




## Introduction: The Five-star Movement from the street to local and national institutions

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### ABSTRACT

The special issue is the result of research and analysis concerning the activities of the Five-star Movement (M5s) in the local and national institutions and the process of institutionalisation undergone by this new political entity. Even though the M5s has resisted being transformed into a political party, it is having to face the problems associated with its relative institutionalisation: the selection of personnel; the coordination of activities; decision making. Like many other movements, the M5s has brought a new logic to the institutions and some innovative practices, but has been forced to adapt to the insider's rules.

### KEYWORDS

Five-star Movement; institutionalisation; local institutions; parliament

The electoral successes of the Five-star Movement (M5s) over the last five years and the position it has acquired in local and national institutions have brought great changes to the Italian political system. But they have also created problems for the Movement itself – problems that have obliged it to initiate a process of transformation of its organisational structures – while introducing significant elements of discontinuity to the representative assemblies and in their practices. Especially in the initial phase, the Movement's procedural demands (from the call to 'open Parliament like a can' to the insistence on the live-streaming of deliberations) have had more emphasis than its substantive programmatic points: reform of the political and representative institutions has been given priority over policy issues.

In its efforts to transform public policy at a local and national level, the M5s has had to grapple with several difficulties arising from the considerable size of the public debt and from the legislative constraints established by previous governments. Its elected representatives have had to take on roles and responsibilities previously assumed by representatives of the traditional parties – but without having had any previous experience of membership of political institutions or specific skills in carrying out the tasks of government. The political events of the past year have highlighted the problems that have emerged in city administrations and, most recently, in the new coalition government headed by Giuseppe Conte.

Even though the M5s has resisted being transformed into a political party, it is having to face the problems associated with its relative institutionalisation (Biorcio and

Natale 2018). One emerging problem is that of ensuring that interaction among its three components – members and rank-and-file activists; its elected representatives, and its leadership – carries on smoothly (Corbetta 2017). This special issue brings together four studies concerning its involvement in a number of election campaigns, and the activity of its representatives within the elective institutions from the national parliament, through regional assemblies, to local councils. To what extent have the Movement's representatives been successful in managing and transforming public policy on the basis of the programmes and principles that have inspired it? To what extent have they had to adapt to the criteria and practices that have hitherto informed the activities of elected politicians within the institutions? How far has leaderisation of the Movement gone? The articles included in this special issue present the results of research and analysis concerning the activities of the M5s in the local and national institutions and the process of institutionalisation undergone by this new political entity.

### **Taking control of local institutions**

The movement founded by Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio initially had no ambition to compete within the electoral arena. The launch, in 2005, of the blog, *beppegrippo.it*, aimed only at providing a channel of communication alternative to those offered by the main media organisations, and at giving visitors the opportunity to intervene, make themselves known and become active. Thus it was that a number of initiatives were promoted both on the internet and on the ground, in a number of localities. In some areas, groups of activists and sympathisers were formed – groups which, in some cases, had had experience of running in elections by being part of civic lists fielded on a local basis.

The decision to participate in local, regional and then national elections made it necessary to overcome the fragmentation of the locally-based groups. Thus it was that 2009 saw the foundation of the 'Movimento 5 Stelle' (or 'Five-star Movement'), which attempted, however, to keep organisational formalities to an indispensable minimum. The new political entity brought together the ideas and the experience that had been acquired by the rank-and-file activists – organised in hundreds of MeetUp groups spread throughout the country – and as a result of various on-line initiatives. The reinforced presence of the local groups gave rise, not to any real coordination at the city, provincial or regional levels, but rather to a broadening of a horizontal network on the ground. For its part, the Movement's leadership interacted directly with the rank-and-file members, through the internet, without the mediation of leadership groups with the power to take political decisions.

The period that preceded the Movement's success in the Sicilian regional elections of 2012 and the general election of 2013 saw an increase in the number of M5s candidates elected to local councils. It is in this context that a nucleus of elected representatives was formed in the local councils of several Italian cities, including Genoa, Turin, Milan, Rome, Parma, Bologna, Modena and Reggio Emilia. As shown by the research into the institutionalisation of the M5s in the municipalities of Rome and Turin (see below), this long 'run-in' phase enabled those elected – often without political experience or experience of the elected institutions – to acquire the skills necessary to enable them

to carry out the tasks associated with their positions. Without this long initial period of opposition to the local administrations, it is difficult to think that they would have been successful – a few years later – in gaining control of Turin and the capital city. Together, Chiara Appendino and Virginia Raggi consolidated their knowledge and skills by sitting on the opposition benches and there putting together an alternative agenda for city government, an agenda involving the issues of mobility, the state of the suburbs and opposition to large-scale and expensive prestige projects.

