

The Five Stars Movement in the Italian Political Scenario

A Case for Cybercratic Centralism?

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Abstract: *With the rapid diffusion of Social Media, grassroots political organizations are starting to use supportive technologies to avoid party representation. The Pirate Party in Germany and the Five Stars Movement (5SM) in Italy are trying to use the interactive democracy paradigm to renew the institutional framework of political representation from the bottom up. This paper aims to analyse the case of Beppe Grillo and 5SM that - after a successful showing in administrative elections - has been involved - for the first time - in a national election (2013). How the 5SM - as a virtual party without a structured organization - will solve the problems related to its institutionalization and how the "proxy vote" will be used in parliament are the main questions, which scholars are debating. It is a unique occasion to see if this emerging model of a political form will evolve into a democratic rather than a cybercratic organization.*

Keywords: Five Stars Movement, Liquid Democracy, Direct democracy, e-participation

In the United States we had to wait until 2008 to see the power of the Web being used to link party fund-raising to political engagement and thereby contribute to Obama's unprecedented electoral victory. In Italy it wasn't until Grillo that any significant progress in terms of online politics was made. After social media had begun to compete with television for people's time and attention, it was then that the Grillo phenomenon really took off. And with Grillo, online politics moved out of the Geek domain to enter into the world of ordinary people. In 2005 the European section of Time Magazine considers Beppe Grillo as the European hero of the year. Three years later, The Guardian put Grillo's Blog at number 9 on its list of the world's top fifty most powerful blogs. The Italian political classes are both scared and fascinated by Grillo's rise to success. The Right-wing admires his style and the Left-wing, his method. To try and define the Grillo phenomenon, people have often used political terminology like anti-political or populist etc. But all attempts to fit Grillo into ready-made interpretative frameworks look set to fail.

1. The Beppe Grillo Story

Grillo was a TV comedian until 1987, when he became a *persona non grata* on State TV after drawing people's attention to the corruption in Bettino Craxi, the then Prime Minister's Socialist Party. Since then he has made a living from performing in theatres, from the sale of his books and from his blog. It is through this blog, Beppegrillo.it, that Grillo expresses his *vis polemica*, a form of direct communication with the thousands of fans who are attracted by his comic verve. When Grillo organised the Vaffa-day in Bologna in September 2007 to rally support for a grass-roots change to legislation consisting of three points (no to anyone involved in criminal lawsuits standing for parliament, no to re-election after two mandates and yes to direct election of candidates) the response from politicians was strangely supercilious – viewing him as some kind of "court jester" trying to perform on the serious stage of politics. The press gave much more space to Grillo's proposal. Michele Serra wrote that

"It's as if the hypothetical numbers involved suddenly materialised, as if the nebulous, virtual assembly suddenly became clear and real. (...), An important if not decisive indication of the

increasingly important role played by the Web in influencing people's orientation and choices" (Serra, La Repubblica, 9.9.2007).

Grillo is thus able to take another step forward into the democratic agora, where protest is transformed into commitment and political alliance into recognition of leadership. Beppe Grillo's friends now find themselves members of the 5SM, which was formally founded on 4 October 2009. One star for each of the cardinal points the Movement upholds: environment, water, development, connectivity and transport. It's at this point that we witness the transformation of a generic Internet public into a fandom and then into a structured group of activists working on behalf of a political project. These people are mainly young, male, well-educated, with high levels of digital literacy and easy access to information and many of them with no previous political experience. Most of them were born in the South of Italy but live in the North-East. The vast majority of them are white-collar workers or self-employed professionals (in private firms or commerce) with a smaller group of university students. There are no unemployed members or people working on short-term contracts. 5SM activists would like to help Italy move forward but are blocked by a political class who are incapable of modernising themselves or the country, preferring to insist with conservative strategies. When questioned, the 5SM activists appear very radical as regards public administration, the media, the jobs market but much less so when it comes to support for a women's quota in parliament or the abolition of the legal value of a university degree. They refute the idea of leaderism and anti-politics as media simplification and prefer to think of themselves as anti-bad politics (Orazi and Socci, 2008).

