

Why Italian Elections Matter: A New Type of Populism Is Rising

5 Star Movement is poised to be the country's largest party after Sunday's national elections



Comedian Beppe Grillo has led Italy's 5 Star Movement, the party he founded in 2009, to the top of the polls ahead of Sunday's parliamentary elections. PHOTO: FILIPPO PRUCCOLI/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

By

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ROME—Last October, Beppe Grillo headlined a protest by the 5 Star Movement, the populist political party he founded. Standing outside the Pantheon he denounced [a new electoral law](#) that will limit direct voting for parliamentary candidates and help protect incumbents in national elections on Sunday.

Mr. Grillo, who became famous as a comedian, brandished a white blindfold. “We are protesting blindfolded because this is how they want us—unable to see,” the 69-year-old told a cheering crowd. “They only pass rules that protect themselves.”

The 5 Star Movement exploded in Italy after [a weak economic recovery has failed to bring relief](#), feeding popular anger against the corruption and ineffectiveness of Italy's political class. Polls show 5 Star could emerge from [Sunday's vote as Italy's single biggest party](#), putting it for the first time in a position to play the senior partner in a coalition government or form an even more powerful opposition.

Protest Vote

Polls show the 5 Star Movement has gained in popularity ahead of parliamentary elections in Italy on Sunday.

Source: EMG

Populist groups in Europe in recent years have thrived on [rising anger about immigration](#) and the European Union. 5 Star represents a uniquely Italian strain, being overwhelmingly a revolt against Italy's entrenched political class. The rest of its program is eclectic, borrowing from left, right and technological utopianism. It has centrist views on immigration, and while it was once in favor of Italy's exit from the eurozone, its leaders say it is no longer time to leave the common currency.

The election is likely to prompt a question that could force 5 Star to define its future—and potentially that of Italy, too. Is it a governing force or simply a protest movement?

On one side are members, [including Luigi Di Maio, the party's 31-year-old candidate for premier](#), who are pushing it to join an alliance with mainstream parties. According to polls, 5 Star would receive about 27% of votes—not enough to govern alone, but potentially enough to play a major part in a coalition government.



5 Star is known as a protest party and a vehicle for public anger at Italy's entrenched political class. PHOTO:ALESSANDRO BIANCHI/REUTERS

Mr. Grillo has roundly rejected that scenario, saying that unless 5 Star wins an outright majority, it should remain an opposition party. Joining a coalition government is “like saying that a panda can eat raw meat,” he said in January. “We only eat bamboo.”

If no single party or coalition emerges with a parliamentary majority, Italy's president could ask parties to attempt to form a grand, cross-party coalition that could have a limited lifespan.

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If that fails, he could call fresh elections. Speculation has swirled around the possibility of a grand coalition between the Democratic Party, the current ruling party, and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, along with smaller parties.

Mr. Grillo emerged in the late 1970s as one of Italy's most popular comedians, whose mordant political satire deftly took down Italy's corporate and political elite.

In 1986, during an appearance on Italian state-controlled broadcaster RAI, he joked about a trip the country's Socialist prime minister, Bettino Craxi, was then making in China. "If everyone is a Socialist [in China], who do they steal from?" he said.

The joke struck a nerve and cost Mr. Grillo his gig on the channel. He later said the experience soured him on television and drew him to other outlets, such as the internet and theaters, where he could have direct contact with fans.

Mr. Craxi eventually was at the center of the "Clean Hands" corruption scandal that swept away an entire political class, putting many politicians under investigation or in jail. Indicted on corruption charges, Mr. Craxi, who denied wrongdoing, fled Italy in 1994 and later died in exile.



Beppe Grillo, left, Luigi Di Maio, the party's candidate for prime minister, and party member Alessandro Di Battista at the demonstration against the new electoral law in Rome in October. PHOTO: TONY GENTILE/REUTERS

In 2005, Mr. Grillo began writing a blog that exposed corporate malfeasance and official corruption. It became one of Italy's most popular, with millions of readers.

He became electrified by a best-selling book by Italian journalists called "La Casta" that recounted tales of former parliamentarians collecting pensions in their 40s, arranging public-sector jobs for relatives and enjoying cut-rate lobster meals in their private restaurant. He launched a "Clean Parliament" campaign for a popular referendum that would ban from office lawmakers with criminal convictions.

In September 2007, he organized an event to publicize the campaign that he dubbed V-Day, with "V" standing for *vaffanculo*, Italian for f— off. He mobilized activists to collect signatures in more than 200 cities in Italy and abroad.

Before a crowd of 100,000 in Bologna, Mr. Grillo read the names of 24 parliamentarians and the crimes for which they had been convicted. Throughout the event, he led the crowd in a rousing “Vaffanculo!”





Forecasters expect no party to win a majority in Italy's parliamentary election. Speculation has swirled around the possibility of a grand coalition between the Democratic Party, led by Matteo Renzi, left, and Forza Italia, led by Silvio Berlusconi. PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

“These people don’t represent anybody,” he shouted from the stage. “We have succeeded in something that will go down in history. This is the Woodstock of honest people.” His supporters collected 350,000 signatures, seven times the number needed to force parliament to examine the proposed law. In 2012, a law banning convicted criminals from serving in parliament was passed.

