

'Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement. Organisation, Communication and Ideology', by F. Tronconi (ed) (2015), Abingdon: Routledge.

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The emergence of the Five Star Movement (MoVimento 5 Stelle: M5S) at the 2013 Italian general elections still represents the most surprising electoral success in post-1945 Europe. Officially founded in 2009, it first gained support at the local and regional levels in May 2012, and just a few months later became the leading political party in Sicily (pp. 1–3). In the same year, polls signalled its increasing success as the second most popular party nationally. A few months later, in February 2013, the M5S surprised political commentators and gained 25.6% of the votes, emerging as the most popular political party in the general elections, and again increasing its success in 2018, with 32.7% .

This edited volume by Filippo Tronconi examines this political phenomenon, following a research project by the Istituto Carlo Cattaneo in Bologna, launched in the spring 2012. The analysis benefits from a wealth of data, from the Italian National Election Studies (ITANES), ITANES Ipsos, Manifesto Data Project and Beppe Grillo's blog posts and two waves of interviews conducted at the local level. Contributions from experts on party organization, political behaviour, political sociology, media sociology and political communication offer an in-depth picture of the organization, communication and changing ideology of the M5S.

The starting puzzle of the project investigates the factors and electoral strategies behind this surprising success. The strength and weakness of the contribution lays here. The volume definitely provides an invaluable answer to the organizational and contextual factors affecting the success of the M5S, but it also addresses the swift changing faces of the M5S and its voters (pp. 207–210), showing the challenge of time-constrained research publications such as a book can be for such a fluid political phenomenon. At the ideological level, the M5S has been able to reposition itself based on a dynamic relationship with the voters. First, it successfully monopolized the protest vote, but later it also exploited the rising discontent associated with the financial and economic crisis. Without neglecting ‘the left libertarian stances’ (p. 225), it has attracted voters from the centre-right and radical right-wing electorates, from Forza Italia and the Northern League, now in government with the M5S as the League, and being able to identify the right cleavages.

Hence, the M5S’s future challenges. In the conclusions, Tronconi stresses the dilemmas for the M5S: on one hand the challenge of consolidation, on the other the need to (re)define its organizational structure, between being a movement party and a charismatic party. Consolidation would require its ideological definition and create internal disputes between those here defined as ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’ (p. 226): those willing to pursue a strong opposition to any alliance, and those who may be more flexible and open to temporary alliances or returning on previous choices. This has already cost a few expulsions in the M5S and has further recently created consequences at the European Parliament (EP) level. The half-term European legislature and the nearing changing political environment, after the British EU withdrawal referendum, called for a sudden vote on

M5S membership in the EP. Currently sitting in the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) political grouping with Nigel Farage (and UKIP), in early January 2017, M5S activists were asked to vote whether they wanted to remain in the EFDD or join the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe (ALDE). The vote happened without any previous information and a few MEPs asserted they did not know about it at the time it was announced. The episode saw two MEPs leave the M5S and the EFDD grouping: Marco Affronte joined ALDE and Marco Zanni moved to the Europe of Nations and Freedom group (ENF). With regard to organizational structure, Tronconi poignantly observes how the passage from the local to the national levels and its rising aspiration creates tensions between ‘hyper-democracy’ (p. 227) and the actual implementation of party procedures that, the recent European episode also shows, remain typical of a ‘leaderist’ party (p. 227), represented by the leader, and former comedian, Beppe Grillo.

The strengths of the M5S, its work in progress nature – ‘We tackle problems as they crop up’ (p. 48) – and fluidity, also point to the lack of skills and high levels of turnover of human resources. Although this can represent a limit towards consolidation, it seems to characterize the strategic goal of the structure. The leadership of the party, represented by Grillo and the Casaleggio Associati – the strategic consulting service, whose director, Gianroberto Casaleggio founded the M5S with Grillo, now directed by his son, Davide Casaleggio, after the founder died in 2016 – promotes an organization similar to an anthill, made up of numerous ants, which may meet by chance, but are fundamentally unaware ‘of the characteristics of the system as a whole’ (p. 50). Vignanti suggests that the M5S shows features of both the movement party and charismatic party, as stressed by Tronconi, but also of a franchise party, better described as a ‘an experiment in building a “superorganism”’ (p. 50).

It is in its unique nature that the M5S and this book are likely to be of interest for political scientists, students and anyone interested in politics. The movement's success can only be partly explained by contextual institutional factors, where only the availability of electoral arenas at the subnational level and its skills to capture relevant cleavages made it a credible candidate at elections. At the organizational level, as we can see, the charismatic leadership, the lack of meso-structures and the predominant use of the Internet, has created both successes and drawbacks but still enabled the party to take the distance from established party bureaucracies, which has later been successful across its voters, in 2018. In fact, at the ideological level, the M5S has been successful in capturing the protest vote, but particularly blurring the right-left axes and can combine the left-wing support for universal basic income with radical right-wing stances, critical towards the Euro and cautious positions towards immigration, partly captured by the League, now in government.

The great advantage of this book is that it represents the main contribution, in English, on the success of the M5S, as a political phenomenon per se, without focusing on its populist dimension. As the book itself shows, the M5S needs to show it is able to consolidate, although meeting new challenges now in government, if it seeks to remain in the Italian political system, or it may fall as it has raised