

Web democracy between participation and populism

Crisis, political parties and new movements in the Italian public sphere

Michele Sorice

Democratic Innovations Working Papers

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Italian public sphere**

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Contents

1. Italy between consolidation and crisis
 2. Democracy in Italy. A problem of anchoring
 3. The Five Star Movement
- References

1. Italy between consolidation and crisis

The Italian situation is an extremely interesting case: on the one hand because of some similarities with most of the western democracies, on the other because of its unique structural characteristics. To understand the Italian specifics we need to take three factors into consideration:

the increasing importance of the executive and the implicit change to the institutional set-up;

the electoral laws;

the role of the media and, in particular, its relationship with a political leader (Silvio Berlusconi) who has a very strong media presence.

The first incontrovertible factor has been the increasing importance of the executive, in the same way in Italy as in the United Kingdom, Germany, France and the USA (Helms 2005). “As early as the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, Italy too witnessed an increase in the importance of the executive in the decision-making process. Previously the parliament had a central role in the system of government but this role has been taken over by the executive, in

particular with the introduction in Italy of the system of two political parties in competition with each other, called “bipolarism”, starting with the 1996 elections. With the passage of the 1990s, the centrality of parliament became a thing of the past.” (Fabbrini 2011b, 39-40). In effect, this change was no small matter. The centrality of parliament in the system of consensual democracy which characterised Italy before the 1990s, was effectively replaced by a majoritarian kind of pseudo-democracy. The transactional leaders (who were also low-profile figures) of the pre-1994 governments were replaced by transformational leaders and within the parties the new “democratic prince” assumed greater decision-making powers. A far from secondary feature in this process was the crisis of the traditional parties, victims of ideological misalignment as well as of social change (Sorice 2011). National societies, “which were organised around socio-economic divisions (those underlying the competitive democracies) or around ethnic/cultural divisions (those underlying the consensual democracies) were progressively dismantled (more the socio-economic than the ethnic/cultural divisions, really). After this dismantlement, societies emerged that tended to be individualistic, organised around particular professional or social groups, generically amorphous in terms of their identity. In this context it became difficult for the political parties to carry out their representative activity. They had to recognise that they were no longer the repositories of identity that

pre-existed politics, and so they had to invent ways of promoting and redefining themselves. The principle solution was to trust in their leader's capacity to gather consensus. Moreover, in Italy, the vacuum left by the traditional party system has been occupied not so much by new parties as by personal parties or in any case by the leaders' parties" (Fabbrini 2011b, 43-44).

The new centrality of the executive, together with the electoral reforms (the second factor), significantly changed the institutional set-up although, strictly speaking, no structural changes were made to the form of the state. In fact, today citizens still vote for their parliamentary representatives, not for the government. However, the 1993 electoral laws, the 1999 constitutional reform (which introduced the direct election of the heads of the regional governments) and the 2005 electoral reform (the Calderoli Law) effectively changed the landscape. The result was a new form of government "which is not contemplated in the traditional legal or political literature. It is a form of mixed government combining elements of presidentialism and of parliamentarianism. It was defined as a neo-parliamentary system. But it could also be called a neo-presidential model (...) with three main characteristics: 1) a directly-elected head of the executive; 2) electoral systems with a majority bonus; 3) belief in the saying, "stand together, fall together" (D'Alimonte 2011, 56). In reality, if this is entirely the case for local government elections, it is not

completely so for national elections, as D'Alimonte clearly notes (ivi): the head of the executive is not formally elected directly by the people, although the 2005 Calderoli Law lays down that voters must express a preference for the head of the coalition or political force. In practice, this was already the case during the lifetime of the 1993 Mattarella Law. In this way we now have a totally original situation: a “de facto” government that emerges from the ballot boxes as chosen by the voters but, by law, it remains the prerogative of parliament to guarantee the government’s majority and of the President of the Republic to appoint the Prime Minister.

It is clear that this is a dangerous situation precisely because of the lack of any stable majority (a situation that is exacerbated by a legislature consisting of two chambers) as happened after the February 2013 general election.

