

## **LUST FOR THE VACUUM: UNDERSTANDING THE PERSISTENCE OF THE FIVE STAR MOVEMENT IN ITALY**

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<https://doi.org/10.22215/cjers.v13i1.2530>

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### **Abstract**

The article investigates the persistence in the political sphere of the peculiar Five Stars Movement (5SM) in Italy. It does so by analyzing how the support base was mobilized on the ground in order to provide important insights on the contemporary Italian (and European) crisis of representation. The 5SM responded to the political vacuum caused by the decline of the traditional mediating role of the Italian party system with a unique project. The absence of a traditional political plan in favour of a platform whose issues are supposedly decided by the 5SM's activists, supported by a complex structure inclusive of both vertical and horizontal features, as well as an original style of communication and an ideology that officially tries to capitalize on the participative side of Web 2.0, offered the activists the hope of being in control of their future. Such a liquid core of the movement and the way it was perceived by the activists became key to the fortunes of the 5SM.

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## **Introduction**

The meteoric rise of the comedian Beppe Grillo's Five Stars Movement (5SM) to become the major single party in Italian politics at the national elections of 2013 and 2018, starting only four years after its creation in 2009, has naturally attracted worldwide attention. The movement seemed to be peculiar in the electoral history of western democracies for a number of reasons, including the following. First, it is important to note its rather radical ideology that mixes aspects of populism and cyber-libertarianism, calling for direct democracy through the net (Deseriis 2017a, 1; Natale and Ballatore 2014, 105). Second, the movement's 'post-ideological' claim is that it has transcended right and left divisions. Third, the 5SM uses populist rhetoric that aggressively attacks the two 'castes' of politicians and 'traditional media' (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 436). Finally, the movement uses a very peculiar organizational structure constructed through new online communication media which, despite its lacking a traditional party platform, has vertical and horizontal elements (Florida and Vignati 2013; Tronconi 2018), resembling features of both political parties and social movements (Diamanti 2014).

Emerging in a country whose recurring crises made it prone to the rise of populist parties and therefore their study (Tarchi 2015; Tarrow 1979), analyzing the legacy of the 5SM might contribute to the understanding of important trends. In fact, the emergence and persistence of such a political actor not only exemplifies, but goes beyond what most commentators have envisaged for the populist response to the crisis of representative democracies. The 5SM rejects in a classic populist manner the complete political establishment using aggressive tones and styles of communication. In addition, utilizing novel digital technologies, the actor questions contemporary party systems and, by claiming to override the mediation of political parties in favour of a direct form of online participation, it brings back old concerns about democracy and the critical role of political parties (Ostrogorski, 1964; Berger, 2017). Arguably, the 5SM's communication, organization, and absence of a fixed political plan provide a unique answer to the wider crisis of democracy, whose implications might have significant impacts on the future of Italian (and Western) politics.

In order to understand the persistence of the 5SM, this article focuses on how support was mobilized on the ground through communication and organization employed by the political actor. The 5SM responded to the political vacuum caused by declining trust in the Italian party system with a project that provided the feeling of empowerment to its activists. It is the absence of a fixed political plan in favour of an evolving platform whose issues are supposedly to be decided by the 5SM's activists, supported by a complex structure comprised of both vertical and horizontal features, as well as an original style of communication and ideology, that officially try to capitalize on the participative side of Web 2.0, that made the fortunes of the 5SM. This rather 'liquid' entity is key to understanding the legacy of the 5SM.

Initially, Grillo's blog gained an early reputation as a reliable channel of counter-information that, in turn, helped consolidate the anti-establishment traits of the comedian in a cultural environment of growing political mistrust. The web provided Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio (co-founder of the movement, whose 'Casaleggio Associati' managed Grillo's online communication) a way of circumventing media gatekeepers, as well as influencing the discourses, structures, and ways of mobilizing the populace. The founders constructed an entity that does not have a political plan, while it does have autonomous and decentralized elements at the local level that contrast with an authoritarian control of the head office at the national level.

In a full populist move, they called for people's sovereignty through direct democracy online, supported by the autonomy of the local level and the fact that, theoretically, the political plan is to be decided by the 5SM's members. Thus, the shared lack of a political imaginary became their strength. The perceived availability of such empty space turned into political potential and, despite the tight control at the head office by Grillo and the Casaleggio Associati, the 5SM kept consolidating support.