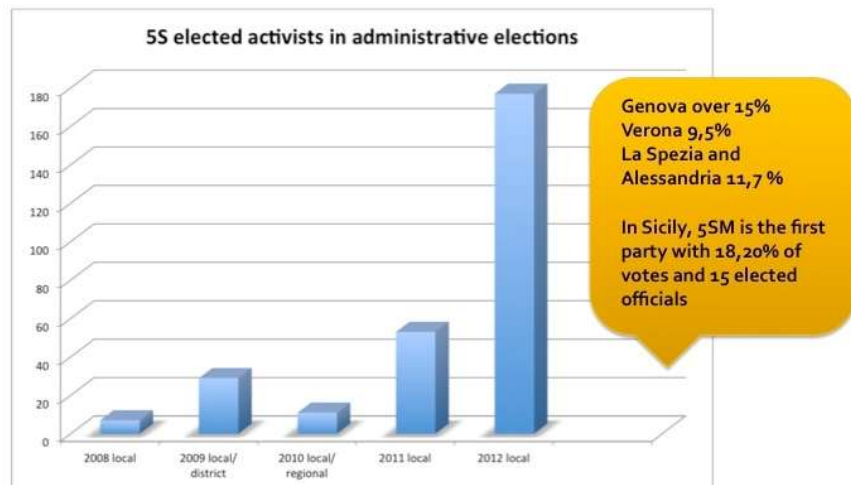


Figure1: Five Star Movement Local Election Results

During the local elections of June 2009, civil lists stood for election in 64 local administrations (town council) through the work of their local MeetUp groups. 23 of their candidates were elected as borough officials and 6 as district representatives. In Bologna the 5SM activists represented 10% of the elected leadership. During the local elections of 2012, the Movement stood for election in 101 local administrations and were successful almost everywhere: in Genova (over 15%), Verona (9.5%) La Spezia and Alessandria (11.7%). In the Regional elections in Sicily the same year, they were the first party with the most votes, gaining 18.20% of the votes and with 15 elected Regional Representatives. As far as the General elections in 2013 are concerned, the SWG polls put them in third place. Much of this success is attributed to Gianroberto Casaleggio, an expert in social network marketing, whose staff organises the MeetUp networks, defines the rules, evaluates candidates and handles local crises.

2. Cybercratic Centralism¹

By the time Grillo became a politician, the political scene had never looked so wobbly since Tangentopoli: the Popolo della Libertà (Pdl) and the Lega Nord were at loggerheads, Berlusconi's leadership was no longer unquestioningly accepted, Gianfranco Fini (the center-right wing President of the Deputy's Chamber, allied with Berlusconi) had become an unwilling partner in a forced marriage and the Democratic Party (Pd) was being torn apart by internal conflict. Even the institutional equilibriums seemed to be wavering. In Europe, the country's political and economic credibility have reached an all-time low, Italy is deep in crisis and its people exasperated. A World Values Survey of 2005 had already noted the downward trend of trust in parties with less than 1% (0.9%) of the citizens claiming to have a lot of trust in his own party against 15.2% who claimed to have enough confidence. Italy this time is not the exception but the rule: throughout Europe there is, in fact, the same trend with a range that varies between 70% in Spain and 84% in Germany of citizens who have no more trust in political parties. There is an empty space that new forms of representation could fill.

Initially the Beppegrillo.it blog provided the only forum for supporters to meet: in 2010 there were about 200,000 visitors every day and several thousand comments for each post (Lanfrey 2010). Then came the decision to use the platform that Howard Dean used for organising events and funds raising. It was the group of Beppe Grillo's friends who requested that civic candidates should stand in the local elections which led to the delicate issue of actually formalising the movement's rules, institutionalising it without associations or links to political parties and without the mediation of management or representative bodies.

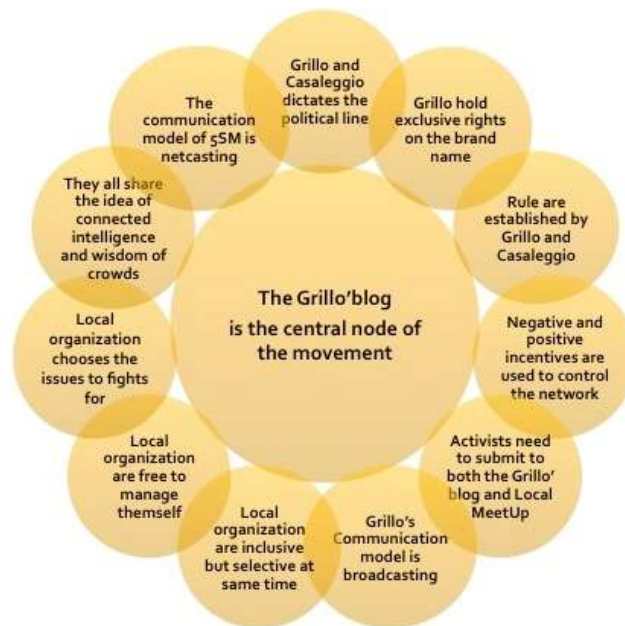


Figure 2: 5SM Cybercratic Model

¹ "Cybercratic centralism" is a semantic extension of "democratic centralism", which has been used to describe the kind of party organization with a strong internal discipline and a centralization of all steering functions.