The event convinced Mr. Grillo that he and the army of young people supporting his campaign had the power to change Italy. “The V-Day represented a point of no return,” said Marco Canestrari, a communication consultant working with Mr. Grillo at the time. Until then, Mr. Grillo “didn’t know whether [his blog followers] were willing to stand up for a cause.”

Fighting the Establishment

Italy's 5 Star Movement shares some beliefs with other populist parties gaining strength in Europe.

Source: party statements

In 2009, the comedian officially founded the 5 Star Movement. Three years later, during regional elections in Sicily, the party tapped a deep vein of popular anger that was sweeping all of Italy, then in the grips of what would be its worst economic downturn since World War II.

At the time, members of Sicily’s regional assembly were paid about €15,000 a month and earned the right to a pension after just 4½ years in office, all while the Sicilian economy had shrunk 5% between 2008 and 2012, and unemployment had risen to 18%.

Mr. Grillo crisscrossed the island, speaking from the back of pickup trucks and balconies overlooking village squares. He promised a minimum guaranteed income and a fight against perks and privileges enjoyed by local politicians.



Beppe Grillo in 2008 at the second “vaffanculo” day, Italian for f— off, a rally to mobilize activists. PHOTO: TONINO DI MARCO/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

“We should be much angrier than the Greeks and the Spaniards,” he told one rally. “They don’t have politicians who steal. We have a political class who is eating the living flesh of this country.”

In one stunt that garnered him national attention, he swam the nearly 2-mile strait separating Sicily from the Italian mainland. “I wanted to show that a 64-year old man, overweight, who isn’t an athlete, but a comedian, works hard for six months and succeeds,” Mr. Grillo said in a speech later in Palermo. “We can change things.”

Polls predicted the group would get 10% of votes. It won 18%.

“We were so disorganized that we didn’t even have candidates at the beginning,” said Alessio Villarosa, a Sicilian lawmaker who designed campaign T-shirts reading “Down

with La Casta.” “People weren’t even familiar with the name ‘5 Star Movement.’ I used to say, ‘I’m part of Grillo’s movement,’ and they understood.”


Governing Body

5 Star candidates are projected to win the most seats in Italy’s parliamentary elections but fall short of a majority. It is unclear if they would form an alliance to govern.

Source: Istituto Ixè S.r.l.

A year later, in 2013, with a sovereign debt crisis threatening to drive Italy from the euro, 5 Star won 26% of votes cast in parliamentary elections, sending 163 of its members to Italy’s legislature.

Still, Mr. Grillo refused to form coalitions with other parties. In early 2014, when [Matteo Renzi, the young new chief of Italy’s main center-left Democratic Party](#), was seeking political support for his political platform, he asked to meet with the 5 Star leader. “I am here to show you our utter indignation for what you represent, for the system you represent,” Mr. Grillo told him during the meeting, which was live-streamed. Mr. Renzi cobbled together enough support from other parties to form a government and become prime minister.



Predictions of populist, eurosceptic victories ahead of major European elections last year didn’t fully materialize—but Italy is different. WSJ’s Niki Blasina explains why the March 4 election in the eurozone’s third-largest economy could have serious repercussions for the European Union.

Mr. Grillo himself isn’t eligible to run for office, because he was convicted of manslaughter in the 1980s after a car he was driving plunged into a ravine, killing three of his passengers.

The leader laid out rules for the party’s newly elected parliamentarians. They weren’t allowed to participate in TV talk shows and had to donate half their salaries to a 5 Star fund to support small-business owners. Chauffeured cars were forbidden.

The rules sparked tensions. One lawmaker was expelled from the party after appearing on two prime-time talk shows. Four others were kicked out after criticizing Mr. Grillo's refusal to countenance an alliance with Mr. Renzi in his new government. Another was ejected after donating part of her pay to charitable groups rather than the 5 Star fund for small businesses. In all, 48 of the parliamentarians moved to other parties.

5 Star lawmakers have forced parliament to scrap sweetheart deals to rent office space, which according to 5 Star calculations saved taxpayers €32 million a year. They demanded the end of no-bid contracts for supplies, halving the cost of services such as employee uniforms.



Beppe Grillo swam the nearly 2-mile strait separating Sicily from the Italian mainland in 2012 as a campaign event. He said he wanted to show that “we can change things.” PHOTO: CARMELO IMBESI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The party hasn't succeeded with more-ambitious goals. A bid to cut parliamentarians' base pay by half was rejected—members earn about €10,000 a month, 50% higher than

their British peers. A bill to force politicians to give up their seat if they changed parties—common as members jump on the bandwagon of the leading party ahead of elections—failed, as did a proposal to bring parliamentarians’ pensions in line with that of ordinary Italians.

People familiar with the matter say that as elections near, Mr. Grillo has taken a step back in order to allow Mr. Di Maio to lead the movement.

The fiery founder has rebranded his blog as his own thoughts, making it no longer the party’s house organ. He has campaigned far less than in the past, although he will likely headline the movement’s final rally on the eve of the election.

Outsiders can’t picture 5 Star without Mr. Grillo. “I can’t imagine Grillo distancing himself from politics,” said Vittorio Feltri, a newspaper publisher close to the Berlusconi family. “He will surely be the pope of the movement.”

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