In essence, the mixture of an electoral system based on two parties and on parliamentarianism has provoked a short circuit which has, first and foremost, damaged the relationship of trust between the voters and their elected representatives, thus triggering a credibility crisis for the traditional parties. It should be noted that the 1993 electoral system was decidedly a majority one (although it did allow for a proportional share) and was based on the British plurality voting system. The 2005 mechanism, while maintaining the two-party idea, was instead a proportional system with a majority bonus and closed lists of candidates (D'Alimonte, Chiaramonte 2007).

This last (and strongly contested) electoral system has effectively created “a parliament of nominees rather than elected representatives in that it has removed any possibility for voters to vote for or express a preference among candidates” (Fabbrini 2011b, 45), with the partial (but significant) exception of the Democratic Party which independently introduced a means of selecting candidates by holding “primaries” (both for the leadership of the coalition and for election candidates).

In this framework, political communication itself emphasised its commitment to promoting national leaders, even in local and peripheral contexts; this distance underlined politicians’ reliance on opinion polls and the media’s turning the elections into a show. The - often populist - tones used in election campaigns sometimes represent the structural necessity of an electoral competition, which has been transformed into a referendum about the leader (or various leaders). The Calderoli Law, significantly nicknamed the “porcellum” or pigs’ dinner of a law, blocked the preference vote and effectively promoted candidates that in theory were not known locally and this led to a focus on the leaders and, even more so, on their personal characteristics. At the same time, from an institutional point of view, the law transformed the parliament into “an institution at the disposal of the government. In no other western democracy has there been a similar suspension of parliamentary representation, to the point of structuring the parliament as merely an appendage to the party

leaders (*ibid.*). This second aspect is therefore very important and is fundamental to the third factor of the unique nature of Italy's political situation: the role of the media. The media are a symbolic picture frame enclosing the elements that make up a new public sphere: the media-filled public space constitutes a crossover point, the control of which can guarantee if not electoral victory surely a large strategic advantage. The central position of the media in today's politics is not, of course, only an issue in Italy. The importance first of the press, then of television and still later of the internet in North American and British life is widely recognised (Sorice 2009b; 2011).

The Italian situation, in other words, is in some ways extraordinarily similar to that of other societies: a trend towards turning politics into a media show, reciprocal dependency between the media and the political system, interconnections between the agenda of the media and that of politics, interference in the private lives of political figures on the part of the press, the trend towards personalisation and so on. At the same time, however, the Italian scenario has different and specific characteristics. The first is surely the cast-iron links between the parties and national public TV and radio stations, the origins of which go back to the dawn of radio and is now deep-rooted thanks to the various laws reforming the state broadcaster RAI (see Hibberd 2006). The second is the traditional structural weakness of publishing, which forced most newspapers to use public funds to ensure their survival (Forgacs 2000; Murialdi 2006);

and the third is undoubtedly the conflict of interest problem, caused by the dual role of Silvio Berlusconi as party leader (and later Prime Minister) and as the owner of the largest media empire in Italy. Therefore, if some aspects of the media coverage of Italian politics are fully consistent with the situation in other European countries, others are completely original and are by no means secondary in understanding the role played by the media in representing populist and anti-political feeling.

The media provide the space favoured by populist expression, which is often modelled on anti-political rhetoric. Donatella Campus (2006) reminds us that in political competition the “main vehicle of differentiation is the political language”, (Campus 2006, 22) which is, at the same time, a crucial part of the construction of the identity of new social groups. And the idea that the kind of language used may represent a basic element of political communication had already been emphasised by Harold Lasswell. Indeed, language is part of the same reality that expresses political communication, gives it form and, in a certain sense, allows it to exist. “The constituent power of political language does not lie in its immanent property, as the illocutionary force which Austin spoke of, but in its capacity to contribute to the reality of that which it articulates, because it renders it conceivable and above all credible and in this way creates the representation and the collective will which can produce it” (Cedroni 2010, 15).

On the other hand, new political identities can only develop by highlighting their singular “otherness” in relation to the political forces already active (parties, movements, etc.). So the “new” entity must be expressed in a kind of language that makes it immediately identifiable as an alternative (Schumpeter 1942). The differentiation is nourished by the discursive register of anti-politics. The anti-political rhetoric is often shouted out, emotional, highly spectacular in its capacity to rouse passions before producing any elements of rational planning. In other words, it is ideal for the media arena, above all television, which finds one of its structural strong points precisely by creating spectacle.