The movement's organisational model could be described – using a computer metaphor – as a star bus topology with Beppe Grillo's blog as the central hub and the MeetUps the network devices. The blog plays a central role in information, communication and regulation of the group, employing broadcasting logic, although the structure often appears to have problems managing local activities. The local networks seem quite fluid and deal with issues such as the control of information, the No TAV protest (the high-speed trains new line), the public water defense. They vary, in fact, depending on the territory that they represent. The MeetUp groups are strictly local organisations making for the kind of in-depth knowledge of local issues that characterises 5SM candidates. Activists who decide to stand for election accept to campaign always and only on behalf of local issues. Candidates are not allowed to stand for other elections while they are in office. The ban on taking part in national talk-shows could also be read in the same vein. The cult of the persona and their careerist ambition are discouraged, because they want to keep the movement firmly focused on its principle of direct representation. The mandate stipulates that elected candidates need to account for their work every so often. Many observers see this as a kind of slipping down towards direct democracy. For the moment, objectively speaking, it would appear to be a hybrid form, a kind of representative-participative system (Slaton 1992), as a true platform for a direct participation is still missing and the imperative mandate is not allowed by the Italian constitution. The problem of political leadership at local level has been solved by making it answerable to, and mutually dependent on, the constituency it represents. Representatives are spokespeople from the movement who cannot take personal credit for their work. In computer terminology, these representatives are "both a terminal and an executor of the electoral body", as explained by Casaleggio and Grillo (2011, p.154). Decision-making therefore works on a proxy-voting system, facilitated by appropriate technological support. The software incorporates a way of quantifying feedback combined with a transitive delegate voting system where users can indicate their preferences in an error-proof system.



Figure 3: Ruling the Movement

3. Counter-democracy in Movement

The primary elections that Grillo organised to select his candidates for parliament looked like a complete flop. The strict rules, which were implemented to ensure that no “unsuitable” candidates were chosen, had a significant effect on the results, downsizing the whole operation. The experiment in deliberative democracy involving the mobilisation of large amounts of people started to look more like a condo meeting to vote their administrator, with only 1,486 candidates to choose from for both houses, and an electorate with voting rights of only 31,612². The decision to state up to three preferences acted as a way of multiplying votes, guaranteeing the selection of as many candidates as possible, and, at the same time, giving the most popular candidates within the movement, and women - who had always been in prime position – a better chance of being elected.

Apart from the data itself, the primary elections were an opportunity for testing a totally online way of selecting political personnel: no polling stations, no queues and no vote-counting. As far as academics were concerned, these elections presented an opportunity for profiling the demographics of a typical 5SM activist: average age 42 (only 8.5% are under 29, while 70% fall into the 30 - 49 age range) and 87.2 per cent of them are male. In terms of profession, 67% of them fall into only six categories, and 25.99% of these are white-collar workers in the private or advanced tertiary sector and 16.7% are self-employed professionals. There is a small segment of entrepreneurs (6.87), blue collar workers (5.72), public sector employees (5.72) and teachers (5.32). There are the same proportion of pensioners and students (3.7 and 3.6% respectively) though mainly in Southern areas. This mini sample shows that the unemployed, short-term/temporary contract workers, pensioners and students are very much minority categories, whereas the vast majority of 5SM activists are, as we have seen, employed in companies or in the advanced tertiary sector or are self-employed professionals.

Although there were complaints about the lack of transparency in the way the lists were put together and the primary elections run, it seems clear that the rationale was based on a combination of mathematical rules and principles of representativeness: a multiplier factor to maximise the choice expressed, a gender factor to maximise the representation of women, which is generally very poor³, an age-group factor to give young people, who are also generally under-represented, a better chance, and a merit factor to reward those people who had worked hard within the Movement, holding positions of responsibility or demonstrating professional skills and competence. Since these primary elections were perceived as essentially internal to the Movement, they were not marked by any real campaigning, nor indeed any particular media coverage. The candidates were given a space on the Movement’s website to present their curriculum, introduce themselves via video or link to their own social network profiles. Only 40% of the candidates took up the opportunity to introduce themselves through video, while the same percentage had no particular following on any social network nor any particular interest in generating one (Cattaneo Institute 2013). Apart from being overshadowed by the Pd primaries and by Monti’s unexpected appearance on the battleground, the 5SM primaries were also conditioned by a desire to keep some kind of “reserve” on the candidates, only allowing people who had been members since 30th September 2012 (at least two months before the primary elections) and who satisfied a series of other requirements, to stand. Given the results, many people thought the 5SM was the kind of Movement that would fall at the first hurdle. As we will see things took a very different turn.

² Out of a total of 95,000 possible votes, 57,272 were actually cast, according to data published by the organisers.

³ The data was very clear: only 12.85% of the candidates standing for the parliamentary elections were women (191 out of 1486), but almost three times as many were actually elected to the Upper House by the Movement, with a total of 38.27% (62 out of 162).

