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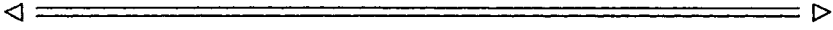
978-0-521-43589-5 - Machiavelli and Republicanism

Edited by Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli

Excerpt

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PART I



Machiavelli and the republican experience

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## 1



## Machiavelli and Florentine republican experience

NICOLAI RUBINSTEIN

Florence, wrote Machiavelli in 1519 or 1520 in his *Discursus* on the reform of the Florentine government, has never been a ‘repubblica . . . che abbi avute le debite qualità sue’<sup>1</sup> – an observation which recapitulates the statement made a few years earlier in his *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* that ‘per dugento anni che si ha di vera memoria’, Florence had never possessed a ‘stato, per il quale la possa veramente essere chiamata repubblica’.<sup>2</sup> In the *Discorsi*, he attributes this to the fact that before acquiring its independence from the Hohenstaufen Empire, Florence had always lived ‘sotto il governo d’altrui’. That it had never been a true republic, he states in the *Discursus*,<sup>3</sup> is borne out by the regime, the *stato*, it had had since 1393, when under Maso degli Albizzi’s leadership the city became a ‘repubblica governata da ottimati’ and thus acquired an oligarchical regime, which lasted until 1434, when it was replaced with the Medici regime. Its ‘difetti’ were the excessive power, and yet insufficient ‘reputazione’, of the Signoria, the long intervals between the electoral scrutinies which qualified citizens for office-holding, the influence which private citizens exercised over the decisions of the government through their membership of advisory bodies, the *pratiche*, the lack of institutional safeguards against the formation of factions or *sette* – ‘le quali sono la rovina di uno stato’ – by great citizens, ‘uomini grandi’. But the worst of these ‘disordini’, the one ‘che importava il tutto’, was the virtual exclusion from the regime of the people, ‘il popolo’, which ‘non vi aveva dentro la parte sua’. These criticisms, which reflect Machiavelli’s disapproval of government by *ottimati*, as well as his passionate concern for a true ‘ordine civile’, contrast with the praise his friend Francesco Guicciardini had lavished, about ten years earlier, on the aristocratic regime of the early fifteenth century, of which ‘meritamente si dice che . . . è stato el più savio, el più glorioso, el più felice governo che mai per alcuno tempo abbi avuto la città nostra’<sup>4</sup> – a judgement which echoed the nostalgia which that regime had evoked, later in the fifteenth century, among *ottimati*.<sup>5</sup> Florence, it

<sup>1</sup> *Discursus florentinarum rerum post mortem iunioris Laurentii Medices*, ed. M. Martelli, Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere* (Florence, 1971), p. 24.    <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 1, 49, p. 131.    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Storie fiorentine*, ed. R. Palmarocchi (Bari, 1931), pp. 2–3.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. N. Rubinstein, ‘Florentine constitutionalism and Medici ascendancy in the fifteenth century’ in N. Rubinstein, ed. *Florentine Studies* (London, 1968), p. 460.

was said, was then ruled by citizens who ‘non dovriano dirsi inferiori a quei più savi Romani così celebrati dall’ antichità’<sup>6</sup> and who placed the common good before private interest; Niccolò Soderini, one of the leading opponents of Medici ascendancy in 1465–6, declared that ‘chi non governò innanzi al 33, non sa governare’.<sup>7</sup>

By way of criticism, as well as of praise, the regime under which Florence was governed in the early fifteenth century was thus considered by later generations the most significant manifestation of republican government the Florentines had experienced before the establishment, in 1494, of the Great Council. In this chapter on republican experience in fifteenth-century Florence, I shall therefore concentrate on the period before 1434, and then briefly discuss the changes which that experience underwent under the Medici, and after their expulsion in 1494.

This is a large subject, and in order to do it a modicum of justice, I propose to distinguish, in what must perforce be very general observations, the following three aspects of that experience: the concept contemporaries formed of Florence’s republican institutions; the ways in which the working of these institutions affected Florentine citizens; and the extent to which they actively participated in the government of Florence.

