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Italy

# 5-Star Movement: Significant but insufficient growth

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**The reasons for the success of the 5-Star movement (M5S) in the elections of 4 March were grasped five years ago during the assessment of this unprecedented phenomenon. As I wrote in *Inprecor* at the time "although Grillo's movement plays a decisive role today in a parliament where there is no clear majority, he is not in a hurry to harvest what he sowed and prefers to leave his opponents, more and more confused and incapable to predict his next moves, to stew in their own juice." [1] Naturally, it was difficult to forecast the use that would be made of such a solid parliamentary delegation, even though it was already foreseeable "that he will not agree to sacrifice his troops in return for a or two ministerial seats. He aims much higher: he thinks not without reason that if the centre-left coalition is still torn a little and that new elections are convened quickly, he could well be this time the absolute winner."**

In fact, although the M5S has contradicted many forecasts, it is at a dead end, far from the victory it took for granted.

However, given the inexperience of almost all new elected representatives, the modest political culture of the leaders themselves and the unanimous hostility of the political class of all parties, its record of the last legislature is relatively positive, at least from the point of view of voter consent.

## A vote against the government and the PD

On 4 March the M5S won 2,006,588 votes more than in 2013 (+ 23%) and 4,905,129 more votes than in the 2014 European elections (+ 85%). This is, in absolute numbers, a number of votes very similar to those lost by the Democratic Party (PD), reflecting the fact that the M5S has largely gained substantial shares of the centre left and left electorate. The DP, which since the replacement of Berlusconi by Monti in autumn 2011 has played a central role in the machinery of government and in support of austerity policies, has dropped from 12,095,306 votes obtained by Walter Veltroni in 2008 (when he was beaten by the centre-right) and 8,646,034 votes won by Bersani in 2013, to 6,134,727 votes collected by Renzi last Sunday. The 2,511,307 missing votes (and the 5,038,134 missing if the comparison is made with the 2014 European elections) were mostly taken by the M5S.

Probably there were also cross-transfers between the different orientations. Further studies indicate that, especially in the South, many traditionally centre-right voters voted for the M5S, while in the north the PD votes that went to M5S partially offset the losses of M5S to the Lega. [2] Naturally, the criteria for verifying these flows may vary, but the level of "mobility" between orientations and between the parties has a dimension with few historical precedents.

The suburbs of the metropolis, statistically populated by the social sectors that have suffered the most from austerity policies, have massively rewarded Lega and M5S. In the north, the suburbs have chosen the Lega of Matteo Salvini, while maintaining, though with significant decreases, important votes for the 5 Stars. In the south, on the other hand, the suburbs produced almost plebiscitary results for the M5S. However, it must not be forgotten that the Lega, by symbolically abandoning its qualifier "Northern for the independence of Padania" and throwing the veil over its territorial roots, managed to win the consensus of the popular sectors from the south most fascinated by reactionary impulses, probably catalysing votes that would otherwise have gone to the Brothers of Italy or explicitly fascist lists. [3]

Precisely because these massive shifts of the electorate are unprecedented and have often been decided at the last

minute, it is likely that these are not electorates that have been won forever. In the 2013 general election, the 5-Star Movement won just under 9 million votes (exactly 8,704,809 votes), or 25.5% of valid votes, an extraordinary result for the first national election, especially as it outstripped the one obtained, also for the first time, by Forza Italia in 1994 (21.0%), which had then allowed Berlusconi to form his first government.

Since then, many failures have highlighted the difficulties of consolidating the 5-Star electorate. Suffice it to say that in 2014, during its second national electoral test (the election for the European Parliament), the Movement suffered a decline of about 3 million votes, mainly because of the abstention rate of 43%. The 2018 general election, however, confirms that, in recent years, the M5S electorate has not only consolidated but has risen from 25.5% to 32.7%, contrary to the predictions of most political commentators. .

It is surprising that this happened despite the authoritarian criteria for the management of its parliamentary groups and the repeated expulsions of deputies and senators for dissensions or (not very serious) offences of all kinds. While the media has amplified each crisis and presented it as the beginning of the end, it turned out that of the forty or so deputies and senators elected on the M5S lists, who had joined other parliamentary groups only one was re-elected (the only one who went to the right, joining the Brothers of Italy, while all the others had chosen the PD or related lists, without success).

