

The Electoral Consolidation of the Five Star Movement

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Abstract

In many European countries, the success of populist formations is transforming the party system and the traditional electoral competition structure. Italy is no exception. Since the 2013 Italian general election, scholars have wondered whether the electoral successes of the Five Star Movement (FSM) marked the end of the so-called Italian Second Republic. This paper analyses the electoral performance and the transformation of the Five Star Movement on both local and national levels. First, I will briefly overview the characteristics of the FSM in relation to the main conceptual dimensions of populism. Secondly, I will examine the electoral history of the FSM from its foundation till the 2017 administrative elections round. Thirdly, I will focus on the territorial strengthening at the local level and on the geographical consolidation of the FSM electoral support. Lastly, I will briefly overview the socio-demographic profile of its voters and the evolution of its electorate.

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1 Introduction

“The mainstream media has often spoken of Pannocchia¹ in the same way they speak of our movement. Do you remember? They said that we were sexist, homophobic, demagogues, populists. They do not realise that millions of people no longer read their newspapers or watch their TVs. Trump capitalised on all this.”

- Beppe Grillo, 9 Nov. 2016 on ilblogdellestelle.it

Populist parties and formations have recently strengthened their electoral penetration everywhere in and outside the European Union. In many European countries their success is fracturing the traditional bipolar structure of the established party systems. Since populist formations are emerging as equal challengers to mainstream parties and in some countries populist movements have become the most important competitors of the traditional coalitions, the competition between social-democratic/centre-left and conservative/Christian democratic parties is undergoing a deep transformation. One of the most interesting (and curious) populist formations in Europe is the Five Star Movement (FSM). In the 2013 general election, the Movement was able to win – just after three years from its official birth – more than 25% of the vote becoming the first and the largest Italian “non-party”, as its leader – the comedian Beppe Grillo whose did not even run as a candidate – defines it.

¹Pannocchia” is an Italian word for corn, and a playful nickname for Mr Trump due to perceived visual similarities between corn silk and his hair.

Although the FSM have attracted the attention of scholars and political observers at both national and international level (Biorcio, 2013; Gualmini, 2013; De Lucia, 2012), what is interesting in the electoral affirmation of the FSM and therefore why is it important to understand the reasons of its success in the context of the European political arena? First of all, Italy has always been a fascinating case study in the context of populism studies in particular in relation to how populism evolves and works (Hine, 1993; Biorcio, 2007; Tarchi, 2014, 2015). Indeed, Italy has been one of the strongest and most enduring markets for populist parties in Western Europe² due to the existence of several favourable structural conditions for the emergence and the success of populist formations (Bobba & McDonnell, 2015; Zanatta, 2002). Secondly, the FSM is not simply an opposition (and protest) party that forcefully (and unexpectedly) shook the Italian political system. The Movement was able to seize a considerable success at both municipal and regional level while becoming a relevant competitor at the national level. Thirdly, the FSM has an almost unique profile in relation to other European populist parties. The originality of its organisational style and the eclectic mix of its policy positions differentiate the FSM from mainstream and populist parties across Europe (*vedi infra*) (Corbetta & Gualmini, 2013; Colloca & Corbetta, 2016; ?, ?). Last but not least, Grillo's movement is a peculiar and interesting case study, which has anticipated the populist wave that is shaking western democracies (Mosca, 2014; Salvati, 2016).

The main aim of this paper is to analyse the electoral consolidation of

²For instance, in the 2013 general election, altogether the populist party have reached 50% of the total votes (Bobba & McDonnell, 2015).

the FSM both at national and local level. In the first section of this paper, I analyse the main characteristics of the FSM in relation to the principal conceptual dimensions of European populism. In particular, I briefly examine the FSM profile and organisation underlining the key elements that make the FSM unique. Secondly, I review the electoral history of Grillo's movement analysing the results of the main national and local elections looking at the transformations in its organisation and strategy. Thirdly, I investigate the consolidation of the FSM at the local level using three indicators: the FSM electoral performance, the consolidation of its organisation and the use of preferential voting by its voters. Lastly, I examine the transformation of the FSM electorate in relation to the socio-demographic profile of its voters.

2 A true spaghetti exceptionalism

Why and how the FSM was able to become a pivotal political actor able to radically transform the Italian party system? Before getting into the FSM electoral history, it is worth trying to better define why the FSM is identified as a populist party and which are those characteristics that make Grillo's movement a unique type of populist formation. Although the concept of populism has become widely used and the recent success of populist parties across Europe has increased the scholarly attention towards it, a common accepted definition and conceptualisation is still lacking mostly because the

different social and political phenomena that are defined as “populist”³.