It should not be forgotten that for a long time, the M5s always won fewer votes at the local and regional levels, thanks to the limits of its organised presence on the ground; thanks the lack of clarity of its ideological profile, and thanks to the absence of any tradition of voting for it at a local level. These apparent weaknesses were transformed, over time, into strengths. Where its candidates managed to make it to the second ballot, they were able to win through because they became a repository for widespread demands for alternatives to the outgoing administrations of the centre right and centre left. The M5s thus succeeded in getting its candidate mayors elected, first in small towns, and then in a number of provincial capitals. It first won mayoralties in 2012 and then progressively increased its tally until in 2016 it gained control of large cities such as Turin and Rome.

M5s mayors had to show not only that they were capable of managing the local administrations they were responsible for but also that they had it in them to transform local government given the expectations of those who had voted for them. This gave rise to a number of not insignificant problems, especially in the larger cities because the municipalities in question were often hampered by large deficits and by unresolved problems inherited from the outgoing administrations.

These problems were especially evident following the capture of the Rome city council (see the article by De Rosa and Quattromani in this special issue). The M5s had managed to win on promises of a radical change of direction with respect to the administrations that had governed Rome for many years previously. Its candidate mayor, Raggi, had obtained over 35% at the first round of voting and had then achieved a secure margin of victory (with 67%) at the run-off ballot, winning especially high levels of support in the more peripheral and less prosperous neighbourhoods, while the Democratic Party's candidate had managed to come first only in the two districts of the city centre.

Governing the country's capital city was an enormous challenge for the Movement: it was by no means easy to get to grips with the enormous problems of a city that had been managed in such dubious ways as those of the previous administrations; and in addition, problems had been aggravated by years of waste and corruption. The organisational structures of the M5s were, moreover, still very fragile, giving rise to uncertainties, contradictions and mistakes. In addition, the considerable media attention devoted to the case of the first large metropolis to be governed by the Movement tended to inflate the difficulties even further.

The formation of the administration itself gave rise to problems. The M5s lacked members with relevant experience and was therefore obliged to look for reliable individuals who did have the necessary experience, externally. The selection of members of the executive gave rise to internal disagreements and disputes. The composition of the executive was constantly in flux thanks to resignations or the

dismissal of members (sometimes following allegations of wrong-doing). Following the initial difficulties, the Raggi administration acquired progressively greater stability and began to try to deal with the city's many problems with the aim of achieving significant results before the expiry of its term of office.

In Turin, the victory of the Movement's mayoral candidate had been a surprise and had given rise to considerable expectations following more than twenty years of administrations staffed by the centre left (see the article by Biancalana in this issue). In the previous council elections, the Movement's performance had been very modest, resulting in the election of no more than a handful of councillors. In 2016, the mayoral candidate, Appendino, had come second at the first round of voting (with 31%) and had won the run-off ballot with 55% of the vote. As in Rome, so in Turin, the highest levels of support were registered in the outlying districts of the city, radically transforming the political dynamics that had prevailed up to that point.

The case of Turin is particularly interesting because it highlights the organisational adaptations and the pragmatic solutions that were adopted in other cities as well. So, as was true in the case of Raggi, the election campaign fought by Appendino was highly personalised in terms of both style and substance. On the other hand, the election victory changed both the organisational profile and the style of management of the political initiatives taken by the M5s in Turin. Decisions concerning the most important issues facing the city were taken by the mayor personally, or by her executive, and in some cases involved consultation with the councillors who maintained close relations with the rank-and-file activists. The citizens' assemblies sponsored by the Movement were used above all to present and debate the activities of the administration, rather than as fora for the consideration of alternative policies.

In all the municipalities, M5s members elected to the councils (for the Sicilian case see the article by Montemagno and Macaluso in this issue) have, however, assumed an increasingly important role for the Movement, having become its principal political contacts at the local level. In many cases they have in practice performed the functions which, in the traditional parties, are carried out by officials and organising bodies at the municipal and regional levels.

The management of the large municipalities, such as Rome and Turin, have accentuated these tendencies. The need to take rapid decisions on multiple issues has made it necessary to transform the Movement's organisational structures. There has thus been a process of growing centralisation of the Movement, with an increasingly significant role being played by the 'spokespersons' (especially the two mayors), and a relative downgrading of the prerogatives of the groups of rank-and-file activists.