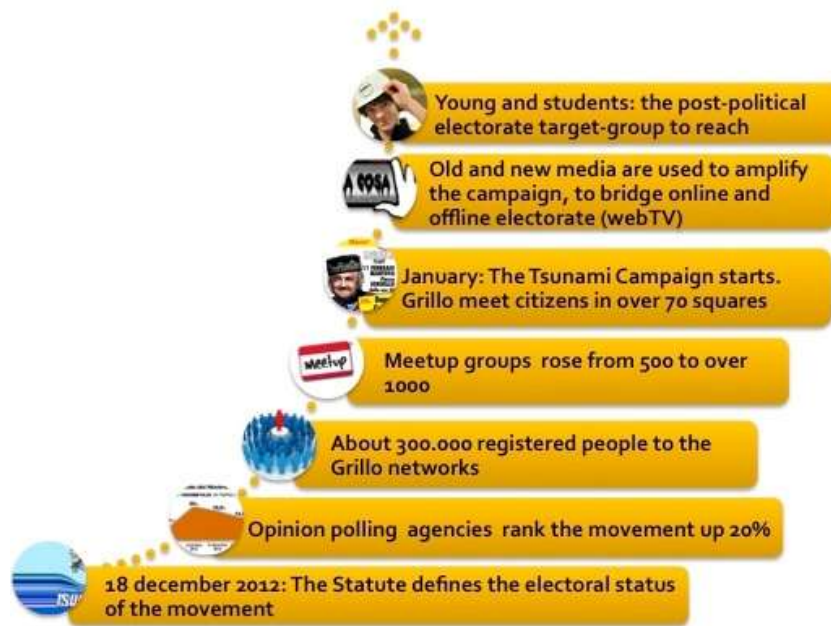


Figure 4: The Tsunami Tour

A month before the elections, the number of MeetUps started to increase, going from just over 500 in November to over 708 in early January and soaring to 1,102 groups in March 2013 (an increase of over 32 groups per week). Apart from the MeetUps, many of which constituted four thousand members, there were also smaller groups with a few dozen members. If we look at the MeetUp list (<http://beppegrillo.meetup.com>), we can see that the Movement is actually very far-reaching, with a network that branches out over large areas yet concentrated in local points too. This enables it to keep track of the country and to mobilise people when necessary, and it doesn't matter how small the hubs are. A constellation of groups that use different technological devices depending on need, function and availability: websites, Facebook groups, Google groups, Twitter, Tumblr, webTv, YouTube channels, Ustream channels etc. Each of these is used by the activists to organize events, communicate with sympathizers or recruit amongst interested visitors. If, then, real members of the MeetUp groups number about 120 thousand people and there are another 50 thousand people in the small interest groups, that means the total number of registered members of the Movement is about 300 thousand. However, the network structure of the Movement obviously means that there is the potential for reaching out to many more people, maybe even millions⁴.

It was not until 18 December 2012 that the Movement drafted a proper statute to define its electoral status, recognizing the constitutional right of citizens belonging to the 5SM to steer the course of National Politics by presenting for election candidates and lists of candidates who would be selected using direct participation procedures set up on the Internet. The biggest opinion poll agencies started talking about the Movement as the third biggest party in Italy, with support ranging from 16% to 20% (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013). This was enough to make other parties in the field sit up and take the Movement seriously, though not enough to make them consider Grillo a threat. Things started to take a different turn when the tsunami started in January⁵; an old-style

⁴ Data from Novembre 2012. After the political elections, the number of registered members of the MeetUp groups rose to 1390 thousand while the figure referring to interest groups stayed the same (4 April 2013). Data is always relative, however, because evolution of an online movement tends to be organic, and in some ways, messy; MeetUps, Civic Lists, Friends of Beppe Grillo and other profiles produce a certain amount of overlap. The figure of 300 thousand members – the hard core of the Movement – comes from interviews we held with 5SM activists.

⁵ «Tsunami» was the term used by the political scientist Giovanni Sartori in his well-known article for La Stampa, *Cast causes Quake (La -trema sotto la casta)* (19 September 2007).

electoral campaign, played out in the piazzas, making the most of Grillo's theatrical rhetoric to draw the crowds. This tour provided the opportunity for setting the Movement's first exclusively electoral objective: broaden its base, embrace other causes, extend the manifesto and build a bridge between the online community and the political community at large. The lesson learned by Howard Dean is that one should never confuse online popularity with the electoral consensus. The Movement needed to reach out to those people who choose not to vote, who do not participate, who do not go online to find out what they need to know, the kind of person who has lost political faith. The Movement also needed to be able to communicate with that part of the vast group of workers, unemployed people and students. In particular, the idea of the generation gap became central to Grillo's discourse, whereby the young stood in opposition to everything old and stale, from party organisations to government institutions and the forms of democracy they uphold. Moreover, young people and students are an extremely volatile, post-political electorate, and one that was prepared to change cassock or to agree to wear one. The time had come for Grillo's movement to channel this disillusionment through the Movement, using his anti-language and the media system as a powerful amplifier of its message and a way of mobilising the electorate (Corbetta and Gualmini 2013).

