

## Beppe Grillo's unexpected rise makes him the Italian (non)politician of the year

by Blog Admin

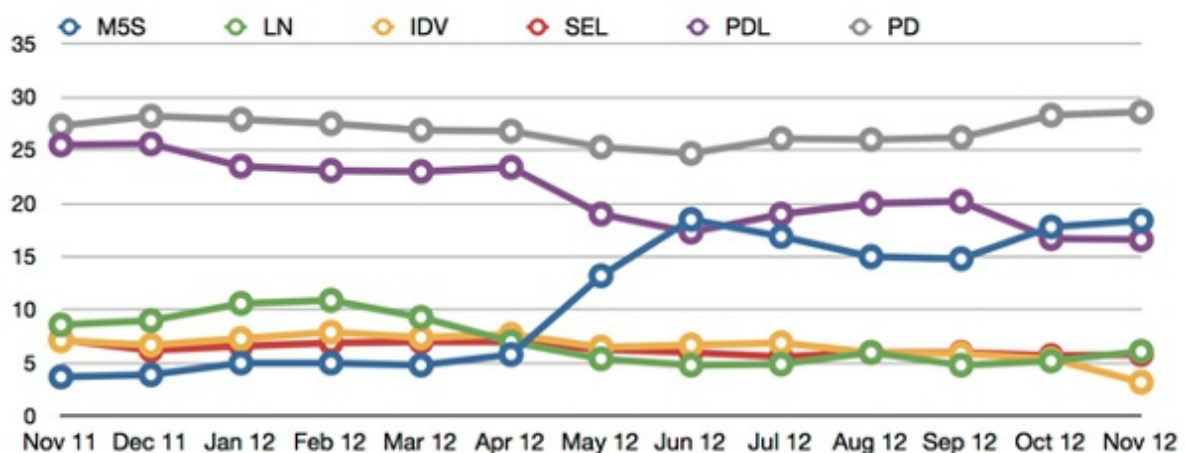
While the end of year headlines are being dominated by Silvio Berlusconi and Mario Monti, [Giuliano Bobba](#) and [Duncan McDonnell](#) argue that the most interesting Italian politics story in 2012 was Beppe Grillo and his Movimento 5 Stelle. The movement's particular blend of anti-establishment politics, and a communication strategy that focuses on both the internet and grassroots campaigning, mean that we should expect further surprises from Beppe Grillo in 2013.



2012 has been a big year for unelected leaders in Italian politics. It started with [Mario Monti's technocratic government](#) enjoying record levels of support in the polls and finished with his resignation, following Silvio Berlusconi's decision to switch from reluctant backer to vociferous opponent. Although Berlusconi's latest U-turn and its effects are dominating the Italian media in the pre-Christmas weeks, it is a longer-standing opponent of Monti that has been the real surprise of 2012: the 'non-politician' Beppe Grillo (who has never been elected to office and claims he will never stand as a candidate) and the Movimento 5-Stelle (M5S – 5 Star Movement) which presents itself as 'not a party'. In the space of just a few months following the [2012 local elections](#), as shown in Figure 1, the M5S leapt from around 5 per cent in the polls to almost 20 per cent and second place. Even more surprisingly perhaps: it has stayed there.



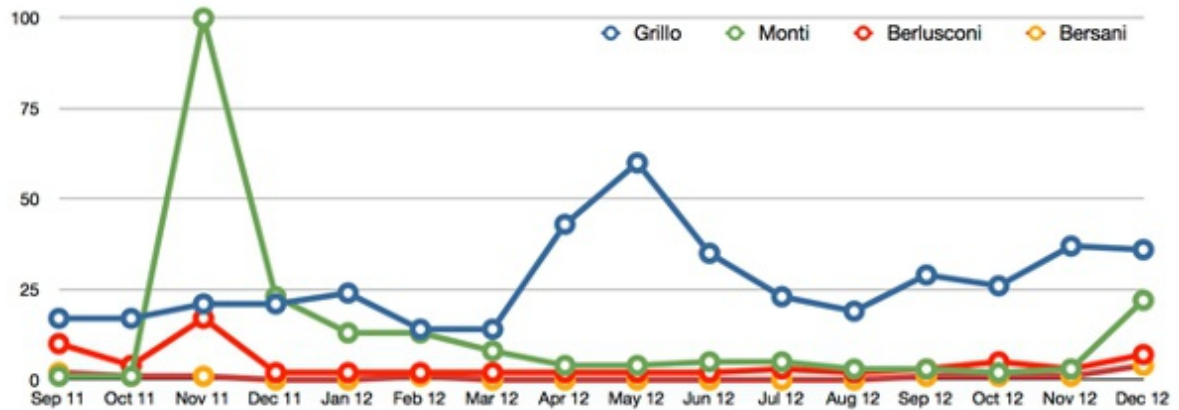
**Figure 1: Average monthly polling figures in Italy, November 2011 – November 2012**