From a theoretical prospective populism has been conceptualised as an ideology, discourse, strategy, or political logic. Mudde (2004, p. 543) defines it as “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonte generale* (general will) of the people”. Alternatively, populism can be described as a communication style that function without intermediaries (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) and it is characterised by the usage of “an anti-status quo discourse that simplifies the political space by symbolically dividing society between “the people” (as the “underdogs”) and the “other” ” (Panizza, 2005, p. 3). Futhermore, populism has been conceptualised as a specific political logic that structures the entire political life assigning a binary moral dimension to political conflicts (Laclau, 2005; Hawkins, 2009). “The people” become “the possibility of any renewed and effective political project and, indeed, the very subject of the political” (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, p. 384). Populism can also be a political strategy in relation to policy choices, political organisation and form of mobilisation. It could applies to pro-redistribution policy positions especially in contrast with big economic interests (Acemoglu, Egorov, & Sonin, 2013) and it can be centred around a personalistic and charismatic leader who “seeks or exercises

³Additionally, populist formations present contrasting characteristics that in some cases are diametrical opposite or (on purpose) undefined. They often combine different ideological and cultural identities with diverse type of rhetoric, internal organisation and political programs. Some of them are relatively new (FSM, Podemos, Syriza) while others have a long political and electoral history (FN, FPÖ, AFD). For an extensive review see Gidron & Bonikowski (2013).

power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganised followers” (Weyland, 2001, p. 14). More recently, populism has been described as a political style (Moffitt, 2016) that goes beyond the purely communicative and rhetorical elements. In line with this, some authors argue that the success of populist formations relies on a diffuse sentiment of anxiety and disenchantment and on a perception of crisis, breakdown or threat (Taggart, 2004; Moffitt, 2016). This leads to the demand to act decisively and immediately breaking taboos and fight against political correctness (Mudde, 2004). Last but not least, the literature identifies two families of populism characterised by different social and economic programmatic manifesto. The “right(wing)” populism is defined by economic liberalism, fiscal equality, social and political order and tend to empathise with small and medium business and property owners, blue-collar and self-employed entrepreneurs (for an extensive review see Mudde (2013)). On the other hand, “left(wing)” populism is defined by a neo-Keynesian and redistributive approach and it is sympathetic with unemployed, temporary and insecure workers and low-income pensioners (March, 2007).

What is surprising from a theoretical point of view is that the FSM is a mixture of the various (and sometimes contrasting) conceptual dimensions above-mentioned. First, although it is difficult to ideologically classify the FSM due to its short history, its programmatic manifesto is a combination of different ideologies and its policy positions are a mixture of liberal and pro-business elements with a strong environmental, anti-capitalist and Keynesian ideas (?, ?, ?). Specifically, the Movement’s policy positions combine elements

of both sides of the GAL/TAN cleavage⁴ with a particular attention towards post-materialistic values (Salvati, 2016; ?, ?).

Secondly, although the FSM has become a pivotal political actor in the Italian political (and party) system, the Movement's rhetoric still relays on a strong anti-political (and anti-elites) message. The political dimension is simplified and reduced to a Manichaeian conflict between the power of professional politicians (and of the "caste"⁵) and the impotency of "common people" (?, ?, ?). The fight against corruption and the waste of public money and the need to enforce the citizens' participation within the political arena are offered as easy solutions for complex problems. (?, ?; Corbetta & Gualmini, 2013; Gualmini, 2013; Natale, 2014). The political message constantly swings between demagogic anti-politics manifestations and the "desire to participate, constructive criticism and demands for control and transparency" (?, ?, p. 518). The verbal radicalism (i.e. the "Fuck-Off Day") of its discourse coexists with the request of a moralisation of politics.

Lastly, the organisational structure and the political strategy of the FSM mix elements of a catch-all party with some traditional characteristics of a movement/protest party (?, ?, ?). Concerning the movement/protest nature of the FSM, the organisation of the party structure is extremely limited with an almost complete absence of a staff of paid professionals. The Movement's strategy is a combination of formal democratic competition activities and extra-institutional mobilisation, disruptive demonstrations or non-

⁴GAL/TAN refers to Green-Alternative-Libertarian/Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist. For further details please refer to Hooghe et al. (2002).