If we want to ask how the Florentines conceptualised their republic, we have to go back to the fourteenth, and even the thirteenth century, when the rise of the Signoria in Northern and Central Italy brought about, in the surviving Italian city republics, the perception of a fundamental antithesis between despotic rule and the ‘popoli che vivono in libertà’,<sup>8</sup> the ‘libertas populi’,<sup>9</sup> a term which, in the fifteenth century, the humanists replaced with the classical one for commonwealth, *res publica*. According to Cicero’s definition, as explained by St Augustine,<sup>10</sup> ‘omnino nullam esse rem publicam, quoniam non esset res populi’; and, in his translation of the *Politics*, Leonardo Bruni rendered Aristotle’s term for the third true constitution, *politeia*, with *res publica*.<sup>11</sup> The chief difference between the republican and the despotic regime was to concern the contrast between the absolute and arbitrary exercise of government and its limitation by law and the will of the people.

<sup>6</sup> Luca della Robbia, in his life of Bartolomeo Valori composed around 1500, ed. P. Bigazzi, *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 4, 1 (1843), pp. 239–40.

<sup>7</sup> That is before the victory of the Albizzi faction, which, after Cosimo de’ Medici’s return from exile in 1434, was followed by the establishment of Medici ascendancy. Ed. G. Pampaloni, ‘Nuovi tentativi di riforme alla Costituzione Fiorentina attraverso le consulte’, *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 120 (1962), p. 572 (*pratica* of 8 July). For a contemporary narrative of the crisis of the Medici regime in 1465–6, see M. Phillips, *The Memoir of Marco Parenti. A Life in Medici Florence* (Princeton, 1987 and London, 1989), chs. 7, 9, 10.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Matteo Villani, *Cronica*, 1x, 87, ed. F.G. Dragomanni (Milan, 1848) vi, p. 275.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Ferrero de’ Ferreri, *Historia*, ed. C. Cipolla (Rome, 1908–20), II, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> *De civitate Dei*, II, 21; cf. Cicero, *De re publica*, I, 25.

<sup>11</sup> *Politics*, 1279a: ‘Cum autem multitudo gubernet ad communem utilitatem, vocatur communi nomine rerumpublicarum [πολιτειῶν] omnium, respublica [πολιτεία]’, Aristoteles, *Libri omnes quibus tota moralis philosophia . . . continetur* (Lyons, 1579), v, p. 571.

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Bruni was the first humanist to attempt, in his *Laudatio Florentinae urbis* of 1403,<sup>12</sup> an analysis of the republican constitution of Florence; but, largely owing to the panegyric nature of this work, his analysis is incomplete and necessarily biased; while his later, more objective account, in his short Greek treatise on the Florentine *politeia*,<sup>13</sup> suffers from his attempt to apply Aristotelian constitutional theory, in the form of the mixed constitution, to Florence. What does, however, stand out in these analyses are a number of basic principles, which are conceived by Bruni as fundamental to an understanding of the Florentine system of government: for the executive, the Signoria, a strict limitation, by a variety of means, of its almost regal authority, and its dependence, in the last resort, on the will of the people, as voiced in the legislative councils of the People and of the Commune; for the citizens, liberty under the law, and an equality which implied, among other things, as Bruni pointed out in 1428 in his funeral oration for Nanni Strozzi, equal opportunity to rise to high office;<sup>14</sup> for the social classes, as he states in his constitutional treatise about ten years later, a balance between the patricians and the people which, while tilted towards the former, took no account of the extremes of private power and of poverty, whose representatives were excluded from government. How far did the political experience of Florentine citizens conform to these principles?

The overriding experience the average Florentine citizen had of his republic must have been the power, and indeed the majesty, of the Signoria, with its eight Priors and the Gonfalonier of Justice, a power which Gregorio Dati described, at the beginning of the century, as 'grande senza misura'.<sup>15</sup> Decisively reasserted in 1382 after the Ciompi revolt of 1378,<sup>16</sup> it included the authority to initiate legislation, as well as the right to intervene in criminal jurisdiction when the public interest might demand it. But the Signoria, which deliberated jointly with its two Colleges, the Sixteen Gonfalonieri di compagnia and the Twelve Buonuomini, was not the only magistracy which the citizens would regard as the governing body of the republic. The Otto di Guardia, set up after the Ciompi revolt to protect the security of the state, had acquired extensive powers in policing it, the Dieci di Balìa were, after 1384, in times of war, in charge of military operations and diplomatic negotiations, the Ufficiali del Monte administered the funded debt and had become the central financial magistracy of the Commune. The increasing range of the powers and competence of the executive branch of government was part of the political experience of the Florentines from the 1380s onwards; it was largely due to the

<sup>12</sup> *From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni*, ed. H. Baron (Chicago and London, 1968), pp. 217–63.