Figure 1. The rhetoric of anti-politics

Within the media (and markedly in that area of television programming which is defined as “telepolitics”¹) anti-political rhetoric finds a strong

¹ This is a rather worn-out definition although it is still effectively adopted. Politics, in fact, is present in many segments of television programming – from infotainment to talk shows, from current affairs specials to programmes for which spectacular political debate is their *raison d’être*. The

resonance, which does not originate in television but which finds in this medium an extraordinary breeding ground.

Anti-politics feeds on the clash between “us” and “them” (Campus 2006); it thus adopts a mechanism of ideological unification (Sorice 2009a, 188; Thompson 1990). In other words, anti-politics is absolutely ideological even when it adopts discursive strategies against party “ideologies”. We can identify four principles of anti-political rhetoric (Figure 1).

We can define the first principle as rhetoric against the system, and it is perhaps one of the most common forms of political language, and not only that of recent decades. In this kind of rhetoric, the “enemy” is the institutional system and/or the way in which the state itself is organised. This rhetoric uses a kind of language and the specific grammar which characterise forms of populism that do not recognise the legitimacy of the institutional structure. Usually, it is the party system (and/or the way it is organised) which is blamed, in reference to an analysis (it doesn’t matter if presumed or real) of its structural weakness and incapacity to produce lasting (or strong) governments. De Gaulle provides an example of this anti-political rhetoric (Campus 2006, 26). He accused the parties of being responsible for the paralysis in French politics.

latter are today classified within a new genre called “politainment” which is undoubtedly accounts the most important and privileged space to put politics on show (see Mazzoleni, Sfardini 2010).

Anti-political rhetoric can however be found in the case of Italy as well, in particular in the declarations and campaigns against parliamentarianism and in favour of ultra-presidentialist shifts. One case of rhetoric against the system, it seems to me, is also that found in the UK in some of the English Defence League's campaigns. EDL is a xenophobic movement of the far right which in the name of a return to a presumed tradition, actually tends towards delegitimising the Westminster system itself.

Our second type of anti-political rhetoric we call anti-State rhetoric. For the most part it is the welfare system that comes under attack from this rhetoric, "which stems from a rejection of the political programmes, the institutions and the legitimacy of the modern social state and mixed economy capitalism" (Taggart, 2000). Its main targets are the State, which it accuses of being "nosy" and of seeking to meddle even in the private life of its citizens; the government, usually accused of being too intrusive and in constant search of new and more sophisticated forms of taxation; public officials with judicial powers (magistrates), who, particularly in Italy, have been publicly and vehemently blamed by many centre-right politicians for some of the country's shortcomings (the slowness of the justice system, the ease with which criminals are released, the ostensible links between justice and politics). This anti-political rhetoric embraces cultural and political spheres that in other respects are miles apart; the Lega Nord's criticism of centralised government (clearly evoked by

the expression “Roma ladrona” – thieving Rome) has much in common with the propaganda against the “tax collector State” (and in general against the State’s supposed excessive meddling in the lives of its citizens) voiced by the champions of an ultra-liberal approach to the economy and the organisation of society. Anti-political rhetoric relies on a small number of key concepts: a) “making one’s own decisions about one’s future”, that “future” being either personal (of a member of society) or collective (of the “North” or the “South”); b) a moral obligation “not to pay others to squander resources”, “squander resources” being taken to include the costs of the national health system and the costs to the environment; c) the advantages of the State as a “neutral” and “distant” regulator; d) the need for “few laws”, organised above all so as to prevent the judiciary (accused of being “slow”, “bureaucratic” or “partisan”) from enjoying “too much” freedom of action; and e) attacking the inefficiency of the justice system, which allegedly provides too many “safeguards” for those suspected or accused of various offences (politicised justice). Some political parties often strategically combine slogans that are fundamentally “anti-safeguard” and de facto in favour of politicised justice with political rhetoric in which the judiciary is accused of being permissive. Contrary to appearances, this is not a schizophrenic message; it is a clear populist strategy that stigmatises the judiciary for the “otherness” that sets it apart from the people; the judge as someone “other” than us. So, we

have “us” (the people) on one side and “them” (the judiciary) on the other in the role of “persecutor” or “defender of criminals” according to circumstances.

