

Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement is a new kind of radical and popular opposition to the Italian government

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The comedian and TV personality Beppe Grillo has shaken up Italian politics since launching his Five Star Movement – a decentralised non-party, which rails against what it describes as a corrupt and dysfunctional political and social system. An expert on the movement, **Nicolò Conti**, argues that now that the party has significant parliamentary representation, it remains to be seen how the party will make an impact and give representation to its popular (but incautious) stances.*



The rise of new parties is a relevant problem in the European countries, even more in recent times since they have increased in number and electoral size. Some of these parties ascribe to political radicalism; some are not radical, but aim at representing ideologies that are already represented, but poorly so, by the established parties. Others do not differ much from the old parties with respect to policy but try to convince voters that they are better in other respects such as honesty of their leaders. The ability of these new parties to become electorally successful is dependent on their capacity to distinguish themselves from the old parties. But in order to be electorally successful these new parties also need to address social problems that are considered critical by a significant number of voters, represent neglected issues and interests, purify original ideologies that have been abandoned by the conventional parties, or rejuvenate established ideologies. Many of such parties have recently emerged in Europe, however nowadays the main challenge to democracy is certainly represented by those parties ascribing to political radicalism.

The Five Star Movement is certainly one of those radical challengers. At its first general elections in February 2013 it gained 25.6% of the vote, resulting in being the most voted party in the lower chamber (the second one in the upper chamber) of the Italian parliament, with a truly national base having gained similar percentages of votes in all areas

of the country. In the following (European, local) elections this party has proved an enduring challenge to the more established parties ranking as second largest party in the country in terms of its size.

The Five Star Movement's organisation and communication strategies are unconventionally based on a mix of protest, support for unmediated direct democracy and strong communication abilities of the party leader, the popular comedian and former TV star Beppe Grillo. However, the emergence of this party is not only linked to its ability to distinguish from the old parties (defined as corrupt) and from the political and economic establishment (defined as enemy of the people). It is also thanks to its capacity to represent issues and interests considered urgent by citizens but not covered by the other parties that it has become so popular. Most of these issues and interests result from globalization, de-nationalization processes and from the economic crisis.

By defending losers in the above processes the party builds on the increased sense of insecurity of citizens. The phenomenon of radical parties representing popular discontent and providing a structure to citizens' attitudes that would be otherwise latent in the political system is common to other countries as well. It is certainly a main challenge in those countries more severely hit by the crisis, such as those of Southern Europe. As a matter of fact, it is possible to find similarities between parties such as the Five Star Movement in Italy, Podemos in Spain and to some extent even Syriza in Greece. Economic and political grievances are influential factors in explaining the vote for these parties whose emergence can well be associated with the effects of the economic crisis and the austerity measures externally induced by the EU and implemented by the national government.

The Five Star Movement was able to capture the mounting discontent of the public for conventional parties as well as the wide-spread concern of the Italians for their income and economic conditions and their corresponding demand of expansion of social security schemes, re-distribution of wealth and social regulation of the market. Some of the proposals of the Five Star Movement (such as measures of income support and guaranteed minimum income, or social housing) are very ambitious and probably unsustainable for a country in prolonged economic recession like Italy, with a large public debt and under strict financial control. Indeed, the main goal of the Five Star Movement until now has been one of vote maximization, certainly not to become coalitionable for government. Many have accused this party to play a role of irresponsible, not constructive, opposition now that it is in parliament, however this posture has not reduced its popular support so dramatically until now.

Post-materialist issues, and particularly environmentalism, have also become more relevant issues for Italian voters and especially for the young generations (the cohort where the Five Star Movement is most popular), but differently from other national contexts they were not well represented in the Italian party system, while the Five Star Movement has been careful in up-taking these issues as well.

The party has also tried to build on widespread negative feelings about immigration, more and more a divisive issue within Italian society (particularly after the massive immigration flows that have interested the country after the Arab spring). However, the Five Star Movement has proved much less cohesive on this issue than on socio-economic issues, or fight against political corruption. It has even revealed a deep internal division between a more humanitarian party component and the leadership that is instead more prone to defend strict measures of fighting against illegal immigration. In the end, the party stance on immigration is rather ambivalent and probably not so decipherable by citizens, moreover other radical parties in the Italian party system represent anti-immigration feelings in more linear way.

Cue-taking from voters is a phenomenon that has deeply characterised the first steps in the life of the Five Star Movement. The overall good fit between its programmatic supply and citizens' most pressing demands has been one of the keys to its electoral success. Its continual attacks against corrupt national/supranational elites in a typical populist fashion is another key. Now that it is represented in large numbers in the Italian parliament as well as in local institutions, it is to be seen how the party will make an impact and give representation to its popular (but incautious) stances.

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