## **Engagement in parliament**

In the beginning, the M5s was characterised by the expression of very harsh judgements concerning the behaviour of its elected representatives in Parliament, with allegations that the parliamentarians were failing to respect the mandates citizens had given them and often jumping from one parliamentary group to the other during the course of the legislature. Also heavily criticised were the large salaries and other benefits they enjoyed. The compilation of the candidate lists for the parliamentary elections, and regulations governing the conduct of the

parliamentarians, was a litmus test of the capacity of the Movement to abide by radically new principles of representation (see the article by Sampugnaro and Gozzo in this issue).

In 2013, the selection of candidates for the general election took place through an on-line vote of the entire membership. Running in the '*parlamentarie*' (literally, 'parliamentaries') as they were called, was limited to the 1,486 activists who had already been candidates at local or regional elections. Participation in the on-line vote amounted to 20,252. Those selected as candidates in this way were then obliged to sign a document confirming their willingness to abide by certain rules and principles that would supposedly govern their conduct if they were elected to Parliament: once elected, they would have to refund a part of their salary; they would have to abide by the programmes on which they had been elected, and they would have to adhere to the decisions made by the activists, on line, as well as maintaining close connections with the Movement outside Parliament.

The M5s was the most-voted party nationally in 2013 and succeeded in electing 109 deputies and 54 senators. The election of its representatives substantially modified the social and cultural profile of the chambers. Not only was there a much lower presence – fairly obviously – of 'political professionals', but the profile of parliamentarians stood out for the large proportion of relatively young people and the large proportion (at least as compared to previous legislatures) of women (34%).

The M5s was committed to an overhaul of the traditional ways of doing politics, but its representatives lacked political experience and experience of the representative institutions. Initially, therefore, their engagement with the principal media outlets was very limited. How was it possible to act in the absence of political coordinating bodies comparable with those of the traditional parties? The management of parliamentary activity was assigned to the assembly of deputies and senators, who filled the executive positions on the basis of rotation so as to avoid the creation of permanent organising structures. At the same time, working groups were created in order to take decisions concerning the policy initiatives that were to be pursued in the two chambers.

At the beginning of the seventeenth legislature, the parliamentary groups were structured horizontally such that internal differentiation was mainly a matter of geographical affiliations, of involvement in local social movements or of belonging to one or the other branches of the legislature (see the article by Sampugnaro and Gozzo in this issue). Through participation in the business of Parliament, the deputies progressively acquired the skills needed to enable them to carry out their duties. In many cases, decisions concerning important matters gave rise to conflicts and differences of opinion. In some cases, behaviour which contravened the rules and decisions of the Movement led to the parliamentarians concerned being expelled from the group. In other cases, parliamentarians distanced themselves from the group thanks to decisions they could not agree with. Overall, 21 deputies and 19 senators either resigned or were expelled from the Movement's parliamentary groups.<sup>1</sup> Most of these instances occurred during the first two years of the legislature.

The Movement's parliamentary groups were the main opposition to the governments led by the Democratic Party (PD) during the course of the legislature. The behaviour of the Movement's parliamentary spokespersons was required to be consistent with the political initiatives being taken on the ground, outside Parliament, advancing, within it,

a series of citizen demands. The issues taking up most of the time of the Movement's deputies and senators were ones concerning reform of the public administration, the fight against corruption, health and environmental problems, in accordance with a policy agenda which, with regard to socio-economic issues and civil liberties was, broadly speaking, close to the perspectives of the left (Farinelli and Massetti 2015).

Especially during the initial period of the seventeenth legislature, M5s elected representatives sought to maintain constant contact with the base of rank-and-file members and activists. On-line votes were utilised both for the more important decisions and for those concerning legislative initiatives and the stances to take on the legislative initiatives of others. In both 2013 and 2015, members were able to vote on which candidates the M5s should support in the race for the presidency of the Republic, with deputies and senators then casting their votes accordingly. On other occasions, membership votes were demanded on controversial issues or ones not clearly defined in the Movement's programme. For the purposes of keeping open a channel of communication with the members, a special on-line platform called 'Rousseau' was set up and managed by a number of parliamentarians (Ceri and Veltri 2017). Individual members could comment on, and object to, proposed changes and amendments to prospective legislation being considered in Parliament. Deputies and senators could then re-work the proposals thus presented, taking account of comments received, while taking responsibility for final decisions. In May 2016, members were given the opportunity to use the platform directly to advance their own legislative proposals, which would then be made subject to an on-line vote. The two most-voted proposals at each round of consultations were then presented in one of the two chambers of Parliament (Mosca and Vaccari 2017). The project was launched with a view to enabling the Movement to realise one of its greatest ambitions: to transform the ordinary citizen into a potential legislator. The opportunities to get parliamentary approval for the legislative proposals were, however, exceedingly limited thanks to the opposition status of the Movement in the seventeenth legislature.