Here, as with all anti-political rhetoric, its distinctive characteristic is its “newism”. Writing specifically about the Lega Nord, Lorella Cedroni (2010, 45-46) explains

In Italy, the language of the financial crisis uses the lexicon of “newism”, which does not mean it uses new words but that it upturns the content of old words: an enantiosemic lexicon in which a word is used to designate its opposite, like “federalism” which has been used in the language of the Lega Nord to convey the concept of separation, of “secession” rather than union. The language of the Lega is one of the languages of the financial crisis in the sense that it simultaneously reflects a fracture and forms one, a social and territorial cleavage incarnated by the complete break with the codes used by earlier forms of political language. It is also a language that does not need the media (newspapers, radio or television), insofar as it is a direct and personal form of communication – reflected in the rough and crude expressions, slogans, mottos and insults used – an “unmediated” form of communication that finds its outlet mainly on the walls of the “Northern Republic”, on posters, signs and drawings and in outdoor rallies, loud speeches peppered with provocative impatient gestures and delivered in a dialect that breaks with the rigid rules of syntax and grammar.

Our third form of anti-political rhetoric is what we call anti-party. In reality, the target of this type of rhetoric is not just political parties but the whole political system organised around parties and political movements. In other words, without becoming explicitly anti-system, this rhetoric often borrows some of its content and expressions. Anti-party rhetoric is fuelled by a strong aversion to “professional” politicians, who are accused of being unaware of the real needs of the “people”. The political “caste”² thus becomes another group of “them” against “us”. “Hence, a set of recurring themes: praise for the good sense of the populace, which professional politicians lack; glorification of work as an activity that produces results, as opposed to the practice of politics, which is described as an arena where people ‘chat’ but nothing is ever produced or decided” (Campus 2006, 28). This is the background of all those forms of framing (Sorice 2011) that de-legitimise the role of the profession of politics, thus causing a generalised de-legitimation of the whole of political activity and taking another step in the

² The term “caste” is suddenly being used everywhere in journalism and in Italian politics to emphasise the separateness (and privilege) of “professional politicians”. The intention is not to defend the privileges and perks of “politicians” (although they undoubtedly exist); the aim is to analyse the use of strong anti-political rhetoric based on “an almost anthropological prejudice against those who engage in politics as a profession” (Campus 2006, 28).

process of driving a wedge between parties and citizens. The outcome of this rhetoric is to encourage the practice of non-voting or identification with the forces (or leaders) that present themselves as “new”, not embroiled in the party system (usually because they are outsiders or come from areas of civil society that are not satisfactorily represented by the political parties).

In Italy, a clear example of anti-party rhetoric is Silvio Berlusconi’s speech of 26 January 1994, in which he announced his intention to enter politics: it is an exceptionally effective piece of communication (Campus 2006; Caniglia, Mazzoni 2011):

Italy is the country I love. This is where my roots lie, my hopes and my prospects. Here I learnt from my father and from life how to run a business. Here I acquired a passionate love of freedom. I have decided to enter the field and become involved in public matters because I don’t want to live in an illiberal country, one governed by immature forces and men bound to a politically and economically bankrupt past...

Italy’s old political class has been overtaken by events and left behind by the progress of time ...

Italy has reached a turning point in its history. As a businessman, as a citizen and now as a citizen entering the fray, without hesitation but with the determination and equanimity that life has taught me, I tell you that we can call an end

*to the politics of incomprehensible chit-chat,
idiotic rows and political unprofessionalism ...*

The emphasis, in this as in many later situations, is firmly on the “old political class” which, ultimately, is only able to produce “incomprehensible chit-chat”. That anti-party rhetoric served to launch a new kind of politician who presented himself as a receptacle for the popular “us” to be set against the “them” of “Italy’s old political class”. To get this message across the use of specific expressions (like Azienda Italia – Italy Ltd.) and the use of expertise from outside the world of public institutions (managers and professionals from Berlusconi’s own companies called to political responsibilities) were major elements underpinning the anti-party rhetoric. “Later, the profile of the Forza Italia movement underwent a change and Berlusconi created alliances with many political professionals; however, the spirit of the Berlusconi movement and his rhetorical style ... remained unchanged” (Campus 2006, 29). This style didn’t change even with the launch of the “new” party (Popolo della libertà – People of Freedom) when Silvio Berlusconi addressed the crowd in Piazza San Babila in Milan on 18 November 2007 in what is now called the “running board speech” because he spoke standing on the running board of a car.