This paper is structured in three parts. Firstly, it will define the cyber-populist ideology of the 5SM. Secondly, it will analyze how its ideology and web-based form of communication were key to expanding its support base over time. Thirdly, it will dissect the complex structure of the 5SM, demonstrating how its horizontal and vertical features and the lack of a defined political plan intersected with the way it communicated with the support base. Ultimately, one should be able to better comprehend the peculiarity of the 5SM's structure and their 'success'.

### **Cyber-populism**

In order to identify the ideology of the 5SM, cyber-populism (Natale and Ballatore 2014), one should begin by defining populism. The latter is a contested and contentious issue. Nonetheless, in recent years, most scholars seem to agree that populism can be defined as a 'thin' ideology (Mudde 2004) that ultimately divides society into two antagonistic and homogeneous groups. A 'thin' ideology, as opposed to 'thick' ones such as liberalism or socialism, is composed of a limited set of core ideas (Mudde 2007, 17). These do not provide any structural frameworks for how to achieve social change, and therefore are often attached to 'thicker' ideologies. For the sake of this analysis, one can extrapolate three defining traits. Populism firstly includes a positive image of a unitary and monolithic 'people', thus being people-centered. Secondly, it offers a negative view of the ruling elites normally blamed for ongoing problems and is therefore anti-elitist. Thirdly, there has to be a vision of the allocation of power invoking greater sovereignty for such 'people'. This in turn means that such a unitary block can reject the constitutionalist division of powers between the many institutions, as well as the right of minorities, if they are not part of such 'people' (Wirth et al. 2016).

A political communication expressing a populist ideology would, over time, showcase statements regarding the unity of the people, defining its boundaries and stressing its virtues, as well as highlighting negative feelings toward the ruling elites and demanding greater sovereignty for the people (Wirth et al. 2016). A further distinction shall be made in terms of the communication style, which refers to the way such content is presented.

Here, the connection between a populist style and a populist ideology is even looser. In fact, many mainstream actors use a populist style to make a message more appealing and interesting. For instance, one might use simplification, emotional and colloquial language to stress vicinity with the 'people', as well as use dramatization, black and white rhetoric and absolutism to stress the Manichean view of society. Finally, one can induce the claim to people's sovereignty with references to the wisdom of the common man, common sense and simple decisions (Wirth et al. 2016). A communication strategy that shows support for only one of these features, such as the many mainstream actors employing a people-centered approach, does not fully qualify as populist, but it nonetheless shows features of it. An actor who sends out more populist messages than another can be classified as more populist than the other, rather than just qualify as one or not. It

follows that populism becomes a matter of degree, while the concept relates more to the message than to the sender of the message (Mudde 2004).

Having defined populism, now the paper can move on to cyber-populism. The latter merges discourses coming from the web with the ideology of populism in the belief that ‘the government of the people, by the people, for the people is achievable by means of information communications technology’ (Deseriis 2017a, 441). Such ideology has been given slightly different names: technopopulism (Deseriis 2017a), populism 2.0 (Gerbaudo 2014; 2017), web-populism (Lanzone & Woods 2015), or cyber-populism (Natale and Ballatore 2014). This paper prefers the latter definition of cyber-populism, as it draws a direct link with its cyber-libertarian and populist roots. For instance, these origins are detectable in the construction of ‘the people’. Cyber-populists used the ‘new media’ as one of the lowest common denominators, as the empty signifier (Laclau 2005), to build a common identity. Here, the main addressee of populism, the common person, is readapted to fit the condition of modern social network societies. Thus, the ability to connect becomes the lowest common denominator, and the common person is actualized to fit the online users of the net. All the unsatisfied demands therefore converge and find their element of commonality through the web, so that the latter is key in the discursive construction of such ‘people’. Indeed, one can find many expressions of the type ‘we internet people’; while often, even the selfie becomes a method of political identification (Gerbaudo 2014, p.69).

Populist claims to sovereignty can be found in a number of discourses of contemporary populist actors who often call for direct democracy online. The interactivity of Web 2.0, with its likes, retweets, comments, and sharing of content and ideas have led some early activists such as Casaleggio, the aforementioned co-founder of the 5SM, to think of it as informal mass democracy. Following the principle of “one person, one vote,” some of these actors developed the notions of Democracy 2.0. Building on the idea of collective knowledge, where the sharing of ideas and amendments can lead to better results, the pirate parties employed the concept of liquid democracy and used decision-making software as liquid feedback. Through these means, cyber-populists believe they can do away with the need for representation, instead enforcing direct democracy (Gerbaudo 2014, 70). Echoes of cyber-populism can be found in the Swedish, German, and Icelandic pirate parties, but also in the ‘99%’ of Occupy Wall Street and in the Spanish Indignad@s, Partido X, and Podemos.

