Founded in 1955, the Radicali Italiani, previously called “Partito Radicale,” is an anticlerical, liberal, and anticommunist party that has played an important role in the Italian political system, even if its electoral weight has always been rather modest and it has never obtained a top position in the leadership of the country. Its political importance derived from its early perception of the need for a greater social, religious, political, economic, and sexual freedom and from the use of innovative instruments of political action: the radio, nonviolent action, referendum, and more recently the Internet. The most famous battles conducted by the radicals were the referendum campaigns in 1970s in favor of divorce and abortion. Other important combats or battles delivered were in favor of the legalization of drugs, euthanasia, abolition of the death penalty, antimilitarism, feminism, antinuclearism, freedom of sexuality, and abolishment of the public financing of political parties. More recently, in 2005, the Italian Radicals led the referendum campaign in favor of the freedom of research, particularly on stem cells.

This variety of interests and actions shows that the Italian Radicals are a small but complex political reality from which a multiplicity of innovative and often visionary ideas emerged. There is, in other words, an innovative spirit that can also be perceived in the way they have exploited the ICT. It was the first party in the mid-1980s to introduce a Bulletin Board System (BBS) called Agora, which hosted one of the very first virtual communities in Italy and in Europe. It was also the first political party in Italy and probably/possibly in Europe to have a Web site (1995).
and to have organized binding online elections in 2000 to elect one-third of its executive board. These were repeated a further two times.

At the time of the first online elections, the Italian Radicals also implemented an online forum on their Web site that replaced the Agora BBS. This online forum, called the “radical community,” rapidly became one of the most successful forums worldwide with more than 550,000 messages and a great number of people registered for it. In the present chapter, we will analyze this forum in order to measure the deliberativeness of the debates and, on the one hand, to evaluate what functions a successful online forum can perform for a political party, and, on the other hand, to point out some of the ingredients that have determined its success. To date, no such research has been conducted in-depth: existing studies on digital political parties are based on Web-content analysis and on the external reasons for using ICT, such as information dissemination and campaigning (Gibson et al. 2003). The internal reasons for using ICT and, more particularly, the role played by the online forum within the parties received far less attention even though, as we observed in Chapter 3, almost one out of two political parties host Web forums, which is much more than the proportion of cities and parliaments that host Web forums.

The object of our investigation can, therefore, rightly be considered as largely new and original. In order to conduct our research, we will first present and justify our methodological choices that give clear preference to survey and interview analysis over content analysis. This is followed by the investigation of the level of activity of the forum by analyzing, on the one hand, the evolution of forum registrations and, on the other hand, the rate of active and passive participation in the forum. We will then examine the technical and organizational characteristics of the forum and the sociodemographic profiles of its users. The fourth section is concerned with the largely unexplored question of the functions fulfilled by the forum and whether these are fulfilled successfully. Finally, in the last section, the question of the deliberativeness of the debates is explored by referring to the deliberative criteria that have been implemented in Chapter 2. From a theoretical perspective, the radical forum, which corresponds to an influential public space, is particularly interesting for further analysis of the effect of the external impact factor on the deliberativeness of online debates.

5.1 Methodology

In order to evaluate the functions, activity, and deliberative quality of the online radical forum, we shall refer to the statistics provided by the party