

Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement must adapt if it wants to become a permanent feature of Italy's party system

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One of the most important developments in Italian politics in recent years has been the emergence of the Five Star Movement, led by Beppe Grillo, which secured over a quarter of the vote share in the 2013 Italian general election. [Filippo Tronconi](#) writes that while the scale of the Five Star Movement's success in its first general election was remarkable, its first two years in parliament have seen the party struggle to meaningfully influence the policy process. He argues that a normalisation of its organisational structure and a more clearly defined ideological position in the Italian party system would go some way toward preventing an erosion of the party's support.



The [Five Star Movement](#) (FSM), after obtaining an impressive 25.5 per cent of the votes in the last Italian general election, is facing a number of difficulties in managing its sudden electoral success. However, it is too early to predict its imminent downfall, as some commentators do. On the contrary, the FSM is facing the typical challenges of institutionalisation that all new parties have to face. Its survival depends on the willingness and ability to build effective sites and procedures of internal decision-making, that currently depend on Beppe Grillo's leadership, and to build a coherent political platform beyond that of anti-establishment protest.

The Five Star Movement's challenge: institutionalise or die

'I am pretty tired, as Forrest Gump would say'. It was November 28, 2014 when Beppe Grillo, after a five-year-marathon of uninterrupted electoral rallies across the country, decided it was time to take a rest. On that occasion, he [announced through his blog](#) the establishment of a 'directorate' made up of five people, chosen by Grillo himself among his most trusted MPs. The directorate would "regularly meet" with Grillo "in order to analyse the general situation, share the most urgent decisions and build, with the help of everybody, the future of the Five Star Movement". What in other parties could be regarded as an ordinary decision about an update of the organisational chart, marks a crucial turning point in the short history of the FSM – at least symbolically.

Since its birth in 2009 the FSM has always taken pride in avoiding setting up any hierarchical structure similar to those of other political parties. Indeed, its most distinctive motto is "each one counts as one", meaning that decisions should emerge from an exclusively horizontal exchange of ideas taking place on the internet and in face-to-face assemblies at a local level. However, the outstanding electoral success the FSM obtained in the 2013 general elections made this aspiration for direct democracy increasingly less credible. With a remarkable [25.5 per cent](#) of the popular vote the first time it stood in a general election, the FSM achieved the most successful electoral debut of a political party in post-1945 Europe, if one excludes founding elections. Overall, 109 Deputies and 54 Senators were elected, all lacking any previous political experience.

This outstanding and largely unforeseen success forced the party to face a number of challenges, both within the party and relative to its positioning in the Italian political system. Within the party a line of conflict soon emerged between those who were in favour of a 'moderate' pragmatic approach, and thus open to limited agreements with other parties in parliament, and those who wanted to keep the identity of the party close to the original anti-establishment message and thus refusing any possible collaboration with other parties in parliament.

Another line of conflict is between those who questioned the leadership of Beppe Grillo on organisational and policy issues and those who accepted the right of Grillo to have the last word on all of the FSM's strategic decisions. The two lines of division often overlap, because Grillo has always resolutely opposed any talk of possible agreements with other parties (and the [Democratic Party](#) in particular). The result of these divergences has been a constant

internal struggle and a long stream of expulsions of MPs more or less openly diverging from the official line. As of April 2015, 35 MPs (18 deputies and 17 Senators) have left the FSM parliamentary groups, over one fifth of the original 163.

The prevalence of the hardliners within the party, while presumably helping to preserve a strong identity, has made it impossible for the FSM to deliver any significant policy outcome or gain a direct influence over the main institutional decisions made since the elections. This was evident since the beginning of the legislative term, when the FSM refused to support a government led by the Democratic Party – which holds a plurality of seats in both Chambers – and pushed the Democratic Party into reaching an agreement with Berlusconi's [People of Freedom](#) party.



Beppe Grillo, Credit: Matteo (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The main argument put forward in the FSM's rhetoric ("they are all the same, we are the only real alternative to the *casta* of professional politicians") was undoubtedly strengthened, but the party missed an opportunity to play a pivotal role in setting the agenda. Similarly, in other crucial decisions taken in the first two years of the legislative term, the FSM has been unable to make its votes decisive. The decision on a [new electoral system](#), an ambitious [constitutional reform](#) which set out to replace symmetrical bicameralism, the [election](#) of the President of the Republic in January 2015: all these were occasions in which either the majority coalition was internally divided or a qualified majority was required, leaving opposition parliamentary parties with some room for manoeuvre. In all these instances, however, the FSM was unable to exert any influence over the decision-making process.

The aftermath of the [2014 European elections](#) marked another critical turn. On that occasion the FSM obtained a somewhat disappointing result (21.1 per cent of the votes), at least when compared with the 2013 general elections. This was in spite of the favourable circumstances that in many other countries rewarded anti-euro and anti-establishment parties. Having sent 17 representatives to the European Parliament, the FSM had to take a position regarding which parliamentary group to join in Strasbourg. Some saw the greens as natural allies, given the attention the FSM has traditionally paid to environmental issues. In a relatively surprising move, though, Beppe Grillo insisted on reaching an agreement with Nigel Farage's [UKIP](#).