⁵A term that the FSM uses to refer to the political elite, the government, the media system or the national and international business.

violent occupation of government sites⁶. The proprietary, personal and leaderistic aspects of the party leadership coexist with a strong emphasis on the Rousseauian ideals of direct and deliberative democracy (?, ?; Colloca & Marangoni, 2013; Floridia & Vignati, 2014). In this sense, although the FSM was born as a web-based party with a strong emphasis on rank-and-files which have a pivotal role in defining the party political agenda and holding its representatives accountable, the leadership – Beppe Grillo and more recently the “Direttorio”⁷ – has always played a central role in defining the strategy of the Movement (Natale, 2014; Diamanti, 2014). In spite of this, neither the charismatic patrimonialism of Beppe grillo and the grassroots “web-democracy” are able to define a precise political agenda resulting in a volatile and often schizophrenic preference schedule. This characteristic – together with the lack of a precise ideological collocation on the left-right spectrum – is perhaps the more important “catch-all” element of the FSM. Indeed – although the FSM has remained faithful to its founding principles – it showed an incredible ability to adapt and sometimes profoundly change its internal organisation, its agenda, and its political/electoral strategy according to different electoral and political scenarios (*vedi infra*) (?, ?).

The electoral successes of the FSM are the result of the sum of the above-mentioned contradictory elements (Salvati, 2016; Colloca & Corbetta, 2016).

⁶For instance, during the discussion of the reform of the Italian Constitution the FSM parliamentary group occupied the rooftop of the Italian Parliament (“Riforma Della Costituzione, i 5 Stelle Occupano Il Tetto Della Camera per Protesta”, 2013).

⁷A directorate composed of five leading MPs (Alessandro Di Battista, Luigi Di Maio, Roberto Fico, Carla Ruocco, Carlo Sibilia) who are supposed to help Grillo in the most important political decision. It’s not clear if it is still operative since Grillo recently proclaimed himself “political head” of the Movement (Perrone, 2016).

Its profile is consistent with the description of populism as “chameleonic” (Taggart, 2004) in the sense that it can combine multiple political positions and can be attached to different political ideas (?, ?, ?). In this sense, the FSM was able to catalyse the protest, the anti-political, and the angry vote while having a variegated issues priorities and giving an alternative that goes beyond the left or right ideological orientation (Natale, 2014; ?, ?). The next section overviews the electoral history of the FSM from its birth to the 2017 municipal elections.

3 From the periphery to Rome

In order to understand the reason and the success of the FSM, it is necessary to briefly review its (electoral) history underlining the most important changes that contributed to shape its current profile. I identify five phases of the FSM evolution. The first phase (*Friends of Beppe Grillo*⁸) corresponds to the creation of a grassroots movement that precedes the official foundation of the FSM. Before contesting elections, Grillo was able to create a genuinely new movement using his shows (and later on his blog) as a sort of programmatic platform. Excluded from public television at the end of the 1980s, Gillo progressively becomes a successful comedian. His widely popular shows mixed a sharp critique toward the establishment with campaigns of mobilisation and denunciation around issues of public interest and the “common good”. From 2005 – with the creation of *beppegrillo.it* – the comedian started a more direct “political” engagement rapidly becoming a

⁸This name comes from the very first Movement’s discussion groups called “Beppe Grillo’s friends”.

successful blogger. In this initial phase, Grillo's campaigns were focussed on the defence of the environment and on the opposition to the power of multinationals and large economic and financial groups. Grillo's blog was used as a platform to gather ideas and sponsor numerous online campaigns such as *Via dall'Iraq!* (Out of Iraq!) where the President of the Italian Republic was asked to withdraw Italian troupes from Iraq and *Parlamento Pulito* (Clean Parliament), a campaign against the re-election of members of the Italian and European parliaments who had been convicted of criminal offences. Despite the political and media success of these campaigns, the reason behind the political fortune of Grillo's movement is related to its ability to gradually transform itself from an online into an "offline" phenomenon. The creation of the *MeetUp* – an web-based platform that is used to spontaneously discuss and organise participation at local (and later national) levels – and the organisation of two "Fuck Off Day" in 2007 and 2008 against politicians and journalists successfully translated the online protest into concrete political action⁹.

Until 2009, Grillo was limited to giving voice to local protests and initiatives of mobilisation "from below". The second phase (Foundation) began with the official foundation of the Five Star Movement in October 2009. Following the V-Day initiatives of 2007 and 2008, various *MeetUp(s)* started

⁹The first V-Day was organised in 179 cities in September 2007. Although it was mainly directed to "shout" "*Vaffanculo!*" (Fuck off!) to the entire political establishment, it also gathers over 450,000 signatures for three popular legislative initiatives to "clean the parliament". On the other hand, the second V-Day – organised on 25 April 2008 in over 400 Italian public squares – was more focus on translating the protest into concrete political action. Grillo collected over 1.3 million signatures for three referendums, to abolish public funding of the press, the journalists' guild, and the so-called Testo Unico Gasparri concerning media regulation.