Similarly, Grillo and Casaleggio did invoke direct democracy through the net (Deseriis 2017a, 1; Natale and Ballatore 2014, 112). According to its charter, “The Movimento 5 Stelle is not a political party, its objective being the realization of an effective exchange of opinions and democratic debate outside the associational and party bonds and without the mediation of directive of representative bodies, recognizing to the totality of Internet users the role of government normally entrusted to a minority” (Non-statuto M5S, Art. 5). Founded in 2009 to bring together the “experiences of the blog, the Meetups, the rallies, and a number of other popular initiatives” (Non-statuto M5S, Art. 5), the five stars of the logo represent the five starting issues: safeguarding of water and the environment, and the growth of public transport, connectivity and development. Moreover, by statute, the movement has no official physical location, but has instead to be found online (Non-statuto M5S, Art. 4).

Thus, the 5SM defines itself as challenging representative democracies and established party systems with online resources. The stated goal is to achieve a direct democracy where people rule without intermediaries such as politicians and political parties, an objective that is accordingly achievable through means of information and communication technology. To achieve this

objective, its people - the 'citizens' - are discursively equated with Internet users, while the rule of the people normally exercised through direct democracy translates into online democracy (or e-democracy). In this regard, in early 2016, the 5SM launched their platform of e-democracy, 'Rousseau.'<sup>1</sup>

The Internet here is the discursive tool through which Grillo creates a people and builds the dichotomous division of society that characterizes a populist ideology. Here, the evil enemies, comprised of the corrupted political, economic, and media elites, take advantage of the people whose power has been taken away. The 5SM argues that Italy is an oligarchy rather than a democracy, as the main established parties reduced the duty of governing to the protection of their own interests and privileges. Such parties, regardless of their political ideology, are unitary in their corruptness and represent the 'caste'. Grillo repeated constantly that the installation of such a hypocritical political class was possible only through tools that allowed for truth-covering and lying, and the removal of such evil elites could only happen through his impartial channels of communication. On the one hand, there is a deceitful, unlawful, lying unitary elite with which bankers and, sometimes, the European Union, are associated, while on the other hand, there are the honest 'citizens' (and the 5SM) who have virtuous qualities, but have lost their sovereignty and dignity (Lanzone and Woods 2015, 58).

Alongside such a dichotomous worldview, one can also observe a number of ideas stemming from cyber-libertarian discourses. Firstly, the utopian claims of Grillo and Casaleggio also resemble cyber-libertarian features. From the early days of the Movimento until today, the two founders depicted the web as a mythical entity. They argued that it is a transparent and coherent being with a disruptive agenda and its own laws. It is able to cure the ills of Italy and the rest of the world, leading towards a brighter future. The web is the 'supermedium,' as it will change political, social, informational, and organizational processes (Natale and Ballatore 2014, 113). A first consequence of the new medium would be to foster democracy by reducing corruption through transparency. An example is when Grillo states that "it would be great if this money could be monitored on the Web. [...] One doesn't steal through the Web," which resulted in 5SM parliamentarians having to publish their wages online (Casaleggio and Grillo in Natale and Ballatore 2014, 114).

Moreover, just as cyber-utopians are faithful to their self-organizing systems, so are the two founders faithful to the possibility of doing away with representative democracy. Underplaying the role of new intermediaries (like themselves, the blog and/or big digital corporations), they have constantly argued that the Internet does not need nor want intermediaries (Natale and Ballatore 2014, 115). Furthermore, the new technologies of communication with their horizontal networks will ultimately eradicate the need for representation and hierarchy (Floridia and Vignati 2014, 70).

For Grillo, however, such a concept of online democracy does not simply equal a conversation between individuals sitting in front of their screens, replying or posting comments or proposals through the blog, the Meetups, or their new platform of e-democracy, Rousseau. In Grillo's words, online democracy will also result in offline participation, with decentralized offline local groups

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<sup>1</sup> Rousseau is the platform of e-democracy developed and owned by the 'Casaleggio Associati' shortly before Casaleggio's death in April 2016. The ambitious platform divides into ten areas, some of which are still in development. Briefly, the platform is intended to allow for voting in local, regional, and national legislations and for choosing candidates via majority voting. The platform also allows for proposing one's own legislation and for voting on expulsions, even though the functionality of such new options is still a matter of debate within the 5SM. There are also a number of criticisms, as the platform is not open-source, and 'Casaleggio Associati' has exclusive access to the databases of all registered members, transactions, and votes (Deseriis 2017b).

of collaboration, where citizens will have to contribute in person in order to change things. In the 5SM's words, it is the common person that has the duty to re-appropriate their own power (Natale and Ballatore 2014, 116). Accordingly, the oppression of the economic, political, technocratic, and media elites has taken away dignity, but the new media environment is providing an opportunity to citizens that are willing to participate. In this context, the 5SM pretends to be the political expression of such an opportunity. Through the Internet, the 5SM claims to regain the full control that the corrupted caste of politician has taken away.