## Hostility, proof of merits

In the run-up to the elections of March 4 2018, the attacks on the M5S dramatized the problems of the city of Rome, forgetting that Virginia Raggi, a young 5-Star mayor, had inherited a city ruined by the very bad right and centre-left administrations that have alternated over the last twenty years. Even insignificant episodes, such as a purely procedural transgression in the presentation of signatures on the list of candidates in Palermo, were presented by the media - but also by a partisan justice system - as a crime. The movement has been constantly blamed for all this ... with the unexpected result of reinforcing the electorate's belief that such hostility could only be proof of its merits.

The last episode was perhaps the one that had a decisive effect on the vote: it took place a few weeks before the election and was supposed to be a decisive blow to the credibility of the M5S. A television investigation by one of Berlusconi's channels wanted to prove that many 5-Star MPs were not paying part of the fund's allocation to subsidize the opening of small businesses. The goal was to undermine the credibility of the movement. In fact, out of a dozen cases, the unpaid portion was almost always modest and justified as an error or a delay in the transfer. But all the media hammered the news and the PD secretary, Matteo Renzi himself, used it in the election campaign, accusing the M5S aggressively.

The result was a deadly boomerang. The difference was clear between the M5S's immediate suspension of offenders, and the PD's tolerance of many of its supporters indicted for much more serious crimes. It was also easy to respond to the attacks by recalling that the fault of the suspended was to touch only too high a part of the wages that the parliamentarians of all other groups quietly put in their pockets. An excellent propagandist effect, because these small deductions from parliamentary fees affect the level of employment insignificantly and it is a very modest aid that is distributed only to certain entrepreneurs, usually to those who have long been part of Confederation of Italian SMEs (Confapri), which includes only a minority of SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises).

However, as the lists were already filed, the suspended were standing. Nine of them were elected ... thanks to the bad electoral law imposing single-member candidatures, wanted and imposed by Renzi. The most striking case was that of the traditionally left-wing Pesaro constituency, which was considered safe by Renzi. One of the suspended candidates, an unknown, Andrea Cecconi, who had even given up campaigning actively, defeated the centre-left

candidate, minister of the interior and rising star in the PD, Marco Minniti.

In the first commentary on the results, Matteo Renzi spoke in this connection of an absurdity that discredits and delegitimizes the elections, without realizing that this is proof that the electoral mode he imposed is not seen as an opportunity to choose the best candidate, but as a vote for or against the government and the PD.

It must be said that the electoral law is fundamentally ridiculous: apart from single-member constituencies where one more vote is enough to win, voters cannot indicate their preferences and members of partisan lists are automatically elected following a complex calculation of results at the regional level for the Senate and national for the Chamber. The openly avowed purpose of this law was to reduce the parliamentary presence of the M5S – an obvious missed goal - but also to remove from the electorate any possibility of personal choice, making the candidates elected on the basis of the order in which they are placed on the lists by the leadership of their party.

Renzi, his government and the leadership of the DP did not want to see the extent of the electorate's disappointment. Disappointment provoked by the striking contrast between the ceaseless optimistic announcements of so-called conquests and the reality of a country in crisis: its effects on employment, public health, the public school defined as "good" by propaganda, but with a growing malaise of the teaching profession. New military spending - the purchase of F35 fighter-bombers and the so-called "humanitarian" interventions, first in Iraq and then in Niger, without even agreeing with the country's authorities, were deemed incomprehensible and unjustifiable. In addition, there was not the slightest reflection on the resounding failure of the 4 December 2016 referendum, aimed at the suppression of the Senate and several other institutions, which Renzi thought he could win using anti-elite arguments borrowed from the worse repertoire of the first Beppe Grillo.

In a word, they did not understand that the opposition was strengthened directly in proportion to the repulsive force of the government. The latter could only be maintained by abusing the question of trust in parliament, that is to say only because a large section of elected representatives from all camps were terrified by the idea that its fall would provoke early elections, fearing that they would not be re-elected or even not chosen as candidates.