Table 1: The evolution of the FSM

N	Phases	Years
1	<i>Friends of Beppe Grillo</i>	2005 – 2009
2	Foundation	2009 – 2012
3	Institutionalisation	2012 – 2013
4	Stall	2013 – 2014
5	Normalisation	2014 –

to spontaneously organise bottom-up, locally based political initiatives presenting themselves as an alternative to traditional parties. The strength and the rapid growth of the *MeetUp(s)* are related to the fact that they were regrouping a myriad of individuals and political groups, for the most part, pre-existing Grillo’s initiative or somehow related to the comedian’s previous campaigns. Some of these groups decided to compete for the municipal election with the goal of transforming the local institutions into “5 Star Cities”¹⁰. This first attempt was followed by the support expressed directly by Grillo for two independent candidates – Luigi De Magistris and Sonia Alfano – in the 2009 European Election¹¹ after the decision of the Movement not to run (“Grillo Contro Tutti, Show Al Senato Agli Atti ‘Psiconano’ e ‘Zoccole’”, 2009). The poor electoral performances of these initiatives and the refusal by the Democratic Party¹² (“Grillo Candidato Alla Segreteria Del

¹⁰These groups were running under the label “Lista civica Beppegrillo.it”, an evolution of the previous formation “Friends of Beppe Grillo”. They were almost completely independent from the leadership of the Movement and the role of Grillo and his staff was limited to “certify” the list that wanted to participate in the competition. They barely reached 3% of the vote.

¹¹The candidates were linked to the lists of Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values, IDV), the party led by Antonio Di Pietro, the former magistrate who had played a leading role in the “Clean Hands” inquiry in the early 90s.

¹²The Democratic Party is the most important left-wing political formation in Italy)

Pd”, 2009) to allow Grillo to participate in the 2009 primaries lead to the foundation of a national-level entity (Biorcio, 2014). Initially, the Five Star Movement was created with the aim of encouraging the development of new forms of participatory democracy and to give “to all citizens the governing and policy-making role normally restricted to a few” (Biorcio, 2014; Corbetta & Gualmini, 2013; Colloca & Marangoni, 2013). While in its “non-statute” the FSM defines itself as a “non-party”, the program of the Movement was detailed in 120 points along with the conditions to becoming a member of it. The Movement’s adherents must not be members of any other party, while those aspiring to be candidates for public office must not have been convicted of any criminal offence. Although not extraordinary, in the 2010 regional elections the FSM was able to win almost half a million votes, with significant results in Emilia-Romagna (7%) and Piedmont (5%).

The third phase (Institutionalisation) starts with the first important electoral success of the FSM that took place in the 2012 local elections when it won 8.7% of the votes in the 101 municipalities where it was present. Compared with the regional elections in 2010, the Movement doubled its electoral support: in the 43 superior municipalities (> 15,000 inhabitants) where it was present in both elections, the FSM support rose from less than 4% to over 10% reaching double figures in 31 of them (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013). The FSM candidates obtained good results in the northern and central regions electing more than 150 representatives in the local councils and four mayors. In Veneto and Emilia-Romagna, it reached almost 20 % of the

vote and won two important cities, Mira and Comacchio¹³. But what was especially responsible for the affirmation of the Movement in the national arena was the election of its first mayor in the important city of Parma in Emilia-Romagna region. The victory of Parma portrayed the FSM as a realistic alternative to the two main coalitions and as an efficient vehicle for the expression of political resentment, disaffection and protest. The excellent result of the 2012 electoral round and the growing media attention towards this new political formation resulted in an increase in the national-level voting intention polls that rose from from 4% to over 15% (“Supermedia e Storico Dei Sondaggi Politici Elettorali”, 2017). The regional election held in October in Sicily – where the Movement reached 15% of the total voters – confirmed the ability of the FSM to attract considerable support. The reasons behind this initial success are mostly related to the difficult economic and political Italian situation. Indeed, the Movement began to capitalise on the disaffection toward the technocratic government of Mario Monti¹⁴ created to manage the 2008 international economic and financial crisis and supported by the main Italian parties¹⁵ (Giannetti, 2013; Pinelli, 2012). This – together with the discovery of a corrupt systems of power that led to the resignation of centre-right regional presidents of Lazio and Lombardy (“Da Formigoni a Polverini e Vasco Errani: Quando i Governatori Finiscono Nel Mirino Della Magistratura”, 2012) – fostered the resentment towards the traditional parties,

¹³Additionally, with 14% it was the third party in Genoa – the Liguria’s regional capital – coming close to participating in the run-off election.

