

Caught between two stools: The Five Star Movement and government policy



The Five Star Movement has cultivated an image as a party that exists outside of the traditional left/right spectrum, and this image underpinned the party's success in the 2018 Italian general election, where it secured over 32% of the vote. But as [Pierangelo Isernia](#) and [Gianluca Piccolino](#) explain, the diverse nature of the Five Star Movement's supporters poses a major challenge for the party as it now attempts to negotiate its way into government.

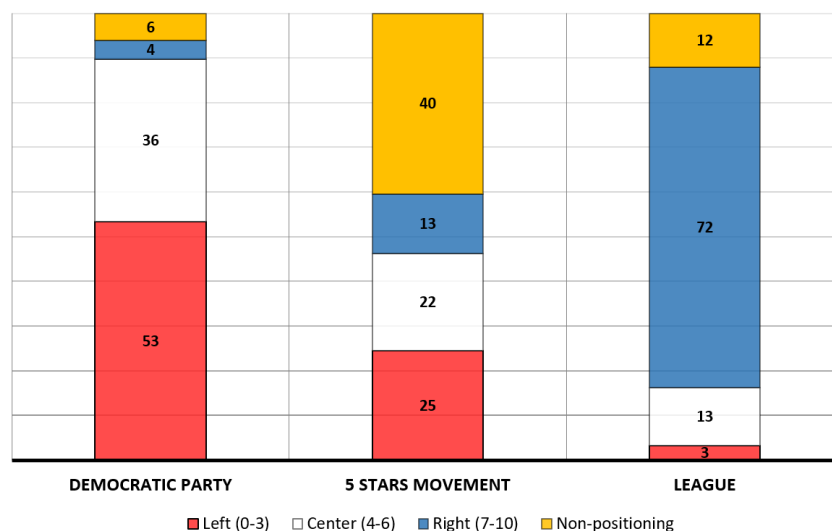
In the labour leading to the delivery of a new government for Italy, the key midwife is the Five Star Movement (M5S) and its leader, Luigi di Maio. In the negotiations for the formation of the first government of the new Italian legislature, the M5S has carved out a quite peculiar bargaining position for itself, claiming that "[being neither right nor left gives us the strength to be able to talk to everyone.](#)" For this reason, the M5S is, as we speak, still hovering between two alternative solutions: an alliance with the League, including somehow both Forza Italia and Fratelli d'Italia, or alternatively with the centre-left PD, in government since 2013.

How feasible is it for the M5S to keep its options open on both the left and the right, steering a middle course between political parties with vastly different political platforms and worldviews on many domestic and foreign issues? Not very, we suggest. How are M5S voters going to react if the party leadership leans one way, or the other, and a government, possibly led by Di Maio, starts to transform promises into policies? Badly, we suspect.

[A survey](#) carried out in September 2017 by the University of Siena Survey Research Center (LAPS) for the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) shows that, as Di Maio suggested, the M5S does indeed have the largest share of voters who "don't recognise" themselves as being on the left or right: 40% of the "Grillini" simply refuse to place themselves on the left-right dimension. The next closest party is the League, but with only 12% who reject the categorisation.

What is more, and this is something Di Maio did not mention, the M5S is also the only party in which a substantial share of voters are split between left and right: 25% of Five Star voters self-report themselves on the left or centre-left, and 13% on the right or centre-right. Figures for other parties are starkly different. Some 53% of PD voters place themselves on the left or centre-left, but only 4% on the right. Conversely, 72% of the League voters locate themselves on the right or centre-right and only 3% on the left. So, far from being homogeneously post-ideological, the M5S party electorate (see Figure 1) has a heterogeneous and quite ideological mindset, more than any of the two potential allies it claims it would like to govern with, the PD and the League.

Figure 1: Left-right placement of Democratic Party, Five Star Movement, and League (Lega) voters