*Today is the official launch of a great new party
of the people of freedom: the party of the people
of Italy. We invite everyone to join us against the*

old fogeys of politics in a great new people's party.

Once again, Silvio Berlusconi's speaking style was to make the traditional political class the enemy, describing it as before as old and outdated ("old fogeys of politics"). While anti-party rhetoric is neither infrequent nor unusual in opposition or revolutionary movements that present themselves as "new" (as was the case with the "enter the field" speech of 1994), the "running board speech" introduces new language: an attack on politics and on the party system is conducted by the leader of a major national party who at the time had already been Prime Minister from 1994 to 1996 and from 2001 to 2006 (that is, until one year before the Piazza San Babila speech).

Anti-party rhetoric addresses mainly (though not exclusively) television viewers, greatly aided in this by the progressive popularisation of politics. "Pop politics" (Mazzoleni, Sfardini 2010) is anti-party rhetoric that often enters the homes of Italians through television variety shows and entertainment in general.³ Important studies on this subject have traced

³ The law on "par condicio" (equal terms) regulates political communication through the usual channels of televised political communication but does not tackle the treatment of political issues in other programme schedules. On this subject see the clear and well-structured analysis by Enrico Caniglia and Marco Mazzoni (2011, 72-77).

the link between the composition of the viewership of television entertainment and the composition of a substantial section of Berlusconi's electorate in the 2008 polls (Itanes 2008).

Silvio Berlusconi is emblematic of the telepopulist leader (Taguieff 2002) who builds his diversification strategy with the help of television and at the same time constantly re-asserts his "newism". Leadership itself becomes an element of strategy and a method of discourse; the media (and initially the headlines of popular newspapers) are also an important vehicle of visibility and legitimisation. In this way, leadership becomes the "heart of political representation: the leader represents the people, acting in their name and in their interest" (Campus 2006, 33-34).

Another example, also of this third type of rhetoric, is that of Beppe Grillo, comedian, blogger, and above all undisputed leader (although he describes himself as a "loudspeaker") of the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five-Star Movement or M5S). Once again, the collective subject on behalf of whom the leader speaks is the group of people opposed to professional "politicians" (the "caste"), as if they were aliens with no links to Italian society. This is populist rhetoric in which the populace is not an aggregation of classes or social groups; it is a homogeneous mass⁴ that opposes the

⁴ Some authors see the same characteristics in the Argentinean movement of the *descamisados* (and in Peronism more

“non-populace” (consisting in this case of politicians, regardless of ideology or institutional position).

The fourth type of anti-political rhetoric is anti-intellectual rhetoric. It is not new in the Italian political scene (and indeed also exists outside Italy). Once again the conflict is between the popular “us” – consisting of those who perform manual jobs and make hardnosed “realistic” lifestyle choices – and “them” the professors (or “upstart academics”), intellectuals incapable of coping with everyday problems, young techies (nerds, geeks, and so on), as well as public sector employees likened to intellectuals because they are also incapable of hardnosed realism (and are “slackers” into the bargain). While the rhetoric against “so-called culture” dates back to 1949, when the expression “culturame” was first used at the Christian Democrats’ party conference in Venice by Mario Scelba to attack intellectuals from the opposing political camp,⁵ the tactic of demonising culture and intellectuals peaked during the period 2009-2011. Anti-intellectual

generally) and even in the Fascist rhetoric of the “combatant” (who is part of the populace) who opposes a “non-populace” of cowardly and disloyal people (whom Fascist rhetoric obviously equates with the Democratic opposition). On these topics see Ionescu, Gellner 1970; Weiland 1999.

⁵ “Do you imagine the Christian Democrats could have won the day on 18 April if they hadn’t had a moral strength, a guiding concept, that is worth much more than all the so-called culture of some people?”

rhetoric relied on the development of a new media hegemony that Massimiliano Panarari (2010) has appropriately termed sub-cultural hegemony.

