

# **Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement**

Organisation,  
Communication  
and Ideology

Edited by

Filippo Tronconi

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Organisation, Communication and Ideology

Edited by

FILIPPO TRONCONI  
*University of Bologna, Italy*

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## Notes on Contributors

**Pasquale Colloca** is assistant professor at the University of Bologna, and collaborates with the Istituto Carlo Cattaneo of Bologna. He holds a PhD in sociology from University of Trento. His main research interests include the impact of economic crisis on political attitudes, old and new political cleavages, political values and civic engagement.

**Piergiorgio Corbetta** is research director at Istituto Cattaneo of Bologna. Now retired, he has been professor of methodology of social research at University of Bologna and also director of the Istituto Cattaneo from 1991 to 2001. In the nineties, he was among the founders of the research group ITANES (Italian National Election Studies). He is author of several articles and books on methodology of social science, statistics applied to social research, political participation and electoral studies.

**Maria Elisabetta Lanzone** has recently completed a PhD program in political science at the University of Pavia. She is currently a visiting scholar at the “Laboratoire Hermes”, University of Nice Sophia Antipolis. Her main research areas are new parties and political participation. She has published articles and book chapters about new populist expressions in Europe. She is a member of the research team C&LS (Candidate & Leader Selection).

**Lorenzo Mosca** is assistant professor at the University of Roma Tre. He holds a post-doctorate in political and social sciences from the Max Weber Programme of the European University Institute in Fiesole. He is the author of several articles, book chapters and books on online politics, social movements and political communication.

**Gianluca Passarelli** is assistant professor in political science at the Department of Political Sciences, Sapienza University, Rome. He is a researcher at the Istituto Carlo Cattaneo and a member of the ITANES (Italian National Election Studies) research group. His main research interests concern: comparative politics, presidents of the Republic, political parties, electoral systems, and electoral behaviour. He is the author of *Monarchi elettivi?* (2008); *Presidenti della Repubblica* (ed.) (2010); *Lega & Padania. Storie e luoghi delle Camicie verdi* (with D. Tuorto, 2012) and several articles in *French Politics*, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, *Modern Italy*, *Polis*, *South European Society and Politics*, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, and *Political Geography*. He is currently review editor for the journal *Polis*.

**Andrea Pedrazzani** is a post-doctoral research fellow at the Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Bologna. His main research interests include legislative behaviour, executive-legislative relations and intra-coalitional politics. He has published articles in the *European Journal of Political Research*, *Government and Opposition* and the *Italian Political Science Review*.

**Luca Pinto** is a post-doctoral research fellow at the Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Bologna. His research interests include party competition and legislative studies. His articles have been accepted for publication in *Party Politics*, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, *Government and Opposition*, and *International Political Science Review*.

**Filippo Tronconi** is associate professor of political science at the University of Bologna, Department of Social and Political Sciences, and a regular collaborator of the Istituto Carlo Cattaneo. His research interests cover European political parties, with a specific focus on the ethno-regionalist party family, political elites and legislative behaviour. Recent publications include *From Protest to Power. Autonomist Parties and the Challenges of Representation* (edited with A. Elias, 2011).

**Dario Tuorto** is associate professor at the University of Bologna, where he teaches sociology of social inclusion and exclusion. His main research topics in the field of political sociology are turnout, populism and party activism. His recent publications include *Lega & Padania. Storie e luoghi delle Camicie Verdi* (with G. Passarelli, 2012) and *Il lavoro difficile. Discriminazione e gruppi discriminate in Italia* (2013).

**Cristian Vaccari** is lecturer in political science at Royal Holloway University of London and associate professor in political science at the University of Bologna. He studies political communication in a comparative perspective, with a particular focus on digital media. His latest book is titled *Digital Politics in Western Democracies: A Comparative Study* (2013). He is the principal investigator of a comparative research project on social media and political inclusion ([www.webpoleu.org](http://www.webpoleu.org)).

**Augusto Valeriani** received his PhD in media studies from the University of Siena. He is currently assistant professor in media sociology at the University of Bologna, Department of Social and Political Sciences, where he lectures in media and international politics. His main scientific interests focus on digital media and politics, journalism, internet and society. On these topics he has authored and co-authored articles in international journals, chapters in edited books and three monographs. His latest book is *Twitter Factor* (2011).

**Rinaldo Vignati** taught political science at the University of Modena, and Reggio Emilia and public opinion at the University of Milano Bicocca. He currently works at the Istituto Carlo Cattaneo of Bologna. He has written articles about political parties, electoral behaviour and political culture. His last works have been published in *Quaderni di Sociologia*, *The International Spectator*, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, and *South European Society and Politics*.