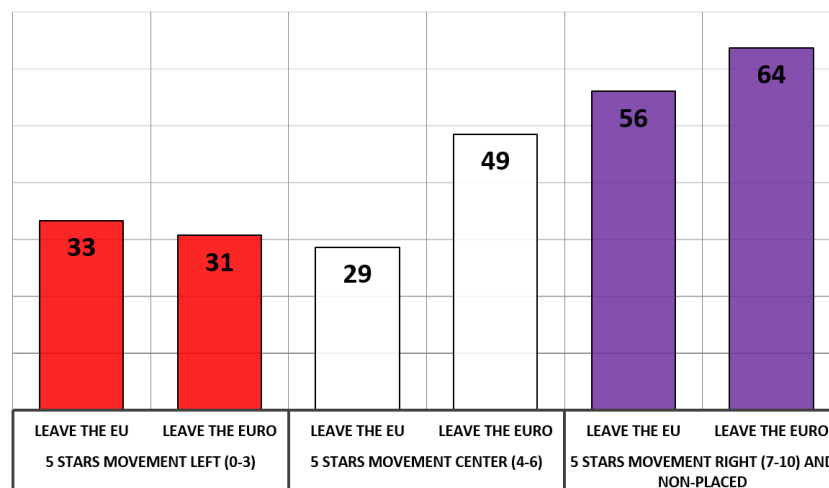


Note: Compiled by the authors.

But the M5S is also the party whose voters' policy preferences are deeply split over several issues which are crucial for the future of Italy, among them the relationship with the European Union and immigration; and this is a deeply ideological divide. On the issue of the EU, the Di Maio voters show a clear Eurosceptic attitude, making them resemble the League more than the Democratic Party (PD). Asked about their vote in a hypothetical referendum on exiting the European Union or the eurozone, respectively 44% of the Five Star voters claim they would have voted for "Italexit" (the second largest percentage after the League voters, with 54%) and 53% would have left the euro (again close to 59% of the League voters).

These figures mark a clear separation between the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party, right now the most Europhile party in the Italian political system, with only a negligible percentage of voters (less than 10%) stating they would leave either the European Union or the euro. Unlike other Italian Eurosceptic parties, like the League and Fratelli d'Italia, however, European issues, and the euro in particular, represent a potential bone of contention for M5S voters. The "Grillini" of different ideological leanings are split on whether to vote "leave" in a referendum on the European Union or on the euro. Only 31% of those on the centre-left would leave the euro (and 33% the EU), against 64% of those leaning to the right or not placing themselves on the continuum who would leave the euro area (and 56% the EU).

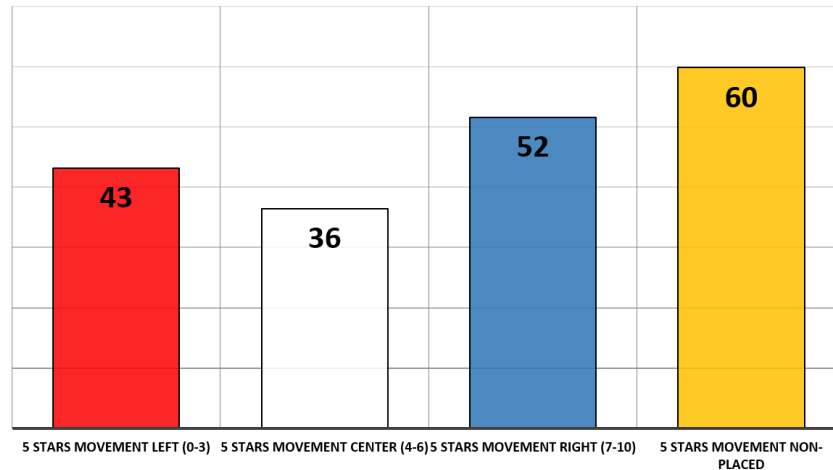
Figure 2: Percentage of Five Star Movement voters who would vote to leave the EU or the euro in a referendum



Note: This question was split in half. Half of the sample randomly received the question on the EU and the other half the question on the euro.

A similar problem emerges when looking at another question, which asked how much the respondent agrees with the statement that "European unification is impossible because the differences between the countries are too deep." Here, too, the M5S voters do not see eye to eye: 43% of M5S voters on the left agree with the statement that "European unification is impossible", while among those on the right this number rises to 52% and up to 60% among those who do not recognise themselves on the left-right scale. These distributions are quite different from those found among PD voters (with only 25% who agree with this statement) and closer to the figure among League voters (where 63% agree with this statement).