## M5S: from 2013 to 2018

Since its appearance on the political scene in 2013, the M5S has undoubtedly experienced several changes: Beppe Grillo is less present in the foreground, his right arm Gianroberto Casaleggio is dead and was replaced in the role of guarantor by his son David (he controls the Rousseau association and the internet platform for the selection of candidates and votes on possible differences, but seems less present and obviously less prestigious than his father). And new leaders without much experience have appeared. The staggering increase in the number of elected representatives, selected with less stringent criteria than in the past and often almost unknown, has caused unprecedented problems: for example, it is only after the presentation of the candidates that some cases of incompatibility with the regulations have been discovered: membership in Freemasonry or participation, in the past, in municipal councils of various colours.

To guide the 250 new deputies and senators (out of a total of 339 elected) "parliamentary technical courses" are planned, and especially the restoration of the norm which, in 2013, imposed not only silence in front of journalists, but also before colleagues from other parties.

This rule - as was obvious - quickly proved impossible to apply in normal parliamentary life, especially in committee activities. And the ease with which several middle-level representatives of the movement have become accustomed to communicating their thoughts to the press has ultimately made it difficult to control elected officials. On the other

## 5-Star Movement: Significant but insufficient growth

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hand, faced with the general imprudence of some turbulent parliamentarians, the group feared incursions of emissaries from other parties with a real “buying campaign”, like the one that, in the last legislature, saw the centre-left, or the DP directly, absorb almost all the dissident or punished representatives.

But Grillo's frequent public polemics aiming to change a decision already made by the parliamentary groups have set a dangerous precedent. Moreover, they have prevented the movement from having a coherent tactic against the centre-left, in crisis. For example, during the election of the President of the Republic, the M5S proposed (or made available through its not very transparent computer network), a list of candidates including dignified and undoubtedly left-wing people, such as Gino Strada, the founder of Emergency, the TV journalist Milena Gabanelli, author of many serious investigations, and the lawyer Stefano Rodotà, who has been president of the PDS [Democratic Party of the Left, forerunner of the PD] during his later years. Regarding the latter, Grillo had some illusions, overestimating his radicalism and his distance from the PD. But on the whole it was an intelligent initiative, momentarily defeated by the absolute control by Renzi's supporters of the Democratic Party leadership, which cynically prepared the coup de force of the re-election of Giorgio Napolitano. The initiative had gathered support that could have been used in a next phase.

Instead, shortly thereafter, a modest criticism of Rodotà's M5S in an interview immediately provoked a quick break: it was the first months of the legislature and Grillo's elected officials were more distinguished by their divisions than by their parliamentary activities. In this interview Rodotà suggested to Grillo “a change of pace” to get out of this “click democracy” that does not work when it comes to making decisions in parliament. Words that were not appreciated by the comedian, who took revenge on the internet without mercy: “Rodotà is a miraculous octogenarian of the Net, thawed from the mausoleum where he was confined by his family, to whom we wish to refund the left”. It is obvious that in this way it is difficult to build a stable area of potential allies. Especially if the tactic is only to swing from one position to another, as has happened several times on various issues, and when the polemic of the parliamentary groups against the government and the presidencies of the chambers too often focuses on particular or formal aspects, failing to focus on the heart of the issues and giving undue attention to form (which was typical at the Parliamentary Regulation Seminar).

In recent times - behind the image of “political leader” Luigi Di Maio, who won his Neapolitan constituency swiftly and who has established himself as a “good guy” popular personality repeating reassuring banalities - the M5S has absorbed a number of personalities, who are anything but virgins in politics.

For example, journalist Emilio Carelli, who for twenty years was Director and Information Manager of Silvio Berlusconi's Fininvest, then of a Sky Italy satellite channel, directed by Robert Murdoch. He is also professor of “Information Technology” at the Catholic University of Milan, as well as vice-president of the Italy-USA Foundation and Radio-TV Confindustria [\[4\]](#), etc. In short, he is certainly not only a useful “independent” contributor, so much so that today he appears one of the most strongly tipped to take on the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies. Nothing is decided, but obviously his election would provide a bridge to Berlusconi, worried by the rise of Matteo Salvini and the downsizing of his precious disciple Matteo Renzi.