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# Introduction

Filippo Tronconi

In its first participation in a nationwide electoral competition, in February 2013, the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S, Five Star Movement) obtained an impressive electoral result. Almost nine million Italians chose its symbol on the electoral ballot paper, making it the most voted party in the Chamber of Deputies, if one does not consider the votes of Italians living abroad, with 25.6 per cent of the votes. No parallels can be found in post-1945 Europe of a new party obtaining a similar success in its first electoral participation. Ironically, in spite of becoming the most voted party, the M5S rejects the label of party and all the organisational structures traditionally associated with it. It claims instead to be a non-association, with headquarters 'located' in the blog run by Beppe Grillo himself. It is not just a new party that shook Italian politics in 2013, but a utopian promise of renovation of politics, without the intermediation of parties, where individual citizens are called upon to decide on all the relevant issues through a continuous online discussion.

Officially born in 2009, the M5S came to the forefront of the Italian political scenario in May 2012, where it achieved a first, unexpected success in local and regional elections (Colloca and Marangoni 2013). The success was doubled a few months later, when Grillo's movement became the first party in the regional elections in Sicily, and even the most sceptical observers began to believe (or to fear) that the M5S would play a leading role in the upcoming general elections. Just one year before that breakthrough, this movement was known only among the most well-informed political observers as a bizarre but substantially irrelevant phenomenon. It was led by Beppe Grillo, a comedian with an anomalous professional path. A popular presence on the public TV channels in the 1980s, he was banned from mainstream television after telling a joke on the ruling Socialist Party during a prime time show. After that, he continued his activity in theatres, cultivating a smaller but loyal audience with shows that increasingly focused on current political events, and especially on environmental issues and a harsh criticism of the degeneration of the contemporary capitalist economy. Later on, the same topics will be extensively covered in the blog that Grillo started in 2005.

It is not difficult to discern the basic elements of a populist movement in the catchphrases launched on a daily basis in Grillo's blog. In first place the juxtaposition between the establishment, conceived as corrupt, quarrelsome, self-interested and ultimately unable to offer solutions for the problems of the country,

and the people, who on the contrary are considered as fundamentally hard-working, honest and virtuous. The establishment is above all identified with politicians, but often includes those who control economic power (big business leaders, bankers, managers of multinational companies), those who control information, trade unionists, high-ranking bureaucrats. All those representatives of the establishment have been in Grillo's line of fire, first in his theatre shows, then on the blog, and finally during his electoral campaign tours. Politicians are quite obviously the favourite target of his diatribes, but the media system is also frequently criticised for betraying its original mission to be the watchdog of rulers. Big companies are another recurrent theme of Grillo's speeches, most notably in 2003, when the multinational dairy and food corporation Parmalat faced bankruptcy. This came as a bolt from the blue for most in the media, while Grillo had been denouncing its imminent financial collapse for months in his shows, to the point that he was heard as a witness by the judges investigating the scandal. More recently, European and national bureaucrats – especially during the Monti government – have been under attack for hollowing out democratic procedures, taking decisions affecting the lives of millions of citizens without being legitimised by a popular mandate.

The second element frequently recalled as a defining feature of populism is the identification between the leader and his (or, occasionally, her) people. The typical leader of a populist movement is someone who personifies the common sense of 'the man in the street', as opposed to the unnecessary complications and artificial divisions that characterise political elites. The leader is thus able to offer simple and immediate solutions to the problems that affect the community, to which professional politicians are unable to give answers. The direct link between the leader and his or her people is also connected to the rejection of intermediate bodies of representation, and particularly political parties. The anti-party appeal is in fact another crucial defining feature of all populist movements gaining visibility across Europe in the last few decades. In the experience of the M5S the role of Beppe Grillo is indisputable and few – even among its own militants – would argue that the M5S would ever have been born or exist today without its founding leader.

The anti-party appeal is another self-evident feature of Grillo's party, which has interesting consequences also for its internal organisation. Paul Taggart (1995), among others, underlines the contradiction of anti-party organisations that perform typical party functions, such as elaborating policy platforms, selecting candidates and competing in elections for popular votes. The contradiction, Taggart explains, is tackled by proposing solutions that challenge the conventional ideas of parties as organisations, either in the direction of a charismatic leadership or in the direction of a 'devolved, decentralised and depersonalised leadership' (ibid., p. 41). The M5S, quite remarkably, presents both these faces in its organisational model, as we will argue in the following chapters.

