



## ARTICLE

# From dreams to reality: the challenges of Italy's Five Star Movement

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**Abstract** Since its birth in 2009, the Five Star Movement has achieved incredible growth, accompanied by important electoral successes. This has resulted in concrete responsibilities and influential positions in the system. Grillo's movement was born as an anti-system and populist force with interesting peculiarities, and the main challenge it is now facing is to prove itself able to govern and to transform problems into solutions. So far the promised revolution has not taken place: a mixture of inexperience, internal divisions, scandals and contradictions has already damaged the image of the movement, which is facing many challenges and a difficult transition. The evolution of the Five Star Movement shows all the weaknesses of populist movements facing reality. The best strategy to confront them is to ensure that all their contradictions emerge and, at the same time, to regain the citizens' trust by providing credible solutions to their problems.

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## Introduction

‘We will open up Parliament like a can of tuna fish.’ This was the vow made by Beppe Grillo, the leader of the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S), before the general elections in 2013 (*Adnkronos.com* 2013). These elections took M5S representatives into the Italian Parliament for the first time. Less than four years had passed since 4 October 2009, the day when Grillo, a histrionic comedian, together with a visionary digital and marketing strategist, Gianroberto Casaleggio, founded M5S on the web from a collection of Meetup groups. Incredibly, in 2013, M5S was the primary political actor in the Chamber of Deputies, winning more than 25% of the votes in the elections (Ministero dell’Interno 2013). In 2014, with a lower but still significant percentage of the vote (21.1%), M5S won 17 seats in the European Parliament (Ministero dell’Interno 2014). Finally, in the last round of local elections in 2016, the movement won 19 out of the 20 ballots it participated in across the country. In particular, Rome and Turin—the capital and the third-largest Italian economic centre respectively—both elected M5S mayors with overwhelming majorities.

Ever since its birth, M5S has achieved incredibly fast and significant growth (Pasarelli and Tuorto 2016), enhanced by its innovative use of the Internet as the vehicle for its disruptive political message. This constitutes an unprecedented phenomenon in Italian (and European) politics. By using anti-system populist rhetoric, M5S has managed to collect a large share of the protest vote, which has its origins in widespread anger and discontent with both the current situation in society and the political and economic situation. By taking advantage of the connective power of new technologies, it has mobilised different communities—not just protest voters—all over the country on a wide variety of subjects (i.e. the environment, a universal basic income, fair taxation, transparency in public administration and the fight against corruption). It has represented some of the most urgent demands of Italian citizens, in a context of poor representation of such demands by the mainstream parties (Conti and Memoli 2015, 529).

As a consequence of these successes, over the past few years M5S has gained powerful positions at all levels of the political system and an opportunity to influence the policymaking process. This means, at the same time, that the movement is now accountable for its actions and under the voters’ scrutiny. After many years spent criticising and blaming the establishment for the problems of the country, now M5S has the opportunity to prove that it is different and to make the promised changes by delivering effective policies. As the title of an article published by *The Guardian* in June, immediately after Virginia Raggi’s victory in the Rome elections, noted: ‘Italy’s Five Star Movement now has to translate problems into problem-solving’ (Grillo 2016). This is a big challenge for a movement which is composed of people with little or no experience in politics and which is not willing to compromise with other political parties.

Moreover, contradictions and conflicts present within the movement are coming to the surface. And since Casaleggio—the brains behind the movement—passed away last

April, M5S has been trying to find a new internal balance. Scandals and allegations are also putting M5S under pressure and they are expected to have an impact on the perceptions and future orientations of the movement's voters.

All of these elements show that M5S is facing many challenges and a delicate transition. This article intends to shed light on the identity of M5S and its accomplishments. Its aim is to ensure a better understanding of the Five Star phenomenon and offer some recommendations on how to confront populist rhetoric.

## A hybrid actor with many contradictions

M5S is a hybrid actor that goes beyond traditional classifications and is composed of a strange mixture of elements and contradictions (Diamanti 2014; Becchi 2015a, 71; Bordignon and Ceccarini 2015; Ceccarini and Bordignon 2016). According to Article 4 of its 'Non Statute'—both in the first version of 2009 and in the 2016 amended version<sup>1</sup>—'the Five Star Movement is not a political party and it is not intended to become one in the future' (M5S 2009, 2016b). It is a 'non-Association', 'a platform' (art. 1) aimed at promoting a fruitful exchange of opinions and a democratic discussion 'without the intermediation of executive or representative bodies' (art. 4). The movement declares itself to be a community of equal people who all have the same value ('uno vale uno'). A system of online voting allows the members of this community to choose programmes and candidates and to actively participate in the movement's decisions. Recently, a new online platform—named 'Rousseau' after the father of direct democracy—was created to enable web users to propose new laws and make amendments to those initiated by M5S representatives in the Italian and European Parliaments, as well as in local councils. This should be seen as another step towards the establishment of a new form of direct and participatory web democracy, as it was originally conceived by Casaleggio and Grillo.

