

# Italy's municipal elections: The beginning of the end for the Five Star Movement?

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/06/16/italy-the-beginning-of-the-end-for-the-five-star-movement/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/06/16/italy-the-beginning-of-the-end-for-the-five-star-movement/)

2017-6-16

*Despite leading many opinion polls at the national level, Italy's Five Star Movement (M5S) suffered a disappointing result in the first round of municipal elections on 11 June. **Fabio Bordignon** argues that the result should not be translated into national support as the party faces several obstacles that prevent it from effectively fighting local elections. The most likely picture for the next general election remains a three-way contest between the centre-left, centre-right and the M5S.*



The Five Star Movement (M5S) is dead: once again. It's not the first time that pundits and political opponents have predicted the end for Beppe Grillo's *non-party* after an electoral defeat. The first round of the 2017 Italian municipal elections, held on 11 June, has been seen by many as a clear sign of the "crisis" of the Italian tri-polar system, generated by the impetuous rise of the M5S. But can the local performance of this strange political creature be taken as a reliable indicator for the evolution of the (national) party system?

The Five Star Movement, in its short life – the party was founded only in 2009 –, has always had a "peculiar relationship" with local politics. It was in local elections that this new political actor first made itself known, in spring 2012, as a credible (national) political contender, gaining its first four mayors: especially in Parma, an important provincial capital (in the Centre North) then described by Grillo as the Five Star's Stalingrad. This was the beginning of a Five Star boom, which, shortly after, allowed the M5S to emerge as the first party in the October 2012 Sicilian regional election, albeit with 'only' 14.9% of the vote. A major breakthrough subsequently came in the February 2013 general election, where they gained a spectacular 25.6% of the vote in their debut and became the 'moral winner' of the contest.



**Beppe Grillo's collage-portrait. Credits: [Charis Tsevis](#) for Panorama weekly (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)**

However, the M5S has always obtained better results in national elections. After all, the Movement was born outside the traditional political “space”. From its cyber-space cradle, it spread on the ground. But, when it comes to municipal and regional elections, the weakness of its territorial organisation, the lack of deep social roots, and the absence of experienced and well-known candidates limit its electoral performance. Moreover, Grillo's party still maintains its isolationist strategy, refusing to build alliances with both national and local forces, which considerably inhibits its winning potential.

Even at the times of the party's rise between 2012 and 2013, the M5S achieved about 8-9% in the major cities where it fielded candidates at municipal elections. The Movement's ability to ride a wave of discontent was much less effective at the municipal level, where local factors and local personalities have more weight. This has been the pattern unless the local vote assumes a national “meaning”, as happened last year in Rome and Turin. At the 2016

municipal elections, the Movement won in 19 out of 20 municipalities – including the two Italian “capitals” – where its candidates were able to get through to the second round.

This result confirmed the strong appeal of the M5S post-ideological project to both left-wing and right-wing voters (especially when one of the traditional blocks is excluded from the run-off), and increased the credibility of the party as a national governing actor. In the municipalities contested by the M5S (114 out of 143), Grillo’s party reached 20.8% (it was at 22.2% in the 2014 European Elections), but this figure falls to 13.6% if we exclude the two cities of Rome and Turin.

Five years after its first electoral success, the 2017 municipal elections close the first cycle of the M5S “in office”. And the balance-sheet is quite meagre. If we consider the four municipalities won in 2012, only the mayor of the small town of Sarego, in the North East, has been re-elected. The case of Parma is, once again, paradigmatic: the incumbent Federico Pizzarotti, following a long record of clashes with the party leadership, has left the Movement and reached the run-off leading a new “civic” list, while the M5S official candidate ranked fourth with only 3.2%. Another (of the many) members “expelled” from the M5S was reconfirmed as mayor in Comacchio. All in all, the Movement has gained only two minor municipalities (out of the 1,004 involved in this election), and it will compete in only 9 run-off votes (out of 111) on 25 June (none of which is in a provincial capital).

Only after the second round will it be possible to draw clear conclusions about the municipal elections. And even then, any interpretation will be hindered by the intricacy of the local political supply and by the presence of many local (and personal) lists, often used by mainstream parties to “hide themselves”. What is already clear is that in many municipalities the competition has assumed a bi-polar format. This has been generated by the poor performance of Grillo’s party, but also by the resistance (and partial re-formation) of old political coalitions, which no longer exist at the national level (at least in this phase). This holds true for both the centre-left and the centre-right. But it holds true especially for the centre-right and its two main parties: Forza Italia, led by the “eternal” Silvio Berlusconi, and the Northern League, led by the “young populist” Matteo Salvini.

The two leaders, whose parties are both estimated to be around 13-14%, seem to be divided not only by their dispute over the centre-right leadership, but also by their political aspirations. While Salvini is pushing his party down a radical-right/Front National route, Berlusconi seems to prefer a “moderate” project, which could bring him close to Matteo Renzi’s Democratic Party (the main centre-left party). But, in many local contexts, Forza Italia, the Northern League and other centre-right parties still govern together. And in a large majority of municipalities they back the same candidate against their centre-left competitors.

Before the first round, centre-left (or left) coalitions governed in 79 out of the 160 major municipalities. Centre-right (or right) coalitions controlled 42 administrations. After the first round, centre-left candidates have already “won” 27 cities, whilst centre-right candidates gained 15. But the final balance will be decided in the 111 run-off votes, in which the two traditional political camps – considered both in their “united” formula or in different combinations – have almost the same number of would-be mayors: 86 for the centre-left, and 83 for the centre-right.

Local elections have always produced a different playing field compared to the national electoral picture. Nevertheless, in the current context, any direct comparison with national results is misleading. Today, political competition at the local level, with its centre-left versus centre-right format, seems to be the legacy of a lost world. It’s the lost world of the Second Republic, whose “majoritarian project” survived in the direct election of mayors. However, the national political system seems to be moving in the opposite direction. National polls continue to portray a fragmented and tri-polar party system, and its “third pole” – the M5S – is still very much alive and kicking, with around 28-30% of the current predicted vote share.

At the next general election, this balance will probably be reproduced in the composition of the new parliament by the proportional electoral laws generated by the failure of Renzi’s reforms plan. Such a situation would bring about the need for new political alliances. In this scenario, the national political system and local political systems would be characterised by different rules and very different dynamics. It would be only the most recent of the many

contradictions that exist within the troubled Italian laboratory.

*Please read our comments policy before commenting.*

*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.*

---

### **About the author**

**Fabio Bordignon** – *University of Urbino Carlo Bo*

Fabio Bordignon teaches Political Science at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo. He tweets @fabord.

- 