The campaign approach reveals an integrated strategy: the network created by the MeetUp groups, the Civic List groups and the Grillo blog members constitutes a community that covers a wide geographical area, shares the goals of the movement and is armed with the technological wherewithal to amplify Grillo's political message, mobilise citizens and organise ad hoc campaigns and events. There is no contradiction between piazzas and the Web, in fact both of them offer a similar kind of forum for the exchange of public opinion. The ubiquitous nature of the Web is provided by the rising numbers of mobile devices and wi-fi connections in Italy, and the piazza, in many ways, reflects the broadcasting model Grillo uses in his shows and in his blog. Thus social-empowering, micro-mobilisation and organised communities are the main ingredients in Grillo's electoral campaign as well.

4. An Electoral Tsunami

Interestingly, the year 2013 has been declared the European year of the Citizen. In Italy, the election results delivered a clamorous victory to 5SM citizens: the most surprising electoral victory since 1993. It has been an electoral tsunami, which swept part of the old political classes away and marked the start of a new, if difficult, legislature. As far as the media was concerned, the only news of any real interest was the arrival in parliament of a Movement of citizens with no background in politics, no specific professional competencies and, seemingly at least, no personal ambition. A somewhat paradoxical response to Monti's technical government, which was based on professional competencies yet deemed inadequate to provide the country with a political solution.

The 2013 general elections, therefore, bear all the hallmarks of insurgent politics with the 5SM doing better than even the most optimistic forecasts⁶, Monti being confined to a very modest result and the expected success of the Pd party very significantly downsized. The Pdl – expected to perform spectacularly badly - lost far fewer votes than anticipated thanks to Berlusconi's occupation of the media, whereas the Lega Nord lost many votes to the 5SM (Cattaneo Institute 2013). As far as the Upper House was concerned, the Region-based, proportional system of allotting seats meant that it was extremely difficult to form a majority, and that the role of the 5SM with its eight and a half million votes was a decisive one. The various inter-party incompatibilities, combined with the fast-approaching end of term of office for the President of the Republic, soon made for an explosive situation. Grillo and his Movement call themselves out, refusing to give a vote of confidence to a Pd-led government and proposing instead a minority, single government

⁶ The Movement got 8.69 million votes in total, 2.4 million in the South, 2.1 in the North-East, and 1.6 in the so-called "red regions" with Lombardia, Lazio and Sicilia heading the score (Data Cattaneo Institute). In the Lower House, the 5SM comes second to the Pd, with 25.55% of the votes. In the Senate it gets 23.79% of the votes.

headed by the 5SM⁷. The result is chaos. It signals the defeat of politics as a land of compromise, the end of political parties as a way of mediating diverse interests and of the institutions as safeguards of the rules of democracy. Moreover it represents the end of the bi-polarism into the Italian political system, applied since 1993.

It was only Christmas when Grillo's Movement seemed headed for disaster, beset by internal strife. Then in mid-January the tsunami tour started. Travelling in a camper van, Grillo toured 70 piazzas and drew large crowds wherever he went, from the provincial cities to the political and industrial heartlands: Turin, Milan, Naples, and Rome. While Grillo talked, the webTV set up for the electoral campaign broadcast his rallies in streaming. The staff, militants and sympathisers covered the events with a constant stream of photos and videos on the different social media. Activists from home commented and launched new discussion threads, thus contributing to the creation of a comprehensive and enthusiastic narrative of events. The Web stormed into the piazzas and the piazzas stormed onto the Web with images showing the crowds of attentive citizens (Schudson 1999). And while the Italian press was kept firmly away, the international press were treated to an exclusive story almost without precedent, with the exception of Coluche, a French clown who stood against Giscard d'Estaing and François Mitterrand in the presidential elections 1981 (Biorcio and Natale, 2013). A month in which virtual and real piazzas moved in tandem and acted in unison, amplifying Grillo's speeches and magnifying the effects of an electoral campaign which had epic traits. A non-silent revolution bent on winning parliament, sending the incumbents packing and restoring sovereignty to the people. The cause they were fighting for took on a force all of its own, drawing in supporters from the right and left, especially the Northern League who responded well to the anti-establishment principle (Pedrazzani and Pinto 2013). The Web became the connective tissue, the megaphone and the organising principle behind a campaign that offers seamless movement between different reality spaces (online/offline). It worked as an integrated whole with citizen-voters at its heart, hubs in a power network who themselves took on the job of stripping old politicians of their role and restructuring democratic processes, with parliament in central position.