An [online consultation](#) was finally held, where the options to choose from were restricted – due to Grillo's own unilateral decision – to the [Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy](#) group (led by UKIP) and the [European Conservative and Reformists](#) (including the British Conservative Party among others), as well as the possibility of not joining any group. This alliance was justified in terms of the movement's affinity with UKIP on the issue of Euroscepticism. However, criticisms were raised based on the xenophobic and populist stances supported by many of the parties within the parliamentary group. It also seemed evident that, when forced to choose, Beppe Grillo preferred to align with rightist movements, despite the rhetorical refusal to position the FSM on the left-right dimension of the political spectrum.

Organisational problems

All these disputed decisions and disagreements originate from the very organisational nature of the FSM. The FSM can be described as a charismatic party, as a movement party, and as a populist anti-establishment party. Each of these descriptors help provide an understanding of the challenges Beppe Grillo's creation has faced over recent months, as well as the path to addressing them.

As a charismatic party, its main problem lies in the difficult process of institutionalising its leadership. As [Harmel and Svåsand](#) argue, different leadership styles are needed in order to tackle the challenges posed by each stage of the organisational development of a party. A charismatic leadership (an authoritative 'creator and preacher', they say) is useful in the first phase in order to build the public image of the party, mobilise supporters around its message, and resolve internal conflicts. The same attribute, though, can be harmful in the following stages .

After the initial breakthrough, the party needs to build an effective territorial structure and coordinate its activities internally (here an 'organiser' is needed); later on the party needs to establish itself as a credible political actor externally (with a moderator, someone 'with good personal credentials for credibility and dependability'). An electoral breakthrough that occurs too rapidly can therefore be dangerous, as time is needed in order to institutionalise the charismatic leadership and transfer the personal power of the founder to the organisation.

On the other hand, a charismatic leadership is antithetical to the idea of creating a formal apparatus that is typical of traditional mass parties and would contradict the credo in a purely horizontal structure. The attempt to build an intermediate governing body (the directorate, which I referred to in the opening of this article) is a response to this strain, though a late and contested one, lacking any bottom-up legitimisation.

The nature of a 'movement party', as depicted by [Herbert Kitschelt](#), makes the FSM unstable by definition. Movement parties, in fact, normally represent the transition phase from a social movement, focused on issues with a limited scope and the short-term engagement of members, to a fully structured political party. In this sense, the success at the 2013 general elections and the entry of the FSM into the legislative arena mark a crucial turning point: for as long as it was acting as a loose confederation of groups organised at local level, the party could reconcile the presence of a national leader (the 'megaphone' of the movement, as Grillo calls himself) with relatively autonomous local assemblies of activists.

However, when the party is expected to take decisions on national policy issues and strategies, this position becomes more and more untenable . The probability of internal conflicts rises, and thus the need for a strong centralised leadership. At the same time, the stronger the leadership, the more evident the contradiction with the aspiration of the party to keep an entirely horizontal structure, where 'each one counts as one'.

The hyperbolic (and naïve) narrative that described the internet as the tool to achieve the goal of direct democracy and total transparency on all crucial decisions for the life of the movement has soon proven to be unrealistic. Consultations with registered members have taken place from time to time, when Beppe Grillo has decided to do so, and according to the procedures laid down by Grillo himself. What remains of a promise of hyper-democracy is a 'leaderist' party, with few spaces for an internal open debate, mostly restricted to the local level.

Finally, the FSM has built its electoral fortunes on an appeal of standing against the Italian political establishment. Focusing on this populist (and popular) issue, and thanks to a leader that has been an outspoken enemy of the ruling class for decades, allowed the FSM to gather votes from the full breadth of the ideological spectrum, from the extreme left to the extreme right. The FSM has been able, in other words, to monopolise the issue of protest against the corrupted 'caste' of politicians, while blurring its position on the traditional ideological space, mixing environmentalist and anti-globalist claims with anti-immigration, Eurosceptic and anti-tax stances.

The problem with this strategy comes with the party moving into representative institutions, which requires it to take sides on awkward issues. On the one hand, staying out of any possible negotiations with other parties preserved its 'pureness', but it also left the party unable to have any influence on the policy process. On the other hand, when forced to reach an agreement, as was the case in the European Parliament with UKIP, it was inevitable for part of the members to feel disappointed by the ideological direction that was implicit in the choice of allies.

Beppe Grillo's FSM is facing the typical challenges of the institutionalisation of a new party, sharpened by a sudden, unexpected electoral success. It is not necessarily doomed to a rapid decline. On the contrary, opinion surveys still credit it with a large share of potential voters (around 20 per cent in recent polls). At the same time, its consolidation

depends on the willingness and ability to 'normalise' its internal organisation and its positioning in the ideological space.

On the organisational side it has to create locations and procedures to settle the inevitable tensions, something which certainly requires a redefinition of Grillo's leadership, and this cannot be limited to the creation of the 'directorate' mentioned above. On the external side it has to consolidate its positioning in the ideological space on a defined and coherent set of issues, reaching beyond the realms of anti-establishment protest.

Filippo Tronconi is the editor of a [new book](#) on the Five Star Movement which has just been published by Ashgate

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