The style of communication of the leader is another frequently mentioned feature of populism. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (2008, p. 7), argue that this is due to the necessity of acting on the political and institutional stage, but

at the same time keeping a distance from it and always underlining the leader's closeness to the people. As a consequence, populist leaders tend to adopt a style that breaks the accepted codes of political communication, with the use of direct, at times offensive, language. Beppe Grillo shows these elements in an almost paradigmatic way. The first massive public event he organised was the V-Day, where 'V' stands for 'vaffanculo' (bugger off), generally addressed towards the Italian political elite. He is furthermore known for constantly mangling the names of his opponents and inventing insulting nicknames (Berlusconi is the 'psycho-dwarf', Renzi is the 'little idiot from Florence', Monti is 'rigor montis'). He takes pride in using rude language, against the hypocrisy of the 'politichese' (political jargon). His speeches during campaign rallies are actually one-man shows where the consummate skills of the actor emerge:

He scorns the stage, roaming among the audience. Apparently consumed with rage, he shouts into the microphone that the country is choking with the rottenness of its ruling class, whether political, religious or corporate – then grabs the head of someone in the audience and clasps it to his chest, stroking the hair, as if providing the spectator a moment's refuge from a cruel world. His short, chubby figure is crowned with a tumbling white mop of hair, his energy belies his 63 years, his commentary shifts from the bitter to the witty and back again in seconds. (Lloyd 2012)

If the characteristics mentioned above allow us to safely place the M5S in the family of populist parties, other elements seem to differentiate it from its European counterparts. The first one of these is ideology. Although the most acute observers of the populist phenomenon warn that we should not automatically identify 'populism' with 'extreme right' (Taguieff 2002; Tarchi 2003; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008), there is little doubt that the majority of the most successful populist parties display a clear rightist leaning, whether in a neo-liberal or in a nationalist xenophobic variant (Betz 1994). The M5S does not fit into this scheme, nor does Beppe Grillo's biography. Beyond the anti-establishment appeal, the foremost point of reference is to be found in post-materialist and environmentalist values: according to the 2009 'Carta di Firenze' the five stars stand for '[public] water, environment, [public] transport, [sustainable] development and [renewable] energy'. One of the most significant battles fought by Beppe Grillo, in his shows and then on the blog, is against the projected high-speed train connecting Turin to Lyon and other big infrastructure projects that have met with hard opposition from local citizens' associations. More generally, the manifesto of the M5S stresses environmental issues (e.g. waste management, energy, urban quality of life, ethical consumerism) and left libertarian stances related to citizens' empowerment through practices of direct democracy (Passarelli, Tronconi and Tuorto 2013). This brings us to a second element of originality, that is, blind faith in the virtues of the Internet as a tool for breaking the chains of old representative politics, and opening the way to a horizontal exchange of ideas and democratic debate among

citizens, and ultimately to the accomplishment of large-scale direct democracy.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Piergiorgio Corbetta (2013) has coined for the M5S the apt definition of 'web-populism'.

The emergence of populist movements is often traced back to some kind of malaise diffused in a society. Betz (1993, p. 413) maintains that right-wing populism found a fertile soil in Europe in the political climate of the 1980s, 'marked by disenchantment with the major social and political institutions and profound distrust in their working'. These are certainly circumstances that can be observed in the Italian context of 2013 as well. Interestingly, it could be argued that something similar was happening at the beginning of the 1990s, when the Italian political system experienced an unprecedented earthquake that led to the sudden dissolution of the parties that had emerged after the Second World War and to the emergence of two champions of populism like Umberto Bossi and Silvio Berlusconi. Twenty years later, with these two leaders clearly declining, or even marginalised in the political scenario, history seems to be repeating itself. Scandals related to public money mismanagement and corruption are frequent in newspaper headlines, and trust in political institutions is almost without exception at its lowest point. Political parties, in particular, have been depicted as facing a very public 'downgrade' (Bosco and McDonnell 2012), but the technocratic alternative of Monti's government has not proven to be much more effective in dealing with the problems of the country (Di Virgilio and Radaelli 2013). Two more aspects make the current situation look even worse than in 1992. First, the economic crisis has added an increased sense of material insecurity for large quotas of society; second, the European Union, which was once seen as the supranational entity able to rescue Italy from its old vices, is now perceived by a growing share of the population as part of the problem to be solved, and is in turn hit by a deep crisis of legitimacy.