<sup>13</sup> 'Leonard Bruni's Constitution of Florence', ed. A. Moulakis, *Rinascimento*, 2nd series, 26 (1986), pp. 141–90. It was probably composed in 1439 or 1440: *ibid.* pp. 154–5.

<sup>14</sup> *Miscellanea*, ed. E. Baluze and G.D. Mansi, 4, (Lucca, 1764), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Istoria di Firenze*, ed L. Pratesi (Florence, 1904), p. 148.

<sup>16</sup> See N. Rubinstein, 'Il regime politico di Firenze dopo il Tumulto dei Ciompi' in *Il Tumulto dei Ciompi* (Convegno Internazionale di Studi 1979) (Florence, 1981), pp. 105–24.

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traumatic effects of the Ciompi revolt and its aftermath and of the wars against Giangaleazzo Visconti, and to the aggrandisement and reorganisation of the city's territorial dominion. But there were limits to this development. A permanent commission of eighty-one composed almost entirely of members of the executive branch, with full powers to hire mercenaries and levy taxes for this purpose, which had been set up in 1393,<sup>17</sup> was for all practical purposes abolished eleven years later, and a contemporary diarist commented: 'il popolo ne fu molto lieto'.<sup>18</sup> It was significant of this reluctance to increase the powers of the executive even further, that when in 1411 a new council, of 200, was created, without whose assent no military action was to be undertaken, it consisted only partly of official members, and its decisions required in their turn the assent of the councils of the People and the Commune.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, these two ancient councils of the republic, whose membership totalled over 500,<sup>20</sup> provided the most important of the checks to the powers of the executive. They could be seen to represent the broad foundation of the republican structure of government. As Bruni puts it in his *Laudatio*, in terms derived from Roman law, 'quod enim ad multos attinet', must be decided by the many.<sup>21</sup>

Bruni points out that another check to the great power of the Signoria was the short term of their office. All public offices were held for short periods, mostly for six months, those of the Signoria for two months only. This, as well as the proliferation of offices since the second half of the fourteenth century, provided the citizens with a wide range of opportunities to hold office, and consequently to participate directly in government and administration. This extensive availability of public office was thus a major aspect of the republican experience of the citizens, and thus of the Florentine *libertas*;<sup>22</sup> another concerned the methods by which this availability was translated into fact, in other words, the methods by which citizens were actually elected to office.

Since early in the fourteenth century, election to public office was based on periodical vetting for eligibility in so-called scrutinies (*squittini*), which were carried out by specially convened commissions consisting of the Signoria, its two Colleges, a number of other ex officio members, and eighty additional members elected by the Signoria and the Colleges, which gave the executive a key role in determining the composition of the commission.<sup>23</sup> Actual

<sup>17</sup> See A. Molho, 'The Florentine oligarchy and the "Balie" of the late Trecento', *Speculum*, 43 (1968), pp. 31ff.

<sup>18</sup> Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli, *Ricordi*, ed. V. Branca (Florence, 1956), pp. 426–7. Cf. G. Guidi, *Il governo della città-repubblica di Firenze del primo Quattrocento* (Florence, 1981), II, p. 146.

<sup>19</sup> Law establishing the council of 200, *Sulla repubblica fiorentina a tempo di Cosimo il Vecchio*, ed. F.C. Pellegrini (Pisa, 1880), Appendix, pp. ix–xiii.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Guidi, *Il governo*, II, pp. 140, 142.

<sup>21</sup> *Laudatio*, as above, n. 12, p. 260. *Codex*, 5, 59, 5, 2. Cf. Rubinstein, 'Florentine constitutionalism', p. 446, n. 1.

<sup>22</sup> See N. Rubinstein, 'Florentine *libertas*', *Rinascimento*, 2nd series, 26 (1986), pp. 13, 15.

<sup>23</sup> On this and the following, see N. Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434 to 1494)* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 56ff.; Guidi, *Il governo*, I, pp. 283ff.

