



Strong but not menacing: Italy's 5 Star Movement at the European elections

by Eric Turner

Department of Sociology and Criminology, University of New Mexico

Executive Summary

The 5 Star Movement has not been able to capitalize on its success in the February 2013 elections with a strong showing in the recent European Elections. Instead, this newly formed political force has lost around a fifth of its support, while the governing Partito Democratico will feel that it has gained a mandate to rule Italy in the coming years, by making gains and coming in first by a wide margin. Although the 5 Star Movement remains a force to be reckoned with in Italian politics, its future successes will depend on the PD's potential failures.

Issues

The 5 Star Movement (5SM) entered its first European Election looking like a menacing force. A little more than a year before, this new party had taken Italian politics by storm by winning 25% of the votes in its first campaign for Parliament, thus becoming Italy's third biggest Parliamentary coalition as well as the biggest party. This was a shock for many, because this movement's affirmation, with its message of anti-establishment rhetoric, environmentalism, Euro-scepticism and direct democratic ideas, could not have been a bigger break with the recent past of Italian politics. This is because, in the Berlusconi years, the Italian political arena had often been dominated by moderation, endemic corruption, unrelenting support of EU institutions and a tendency for elderly figures to dominate the process.

In the aftermath of the Italian election, the 5SM turned down a coalition proposal by Italy's Centre-Left Partito Democratico (PD), which commanded a majority in Italy's lower house, but needed external support in the Senate in order to form a government. Eventually, the PD was able to command support from its main opponent in previous elections, the centre-right Partito della Libertà (PDL). The first year in government has not been an easy one for the PD, which has seen two prime ministers alternate in power as well as a split among its allies, as Italy's former PM Silvio Berlusconi and a few other PDL members left the governing coalition in the aftermath of Berlusconi's conviction for corruption charges, to reform FI (Forza Italia). The rest of the PDL stayed faithful to the PD-led coalition and formed the NCD (Nuovo Centro-Destra).

Under normal circumstances, an opposition party would stand to gain from these levels of government instability, however the 5SM's first tenure in Parliament was also fraught by scandals and divisions, as the movement fielded four different speakers in the Senate and five different speakers in the Chamber of Deputies (Italy's lower house) and several members of parliament were expelled from the party for disagreeing with its increasingly intransigent leader, Beppe Grillo. Since the 2013 elections, 17 of its members of Parliament have been either expelled or have left the party.

Keywords

Italy, 5 Star Movement, PD, PDL, Renzi, Berlusconi, Grillo, European Elections, Italian Politics, European Parliament.

Quotables

-The 5 Star Movement has been punished by its voters in the recent European Elections due to its internal divisions and its leaders' intolerance of internal dissent

-Out of the 5 Star Movement's main rivals, the PD will feel that its electoral gains will give it a mandate to govern Italy, whereas the centre right groups FI and NCD have been weakened by the election, leaving the 5 Star Movement as Italy's uncontested second largest political force

-The 5 Star Movement is unlikely to join a European-wide party in the European Parliament, because doing so would damage its reputation in Italy as a party that goes beyond the left-right political divide

Abstract

The 5 Star Movement's first year in Parliament, following its landslide victory in 2013, has been marked by internal divisions both within the party as well as within the governing coalition which the movement opposes. However the governing PD has made gains in the recent European Elections, giving it a mandate to govern Italy and strengthening its domestic position vis-a-vis the 5SM. Thus the 5 Star Movement's future in Italian politics remains uncertain. In Europe, in spite of the concurrent rising tide of Euro-scepticism, the movement is unlikely to develop ties by joining European-wide parties.



In spite of this, the 5SM still had a reasonable chance to fare well at the May 2014 European Election. First of all, the movement remains, aside from the regionalist right-wing Northern League, the main voice of Euro-scepticism within Italy. Second, these elections have conventionally bolstered support for anti-establishment and opposition parties.

The 5 Star Movement claimed until election day that it had a chance to gain more MEPs than any other parties in Italy. However, this did not happen, and the 5SM had to settle for 21.2% of the vote, down by 4 percentage points compared to 2013, and a distant second from the PD's 40%. The M5S's losses were much smaller than the ones suffered by Italy's Centre-Right forces: Berlusconi's revived Forza Italia came in third at 18%, and his former allies in the NCD received only 5% of the votes.

Implications

The 5SM's performance at the European Elections was below its own expectations but shouldn't be considered as surprising, given the widely publicized internal divisions that have dominated the party's maiden tenure in Parliament. That said, the party remains a formidable electoral force, having gathered just over a fifth of total votes, and is now Italy's second largest representative force in Brussels, with 17 MEPs elected.

In Italy, the PD will be galvanized by the extent of its support, and will be determined to pass necessary reforms to reduce the country's high unemployment and revive its stagnating economy. In particular, current PM Matteo Renzi will see the performance as a personal mandate to enact these reforms. However, in order to do so, his party needs to count on the support of Angelino Alfano's newly formed NCD party, whose own poor electoral result may cast a doubt on the party's motivation to support Renzi.

The 5SM will be likely to continue to oppose Renzi regardless of the achievements of his administration. Thus, its support may rise again only if future failures by Renzi and the PD to reform Italy and maintain a stable governing coalition overshadow its own personal and political divisions. Thus, to the extent that the 5SM's rise to prominence preceding the 2013 elections has depended on the failures and lack of popularity of its rivals in power, it stands to be punished if its rivals in power maintain their current popularity.

The role to be played by the 5SM in European politics is equally uncertain. Its current success, together with that of many other Euro-sceptic forces, such as UKIP in the UK, the Front National in France, and the Folkeparti in Denmark, is a symptom of rising widespread scepticism with EU institutions. However the 5SM is a more anomalous force because it cannot be clearly classified as a radical left or a radical right-wing Euro-sceptic force.

Therefore, it is not clear what will happen when the 5SM will take its seats in Brussels. The two more markedly Euro-sceptic forces in the EU parliament are the conservative EFD (Europe of Freedom and Democracy) and the radical left NGL (Nordic Green Left) coalition. However, by joining either of these very partisan groups, the 5SM would contradict its claim to be 'neither a right, nor a left-wing party'. Thus, the most likely outcome is that the 5SM will remain unaffiliated with European-wide parties.

Author

Eric Turner

Correspondence

UNM Department of Sociology and Criminology
1915 Roma NE, Suite 1103
MSC 05 3080
Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001
USA

Email: eturne84@unm.edu

Tel.: +1(505)-277-2501

Biographical note

Eric Turner is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of New Mexico. His research interests include new political and social movements in Europe and North America, especially Occupy Wall Street, the 5 Star Movement and the anti-austerity movements in Spain, Greece and Portugal.

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comm@european-centre.org