The Venetian entrepreneur Massimo Colomban (who was an councillor in Rome with Virginia Raggi), and MEP David Borrelli, are also part of the lobby pushing for an agreement with the centre right. They were both linked to founder Gianroberto Casaleggio and are currently being courted by Donald Trump's former advisor, Steve Bannon, who would like to build a right-wing bloc in Europe.

But an agreement between the M5S and the Lega will not be easy, although many would like it (including a large part of the majority of PDs). The programme of the M5S, despite the ambiguity of certain points and the difficulty of putting them into practice, is more to the left, even if it is confused. The formulations on immigration are very different from those of the Lega. It brings together those of the PD on the need to attack the “the migration business” and that

of “international cooperation also aiming at the conclusion of repatriation treaties”, with the target of “10,000 new recruits in the territorial commissions to decide, in one month, like in other European countries, whether a migrant has the right to stay in Italy or not”.

There were also exchanges of courtesies with several prelates of the Vatican, including Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti, president of the Italian Episcopal Conference, who with his usual diplomacy showed an openness to a government that would take care that “in social doctrine of the Church we call the common good,” as well as the poor. In fact, this was for him an M5S government supported by a part of the PD. While the electoral campaign was in full swing, the candidate for the post of Prime Minister of M5S, Luigi Di Maio, as a good Neapolitan, had been photographed while kissing the reliquary with the liquefied blood of San Gennaro carried by the cardinal Crescenzo Sepe, while many Catholic leaders openly expressed their dissatisfaction at the ostentatious oath of Matteo Salvini with a rosary ... [5] But Di Maio did not only ask for help to San Gennaro. As they say in Rome, he made “the tour of the seven churches” - meeting with Confindustria, the City of London, the European Union ... - offering them guarantees and obtaining a benevolent expectation.

And he also made a sign to NATO. At a press conference on 13 March at the Foreign Press Association, Di Maio answered an Egyptian journalist who was questioning him about foreign policy, especially the Palestinian question, relations with Libya, Syria and the United States. Egypt: “[Our] line does not tend to isolate Italy, our country has strong international relations with its allies, Italy will remain allied with the West, within NATO and in the EU, with the ambition to change some things that do not work.” [6]

## A government, to do what?

It is too early to know if the half-victory won on March 4 will allow the M5S to form a government. [7] Having not gathered the necessary seats to govern alone, it will have to rely on others, whose votes will obviously weigh in the parliamentary debate on the DEF (the economic and financial document that summarizes the government's economic plans for the next three years), which will set the lines for the future government.

After an election campaign under the banner of the possibility of governing and the “end of the era of opposition”, the movement must try everything to form a government, because if it did not succeed, it would run the risk of become unconvincing and not benefit from its best moment.

But a possible government of Maio would anyway be “provisional”: within a year there will be the dangerous step of verification by the European elections, which means a year of permanent electoral campaign, with many enemies on the warpath, ready to seize on the slightest mistake. And who will all benefit from a likely disappointment of many who hope for the guaranteed income promised by M5S - the main driving force of its success in the southern regions affected by long-term unemployment.

The precedent is the true media guerrilla campaign that harassed Virginia Raggi M5S mayor of Rome, at every step from her election for her modest or non-existent mistakes. This has already led to a limited drop in M5S votes during the renewal of the council of one of the Roman municipalities, as well as in the 4 March elections in most of the capital's urban territory.

Faced with such a close election, the M5S could lose the votes of those who believe that the realization of its guaranteed income proposal will be quick and easy. [8] In addition, this promise was formulated ambiguously, forgetting to explain in the propaganda that the 780 euros promised as “citizen income” would be removed in case of refusal of the first three job offers ... And without mentioning that such an income would face the European dictates

and the resistance of the state apparatus.

The same goes for the “400 useless laws” to be eliminated. How could even one tenth be abrogated in a single year? In addition, it was already a propaganda theme of the Lega: one of its representatives, Roberto Calderoli, Minister of “bureaucratic simplification” in a Berlusconi government, was filmed by television while he threw in the fire of entire collections of laws ... but they all survived this symbolic pyre!