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appointment to office followed on the extraction of the names of eligible citizens from the pouches in which they had been placed after the scrutinies. There were separate pouches for different offices or groups of offices, and of these the most prestigious contained the names of the citizens who had been made eligible for the so-called three highest offices, the Signoria, the Sixteen Gonfalonieri di compagnia, and the Twelve Buonomini. Scrutinies – that of the Tre Maggiori Uffici was separate from that of all the other public offices – were to take place every five years (in fact, the intervals were usually longer), and votes were cast on nominations by the Gonfaloniers of the ancient militia companies, who could be assumed to be well acquainted with the citizens of their sixteen districts;<sup>24</sup> and both the identity of the voters and the results of the vote were kept strictly secret. This meant that citizens who had been nominated would not know whether they had been made eligible until their names were extracted from the pouches prior to the filling of a vacancy. This was a matter of particular importance for the three most prestigious offices, which included the Signoria; accordingly, even if a citizen, though eligible to them, was temporarily barred from being elected (for instance, because he had held the same office recently), he was now known (*veduto*), as were those who were actually elected to office (*seduti*), to have been qualified for government. This gave the group of *veduti* and *seduti* a preferential position not only in subsequent scrutinies, but also when it came to electing the membership of councils, such as that of 200, which were endowed with special responsibilities and powers, and hence affected the participation of citizens in political life.

The secrecy which was an essential feature of the Florentine electoral system conformed to that which surrounded the working of both the executive and the legislative organs of the republic; it formed an essential part of the republican experience of Florentine citizens. Just as the deliberations of the Signoria were meant to be kept secret – an obligation which was physically reflected in the separate location of their living quarters on the second floor of their palace – so the vote in the councils was by secret ballot. This concern with secrecy was underlined by the lengths to which the government would go in trying to prevent the formation of caucuses, as in the temporary suppression of religious confraternities, which were banned, for instance, in 1419, on the grounds that some of them encouraged factionalism; later in the century citizens who, as *veduti* or *seduti*, were known to be eligible to government, were forbidden to attend meetings of confraternities while electoral scrutinies were in progress. But there were ways of evading such prohibitions; we know of at least one of the more prestigious confraternities which, around the middle of the century,

<sup>24</sup> D.V. and F.W. Kent, *Neighbours and Neighbourhoods in Renaissance Florence: the District of the Red Lion in the Fifteenth Century* (Locust Valley, New York, 1982), pp. 17–19.

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had special sponsors, *sollicitatori*, to support weaker members in the ongoing scrutiny of 1454.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, while the secrecy of the electoral system was, on the whole, effective, the same did not apply to the independence of the scrutinies from outside influence. It was quite usual for citizens to canvass members of scrutiny commissions to nominate them; there was even a technical term for this, *pregheria*, and family *ricordanze* would record such *pregherie* and the sense of obligation they involved. Gregorio Dati's *Libro segreto* throws a vivid light on this practice, as well as on the ways in which Florentine citizens experienced the intricacies of their electoral system. On 3 May 1412 Dati records that his name had been drawn for the office of Gonfaloniere di compagnia for his district; until then, he says, he had not been sure that his name was in the pouches for the Colleges, but for the sake of his own honour and of that of his descendants, 'pur lo disiderava'; 'onde', he continues, 'per non esser ingrato né volendo usare lo insaziabile appetito, che quanto più ha più disiderano, mi sono proposto e diliberato che da ora inanzi per ufici di Comune che s'abiano a fare o a squittinare mai non debo pregare alcuno, ma lasciare fare a chi fia sopra ciò . . .'.<sup>26</sup>

The desire to hold public office was, in fact, one of the most striking characteristics of the republican experience of Florentine citizens. A number of the offices in the administration of the dominion were sought not only for *onore* but also for *utile*, and could indeed bring considerable financial advantages to their holders; the honour which membership of the Signoria, whose salary was only intended to cover expenses, brought with it, could also mean social advancement and political influence for oneself and one's family. While the holding of public office was extolled by humanists such as Matteo Palmieri as the duty of the citizen who placed the common good above private interest and who knows 'essere commessa in lui la publica dignità et il bene commune essere lasciato nella sua fede',<sup>27</sup> others castigated the 'ambitio officiorum', the 'volere gli ufici', as the cause of 'tutto ciò che di male è stato nella benedetta città di Firenze';<sup>28</sup> while Alberti, in a famous passage, has Giannozzo deride the citizens' scramble for public office, which makes them into nothing better than 'publici servi': it was far preferable to 'vivere a sé, non al comune'.<sup>29</sup> Some

<sup>25</sup> See J. Henderson, 'Le confraternite religiose nella Firenze del tardo Medioevo: patroni spirituali e anche politici?', *Ricerche storiche*, 15 (1985), pp. 77–94, and also Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence*, p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> *Mercanti storici. Ricordi nella Firenze tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, ed. V. Branca (Milan, 1986), pp. 550–1. <sup>27</sup> *Vita civile*, ed. G. Belloni (Florence, 1982), p. 132.

