17 January 2014

Funny Corruption Fighter: Italy’s Five Star Movement

Bogdan Scurtu

Italy’s “Five Star Movement” (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) is an anti-corruption, anti-establishment, green, populist, and Eurosceptic “party” centered around a single personality, comedian Beppe Grillo. His personal blog and the movement’s Facebook page serve as de facto “headquarters.” He wants to “give more power to ordinary people” via “direct democracy.” With 25.55% of the vote in the general elections in February 2013, the young movement won 106 seats in the Chamber of Deputies (out of 630) and 50 seats in the Senate (out of 315).

Unlike other Eurosceptic populist parties with a significant share of the vote, such as Britain’s UKIP, France’s Front National, Austria’s FPÖ, and Netherland’s Partij voor de Vrijheid, the Five Star Movement does not feature anti-immigration, anti-Muslim, or nationalistic objectives on its platform.

Beppe Grillo is a former accountant turned comedian and TV star. He was banned from public TV when his shows started focusing on political satire that offended too many politicians. Instead, he turned to social media, continuing the political satire on his personal blog. In 2009, Grillo founded the Five Star Movement with web strategist Giancarlo Casaleggio. Grillo is not eligible for public office (because of a manslaughter conviction for a car accident).

Focus on Anti-Corruption

Ten years ago, 70% of Italians believed that EU membership was a good thing; many saw in Brussels the only and last hope against inefficient and corrupt local politicians. According to the Guardian, “Brussels is (still) seen as a more consistent provider of good governance in Italy than Rome.” Yet only 38% of Italians are Europhiles today. This is mainly due to Brussels’s unpopular austerity policies and the unloved Euro currency.

M5S’s anti-corruption message attracted voters across the board in a country tired of corruption (think of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi), hard hit by recession, and a high youth unemployment rate of 40.4%. Grillo’s grassroots movement managed to mobilize apathetic Italians: 35% of the party’s voters never voted prior to the February election, and 29% of it previously voted with the center-left Democratic Party (PD). M5S’s best result was in
Sicily, with 33.55% of the vote; the lowest vote share was in the Northern Province of Trentino-South Tyrol, with only 14.61%. Not surprisingly, poor Sicily and rich Trentino-South Tyrol occupy the opposite sides of Italy's corruption perception index (with the poorer South more corrupt than the richer North).

M5S’s organization is unique: anyone under the age of 45 with no criminal record and no previous political affiliation is welcome to join and run for office. Candidates cannot run for more than two terms, must accept a minimum salary (and donate the difference back to the community), are not allowed to use official cars and other perks, have to post their political platform online, and must be ready to hold a public debate. As the movement’s platform is exclusively online, there is no hierarchic structure; prospective candidates are voted online in a primary-like process. However, the Huffington Post has noted an internal democracy deficit and pointed to Grillo’s associate Casaleggio, who is said to dictate policies and make decisions without consultation.

![Gianroberto Casaleggio](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Political Agenda**

- Organize a referendum for leaving the Eurozone, and allow Italy to default on its debt
- **Zero cost politics** (or close): politicians as “citizen spokespersons” should not receive “fat salaries,” special privileges, and immunity; political parties should not receive public funding
- Green energy: apply EU directives regarding renewables and energy efficiency in buildings and plants; increase incentives for biofuels; encourage trading of electricity especially from micro-sources generating less than 20kW
- Information: free online access for all Italians; digital citizenship from birth (whatever that means); nationalize the telephone infrastructure; ban private newspapers and TV stations with national coverage where single shareholders own more than 10%
- Economy: establish a benefit guarantee for unemployed Italians; encourage small businesses and local production; cap salaries of top management in corporations listed on the Stock Exchange; ban monopolies; abolish stock options
- Sustainable transportation: strengthen public and discourage private motorized transport in urban areas (by introducing various fees); build urban and extra urban bicycle lanes and parking
- Ensure universal free access to the National Health Service; prohibit incentives for drug sales; cap rates charged by private health providers

**Criticism**

Grillo and his grillini (Grillo translates as “cricket”) have capitalized on staging various maverick stunts. The *Vaffanculo Days* (“up yours”) are public mobilization events for the collection of required signatures to submit popular initiatives; on the stage, Grillo’s discourses combine comedy with data graphs. For the 2013 campaign, Grillo organized a *Tsunami Tour*, travelling around Italy in an RV and broadcasting 12 hours a day on a dedicated web channel. In the new parliament, M5S’s representatives arrived by public transportation or by bicycle, and took seats in the center back of the hall, so as to “breath down the neck” of the other politicians, and not be positioned either left or right.
even staged a kissing protest in the parliament during a gay rights debate. Grillo himself swam from Sicily to the mainland to protest a planned public project for a three-mile bridge over the Messina strait that he deemed “useless” for costing almost €4bn and saving only 20 minutes of travel time.

The electorate has not honored M5S’s opposition to public projects such as the Messina bridge. Grillo is increasingly perceived as pulling down rather than building up. He frequently crams politicians, journalists, and trade unionists indiscriminately together. After the February 2013 elections, his refusal to enter a coalition caused gridlock in Italian politics. M5S members even decided to “occupy” the Parliament in April 2013, an ironic move since they already occupy 163 seats. The Five Star Movement reached only 21.2% in a December 2013 opinion poll.

EuroPoint: In February 2013, a quarter of Italians believed Beppe Grillo would achieve what the EU could not: rid the Italian political class of corruption. However, that hope seems to be sinking.