### **Connecting with the base**

Regardless of the perhaps naïve-sounding optimistic determinism of cyber-populism, with its equation of citizens with online users and the assumption of their will to participate in politics, the Five Stars Movement did grow in support over the last decade. To some extent, this is due to use that it made of the changing media landscape in communicating within the Italian context of low trust towards the political and media establishments.

Over the last decades, scholars have noted how western European countries have shown converging trends such as declining party membership and identification, declining voter turnout, and increasing volatility of the vote, suggesting that political parties were losing their representative functions (Mair 2002, 89; Kriesi 2014). Nonetheless, some countries saw their party systems being more discredited than others. This is surely the case with Italy. Here, the structural changes regarding the supra-national level of governance, the impacts of globalization, and the economic crisis of 2008 added problems to an already-fragile political establishment. The political crises and the various episodes of corruption had the Italian public highly skeptical of its government, with an average low level of trust throughout the 90s that reached its historical trough in the aftermath of the economic crash of 2008 (Tarchi 2015; Verbeek and Zaslove 2016).

In addition, the country also presented a low level of media pluralism, with half of the national television stations owned by Berlusconi's Mediaset conglomerate (Vaccari 2015, 33). Such media empires did not invest in digital technologies and, likewise, the political parties ignored digital forms of communication, as they appeared politically unimportant. By 2008, however, the number of Web 2.0 users increased dramatically, with important political consequences.

In short, the media change amplified the divide between the political establishment and its associated forms of communication (the traditional media) and the 'people'. The increased autonomy of the meaning-making process of online users and the relevant role of personalized algorithms in filtering information exposed users increasingly to information they were willing to receive, therefore fostering mistrust (Castells 2009, 132). As the consumption of such new media assumed mass proportions, this suspicious way of thinking towards the media and political establishment also became a mass phenomenon (Van Zoonen 2012, 58). As a consequence, the government and the traditional mass media and journalism are often seen as a manipulative 'power block' (Aupers 2012, 26).

Conversely, Web 2.0 was perceived as increasingly more 'truthful' and 'democratic,' as it supposedly provided direct access to information. The old institutionalized media could not address the interests and demands of an always more segmented society with its limited number of publications, thus appearing increasingly more unresponsive compared to the new tools (Quandt 2012). The small sub-networks of social media were more likely to be personalized and their

immediacy appeared more responsive. In addition, social media communication resembled to an extent the real life one-on-one communicative structure, as users mainly have friends or acquaintances online. Populists, in what Krämer (2017) names the ‘meta-function’ of the web, often exploit the low trust in traditional media. This was surely the case for Grillo and Casaleggio, who turned out to be two entrepreneurs of the situation.

They were able to connect to popular anxieties and reproduce them, understanding the impacts of the changing media landscape. In fact, the comedian established himself as an anti-establishment public figure and, with the help of Casaleggio, used the web to circumvent media gatekeepers and state a symbolic distinction from the traditional media and political establishment. For decades, the comedian depicted himself as a victim of media and politics that excluded him from television. In 1986, he was censored from national television after polemical jokes towards the then-in-power socialist party of Bettino Craxi, and managed to return on national television only in 1993 with two successful monologues critical of banks, politicians, and Italian lifestyle (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2016, 134). Grillo then dedicated himself to live events in theatres with only a few appearances on pay-tv channels such as ‘Telepiù’. He mixed entertainment with issues of public interest, and his shows took on an increasingly marked aspect of counter-information (Natale and Ballatore 2014, 107).

In January 2005, the ‘Casaleggio Associati’, owned by Gianroberto Casaleggio, launched the blog ‘Beppegrillo.it’. At the same time, Grillo went on a number of tours named after the URL of the website. One could argue that this marks when his shows turned into political campaigns (Natale and Ballatore 2014, 108). The blog had a post per day showcasing a variety of multimedia content, videos, interviews, satirical mashups, and political communiques. Moreover, publicized by the live shows, the webpage was soon to be the most visited in Italy. Grillo launched various single-issue campaigns on the platform, from a number of referenda to environmental issues, the abolition of public financing of parties and media, and attempts to make MPs with criminal records ineligible to run for re-election (Natale and Ballatore 2014, 108). At this time, the Internet in the country was used politically only by Grillo and the few underground and alter-globalization movements, which gave the tool an even more marked element of counter-information.