5. A Five Star Electronic Parliament

The days immediately following the elections were dramatic. The whole country seemed startled and divided over what was happening. People demanded greater transparency, participation and democracy, but also effective and immediate decisions to be taken, guaranteeing a stable government and drastic cuts in the cost of politics. The newly-elected candidates seem initially unsure, and their words often belie their actions. They start to ask for an advanced platform to facilitate the decision-making process. A couple of projects take shape outside official confines.

The 5SM Online Electronic Parliament Project is headed by a few members of the Rome chapter⁸ This highlights the problems inherent in managing democracy when it involves real procedures and decisions which require deliberative organs in order to work. In the absence of this type of democratic organ, the only solution is to use the algorithms offered by a technological platform. It has to be open source, to enable citizens to check the code correctness and to avoid fraudulent use, to enable non-secret ballots, to ensure full control and absolute security where the voting procedure is concerned, and transparent, to permit data mirroring and external monitoring. These features clearly reveal a deep-seated fear that the voting process could be undermined by lobbies or professional hackers. Other features of the platform are harder to understand, however. One example is the decision to eliminate moderation of the discussion (too expensive to manage) leaving the Web to organise itself as it sees fit to debate single issues and only posting a link to the specific discussion on the platform. «In this way the Web itself becomes the parliament,

⁷ According to a LaPolis survey, even before the elections: «the majority (relative: 37%) of people who voted 5SM expected the party to do well and hoped to form a Five Star executive. Another similarly large group (34%) supported the idea of a government coalition. While barely 19% preferred their Movement's MPs to sit on the opposition benches» (Bordignon and Ceccarini, Voting estimates 4-6 February 2013: <http://www.demos.it>).

⁸ The document can be read at: <https://pdfzen.com/35fe5f>

guaranteeing all its users maximum transparency and freedom of expression» (p.2). Or the need to use a physical device (token) to check the identity of online users, making the platform more complicated and expensive to run.

The project developers obviously opt for “Liquid Feedback” partly because it has been used successfully in various parts of the world by the Pirate Party and also because it is considered reliable. However, they are dubious about adopting reputational ranking systems because of the 5SM fundamental rule that «one is as good as another». They do, however, accept that an independent opinion from technical committees might be useful, identifying proposals where there is a potential conflict of interest. They then focus on the decision-making process, looking at whether the legislation drafting process could be made simpler and the effect this would have on public spending, and whether the Schulze method should be adopted for voting on draft laws which are pretty similar and whether they should make proxy voting more difficult and offset the effect of extremely active members (the jargon term is *activerts*) and how they could construct a precise yardstick based on reliability indicators for deciding when a proposal could be presented in parliament and voted according to the imperative mandate. Where more complex issues are concerned, they proposed setting up technical committees and members would be the elected candidates’ staff, the only salaried workers who could work full time on the decision-making process. Their trickiest jobs would be to oversee the budget, make sure that all proposals are constitution compliant and carry out specific research in conjunction with selected and unpaid University experts. None of these features is already present on Liquid Feedback, and some of them are of difficult implementation.

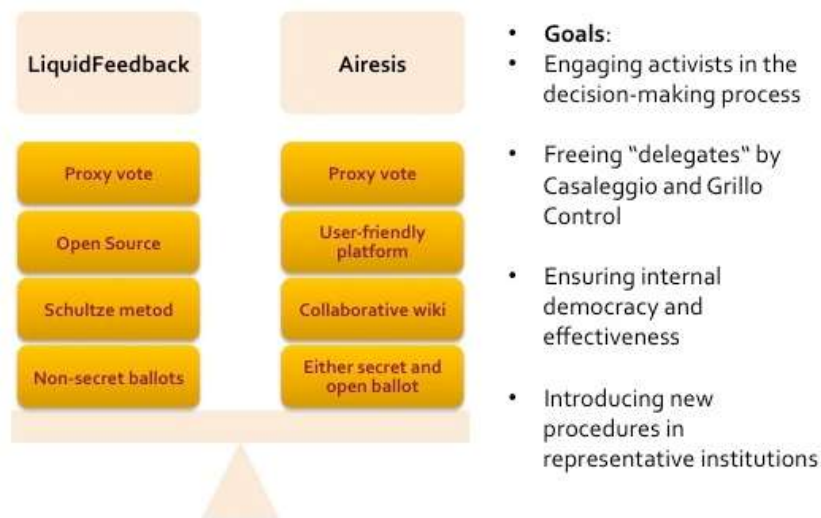


Figure 5: Liquid Democracy Platforms

A second project is “Airesis”, an Italian discussion and decision-making platform which is already available and which many groups of 5SM activists are already experimenting with. Airesis is a more intuitive kind of platform, which allows for the management of functions which have not yet been incorporated into LiquidFeedback. Examples include events management, organising tasks and passes for participants, organising transversal spaces, managing collaborative wikis, integrating personal blogs and, more importantly, enabling people’s votes to be either secret or open and their discussions of proposals to be anonymous. When the percentage of proposal evaluations rises to 60% of the total, the proposal would have to go to the vote.