<sup>28</sup> Rinaldo degli Albizi in a *pratica* of 1431 (Pellegrini, ed., *Sulla repubblica fiorentina*, p. xxxiii): 'Causa vero [discordiarum] est ambitio officiorum'; Marchionne di Coppo Stefani, *Cronaca fiorentina*, ed. N. Rodolico, *Rer. Ital. Script.*, 30, 1 (Città di Castello, 1903 – Bologna, 1955), rubrica 923, p. 413 (ad 1382).

<sup>29</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *I libri della Famiglia in Opere volgari*, C. Grayson, ed. (Bari, 1960–73), 1, pp. 179–82.

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citizens would agree, Giovanni Rucellai, for example, during his time in the political wilderness after Cosimo's return from exile and before being accepted, nearly thirty years later, into the Medici regime.<sup>30</sup> For the vast majority, however, high office represented the peak of their republican experience. The memoirs of fifteenth-century Florentines clearly show the role office-holding played in their lives. The 'cursus honorum' might begin with the election to the consulate of one of the guilds; communal offices would follow, until finally successful citizens would reach the plateau of the top offices of government and administration, which included, first of all, the Signoria and their Colleges, but also such powerful and prestigious magistracies as the Dieci di Ballia, the Otto di Guardia, and the Ufficiali del Monte.

The citizens who had reached this plateau, after having been made eligible for the government, constituted what the Florentines called the *reggimento*; after the scrutiny of 1411, it amounted to just over 1,000 citizens; by the time the scrutiny of 1433 had completed its business, it had risen to over 2,000.<sup>31</sup> While this shows a remarkable degree of social mobility, it should be added that only a fraction of these men (185 and 327 respectively) belonged to the craft guilds, although these contributed a quarter of the members of most offices: evidently because only a very small section of the lower classes were considered fit for positions in the government. Another significant feature of these figures is the prevalence of single families: of the 1757 citizens of the greater guilds who were made eligible to the three highest offices in 1433, just under 100 were individually successful, the rest belonged to 227 families. Among these a very small group was represented with far greater numbers than the average of 7.3 per family – such as the Capponi with 20 and the Strozzi with no less than 40 members. The *reggimento*, it has been said, has to be seen 'as a constellation of families rather than as an aggregate of individuals'.<sup>32</sup>

Nor was the elitist tendency in the access to high public office, and hence to a high level of political participation, confined to the procedure of qualification for these offices. The methods by which the results of the electoral scrutinies were used in the final stage of the electoral process, that is the extraction from the pouches which had been filled with the names of the successful candidates, included in their turn an element of selection. The Signoria comprised, besides the eight Priors, the most prestigious and influential member of the government, the Gonfalonier of Justice, and, to make appointment to this office exceptionally difficult, there had always been a separate pouch for it. To select

<sup>30</sup> See *Giovanni Rucellai ed il suo Zibaldone*, 1: 'Il Zibaldone Quaresimale', ed. A. Perosa (London, 1960), pp. 39–43; cf. p. 122.

<sup>31</sup> For this and the following, see D. Kent, 'The Florentine *reggimento* in the fifteenth century', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 28 (1975), 575–638; see also A. Molho, 'Politics and the ruling class in early Renaissance Florence', *Nuova Rivista Storica*, 52 (1968), 401–20.

<sup>32</sup> Kent, 'The Florentine *reggimento* in the fifteenth century', p. 587.



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names to be placed in this pouch from among those who were eligible to the Priorate, was the job of the officials who were in charge of the technical aspects of the scrutinies of the Tre Maggiori Uffici; but from 1387 onwards, these officials, the *accoppiatori*, could also place the names of those citizens into a special pouch for the Priorate, the *borsellino*, which, owing to the smaller number of name tickets it contained, provided their owners with greater opportunities for being actually elected to office.<sup>33</sup>

Even so, on the eve of the establishment of the Medici regime, the citizens who were eligible to government represented a sizeable part of the population of Florence, which in 1427 amounted to about 37,000 persons.<sup>34</sup> Of these, well over one half were men (c. 20,000); on the other hand, again according to the calculations of Herlihy and Klapisch, 46 per cent were under 20;<sup>35</sup> 25 was the minimum age for office-holding, 30 for the Priorate.