Grillo’s blog always tried to exercise an element of surprise, with a post per day containing relatively in-depth analyses on issues of common interest. Furthermore, such posts were careful to address a number of unsatisfied demands within Italian society. These ranged from employment issues – publishing a number of testimonies of underpaid youth in illegal, precarious positions, or on zero-hour contracts – to focusing on stories regarding the mafia and environmental issues, the recycling of toxic waste, denunciations of corruption, and opposition to the ‘grandi opere’ (major infrastructure works). The blog also published stories of activist groups such as the NO TAV movement in Northern Italy (Diani and Fabbri 2015, 223). In this regard, many activists agree that Grillo’s figure, personality, and web savviness were necessary to contrast with the communication wall of the political establishment (Biorcio 2015).

Conversely, while Grillo was building ties with the electorate, the Italian political system was slowly re-descending into crisis, with Berlusconi struggling with court cases and the left concentrated on opposing him. In addition, until 2013, the 5SM was the only political actor to be active on social media, which provided further practical benefits. Firstly, some contend that social media can benefit political actors by broadening their repertoire of communication (Della Porta and Mattoni 2015, 45). For instance, the degree of openness of social media can allow for higher participation and the potential for a collective process of content creation. The cost of entry is now

far lower for anyone and attentive political actors can notice how users react to certain posts as well as to the overall opinions on different topics.

Secondly, Bartlett et al. (2013) argue that the degree of directness and openness of the communicative sphere can benefit populism in particular. Social media provide a seemingly more direct connection to the people than existing media did. The new media evolve from 'like-minded' peer networks that can work as a direct linkage to the populace, circumnavigating the journalistic gatekeepers (Engesser et al. 2017, 1113). Anti-elitist and people-centered statements that claim to be willing to allocate power to the people can benefit from the immediacy of a tweet or a Facebook post. Taking part in likes, shares, comments, and conversation could easily seem to reduce that gap between the political actor and its followers, as communication might seem direct and unmediated.

One difference is the fact that, given the short nature of online posts, comments, or tweets, ideologies will be expressed in fragments (Engesser et al. 2017, 114). Senders then aim at keeping the post as easy as possible to make it more comprehensible in the shorter sentences allowed by social media. Ambiguous and open ideologies such as populism are well-suited to such fragmented messages, allowing users to complement such ideologies with their own elements, comments, posts, and shares.

In addition, many have noticed how, over the last twenty years, a number of politicians have given increasing importance to the 'media logic' and the way they appear on televised politics (Mazzoleni 2008; Moffitt 2016, 72; Kriesi 2014, 366). They use a language style imbued with simplification, emotional, colloquial language, and dramatization. While not necessarily linked to a populist ideology, this language could predispose an audience to the acceptance and preference of messages containing a degree of polarization (Moffitt 2016, 73). Such trends have remained unchanged with the advent of social media, where catchy slogans, humor, and outspokenness are a common language, as one is normally connected with friends online (Bartlett 2014, 94). In this regard, then, one could argue that Web 2.0 complements older media.

Despite such advantages, the 5SM was nearly unchallenged on social media until 2013. By November 2012, Grillo had 700,556 followers on Facebook, while the second-most-followed politician was leftist Nichi Vendola with 236,436; Bersani, the leader of the Democratic Party, was third, with only 146,088 (Bartlett et al. 2013, 29-34). This provided the comedian higher online visibility and resonance than any other politician.

However, after the 5SM gained an unexpected 25 percent in the national elections of 2013, both the Northern League and the Democratic Party had to renovate, and elected two new, young, media-savvy leaders: Matteo Salvini and Matteo Renzi respectively. The two politicians are not only highly visible on social media but also benefit from positive coverage on national television, therefore playing with a clear advantage in terms of visibility. Renzi, employing a people-centered style of communication, even took primacy on Twitter. Salvini, too, is highly active on both Facebook and Twitter. Thus, apart from an initial lack of competition, the social media landscape was soon to become as highly saturated with politics as in the rest of the western world.

And yet, despite a decline following the 2013 elections, the 5SM continued to consolidate (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2016), reaching a 32 percent share at the 2018 national elections. While accurate communication might have been able to capture a great deal of frustration that followed the economic crisis, recent studies demonstrate that a vote of protest by itself does not suffice to



account for their ‘success’ (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018). Therefore, the use of social media and the blog cannot fully explain the persistence of political support for 5SM, and there must be other factors at play.