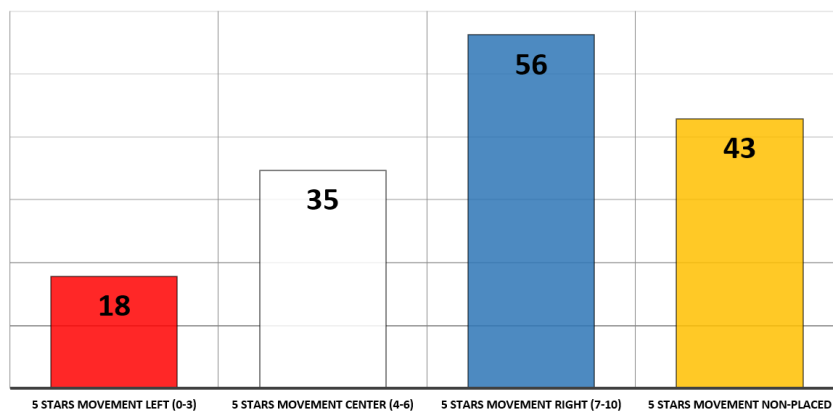
Figure 3: Percentage of Five Star Movement voters who agree with the statement "European unification is impossible because the differences between the countries are too deep"



Note: Compiled by the authors.

Another potential source of turbulence for the M5S leadership is immigration, an issue on which Five Star voters reveal even deeper divisions than on Europe. Respondents were asked to choose which of three policy alternatives was the best way to face migration flows: whether to rescue migrants at sea and bring them to Italy; send the military into Libya to stop them leaving; or rather fend them off and repel them on the open sea, even at the cost of them returning to suffer inhumane treatment in the countries of origin or transit. This last and the toughest option was chosen by only 18% of the “Grillini” positioned on the left – a figure similar to that of the PD voters (with 20%), but 56% of those on the right, on the other hand, would opt for this policy, a figure nearly identical to that of League voters (59%).

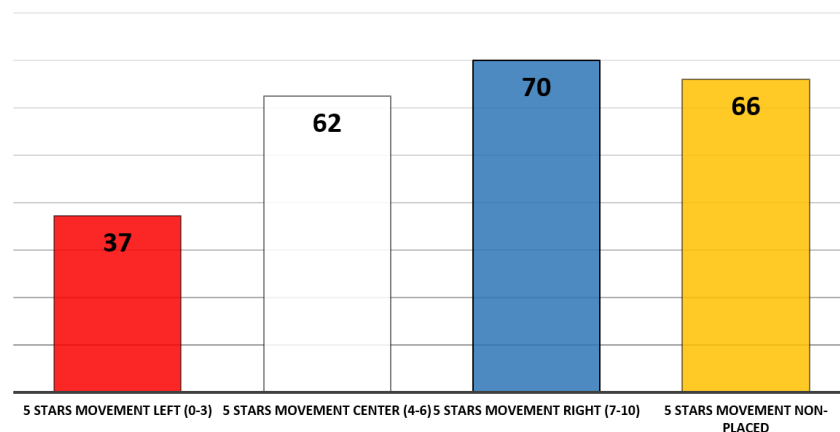
Figure 4: Percentage of Five Star Movement voters who would pick the toughest option (“repel migrants”) as a solution to migration flows



Note: Compiled by the authors.

Similarly, 37% of Di Maio’s voters on the left believe in a direct link between irregular immigration and Islamist terrorism, against 70% of those leaning to the right, putting, again the Five Star voters on the left closer to the voters of the PD and those on the right to the League.

Figure 5: Percentage of Five Star Movement voters who agree there is a link between irregular migration and terrorism



Note: Compiled by the authors.

So yes, Di Maio is (partially) right in claiming that the M5S is neither on the left nor on the right. But this is clearly not going to be an asset if and when the party is called on to run the country. The figures above clearly show how much the electorate of Grillo's party is divided when it moves beyond its anti-establishment populist appeal. How are M5S voters going to react if the party leadership should lean one way or the other on politically sensitive issues such as immigration, or the role of Italy in the euro area? What Luigi Di Maio has boasted of as his party's main strong point – being neither right nor left – could quickly turn into a major weakness for the policy coherence and credibility of the M5S, vis-à-vis its voters, the country and Europe.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

About the authors



Pierangelo Isernia – *University of Siena*

Pierangelo Isernia is Professor of Political Science in the Department of Social, Political and Cognitive Sciences (DISPOC) at the University of Siena, Italy. He is also the director of the Survey Research Center (LAPS – Laboratorio Analisi Politiche e Sociali) at the University of Siena.

Gianluca Piccolino – *Sant'Anna School for Advanced Studies-University of Siena*

Gianluca Piccolino is a PhD candidate in Political Science, European Politics and International Relations, a joint initiative of the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies and the Universities of Florence, Pisa and Siena. He is currently visiting fellow at the Cologne Center for Comparative Politics at the University of Cologne.