After a long silence, Beppe Grillo intervened on his blog giving movement a mischievous but effective definition: “The species that survives is not the strongest, but the one that adapts better. Then we will be like Christian democracy, a little right, a little left and a little centre, able to adapt to everything, so we will always win the climate, the environment, on earth.” Grillo thus defined the political strategy that led the 5-Star movement to become the party for which Italians voted the most in the 4 March elections.

But to be able to govern, it must think about who will give it the necessary votes. It is logical to think of the DP, because of the greater affinity of the programs which propose widely propagandist objectives and without precise indications on how to finance them. Indeed, the extreme generality of the M5S program in terms of taxation (“Less taxes, more quality of life”, without even indicating the reduction of income tax rates) and even more in terms of reducing wastage and costs, suggests that all the beautiful statements are unachievable in a short time.

This is particularly the case with health care “who cares for you” and “an increase in resources for public health and a substantial reduction in waiting lists for all medical examinations”. The deliberate abandoning of the public health service, afflicted among others by a serious lack of medical staff, means that even the best solution requires not only a long period of implementation, but serious funding problems.

The same is true for “quick, just and effective justice”, which should take the form of a “reducing the length of trials” and at the same time be based on “the certainty of trial and punishment”. This is impossible without a radical reform that cancels some of the sentences that unnecessarily fill the prisons and without substantial increase in judicial jobs and courts.

And there is a problem: who can create in a single year a force able to mobilize in defence of the the first achievements that, if they affect specific interests, will trigger strong opposition? Unlike the Lega and the PD, the M5S has no territorial structure and there is a dramatic lack of competent staff (it recruits quickly in all directions with often counterproductive results). It must absolutely conclude something in a short period of time, otherwise it will not be able to govern its electorate and will face the unleashing of hostile media campaigns (and judicial), similar to the one that paralysed day after day the Raggi mayoralty in Rome.

This could lead to a serious decline in just one year, in the European elections.

*Recanati,*

*13 March 2018*

PS:

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[1] Not available in English. ["Grillo Story : analyse du mouvement autour de Grillo"](#).

[2] Lega Nord (LN; English name: Northern League), whose complete name is Lega Nord per l'Indipendenza della Padania (Northern League for the Independence of Padania). Padania is a name for the region of the Po Valley.

[3] Fratelli d'Italia, FdI, is a national-conservative political party led by Giorgia Meloni

[4] Confindustria (General Confederation of Italian Industry) is the employers' federation.

[5] Naples Cathedral houses a vial of the blood of Saint Januarius (San Gennaro) which is brought out twice a year, on the first Saturday in May and on 19 September, when the dried blood usually liquefies. If the blood fails to liquefy, then legend has it that disaster will befall Naples.[1] A recent hypothesis is that the vial contains a thixotropic gel. Researchers have proposed specifically a suspension of hydrated iron oxide, FeO(OH), which reproduces the colour and behaviour of the 'blood' in the ampoule. The suspension can be prepared from simple chemicals that would have been easily available locally since antiquity. On 21 March 2015, the blood in the vial appeared to liquefy during a visit by Pope Francis. This was taken as a sign of the saint's favour of the pope. The blood did not liquefy when Pope Benedict XVI visited in 2007.

[6] *Repubblica*, 13 March 2018 ["M5S. Di Maio alla stampa estera: «No governo istituzionale. Voto non ci spaventa. Padoan avvelena i pozzi»"](#).

[7] On 7 May the issue of government formation is not resolved. On 24 March, the centre-right coalition and the Five Star Movement agreed on the election of presidents of the Houses of Parliament, Roberto Fico of the M5S for the Chamber and Maria Elisabetta Alberti Casellati of Forza Italia for the Senate.

[8] Many newspapers have strongly exaggerated the news that in some cities in Puglia (the "boot" of the extreme south), there were people who went to the municipal offices to apply for citizenship income forms. It was not an "invasion", as it was said, but it is true that there were some, and there are people who look forward to this income, because they do not have any other. And they are in a hurry to see it ...