### **A peculiar structure**

Arguably, the key is to consider how such ideology and communication intersected with the peculiar structure of the 5SM, more precisely analyzing how its support is mobilized on the ground. This is effected via a novel structure with highly decentralized aspects whose inspiration emerged once again from the Internet. At the local level, the movement shows an extremely loose structure, independent from the central office. The latter would rarely interfere with the Meetup groups, leaving the activists fully in charge of plans, initiatives, and local communication (Tronconi 2018). Such governance presents elements of participative democracy (Floridia and Vignati 2014) and resembles features of social movements (Diamanti 2014; Tronconi 2018). It is nonetheless contrasted by the tight control at the central level over the elected candidates that allows for no dissent when it comes to issues of national relevance (Tronconi 2018).

As far as the local level is concerned, during the V-day rallies in 2007, Grillo advocated for activists’ action at the grassroots level through the online platform Meetup, a simple platform that provides an online space to plan initiatives and meetings. Thanks to the early communicative work of Grillo and a few activists, the Movimento started expanding to local areas through meetings launched on the platform. Such lobbying work often managed to intercept and intersect with already-mature local protest groups, happy at acquiring a national voice. Soon, some groups elected candidates within their own localities. The process expanded quite rapidly, and by 2012, the movement had won the first major city council in Parma and had achieved success in Sicilian regional elections. In 2015, the Five Stars Meetups reached over 2,000 units with 135,000 members in 2016 (Tronconi 2018).

At the early stages, the leaders of the movement were Grillo and Casaleggio. Under their direct leaderships, a number of unspecified staff managed the blogs, Meetups, and social media accounts, developed the database of the activists and subscribers, and authorized the use of the 5SM’s logo for electoral campaigns (Tronconi 2018). These ‘headquarters’ rarely interfered with local decisions, allowing local groups a great deal of autonomy (except for important and mediatized localities such as the councils of Rome and Parma). The activists claimed that local decisions were only taken through the assembly and that its freedom was total (Biorcio 2015, 23). In fact, local assemblies could deliver on any issue relating to the locality, ranging from the choice of candidates to the manifestos and political plans, as well as issues of administrative transparency.

To participate in the process was easy. The few requirements stipulated in the ‘non-statute’ were: being a resident in the area of interest, not having previously been part of any political parties, and having a clean criminal record (Grillo 2009), giving birth to an entity grouping very diverse political cultures within it. Arguably, such quasi-complete autonomy would prove to be one of the major agents of the political ‘success’ of the 5SM, as, in an attempt to put the preached direct democracy into practice, it did make its activists feel empowered.

In this regard, the openness and directness of the blog, the Meetups, and the other social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were important contributors to the organization of the movement, especially at the local level. While final decisions were taken face to face in the assemblies, the Meetups served as a source of information for the sharing of ideas and coordination for the activists.

The openness of the platform also contributed to maintaining these local entities leaderless. Furthermore, such a mode of communication not only enabled Grillo and Casaleggio to monitor the reactions of their followers, but also allowed sympathizers and observers to follow the development of the Meetup of a given locality, reducing the cost of entry.

Arguably, in this structure, one can see the extent of the application of the ideas of cyber-populism. The web provided a model of organization that was then adapted, or at least attempted to be adapted, into the reality of a social movement. In addition to the connection of loosely decentralized Meetup groups that emerged outside the institutions, the 5SM applied the cyber-libertarian belief that digital information should be easily shareable, editable, and actionable, pushing citizens to take political action into their own hands. One can also find the notion embedded in the open source mode of governance that ‘a network can govern itself,’ as the structure and the local decisions are open to inputs by the base of their members and activists. Activists argue that, at a theoretical level, this is an attempt to actualize the concept of collective intelligence, wherein the collaboration and competition of many individuals bring about the possibility of a new politics (Biorcio 2015, 188).

In short, the 5SM has elements of ‘participative’ democracy. While often overlooked, these strains do exist and are visible in the practices at the local level, which are therefore comparable to those employed by contemporary social movements such as ‘Occupy,’ the ‘Indignados,’ and the pirate parties in Northern Europe (Floridia and Vignati 2014, 5). However, what does not appear in the narrative of Grillo, but cannot be overlooked in academic study, is the contradictory strong element of verticality.

Indeed, it is easy to notice how the central office repeatedly attempted to limit the actions of its candidates. While autonomy at the ground level of the Meetups was quasi-complete, the central office limited its national representatives in any way it could to avoid factions and disobedience. This was especially evident after the success at the national election of 2013, when the 5SM suddenly entered national institutions with 109 deputies and 54 senators, as well as European Parliamentarians and a number of regional and local councillors, including in the municipalities of Rome, Turin, and Livorno (Tronconi 2018, 173).