The de-legitimisation of intellectual work is ideological. It tends to sideline argumentation in favour of shouting spectacles, replacing the principle of authority with the “principle of majority”. According to this principle, an idea shared by the majority is bound to be right and anyone who holds conflicting ideas is an enemy to be eliminated (not only metaphorically). It is the same reasoning that prompts some historians to shift from analysing historiographic sources to I think that (which can be used to undertake a dangerous revisionism); it is the same reasoning whereby some academic disciplines are deemed “useless” or ruinous in terms of job opportunities regardless of the empirical data demonstrating the contrary; and finally it is the same reasoning that lies behind the institutional short-circuit whereby “having the majority” means having the right to not respect existing rules. While in the first two instances culture (and its certified methods of validation) and the intellectual professions are seriously under threat, in the last instance it is the democratic system itself that is in danger of collapse.

Anti-intellectual rhetoric is close to anti-party rhetoric: academic knowledge is often criticised by neo-populist leaders for being abstract, unconnected with the practicalities of daily life, and for the most

part self-referencing. Another “non-populace” is composed of “barons” and “upstart academics”, often armed with ideas and research data that serve the action of government or opposition. Obviously, such rhetoric – adopted by government anti-politics (Campus 2006) – becomes a framework for justifying cuts to research funding.⁶

Anti-political rhetoric lays emphasis on the fact that, like populism, it is not based solely on demagogy; on the contrary, such forms constitute rhetorical devices designed “to win popular consensus for the achievement of individual ends” (Campus 2006, 29).

⁶ Depending on the historical context, scientific research may become a source of heroic narrative (an important element in nationalistic rhetoric: consider the emphasis placed on research in the Soviet Union) or the object of social delegitimation (as in the case of forms of ultra-liberal neo-populism).

2. Democracy in Italy. A problem of anchoring

To understand the weakness of the Italian democracy, we should also analyse the peculiar situation of the country, such as of a “democracy without qualities”, to use a Leonardo Morlino’s statement (1998). According to the influential political scientist, Italy continues to experience a problem of “anchoring” of its democracy. The Morlino’s Theory of Anchoring suggests that democratic consolidation and crisis can be explained by the diverse and changing connections between legitimation and a few precise anchors. The process, in the same words of Leonardo Morlino (1998: 339-340), can be explained as in the following 16 points:

1. To detect and measure consolidation and crisis, a few aspects concerning the institutional, electoral, party, and élite domains must be explored, but the main attention should be paid to parties and their connections with civil society.

2. The two basic processes of consolidation and crisis are characterized by a bottom-up phenomenon—legitimation— and a top-down phenomenon—the anchoring of civil society.
3. Legitimation is always formed by two distinct aspects that are intertwined, consensus at a mass level and support at an élite level.
4. The development of legitimation may be distinctively detected, although a precise quantitative analysis of it is not always possible.
5. The anchors are shaped during the first years after the installation and to a greater or lesser extent are weakened or transformed during the crisis.
6. The main anchors are party organization, the function of gatekeeping, clientele ties, and neo-corporatist arrangements.
7. To achieve consolidation, the more exclusive the legitimacy, the stronger and more developed the anchors.
8. To achieve consolidation, alternatively, the more inclusive the legitimacy, the weaker the anchors may be.
9. Anchors, however, are always very important to understand better which types of consolidation and democracy emerge.
10. The ‘formulas’ of consolidation are defined by the actors in the different mix of the two sub-processes.
11. These ‘formulas’ are party consolidation, state consolidation, and élite consolidation.

12. The outcomes of those processes are different models of democracies where institutional aspects, party systems, and the relationships among parties and civil society are considered.
13. Consolidation formulas contain the seeds of their own self-destruction, such as long incumbency, no alternation in office, no partners in cabinet, an unitarian state, overdeveloped party organizations, strong party links with interest groups, a 'frozen' moderate electorate, and no signs of dissatisfaction in the moderate groups.
14. Crises are related to the previous consolidation formulas. They are the result of interactions between élites and citizens that affect the existing anchors in different ways and to a different extent.
15. At a mass level, attitudes, perceptions of inefficacy, and negative reactions are the most crucial aspects to explore for analysing the crisis.
16. Crisis is mainly explained by weakening of anchors, together with fading constraints and emerging incentives.

		legitimation	
		exclusive	inclusive
control	dominance	party consolidation	state consolidation
		ITALY	GREECE
			PORTUGAL
			SPAIN
	neutrality	maintenance	élites consolidation

Figure 2 Models and cases of democratic consolidation (Southern Europe). Source: Morlino 1998.