The M5S, however, represents an interesting case study also beyond its specific national context, to the point that it is legitimate to wonder if it can be considered a vanguard of new forms of political organisation likely to spread over the continent (Mosca 2014). The anti-establishment themes it proposes go well beyond the borders of Italy and span throughout Europe. What makes Beppe Grillo's creature unique in the continental scenario is its innovative use of the Internet, both as an organisational and a communication tool, and its ability to position itself beyond the traditional left-right ideological dimension of competition, which allows it to gather votes from a very heterogeneous electoral constituency. This differentiates the M5S from other populist parties across Europe that have recently achieved a remarkable

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1 'Each one counts as one, but an interconnected and responsible mankind has a value that tends to infinity. The Internet creates communities. Among them, the largest one is the human race, which has never had the opportunity, before now, to be connected, to share, to decide on its own destiny in real time. We are lucky enough to participate to a final change of our History, and we can be both witnesses and actors of it. The Internet redefines the relations between citizen and State, citizens become the State' (Casaleggio and Grillo 2011, p. 188).

electoral success. Most of them, although able to gather voters from previously leftist strongholds stressing issues that are not necessarily related to the ideological cleavage, like Euroscepticism, or immigration, are quite easily recognisable as right-wing populist parties. The UK Independence Party, the Perussuomalaiset (True Finns) and Alternative für Deutschland, to name a few, can be placed in this category. Other recent experiences have more clear similarities with Grillo's movement. The Spanish Podemos, which emerged as the political expression of the Indignados movement, shares with the M5S an extensive use of social media, the idea of participatory democracy and citizens' empowerment, and the emphasis on transparency in its funding. The German Piratenpartei is probably the political experience most often compared to the M5S for its use of the Internet as a tool for internal organisation. Both these parties, however, are clearly distinct from our case, for the fact that they are much closer to the ideal of leaderless organisations, based on an assembly model of decision-making at all levels.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, Grillo keeps a final word on all key decisions and crucial resources within the M5S, starting from the property of the symbol and the blog [beppegrillo.it](http://beppegrillo.it).

In this book we address these issues looking at the different faces (and contradictions) of the organisation of this party, its use of the Internet, its social base and electoral strategies. The founder Beppe Grillo is introduced in the first chapter, with his unusual path from TV to the stages of theatres, to the virtual stage of his blog, and back to the 'piazzas' as a political leader. The second chapter provides an overview of the organisation of the M5S, its many contradictions and the challenges it poses to traditional political science classifications of parties. In the following three chapters the theme of organisation is tackled from different perspectives: activists, voters and elected officials, respectively. We then move to the Internet (Chapter 6), meant as a tool for organisation, decision-making, communication and identity-building. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 focus on the links between the party and society. While Chapter 7 primarily concerns relations with social movements prior to the participation in the electoral competition, the following two chapters make extensive use of post-electoral surveys to explore the reasons that led some nine million voters to choose the M5S in the February 2013 general elections. Two aspects of this voting behaviour are particularly taken into account: the protest component (Chapter 8) and the ideological component (Chapter 9). In the conclusions we build on the evidence gathered in the previous chapters to address what is probably the most challenging puzzle for the observers that approach the study of this party – and for scholars interested in the emergence and success of new parties more generally. How could a party at its first nationwide electoral competition, founded by an individual entrepreneur only a few years before, without any previous financial and organisational resources,

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2 The formal appointment of Pablo Iglesias as Secretary General of Podemos (November 2014) distances this party from the leaderless model. However, the role of Pablo Iglesias is not comparable with that of Beppe Grillo, as the former emerged from a participated democratic process that never took place inside the M5S.

achieve such an outstanding result? What accounts for the most successful electoral breakthrough in a consolidated democracy in the history of the whole of post-war Europe? We argue that the answer is to be found precisely in the original organisational arrangements of the M5S, and in its careful positioning in the political space of contemporary Italy. At the same time, doubts remain on the sustainability of this success, as the very same features that allowed this party to quickly impose itself as one of the main Italian political forces, could represent its potential weak points. If the M5S is not able to adapt to the role of a leading actor in the Italian political scenario, its decline could yet be as fast as its rise.

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#### Documents

doc. NP: national program

doc. RPB: regional program Basilicata

doc. RPER: regional program Emilia-Romagna

doc. RPFVG: regional program Friuli-Venezia Giulia

doc. RPLA: regional program Latium

doc. RPLD: regional program Lombardy

doc. RPP: regional program Piedmont

doc. RPS: regional program Sicily

doc. PPT provincial program Trentino

doc. MPG: municipal program Genoa

doc. MPP: municipal program Parma

doc. MPR: municipal program Ragusa

doc. MPTA: municipal program Taranto

doc. MPTU: municipal program Turin

doc. MDCRS: motion for denial of confidence to the regional governor of Sicily (allegato all'ordine del giorno della seduta del 29 ottobre 2013)

doc. MTBRS: initiative aimed at revoking oil drilling in Valle del Belice (iniziative finalizzate alla revoca delle trivellazioni nella Valle del Belice) This page has been left blank intentionally

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