Even though Grillo never ran for the presidency, and from 2017 called himself a guarantor rather than a leader, he intervened more than once in expelling members from the movement. While on some occasions this might have proven beneficial by providing unity, there is an undisputed lack of checks and balances. For instance, the expulsions of parliamentarians reached 40 in 2017, while the 2016 exclusion of Pizzarotti, the mayor of Parma, after a public dispute with Grillo, and despite the positive reviews of Pizzarotti’s work, attracted great attention. Similarly, the expulsion of Marika Cassimatis, for undisclosed internal reasons, raised numerous concerns within the Movimento. Cassimatis even resorted to suing the 5SM. This brings to the fore a first critique: the lack of internal democracy.

A second important criticism is the overall lack of transparency, ironically a major theme in 5SM discourse. In this regard, the management and the communication have always been in the hands of ‘Casaleggio Associati Srl’, which is officially a profit-based e-commerce company that has at least generated revenue from advertisements on the website. While this was arguably understandable, as those revenues helped kick-start a movement that was refusing public funding, it is worrying that the relationship of the company with the 5SM has not been made fully clear to date.

Likewise, 'Rousseau,' the long-awaited platform of e-democracy, is managed and owned by the president of the 'Casaleggio Associati,' Davide Casaleggio, son of the founder Gianroberto, who died in 2016. Davide appears at e-commerce conferences and seems interested in practices of consumer surveillance and data analytics, while his position in the 5SM is not clear, leaving many suspicious (Politi and Roberts 2017). Moreover, despite employing many discourses on the freedom of information, what strikes experts is the fact that the platform is not open-source, leaving at least doubts about the anonymity of voting on the platform (Deseriis 2017b). Hence, it seems accurate to speak of both a horizontal and a vertical element.

One of the consequences of this tension is the fact that the movement has been hard to classify. Some define the 5SM as a hybrid actor (Bordignon 2014), while others argue that it does not belong to any political category; it is not a movement party, not a personal party, and not a business firm party (Tronconi 2018). Even entrance into Italian institutions and the much-discussed institutionalization did not really remodel the 5SM into a more familiar political entity. The online registering of its members, the addition of online primaries, and voting over specific issues did not solve its organizational gaps, leaving many wondering how a political force could sustain a long-term battle without having the solid organization of parties, and their multiple levels of decision-making, with fixed codes of conduct and dynamics of coordination.

In addition, the founders as much as the activists contributed to such confusion. While they never stated how the movement ought to be, they were always careful in differentiating themselves from the rest of the political establishment. One can observe an element of negativity recurring throughout the discourse of the 5SM. For instance, the project was born as a non-party, founded with a non-statute, with its members coming from outside the world of politics, opposing the traditional political system in favour of a new participatory conception of politics. The logo of the 5SM by itself does not define a political program of the same type as traditional parties but is an aggregation of a number of demands unaddressed by mainstream parties. Furthermore, the 5SM showcases members making statements from both a right-wing position critical of immigration, refugees, and the EU, and a left-wing one in favor of civil rights and critical of neoliberal capitalism. This led some to label it as a catch-all, anti-party party (Diamanti 2014). One could argue that the 5SM always left an undefined space, a liquid core characterizing its political essence.

While the above arguments are well-known, the point here is that it is precisely the lack of a clear political platform, supported by its unique structure, novel ideology, and channels of communication, which account for the ongoing electoral success of the 5SM, and which have provided it with internal coherence through making claims to having implemented direct democracy. For instance, Grillo argues that the 5SM willingly does not take a priori positions on issues such as immigration and membership of the European Union, as they have to be decided from below. This is the major dialectical strength of the movement. The lack of official standpoints on topical issues, aided by the platforms of communication on which one can find any sort of statement, proposal, and viewpoint are, in the 5SM's words, proof of their democratic spirit. While this argument is debatable, it has worked to date in favour of the 5SM, which has avoided having a clear political platform in the manner of traditional parties and managed to keep together an ideologically diverse electorate (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2016, 142).

The peculiar structure of the 5SM, especially at the local level, gives coherence to such a political project that lacks an official plan. The activists, especially those elected into the institutions, have often lamented the problems emerging from a political force that lacks internal multi-level coordination (Biorcio 2015). Nonetheless, they claim it to be their nature: fluid and dynamic. They

claim to be oriented towards the movement because of its lack of leaders, hierarchies, and ideologies, while they undertake activism as a civic duty. Moreover, the majority appreciate the ease and openness of the movement and the fact that one can get close without having to take part in it. Besides, they all counterpose the alleged transparency, horizontality, and lack of ideology and structure of the Movimento with the ‘hierarchical’ and ‘corrupted’ traditional party structure (Biorcio 2015, 14).