We do not have time to deal with this problem here, but it is obvious that we must also consider the structural weakness of Italian democracy, to understand the impact that anti-politics and populism have on it and its processes.

3. The Five-Star Movement

The case of the Five-Star Movement is unique. It is part of the category that Emiliana De Blasio has called “webpopulism”, but at the same time the movement led by the former comedian Beppe Grillo and the publisher Gianroberto Casaleggio cannot be described only as populist and it certainly is not only anti-political since it is organised like a political party, although it rejects that definition. However, the movement also has a number of very specific characteristics.

The Five-Star Movement arose out of the protest actions originating within Italian comedian Beppe Grillo’s blog, which had been running since 2001. The party calls itself a grassroots “movement” from the bottom up, refuses to be called a party, and its articles of incorporation are called, in the programme, “non-articles”. The party – as pointed out in a recent article by Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini published in *South European Society and Politics* – is at the crossroads of various models of organisation and

concepts of democracy: it combines online presence and local activity. The horizontal relationship between the activists (dominated by the rhetoric of direct democracy) is combined with often top-down decision-making processes that originate from the Grillo-Casaleggio duo. Grillo, for instance, owns the trademark “5 Stelle” and adherents are allowed to use it until that authorisation is revoked, a mechanism not unlike commercial franchising (to the extent that several commentators have spoken of the evolution from Berlusconi’s proprietary party to Beppe Grillo’s franchising party). We can also add that the M5S seems to show a stratarchical structure (but we need deeper research to highlight this organizational issue).

At the same time, however, it should be pointed out that Beppe Grillo’s party-movement has managed to capture many of the political and social solicitations coming from grassroots movements already active at local level (from movements in favour of “joyful downsizing” to environmental movements, from associations in favour of alternative forms of economy to the new global networks); it has also won the approval and forms of endorsement from far right movements (and indeed Grillo has been accused of having occasionally expressed anti-Semitic ideas: the American journalist Lisa Palmieri-Billig, for example, has noted that the blogs and tweets of supporters of Grillo’s movement often contain strongly racist and anti-Semitic statements. Several Jewish organisations have expressed concerns about these aspects. And

similar concerns were expressed by the president of the Jewish community of Rome – Mr. Riccardo Pacifici – in an interview with the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, published on March 22nd). It must also be underlined that some concerns have been significantly softening in the last days of the electoral campaign.

Still, the hybrid nature of the movement is an interesting example and the model of democracy propounded by the activists elicits curiosity and concern. The idea of a direct democracy achieved through para-participatory democracy software (such as Liquid Feedback) has interesting features that challenge a possibly tired liberal democracy. At the same time, anyone can see that the M5S presents a dangerous overlapping between direct democracy (the democracy of the ancients) and participatory democracy (two conceptually very different things). Even the democracy inside the movement seems highly questionable and has led to numerous defections among the locally elected.

But, who are the activists and the voters of the Five Stars Movements? We can identify four groups, four families of voters, according to the findings coming from a research directed by Roberto Biorcio and Paolo Natale (both at University of Milan), substantially confirmed by a similar study achieved by our research centre (the Centre for Media and Communication Studies “Massimo Baldini”, based at LUISS University, in Rome).

We can identify, as said, four families of voters.

The first one is constituted (in the words of Biorcio and Natale) by the Militants. They are, basically, the oldest activists, people with a recent history of vote wavering between right, left and abstention. The great part of them are Beppe Grillo's blog followers. They are, less or more, the 25% of the 8 millions voters of the Five Stars Movement.

The second one is a family that, always following Biorcio and Natale, we can name as the Leftist,⁷ because it is composed by people coming from previous militancy (or membership) in the area of the left parties or also environmental movements and radical left groups. They are people who perceive themselves as politically "at left" and/or sincerely democratic. Usually they don't agree with the statement "no differences between the right and the left". This "family" represents the 20% of the whole M5S electorate.