Source: <http://sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it>

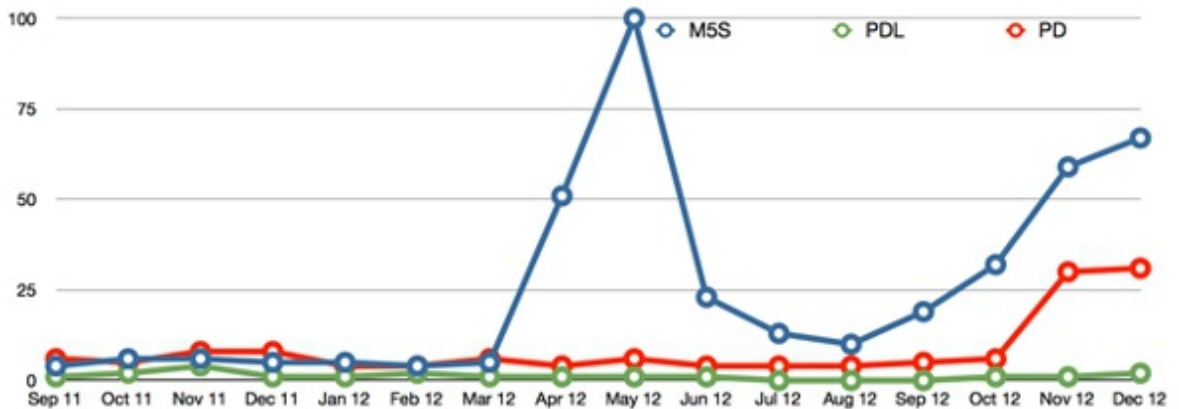
It is not just its jump in support which makes the M5S stand out: this is a political force unlike any ever seen in Italy or anywhere else in Europe, with the partial exception of the Pirate parties. Founded in September 2009, it communicates and organises on two levels: Internet and local grassroots. The importance of the first of these is immediately apparent. According to the M5S's 'non-statute', the movement's headquarters is [Grillo's website](#), which is also the country's [most-read blog](#). As we can see in Figure 2, below, the internet is very much Grillo and the Movimento's territory. Compared to other key leaders such as Monti, Berlusconi and Pierluigi Bersani of the Partito Democratico (PD – Democratic Party), with the sole exception of November 2011 when Monti came to power, Grillo has constantly been the most searched-for political figure on Google Italia over the past year (and more). Likewise, as shown in Figure 3, in the same period the M5S has been easily the most-searched for political force.

**Figure 2: Search volumes on Google Italia for main political figures, September 2011 – December 2012**



Source: [Google Trends](#). See [here](#) for an explanation of how Google Trends works.

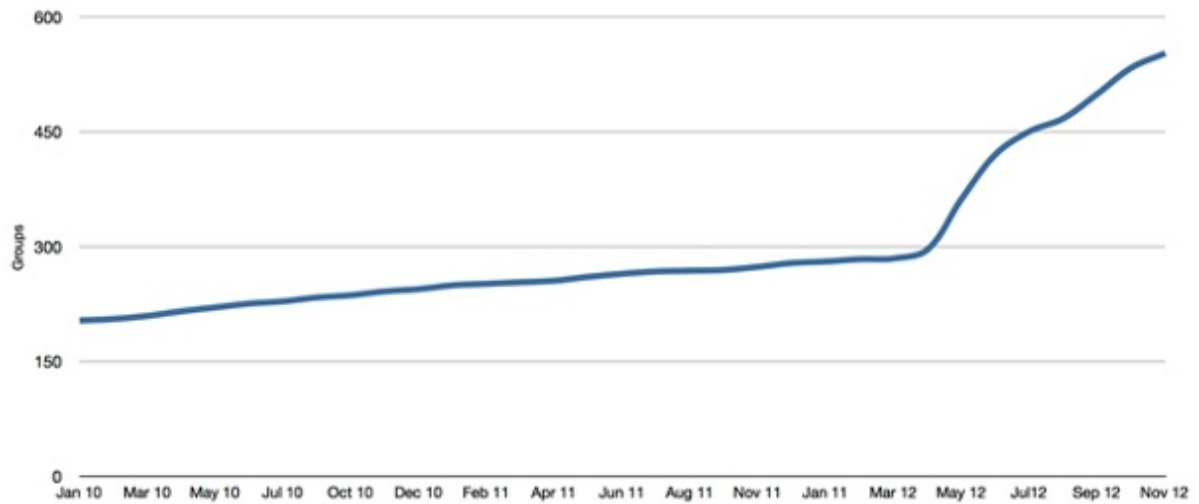
**Figure 3: Search volumes on Google Italia for M5S, PDL and PD, September 2011 – December 2012**