In 2018, the Movement presented itself, for the first time, as a serious contender for government as a result of which the rules governing the selection of parliamentary candidates and the communications strategies to be adopted were completely transformed.

The most important change, however, was the one that came with the decision to choose the candidate premier, before the parliamentarians, through a members' ballot. The winning candidate also took on the role of political leader of the Movement, with extensive powers to intervene in the process of candidate selection and to decide on campaign strategy. The chosen candidate was the outgoing vice-president of the Chamber of Deputies, Luigi Di Maio, who in competition with the other seven candidates who were running, had a run-away victory.<sup>2</sup>

The parliamentary candidates were selected from among those who, fulfilling the relevant criteria of the statute and code of ethics, decided to put their names forward. Thereby, it was possible to implement one of the Movement's most important principles, namely, the election to representative bodies of ordinary citizens. The rank-and-file of the Movement reacted to these changes positively: 15,000 people sought adoption as a candidate through the mechanism of the parliamentarians. At the same time, almost all of the outgoing parliamentarians sought re-adoption and those that did attracted large numbers of votes and were successful in their endeavour.

The political leader in some cases modified the list of candidates so chosen by members, this in order to create groups that were more cohesive and homogeneous as compared to those of the outgoing legislature. The choice of those candidates that were fielded in the single-member districts was made directly by the political leader without any consultation of the rank-and-file.

Putting together the election platform was a task that was carried out several months beforehand through a series of on-line discussions and ballots, involving the entire membership, on issues central to the Movement's political identity.

## **The government of change**

The voters' judgement of the performance of the Movement's representatives appeared to be broadly positive insofar as 75% of those who had voted for the party in 2013 did so again in 2018 (Biorcio and Natale 2018). Moreover, support for the Movement expanded considerably as its candidates were supported by almost a third (32.2%) of those casting valid votes in the election. Consequently, it returned 333 candidates, made up of 221 deputies and 112 senators, more than double the number elected five years previously. Many of those who were running for the second time were successful thanks to the reputation and media visibility they had acquired as spokespersons for the Movement. The parliamentary groups changed their internal rules with an expansion of the functions of political supervision and control that were attributed to the political leader.

However, the M5s did not have the numbers to enable it to form a government on its own. For the first time, the Movement changed the strategy it had until then adopted both locally and nationally, agreeing to the formation of a coalition government and thereby putting aside the attitudes of diffidence it had always expressed towards other political forces in the past. The realisation of at least some of the objectives set out in its election platform was to be assured by means of a 'contract for government', which would be binding on the parties signing up to it.

Negotiations were thus initiated both with the PD and the League. The possibility of forming a government with the PD had already been discussed – without a positive outcome – in the previous legislature, on the basis of initiatives taken, first, by Pierluigi Bersani and then by Matteo Renzi. After the great defeat of 2018, Renzi personally closed off the option of any kind of negotiations between his party and the M5s. Negotiations with the League too seemed set to be difficult thanks to the close alliance between the latter and Forza Italia under Silvio Berlusconi. However, Matteo Salvini's party decided to commit itself to the search for an agreement with the Movement that would make possible the formation of a government involving the two to the exclusion of the other parties of the centre right.

The two forces had presented themselves to voters as the champions of a radical overhaul of the policies pursued by previous governments. But their objectives were very different. In order to reconcile such differences, a 'contract for government' was drawn up – one that included the most high-profile of the policy objectives of the two parties: the citizens' income, the reduction of the costs of politics, and anti-corruption measures for the M5s; the 'flat tax' and a corresponding reduction in tax rates, a plan to contain immigration, and measures to increase public security, for the League.

The hybrid quality of the contract gave rise to considerable discussion within the Movement and it was put to an on-line membership ballot in accordance with the rules set out in the Movement's statute. The document was approved by more than 94% of those voting. The premiership was entrusted to Giuseppe Conte, a university professor, whose name had been put forward by the M5s, prior to the elections, as a possible ministerial candidate. The leaders of the two parties were nominated as deputies to the Prime Minister.

The launch of the government proved highly problematic due to the political profile of the Movement's ally. The League agreed to participate in and to support the government while repeatedly confirming its association with the coalition of the centre right. Its leader, Salvini, enjoyed a very high media profile thanks to his assumption of positions that were both unconventional and uncompromising with respect to his opponents. His communication style enabled him to draw attention to issues that were of primary importance for supporters of the centre right: immigration and security.