The third family is a group of people we can name the Protesters. It is a very fragmented group, a mixture of protest vote and rational choices of refusal "traditional" politics. They consider the vote for Five Stars Movement a tool to provoke deep changes in the Italian political system. In their political roots, there are anti-political rhetoric and engagement for change. They are the 30% of the movement's voters, as Biorcio and Natale (2013) noted.

⁷ "Gauchisti" are called by Biorcio and Natale (2013) using an Italianisation of the French word "gauchiste" (de gauche, leftist).

The fourth family is that we can surely define as Populists. They belong to the right-wing populism tradition. They have an history of poor electoral fidelity even if predominantly right-wing. Mostly indifferent, many of them show anti-democratic sentiments, sometimes even coloured by racist and sexist positions. They have a strong presence in the web 2.0, particularly in Twitter where they often act like “trolls”. They represent circa the 25% of the whole populace of the 5 Stars Movement’s voters.

As said, a good percentage (between 20-22%, see Biorcio and Natale 2013) of the activists of the 5 Star Movement come from very significant political experiences; some of them have their political background in the same movements and organisations that Donatella della Porta (2011; see also della Porta and Rucht 2013) studied as relevant in the adoption of deliberative and participatory democracy.

Deliberative democracy, theoretically, is based upon the idea that the preferences of social actors can be transformed in the course of the interaction (Dryzek 2000; della Porta 2011). The decision “is based in a horizontal flows of communication, many content producers, huge opportunities for interactivity, compared on the basis of rational and willingness arguments, in a dialogical way. In this meaning, deliberative democracy is discursive one” (della Porta 2011, 83). It is evident, then, that a deliberative democracy is mainly based on practices

of consensus building, where the avoiding of the individual egoism is a precondition (Arendt 1991) and the dimension of solidarity a true programmatic value. The deliberative and participatory democracy goes beyond the idea of the Habermasian public sphere in favour of a broader view on the alternative public spheres in which people can implement the mechanisms of deliberation (della Porta 2005).

It is a practice quite different from voting in the web (which is also subject, in the M5S case, to a subscription to a private blog) and also from the emphasis of the median position (as it often happens with interesting web based platform such as Liquid Feedback). Deliberative participatory democracy seems really different from the referendum logic (yes/no, I like it/I do not like it) that underlies the myth of direct democracy, very often evoked by Beppe Grillo.⁸

We are here in the presence of an aspect of ideological nature. The rejection of representative democracy and its institutions, in fact, belongs to the category of anti-political rhetoric (Campus 2006, De Blasio, Hibberd, Higgins, Sorice 2012), and, on the other hand, not by chance, same accents against parliamentary institutions and mechanisms of representation through parties have been typical characteristic of Silvio Berlusconi's statements. At the

⁸ Definitely, the so-called direct democracy is not deliberative and participatory democracy, even if it can be framed as specific issue of the participatory democracy.

same time, however, the best known activists of 5 Stars Movement don't offer only a simple anti-political position: indeed, they choose a strong political profile, using the rhetoric of direct democracy as a founding myth. This is a clear ideological choice: apparently contradictory in a post-ideological movement.

Some scholars in the field of gender politics have also observed a "macho ideology" in Beppe Grillo's rhetoric. In the recent elections of the Presidents of the Low House and of the Senate, some senators, members of the Five Stars Movement voted for the candidate of the Democratic Party, the former anti-mafia prosecutor Piero Grasso. Against them, Grillo has used the same rhetoric he previously used against the dissidents in some local areas: threat, sanction, expulsion. So, on the one hand, a process of institutionalisation of the party form (a post-ideological movement, in other words, has a fast transformation into a real party); on the other hand, the use of typical male gendered argumentation, based on the idea of the tribal loyalty to the chief. We have anyway to highlight that similar processes are present in many other political parties.

We should also discuss the Beppe Grillo's elitist egalitarianism (in which some are "more equal than others"), which is even connected to the concept of "light state" (another prominent position in the Grillo's statement but sometimes contrasting the Five Star Movement activists' policy). They are two sides of the creeping antiegalitarian mutation (Urbinati 2013) that seems to inclose dramatically our democracy.

Finally, the tools of “liquid democracy” remain the (potential) prerogative of a minority of the country (a country where, don’t forget, there is still a huge gap between north and south, including in internet use, and even a strong generational gap in the media technologies adoption).

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