At the same time, one has to bear in mind that the Tre Maggiori Uffici represented only a fraction of the offices that had to be filled recurrently within the city and its territory. Only a few of the most sensitive of these were temporarily filled by way of direct elections, as were many of the minor ones, but here too the normal method was by sortition preceded by scrutiny. These scrutinies of the 'internal and external offices' concerned magistracies such as the Dieci di Balìa and the Otto di Guardia, whose importance could in some respects equal or even surpass that of the Signoria, as well as top offices of the territorial administration, such as those of the Captains of Pisa and of Arezzo, which combined great responsibilities with extensive powers; but the scrutinies also made citizens eligible for a host of minor administrative offices in the city and its territory. If republican experience, in terms of participation in government and administration, was to be based on eligibility to office, its range, despite all the gradations of that eligibility, was remarkably wide.

But if we define republican experience in terms of actual participation in decision-making, the picture is very different. Among the 3,000-odd posts, including membership of the councils, that had to be filled every year,<sup>36</sup> those which belonged to the executive branch of government were, at any given point in time, occupied by a small section of the citizens who were eligible for them. On the other hand, while participation in actual decision-making was restricted to a small group of citizens, this was counterbalanced by the rapid rotation of office. It was further compensated by the regular use, by the Signoria, of advisory committees, which consisted, apart from ex officio members, of citizens who at the time did not belong to the executive branch of government.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Cronica volgare di Anonimo Fiorentino*, ed. E. Bellondi, *Rer. Ital. Script.*, 27, 2 (Città di Castello, 1915 – Bologna, 1917), pp. 34–35.

<sup>34</sup> D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans et leurs familles* (Paris, 1978), p. 183.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 348, 375.

<sup>36</sup> Molho, 'Politics and the ruling class in early Renaissance Florence', p. 407.

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Without any status in the constitution, the composition of these meetings, or *pratiche*, was determined by the choice of the Signoria, a choice which in its turn was based on convention. That eminent citizens should be summoned was long-established practice; under the regime established after 1382, the *pratiche* were the most reliable mirror of its aristocratic features. Since the Signoria seldom ignored their advice, they formed an essential, usually decisive, element in the process of decision-making. The new elitist style of politics is borne out by their increasing frequency and also by the shift, noticeable after the turn of the century, from advice being given by speakers on behalf of corporate bodies to being offered independently, or on behalf of other members.<sup>37</sup> The citizens who were regularly summoned to these consultative meetings represented the elite of the *reggimento*; in the early fifteenth century, they amounted to about seventy men.<sup>38</sup> In this inner circle of the regime, Maso degli Albizzi held, from 1393, a dominant position, in which he was succeeded, after his death in 1417, by his son Rinaldo. However, they shared this position with a few other prominent citizens, such as Rinaldo Gianfigliuzzi and Niccolò da Uzzano, and their status within the *reggimento*, influential as it was, did not materially detract from its prevalently aristocratic character.

The aristocratic and elitist tendencies in the regime were counterbalanced by the role the legislative councils continued to play in it. Membership of these, and in particular of the council of the People, could be regarded, by way of the assent they had to give to the decisions of the government, as the most democratic feature of political participation within the regime, and hence of republican experience. But for the mass of Florentine citizens there was still another, more restricted sphere in which this experience could make itself felt. Dale and F.W. Kent have recently shown, in a seminal study, the role played in civic life by the *gonfalon*, that is the sixteen districts into which the city was divided.<sup>39</sup> The *gonfalon* had their own assemblies which were presided over by the *Gonfalonieri di compagnia*, who represented their districts in the electoral scrutinies by nominating residents for eligibility to office, and who helped the Commune in the distribution of the tax burden that had been allocated to their districts while the *Catasto* was not in force, that is, before 1427 and between 1434 and 1458. Meeting periodically in the principal parish church, they elected committees of residents to function as syndics for the tax assessments, and this provided a modicum of civic participation on the local level. Yet here too, appearances can be deceptive: in the district studied by these authors, Lion rosso, over a period of forty-six years about two-thirds of the citizens who attended these assemblies belonged to ten to fifteen families: the 'patrician families who ruled the city also provided leadership in the local world of the *gonfalone*'.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> G. Brucker, *The Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, NJ, 1977), pp. 284ff.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 264ff. <sup>39</sup> *Neighbours and Neighbourhoods*, pp. 17–19. <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77–8.