The choice or development of a platform involves more than wanting to play a more effective role in the democratic process and support 5SM parliamentary members. It also symbolises the desire to free the Movement’s activists from Grillo and Casaleggio, and get rid of the sensation that the Movement is remote-controlled by the two men. In any case, whenever collective deliberation

methods have been tested, liquid democracy has so far failed to provide a solution to one of the classic dilemmas of traditional theory (Sartori 1993): ensuring that minority groups are respected and represented. There is also the risk that in these minority communities there is a lot of pressure on people to go for cohesion and the majority vote. The result is the very real risk of a perverse, downward “spiral of silence” (Neumann 2002). The “wisdom of the crowds” (Surowiecki 2004) tends to annihilate differences and minority opinion, leading to a substantial reduction in the democratic quality of the decision-making process. This warped effect can be observed easily in some of the decision-making procedures on Airesis or LiquidFeedback.

In the meantime, parliament itself is a new institution in many ways. The politicians making up the XVII legislature have not looked so young, so female or so different since the 1994 and 1972 elections when the PCI seemed about to overtake the DC. The most striking aspect of this new parliament is its willingness to introduce new procedures. The presence of 5SM activists is enough to encourage the established parties, especially the Democratic Party – to which the Head of State has given a pre-assignment for government formation – to change. Thus, for the first time in the history of the Republic, consultations with political leaders and social parties are broadcast in web streaming. This practice quite clearly follows on from what was established by the 5SM, who always broadcast their press conferences and debates in the Upper and Lower House in streaming, and summarised the day in parliament with video-accounts on their own webTv. Fervent sharing amongst all the 5SM groups on the social media guarantees that the videos quickly go viral.

Intra-elite discussion; especially political consultations, have always been described as “bargaining over the price of a sofa”. Video streaming offers a new format which has serious implications for the question of transparency, but can also be used with more sinister intent, however. Many people already see a kind of electronic Panopticon on the horizon. On the other side of the video screen we have an electorate that entrusted the Five Star activists with the difficult task of breaking with the political past. We also have the Movement itself, which controls their every breath. “Terminals” is how Grillo describes them. The control chain and the no-confidence stance are very closely-linked. The 5SM activists control the political classes and have seats within the institutions but the activists are controlled by the Movement. In a context where no trust is possible, democracy seems to become a monolithic and obscure, rather than liquid, process.

6. Grillo: The Parties’ Guilty Conscience

During his career as a comedian, Grillo always played the role of the “Talking Cricket” in Collodi’s Pinocchio, reprimanding the political classes for corruption, the economic establishment for financial scandals and denouncing information sources for collaborating with existing power structures. If we search the pages of history we can see that Grillo’s movement bears uncanny resemblance to an American movement founded in 1992, which was similarly criticised by the media and by academics. The movement was founded by Ross Perot and was called “United, We Stand America”, which later became the Reform Party, which continued until the early 2000 (Kirp, 1992; De Rosa, 2000). Although the Web at that time was not so well-developed, Perot (a rich computer tycoon) managed to establish a network of groups in every State which were all linked by computer to the central organisation. And he stood in the 1992 Presidential elections and performed reasonably well. His model was extremely innovative and ambitious for its time. A series of Electronic Town meetings (ETM) meant that people and groups could coordinate (Barber 1984; Mattew 1994; Clift 1997; Malbin 1989). The decision-making process focused on local issues and was supported by an online petition platform (uVote). The voting system – based on consensus focusing and termed National Group Technique – also included videoconferencing technology, which gave the group immediate feedback. The movement paved the way for the formation of a permanent non-party organisation in readiness for the 1996 elections. They were the first non-party party. Perot was also a hardliner, coming down heavily on any members who strayed from the party line or formed splinter groups. In terms of his ideological approach, Perot also had much in common with Grillo, especially his scorn for the political establishment and its ineptitude, and his

criticism of the media (Perot, 1992). The political context in which his movement developed was also one marked by tension. People were fed up of politicians being selfish and refused to accept that they kept increasing their own salaries. Citizens exerted their rights and set up a movement called “Term Limit”, getting people to sign a petition to limit the term of office of those politicians then in power (Black and Black, 1993). So both Perot and Grillo found fertile terrain, with people very much on their side, which enabled them to transform popular discontent into an organised structure. How did they do it? How come so many people thought their ideas were feasible?

