

Who's afraid of the Five Star Movement? Why Italy leaving the euro remains unlikely regardless of what happens on Sunday

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Several observers have raised the possibility that should Italy's constitutional referendum result in a No vote, it could leave the door open for Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S) to win power at the next Italian election. As [James L. Newell](#) writes, there has been particular concern over this prospect due to the Five Star Movement's commitment to hold a referendum on Italy's membership of the euro. However, he argues that the chances of the M5S leading Italy out of the euro remain extremely unlikely, regardless of the result on Sunday.



It is widely believed that if Sunday's referendum on constitutional reform in Italy is not passed, then comedian Beppe Grillo's Five-star Movement (M5S) could cause considerable political, not to say economic, upset. The belief arises from the fact that the M5S wants a referendum on Italy's membership of the euro. And if Italy were to leave the euro, it is suggested, then the EU itself would be placed in danger.

It is thought that if the No side loses then Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi will resign. A period of political uncertainty and turmoil will, so one story goes, put wind in the Movement's sails, and fresh elections will see an M5S victory. Elections have to be held no later than early 2018.

But others have suggested an alternative, even more lurid scenario. According to this, Renzi wins. Fresh elections are held on the basis of the new electoral law that is linked to the constitutional reform. This puts the M5S in an even stronger position. For the law assigns 55% of the seats to the winning list provided it achieves at least 40%. If it doesn't, then there is a run-off between the two most-voted lists, with 55% of the seats going to the winner at that stage. So according to this scenario, the M5S wins an overall majority. It is able to govern alone, without any need for a coalition. This causes even greater havoc by making an exit from the euro even more likely.

However, neither scenario is at all plausible. To see this, consider first of all who the Grillini are. The Five-star Movement was started in 2009 by Grillo and the web strategist, Gianroberto Casaleggio. He had the intuition that the Internet could be used as the basis for a new kind of party, one without organisation, money, ideology or

headquarters. This encouraged Grillo to use his blog and the social networking site, Meetup.com, to bring people together to campaign on local issues and then field candidates for elections.

So the Movement drew initial strength from the twin ideas of a new form of direct democracy and popular disgust with the political elites. This meant that it drew support from across the political spectrum. Therefore, its policies have always been an eclectic mix of the anti-establishment, environmentalist, anti-globalist and Eurosceptic. At the 2013 general election, it came from nowhere to become the second most-voted party. Through ups and downs, its poll ratings have stood at around 30% ever since.

Its current ratings put it on 29.9%, the centre left Democratic Party (PD) on 31% and the centre-right parties on 28.3%. It does not seem to have suffered from outcries surrounding a number of controversial appointments by its recently elected mayor of Rome, or from allegations that activists have been involved in falsifying signatures on the nomination papers of candidates for elections in Bologna and Palermo. These incidents seem to fly in the face of its claim to stand for a new, more honest politics. But people vote for the M5S simply because it represents something different from a political class in whom vast swathes have virtually no confidence.

Since it draws support from all parts of the political spectrum, the fear is that in a run-off ballot it would sweep the board. For it would inevitably attract votes from two sources: its own supporters and those opposed to whichever of the parties, the PD or the centre right, it found itself up against.

But the electoral law might not survive in its current form. If Renzi loses, then the electoral law will have to be revised and the prospect of an M5S majority government will retreat accordingly. For the law's operability depends on the constitutional reforms being passed and it is opposed by powerful groups from across the political spectrum. Even if Renzi wins, the law might still not survive in its current form. On 21 September, Renzi was forced to bow to pressure to support a parliamentary motion declaring a willingness to revisit it. Moreover, the law has been challenged before the Constitutional Court, which is expected to deliver its verdict shortly after the referendum.

The profile of M5S activists and supporters casts doubt on whether it would be able to govern effectively. A vote for the M5S is a straightforward protest vote. Otherwise its activists and supporters are divided across the whole range of issues separating left and right. It is doubtful that such a party can remain cohesive when faced with the pressures of governing. With responsibility for making choices that can only benefit some while hurting others.

And its experience both in Parliament and in local government confirms that protest parties railing against 'the system' are as likely to find themselves being absorbed by it as they are to transform it once they experience the pressures of office. To become a party just like all the others. For example, Italian parliamentarians are notorious for jumping from one group to another during the course of a legislature. Currently, no fewer than 154 (or 24%) of the members of the Chamber of Deputies belong to a different group to the one they were a member of at the start of the legislature. Not surprisingly, then, the M5S now has 18 (or 17%) fewer members than the 109 Deputies it elected in 2013.

Many of the defectors have left because they came into conflict with pressures to behave as mere party delegates – pressures created by the new ideology of direct, 'bottom-up', democracy espoused by Grillo. And ironically, he has sought to impose this discipline from the top down – by the threat to withdraw from potential and actual rebels all entitlements to use the Movement's brand, of which he is the exclusive owner.

So even if the M5S found itself in office after an election some time in 2017 or 2018, it would be uniquely badly placed to withstand the enormous threats to its unity that would derive from the market pressures, including capital flight and economic turmoil, its promise of a euro referendum would presumably bring.

And even if it were able to withstand such pressures, it might then find it difficult, if not impossible, to hold such a referendum in the first place. For one thing, the Constitution prohibits the holding of referendums on laws authorising the ratification of international treaties, and the jurisprudence that has developed over the years has extended this

prohibition to the laws that give effect to such treaties.

So in order to hold a euro-membership referendum it would probably first be necessary to secure a revision of the Constitution, and for that to be possible, it would be necessary to win two positive votes in each chamber of Parliament at intervals of no less than three months. With the constitutional reforms being proposed by Renzi, the obstacles in the way of achieving this might be greater than they would be currently. For hitherto, or at least until the change in the electoral law in 2005, the two bodies have tended to have very similar if not identical political majorities. With the changes being proposed by Renzi, these majorities would more than likely diverge.

But there is more. The support of less than two thirds of the members of each chamber in the second vote would make it possible for a fifth of the members of each chamber, or 500,000 electors or five regional councils to subject the proposed constitutional amendment to a confirmatory referendum.

So there might have to be two referendums before an exit from the euro could take place. And then, of course, the referendums would have to be won. In order to achieve that, the M5S would have to overcome their current uncertainty about what they would replace euro membership *with*. And they would have to find a way of persuading the 67% of respondents who currently say they favour continued membership.

Of course we live in rapidly changing times. But if forced to place a bet on it, I would put my money on there not being a euro exit any time soon – or at least not one engineered by the M5S.

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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. Featured image: Beppe Grillo campaigning ahead of the 2011 local elections. Credits: Giovanni Favia (CC BY-SA 2.0)

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