Source: [Google Trends](#)

While it has become commonplace to refer to the M5S as an ‘Internet-based party’, this is misleading. In fact, the interesting and novel aspect of the M5S is how online and offline activities are combined. Grillo has constantly encouraged his supporters to discuss – both on the internet *and* in physical locations – the issues he raises on the blog along with local questions in their cities and towns. This has been done through the creation of [Beppe Grillo meet-up groups](#) which, as we can see in Figure 4, have also grown swiftly in parallel with the rise in opinion poll support this year.

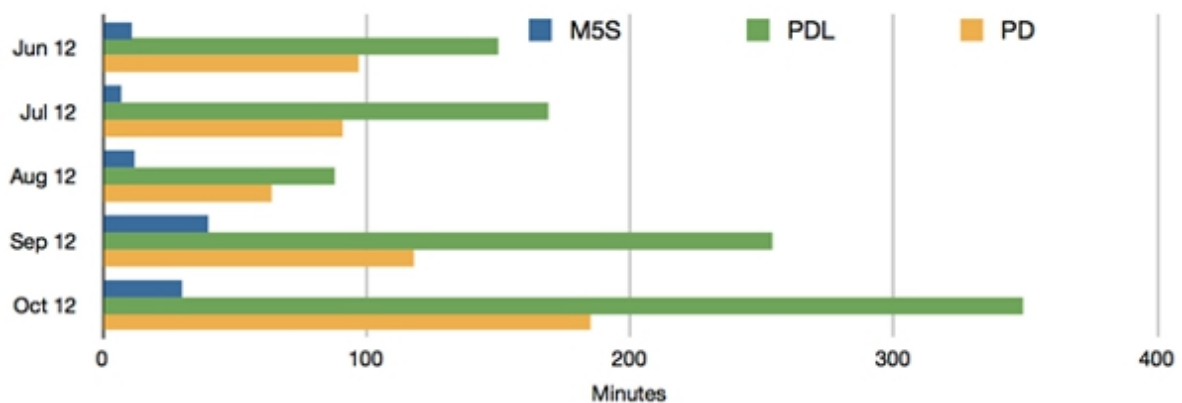
**Figure 4: Number of Beppe Grillo Meet-up Groups, January 2010 – November 2012**



Source: [beppegrillo.meetup.com](http://beppegrillo.meetup.com)

The successful mixture of online and offline, Grillo and grassroots, was well in evidence during the October 2012 Sicilian regional election campaign. Having swam (the relatively short distance) across to the island from Calabria, Grillo proceeded to pack out piazzas across Sicily in support of local M5S candidates chosen from the meet-ups. As a result, the M5S candidate for the regional presidency Giovanni Cancellieri rose in just a few weeks from less than 5 per cent in the polls to take over 18 per cent (and third place) in the election. This was despite the fact that the national media – as they have done throughout 2012 – either largely ignored Grillo and the M5S or else focused on any hint of dissent within the Movimento. As Figure 5 below shows, the M5S has received far less primetime news coverage than the PD and PDL in recent months, despite its rise in the polls.

**Figure 5: Coverage of the M5S, PDL and PD in prime time news shows, June – October 2012**



Source: [www.agcom.it](http://www.agcom.it)

Of course, to an extent this plays into Grillo's hands given that he has shunned the mainstream media and accuses them of being servants of the elite. However it may end up penalising him and the M5S in 2013. While throughout 2012 the M5S has benefited from the media's attention on the scandals and internal disputes affecting the traditional parties, now that we move towards a February general election, airtime will be increasingly dominated by the campaigning of mainstream politicians. By contrast, members of the M5S will be absent from talk shows and debates, following Grillo's instructions to avoid television and the press.

Moreover, the current electoral law is based on party lists which do not allow citizens to choose specific candidates, and so favours a strongly centralised and national media-driven campaign. With Grillo communicating through the internet and rallies, in tandem with the activities of local meet-up groups, it now remains to be seen whether the two-step strategy of the M5S can work as well in a general election campaign as it has in subnational contests. It is also open to question whether a movement which has

grown so quickly will be able to handle a campaign of this size and, following the election, the presence (presumably) of a sizeable number of MPs, all of whom will be novices. The new year will thus bring new challenges for Grillo and the M5S, which will be fascinating for media and party researchers to observe. While these difficulties will not be overcome easily, we should not rule out the most innovative Italian (non)politician in 2012 continuing to surprise us in 2013.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/BGrillo>

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