Very different were his relations with the governing M5s. The Movement had to demonstrate, not only that it was capable of governing, but also that it was able to change public policy to a degree sufficient to enable it to satisfy popular expectations. In order to give effect to its programme for change, the M5s committed itself above all to efforts to extend rights to welfare, to reduce poverty and to combat corruption. It was a more ambitious and more problematic programme than the League's since it required enormous resources and complex legislation.

As the failures of numerous governments over the previous twenty-five years had demonstrated, governing Italy successfully was no easy task. Implementing the 'contract for government' encountered numerous significant difficulties due to the differences between the programmes of the parties that supported it, the political and economic constraints inherited from previous governments, and above all the restrictions on spending imposed by the European Commission.

After the formation of the Conte government, several programmatic differences and disagreements emerged between the M5s and the League. Large numbers of important objectives that had been crucial to the Movement were scaled back and transformed in the legislative proposals that were put forward to give effect to them.

The Movement's very identity risked being transformed by the alliance with Salvini's party, which gave repeated confirmation that, politically and culturally, it was a party of the right. The Movement had always refused to locate itself in left-terms, but now it risked being perceived by a significant proportion of its supporters as a party most closely associated with the right. Consequently, voting intentions polls registered a slight decline in support as compared to its performance in the general election.

## **The movement's institutionalisation**

All new movements that have taken part in election contests and succeeded in electing representatives to the institutions of government have undergone a process of institutionalisation with respect to their organisational structures, as well as a process of reformulation of the objectives originally set out in their programmes (Kitschelt 2006; della Porta et al. 2017). The M5s has been no exception, having had to seek some kind



of positive interaction between its three components: its membership base, its elected representatives and its leadership.

The increasingly significant institutional roles it has taken on in recent years have made it necessary for it to change its original, largely informal, organisational assumptions. The idea that it is a 'non-association' – a community of citizens in sympathy with the views expressed by Grillo, on line, through his blog – has been abandoned. The 'non-statute' drawn up in the beginning has been replaced by new statutes and the stipulation of codes of conduct for its members and those of its members elected to public institutions (see the article by Macaluso and Montemagno in this issue).

The M5s has always refused to create internal governing bodies at the local or the national levels. Those elected to the public institutions have however taken on in practice roles similar to those assumed by the leadership groups of political parties at all levels. The Movement's principle that 'one always counts for one' has been partially modified: the activists who have been elected to the institutions having first been selected as candidates through on-line membership ballots, have in practice taken on the functions of political leadership.

Until 2017, Grillo together with his staff had always had a central role in providing leadership to the Movement, refusing, however, to seek election to the representative institutions. In 2017, in the run-up to the following year's election and with the aim of taking over the government, the political and organisational profile of the Movement was partially transformed. The Movement was formally re-established with the setting up of a new association with the name 'MoVimento 5 Stelle', an association replacing the earlier one, embracing its membership and setting out new rules. In the new statute and association, the role of guarantor (assumed by Grillo) was distinguished from that of political leader (assumed by Di Maio). If the setting up of middle-ranking leadership groups was avoided, then the role of the members' assembly was confirmed, with the members being able to participate in the most important decisions through voting on line.

The new statute represented an important milestone on the path towards the Movement's institutionalisation. The powers entrusted to the political leader, and his governing responsibilities, have profoundly changed the nature of leadership within the M5s. At the same time, the positions and initiatives of its government representatives have acquired ever growing political significance for the Movement.

Luigi Di Maio ran a highly personalised campaign in 2018 and has subsequently sought to retain a high profile through his role in the governing coalition. The difficulties involved in realising the Movement's main objectives have led to some weakening of his leadership. The most recent expulsions, seeking to mete out exemplary punishment to those who dissent from certain aspects of the contract have given rise to a period of uncertainty. Beppe Grillo has therefore intervened, making pronouncements and taking stands at those political moments that have seemed most problematic from the point of view of efforts to manage the governing alliance with the League and possible protest and division among the ordinary members.

The road to institutionalisation does not yet appear to be clear, the outcome of the process still uncertain. What is less uncertain is that such outcome will be significantly influenced by the Movement's success or otherwise in achieving the objectives it set itself when it decided to form a government.

## Notes

1. In the course of the legislature, all of the parliamentary groups underwent some degree of change in terms of their composition: at least 30% of deputies changed their group affiliation at least once, as did 40% of senators.
2. Di Maio won the votes of 30,936 of the some 37,000 who participated.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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