They acknowledge that such a nature will lead to problems that some members might not be fit for political positions, while others will act corruptly or focus opportunistically on their own careers. However, they argue that the goal of renovating politics allows for mistakes, as they are inevitable when one tries to put new methods into practice. Some even defined the movement as a container, an empty space to be filled in by the activities of the members (Biorcio 2015, 24). Arguably, it is the perceived vacuum of this container that provides the feeling of political empowerment to the activists, the hearth of the 5SM’s success.

This also parallels the ideology of cyber-populism. The latter, by being ‘thin,’ does only provide a few core ideas, in this case, the rule of the people by means of information technology. This ideology does not prescribe any social or economic reform or a clear path for how to achieve digital democracy. While it identifies a somewhat precise enemy in the political class, addressing the post-crisis frustration, it does also leave various doors open, which allows activists to fill them up with their hopes.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that the support is stable. The complex interconnection of structure, communication, and political praxis – that up to now remained somehow coherent – might not cope with the challenge of governing, especially if such duty is shared in a coalition. Governing requires internal unity, but the 5SM’s support theoretically derives from its openness to input from the base. It is therefore important for the central office of the 5SM not to openly oppose the will of its base, attempting to maintain the perception of unchanged connectedness. While they might get away with negotiating on issues on which they did not initially adopt clear stances, such as immigration, they are less likely to gain tolerance from their voters if they fail to deliver on their classical issues, such as corruption, environmental struggles, and income levels. In depending upon their coalition partners, the leaders of the 5SM are therefore placed under the greatest pressure since their entrance into politics. The fact that during this past decade they have been able to address their challenges is no guarantee that they will do so now.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the 5SM attempted to place the political projects in the hands of the members of the Movimento, at least at a rhetorical level. This was arguably the key determinant in comprehending the long-standing support for the 5SM.

Hence, a few implications follow. Firstly, this history demonstrates that there are considerable numbers of citizens interested in participating in the public sphere, in contrast to the many claims of political apathy. In turn, and alongside most of the literature on the topic, the findings of this case study also confirm the deep crisis of representation within the traditional Italian party system. The quality of the response of the 5SM, however, does raise a number of questions.

To begin with, many wonder whether this answer to the crisis of representation is a ‘good’ one or whether the emergence of such discourses can have negative consequences for the health of

contemporary democracies. Surely, the 5SM did manage to re-engage citizens who were previously not participating in the political sphere. However, some warn of the undemocratic potential of the widespread acceptance of a discourse imbued with the categorical rejection of the political opposition.

Secondly, the discourses of the 5SM imply that the Internet will offer a more effective way of mobilising citizens and their 'collective intelligence' compared to what can be achieved using traditional political parties. This raises the question of whether the technological utopianism intrinsic in the discourse might be beneficial. For instance, the 5SM's concept of decentralizing political actions with the use of online platforms of e-democracy, such as 'Rousseau,' can have benefits, cut costs, and speed up processes of democratic politics at the local level. This nurtures hope for innovative forms of a more direct democracy. However, activists cannot afford to uncritically accept claims of direct democracy online, as the Internet presents instead a great number of spins and subtle forms of control. Before embracing such a utopian view of the web, there should at least be widespread social awareness of the importance of data, which is far from being the case today.

Ultimately, it is important to monitor the influence of 5SM elsewhere in Europe. In Spain, Ciudadanos and Podemos have both made use of online resources and have, to some extent, employed similar discourses. Similarly, the claims of superseding right- and left-wing ideologies are also used by right-wing populist parties, such as the Front (now Rassemblement) National in France. Further research should move in this direction, discovering the motivation of their supporters and comparing them with the 5SM. The autonomy that interested the 5SM's supporters might also suggest novel approaches for the EU, favouring perhaps the need for closer contacts with local realities and disempowered citizens.

Whether the 5SM will be able to be perceived as an incubator of hope after its first experience in a ruling government goes past the scope of this paper. It is nonetheless important to keep monitoring how this novel political experiment evolves, and to what extent the mixture of populism and digital media will influence the contemporary party system.

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Published by the Centre for European Studies at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada  
Available online at: <https://ojs.library.carleton.ca/index.php/CJERS/index>

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ISSN: 2562-8429

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