In reality, the identity of the movement is much more complex and ambiguous. Since the very beginning, the two co-founders have controlled the movement, taking the strategic decisions (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2015, 464). The procedures followed for online voting are of doubtful transparency and legitimacy. An internal organisation has clearly emerged, with a group of people officially in charge of the coordination of the movement. The *Direttorio*—the main executive body of the movement—was created in 2014. It is made up of five members who were approved by an online vote but selected by Grillo and Casaleggio. Since this time, M5S has been constantly expanding its internal structure. An M5S ruling class has emerged as a result of this process, in clear contradiction of what the Non Statute says about the rejection of intermediary bodies (Becchi 2015a, b). In the Parliament, the movement has placed its representatives on

<sup>1</sup> The article refers to the amended version of 15 February 2016. At the time of writing, a new version of the Non Statute is currently being voted on again by M5S members (M5S 2016c). However, the proposed amendments do not affect the articles mentioned here.

strategic committees and has even managed to elect one of its members to be a vice-president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies.

M5S looks more and more like a political party, with a strong and charismatic leadership, a ruling class and an internal structure. It has its own post-modern ideology—web democracy—but also embraces elements of populism, environmentalism and anti-capitalism. Like other political parties and movements, M5S organises regular conventions at the national level to gather its supporters together.

M5S activists are a mixed crowd of individuals with diverse political opinions and different interests. Having said that, they have a few significant things in common: for instance, 84.6% of them declare their top priority to be the fight against political corruption (Putini 2016, 92), the majority of them (56%) do not personally identify with the right–left continuum and 66% of them believe that M5S goes beyond this traditional right–left classification (Putini 2016, 91). In this sense, M5S can be seen as a ‘catch-all (anti-party) party’, able to unify groups with very different and even contrasting ideological outlooks (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2016, 154).

## A real revolution?

If we look at the concrete results achieved so far by M5S in its political activity, they fall somewhat below the ambitions of the movement and the expectations of its voters. In the past three years, a contribution by M5S has never been decisive in getting any of the laws approved by the Italian Parliament passed (FB-Lab-FB and Associati 2016, 2). The movement has played a classic oppositional role, using parliamentary tools such as questions and motions, and engaging in filibustering activities, such as the presentation of big numbers of amendments, with the only purpose being to slow down the approval of legislation (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2015, 467). Instances of cooperation between M5S and other parties are limited and concern specific amendments, while on bigger issues the movement still refuses to take part in negotiations and maintains its self-imposed isolation. Since the very beginning it has strongly opposed the government’s reforms, but at the same time has never come up with a clear alternative proposal.

At the local level, M5S administrations have not proved more successful than those of other parties. In some cases—for instance, in Quarto, Livorno and Rome—the movement has had to defend itself from scandals and allegations, as could have happened to any of the traditional political parties in Italy.

In the European Parliament—where M5S is part of the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group, alongside the UK Independence Party—the movement seems more inclined to engage in dialogue with other political groups and stakeholders, most probably due to the less confrontational context in Brussels. This positively affects the potential impact that the movement has on the policymaking process (FB Lab-FB and Associati 2016, 17). However, the strategy of M5S at the European level and its positions on Europe are far from clear. Originally, the movement was strongly opposed to

the EU and the euro. M5S strongly supported the idea of a referendum on a possible Italian exit from the EU, although such a vote would not have resulted in action under Italian law. Recently, despite denials, the movement has completely changed its position: instead of supporting an Italian exit, it now supports Italy remaining a member of the EU and has committed to the fight to reform the European institutions from within. Such a drastic shift was not the result of an online vote. On the contrary, web users were extremely surprised (and many of them upset) to find out that a blog post on the movement's website about Brexit, explaining why Italy should also have a referendum to leave the EU, had been mysteriously re-edited—probably with the hope that nobody would notice the change—to say that M5S has no intention of leaving the EU (Zaffarano 2016). However, the movement still supports the populist idea of a referendum to leave the eurozone.

Indeed, there has been nothing revolutionary so far in the actions and positions of M5S. Perhaps the only concrete achievement worthy of mention is its major contribution to a guarantee fund, established by the Ministry of Economic Development, for micro-credit for small and medium-sized enterprises. Each month M5S representatives transfer a considerable part of their salaries to this fund. At the time of writing, their total contributions exceed 15 million euros. The initiative has proven very successful: so far, more than 1000 micro-entrepreneurs have had access to the fund and have benefited from the technical assistance of the wide network of business consultants involved in this project (M5S 2016a; Patti 2016).

