceived this choice as a way of...
limiting their appearances on national radio and television, and as part of a broader strategy of silence around the referendum issue. Other elements support this interpretation. For instance, the electoral advertisements giving information on the vote appeared only during the last days of the campaign and during night-time slots. Furthermore, the most important RAI news broadcast communicated a wrong date for the referendum. Finally, the main talk shows, both those aligned with the left or pro-government, both on the public RAI or on national private television stations, never invited the referendum committees to appear and to express their opinions. The referendum supporters reacted to this perceived censorship mainly in two ways. Firstly, by approaching the national broadcasting service as a public institution, and therefore asking that it apply the electoral procedures in a better way. Secondly, by campaigning against these media choices, for instance, distributing parodies of the TV advertisements dedicated to the referendum.

A second example can better explain how the activists tried to access to the mainstream media, utilizing the internal mechanisms of these media to their advantage. In February 2011, they attempt to use the main Italian TV contest, the annual Sanremo song festival, to spread symbols and messages related to the referendum. To achieve this goal, they organized an alternative festival dedicated to water in the small town of Sanremo, during which they distributed leaflets and blue air balloons, organized flash mobs, and invited sympathetic artists and singers to exhibit in the town squares. Even though this alternative event did not succeed in getting much coverage during the main TV contest, the referendum supporters were able to convince some participants to the official festival to wear an electoral symbol, a blue wristband, during the live broadcast.

Similarly, the referendum promoters attempted to garner support for their cause during the traditional and very popular concert that the most important trade unions organize every year on 1 May, in Rome. In this case, most of the artists involved were also referendum sympathizers: some had already collaborated with the water committee in the past, and wanted to express their opinion during the concert. However, since RAI television was transmitting the event, the artists were obliged to avoid talking about the referendum during their performances. In this case, too, some of the musicians reacted by wearing a water-related symbol, an electoral badge.

A final example of how the activists interacted with the media environment is their large use of testimonials during the campaign. Numerous and, in particular, with the main parties, is therefore direct and evident.
musicians, famous comedians, writers and actors agreed to appear in short spots promoting the water referendum or the public water issue, or to contribute with their own songs, texts or sketches. Even though these spots or videos circulated primarily online, in most cases these testimonials were famous thanks to their participation in TV programmes: this phenomenon, therefore, is only in part a digital one. Furthermore, the single appearance of the singer Adriano Celentano on a famous talk show supporting the referendums probably reached more Italian citizens than the spots that were circulating online.

Conclusions

This chapter has described how the Italian referendum campaign against water privatization was a relatively short process that was, nonetheless, strongly linked to a longer mobilization in Italy as well as with a more general conflict on a global scale. While the main goal of the campaign and its activists during the referendum was to reach in a quick way the maximum number of citizens, and to convince them to vote, the Forum and its activists never abandoned their long-term goals. They attempt to present, whenever possible, their anti-neoliberal paradigm during the actions taken, opening channels of direct dialogue, publishing pamphlets, and stressing the differences between the relatively generic idea of acqua pubblica (public water) and acqua bene comune (water as commons). It is important, therefore, to bear this distinction in mind, in particular, when attempting to understand why alliances with political parties and the conditional support from some of the media during the campaign proved to be ephemeral. In my opinion, the other actors could easily supported the referendum and the vote, even though they seldom shared the anti-neoliberal ideas of the referendum promoters on water.

For reasons of space, I have described the campaign in a simplified way, too, presenting the water coalition as a unique, homogeneous actor, and its communications choices as something planned and uniform. In the next three chapters, I investigate the referendum mobilizations in greater detail, with a focus on digital media and online forms of communication. The

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34 In some rare cases, testimonials emerged and acted online: in particular, it is the case of the video *YouTube stars contro il nucleare* (YouTube stars against nuclear power) (*The Jackal* 2011), where numerous famous Italian YouTube contributors supported the referendum against nuclear power.
internal differences and the pluralist nature of the water coalition better emerge from this detailed analysis, showing, in particular, how highly different communications strategies coexisted and connected during the referendum campaign.