According to Rosanvallon (2008), there are many reasons why our society is one of mistrust. First of all, the optimism we associated with technology has gone. Industrial development is now more synonymous with risk than with progress (we only need to think of the reaction the idea of nuclear power provokes). Secondly, the agencies responsible for economic forecasts have contributed to a growing idea of the impotence of politicians (the idea of politics being measured in terms of spread has been widely criticised). And finally there has been a structural decline in trust on a social level where ties are getting progressively weaker. Beppe Grillo is a man whose campaign is based on respectful environmental progress, questioning the power of banks and their control over the economy, and interpersonal trust⁹. So control over political action has been personified in the 5SM with people working as a surveillance-team that monitors and comments on political performance; as a contrast team that works to veto any measures they feel are unjust and as a judgement-team (or people’s tribunal) that investigates and makes formal accusations against politicians or institutions. This explains the repeated requests for transparency in politics, the appeals to rid parliament of any members involved in criminal lawsuits and their attacks on President Napolitano and journalists. Rosanvallon describes this approach as the organisation of mistrust (2008) informal social counter-powers and even institutions all intent on trying to compensate for the erosion of trust. The Rosanvallon “counter democracy”

“does not work separately from the legal, democratic institutions but aims to become an extension of them and to widen their powers. It is one of the pillars of institutional democracy. It needs to be seen as a proper political form” (Rosanvallon 2008, p. 292).

In other words, it is a form of politics that sees society itself holding the reins of power, and exercising that power in new and different ways. However, it is destined to remain largely misunderstood because it does give more power to the people and it does open the doors to populist-demagogue tendencies. Seen in this light, Grillo is the embodiment of the kind of leader who wants to bypass traditional party mechanisms, to overcome the “democracy without people” as in Duverger (1968), or the “democracy counter-people “ as in Mastropaolo (2005) which stresses the growing divide between the procedural and real democracy. For the first time in Italy, the Web has shown its muscle and proven itself capable of producing politically-aware collective subjects. As Grillo himself said:

“In Italy the Five Stars Movement was born to the Web, with not a cent of public funding to its name, and with media opposition from all sides, yet it is forecast to be the third major party in the forthcoming general election” (Casaleggio and Grillo, 2011).

7. Final Remarks

In theoretical terms, Grillo’s 5SM is the tip of the iceberg of a complex phenomenon that emerges from the separation between legitimacy and trust, two principles which theories of democracy and representation had merged together in the form of electoral processes (Rosanvallon, 2008). Once they are separated, the electoral process can no longer be seen as sufficient reason for keeping afloat a political class that fails to respond to citizens’ needs and,

⁹ The 5SM takes ideological inspiration from Lester Brown, environmentalist and economist, described by the Washington Post as one of the most influential opinion makers in the world; Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel prizewinner for the economy, Jeremy Rifkin expert in International Affairs; Wolfgang Sachs, sociologist; Serge Latouche, theorist on economic degrowth.

more importantly, fails to deserve their trust. Grillo's criticism is one that aims at the heart of the way power is perpetuated through representation, and through its representation in the media. In Grillo's view, both the political-representative system (circuit) and the political-mediated system (circuit), form part of the same (terrible) agenda that was responsible for ruining the economy, destroying the environment and contaminating the information. Interactive democracy is the way to move Italian politics forward. However, the model is not perfect, and 5SM is not willing to really challenge the old politics. The result is a defensive reaction that closes the movement to dialogue with other parties, and opens it to an epistemic form of participatory democracy (De Rosa 2013).

Whether the movement will evolve democratically along Pirate Party lines or whether it will be realigned as a personal party, with Grillo holding exclusive rights to the brand name, this seems to be the crucial challenge. For the moment, the movement looks intent on facing up to the organisational as well as the electoral challenge, having already managed to emerge from the realm of sub-politics where most movements seem happy to stay (Beck 1997). It is during this transition phase that the organisational dynamic is so important. Because trying to organise people without a clear system of incentives – or using negative ideological incentives (like Beppe Grillo's bans) – can create internal conflict and discontent, giving the impression that the movement is more like a Leninist-inspired party (Panebianco 1982). The most complicated issue facing the 5SM at this stage is finding the right balance between Grillo's (personal) freedom of action and the organisational restrictions placed on the membership, as the early events seem to demonstrate. It looks unlikely in the end that Grillo's movement – at least for the moment – will be able to avoid those iron rules of organisation spelled out in the political science literature. Signs of difficulty are already beginning to show as it changes from movement operating in a social context to movement in an institutional context. Panebianco (1982) set out a list of the major factors that organisation revolves around and two would seem particularly important: recruitment and laying down the rules. The attempt to move from a local level of participation to a national one poses a tough challenge for Grillo and the whole MeetUp network, from finding the right technological platform for handling a people's vote, to deciding on terms and conditions for potential candidates.

Organizational constraints and dilemmas apart, Grillo and 5SM are having success where many others have failed. He is the product of a set of unique circumstances: the political and economical situation, the party system crisis, but also the transformative power of new media, which now are enabling a critical mass of citizens to claim their rights, to demand more transparency and to take part in political processes.

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