Certainly, on many occasions M5S has played an important role in denouncing episodes of corruption and the wasting of public money. M5S has been also able to keep social anger within a democratic framework, avoiding outbursts of violence and revolts in one of the gloomiest periods for the Italian economy. However, its self-imposed isolation, extreme idealism and unwillingness to compromise prevent the movement from being effective and constitute the main obstacles to its accomplishment of concrete goals. As an article recently published in the *Financial Times* noted, M5S 'is still a long way from being a credible contender at the national level' (FT View 2016).

## Instability and new challenges

Internal divisions and political inexperience have certainly not helped the movement to achieve results. What happened in Rome during the first steps taken by the new M5S administration is emblematic. Instead of taking immediate action to solve the city's serious problems, the new mayor became mired in surreal internal fights about who to have on her team. The lack of experience within the movement resulted in a desperate search for competent people able to deal with complex issues. Yet, what happened in Rome is just the tip of the iceberg.

At least two factions exist inside the movement and both have representatives in the M5S *Direttorio*. On the one hand, there is an 'institutional' and more pragmatic faction, which is trying to gain credibility, including at the international level, by using reassuring

tones which better appeal to the orientations of a more moderate electorate. This faction is certainly more inclined to engage in dialogue with institutional actors and stakeholders. On the other hand, there is a 'radical' faction, loyal to the original approach of the movement, which maintains a strong anti-system identity and is not open to compromise with the establishment.

Grillo mediates and keeps the different groups together. Throughout the years, he has considerably moderated the tones of the movement's public interventions, in order to reach out to a wider, more moderate audience. Nevertheless, he has not abandoned the anti-system and anti-establishment rhetoric, which is still present in all his blog posts and public interventions. Without his charismatic leadership—reaffirmed during an M5S national convention in Palermo in September 2016—divisions and conflicts would prevail. That is probably why, even though he announced an intention to step back and let his creation become independent, he still has to be on the front line.

Casaleggio & Associati also plays a strategic—and controversial—role in the life of the movement. Since the beginning, the company has managed Grillo's blog and still has oversight of the movement's presence on the web. It is responsible for the implementation of the new Rousseau platform and is behind the recently created fundraising association (Munafò and Piana 2016). Davide Casaleggio—who took over the administration of the company after his father Gianroberto Casaleggio passed away—has been working behind the scenes for many years. He does not display any personal political ambitions, but his influence on the movement's decisions is as significant as his father's was.

This Five Star galaxy is now becoming extremely unstable due to the new circumstances in which the movement is operating. Tangible responsibilities are increasingly fuelling internal conflicts, divisions and different strategic approaches. In addition there has been a rise in protests and petitions as a result of the controversial suspensions and expulsions of M5S representatives who have supposedly violated the principles of the movement; this has called into question the presence of a real internal democracy within the movement. Furthermore, the arguments of populist propaganda, which worked perfectly in past election campaigns, are showing themselves to be insufficient when it comes to solving problems; too many contradictions have emerged from the gap between the idealistic approach of M5S and its concrete handling of power, and this has led to disillusionment as well as frustration, especially among the supporters of the revolution. All these challenges constitute big obstacles for the movement, which has the ambition to govern the country. Yet, the electoral potential of M5S, which is still considerable, and its emotional impact on voters' orientations should not be underestimated.

## Conclusion

It is rather difficult to foresee the future strategy of the movement and its level of consensus. Italian politics is extremely unpredictable and so are the orientations of the Italian electorate: many different external factors could influence the performance of the movement and any prediction could easily prove wrong.

In the short term it is most likely that the movement will simply try to handle its internal divisions and rebuild its credibility, which has been negatively affected by the messy beginnings of the new M5S administration in Rome. In other words, the movement will try to buy time and minimise its failures by pointing the finger at lobbying groups and the media, which it will blame for preventing it from achieving its goals.

If there is a lesson to be learned from the Italian experience, it is that anti-system movements can win elections with their populist arguments, but they do not have the tools to handle reality. The most effective way to dismantle their rhetoric and confront them is, on the one hand, to highlight all their contradictions and, on the other, to rebuild the citizens' trust in politics by providing credible answers to their demands. The second part of this strategy is indispensable as it is the way to win votes back from the populists. If this does not happen, these votes may simply turn into abstentions, fuelling another dangerous trend that is present in Italy as well as in many other Western democracies.

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