¹⁴Mario Monti became Prime Minister after Berlusconi’s resignation, creating a technocratic cabinet composed entirely of unelected professionals.

¹⁵With the notable exception of the North League

one of the most important element that contributed to the success of the Movement in the subsequent general elections.

The most relevant and unexpected result was reached during the 2013 general elections when the FSM obtained slightly less than 9 million votes for the Lower Chamber (25.6%) and 7.4 million for the Senate (23.6%) becoming the most-voted party¹⁶. The result is astonishing considering that just before the 2013 elections, in most of the public opinion surveys, the FSM was around 16%. As pointed out by Tronconi (? , p. 13), this impressive result makes the FSM “by far the most successful party in the history of post-war western European democracy” and formally started the phase of tri-polarization of the Italian political system. Again, the reasons behind the success of the FSM are many and are mostly related to the complex Italian situation that followed the 2008 financial crisis. Firstly, the Movement was able to capitalise on the disaffection generated by the deep socio-economic crisis. Secondly, Grillo rode the wave of anti-political sentiments that followed the fall of the Berlusconi government at the end of 2011 and the formation of the technocratic grand coalition government led by Mario Monti (Ceccarini, Diamanti, & Lazar, 2012). Thirdly, one of the most important characteristic of the FSM campaign – partially but not only in response to technocratic nature of the Monti Government – was its strong criticism towards the political establishment and the traditional parties, accused – inter alia – of having “stolen” voters of the popular sovereignty. This anti-political and anti-establishment aspect was perfectly reflected in the attitudes of FSM

¹⁶To be sure, if the votes from Italian citizens living abroad are included, the FSM is surpassed by the centre-left Democratic Party.

supporters who had the lowest levels of confidence in political parties and in the institutions of the political system (Biorcio, 2014). Lastly, thanks to its rhetoric, candidate profiles, and issues priorities, the FSM was able to attract support from voters who were extremely heterogeneous in terms of ideological and political backgrounds (*vedi infra*) (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013; Natale, 2014; D’Alimonte, 2013).

In the subsequent local council elections of May 2013, the FSM was unable to replicate the success achieved in the general elections. This started a phase of electoral difficulties for Grillo’s movement that I called “Stall”. Although comparing the results of local and general elections presents consistent methodological problems¹⁷, a great number of columnist and newspapers described this electoral round as a “debacle” or an “almost total defeat” for the FSM (?). Indeed, although the Movement slightly increased its votes compared to the 2012 municipal elections, it lost more than half of the voters obtained the previous general election falling at 11% of the total votes in the 186 municipalities where it was present. The 2014 European elections confirmed the declining support for the FSM and underlined the presence of an extremely volatile electorate (Paparo & Cataldi, 2014). The Movement’s electoral support went down to 21.2% losing 4.4 percentage points compared with the 2013 general elections. Even if the outcome confirmed

¹⁷The relevance, the number of voters and the voting behaviour between first and second order elections and especially between general and local elections are markedly different.

the Movement's remarkable electoral weight¹⁸, the electoral results fell short of the Movement's expectations, especially with respect to success achieved by the Democratic Party which obtained 40.08% of the total vote (? , ?). The impossibility of replicating the result of the 2013 general election is not only related to the surprising success of the Democratic Party of Matteo Renzi but rather to the absence of sufficient geographical anchoring and of an homogeneous electoral support (? , ?). The results achieved by the Movement ranged from 8.8% in the province of Bolzano (Trentino) to 34% in the province of Carbonia-iglesias (Sardinia). This trend is confirmed by the regional elections held at the end of 2014 in Emilia-Romagna and Calabria. In Emilia-Romagna, the Movement won 13%, almost double of the previous 2010 regional elections (7%) but a significant loss compared to 19% of the European elections. The worst result was achieved in Calabria where the FSM candidate was not able to win more than 5% with a consistent decrease from the 22% of the European election and the 25% of the 2013 general election (? , ?).

The failure to achieve the desiderated results marked a turn in the strategy and in the organisation of the Five Star Movement that fastened the process of normalisation started after the 2013 general election. After the European election, Grillo started to put aside the strategy of self-imposed

¹⁸To be sure, the FSM was the first populist formation in term of absolute votes (5,792,865) and the second most voted party in 84 out of 110 provinces (Paparo & Cataldi, 2014). Additionally – although the 2014 European elections were seen as a defeat even by Grillo himself (“Grillo, Amarezza e Ironia: «Sconfitti? Siamo Lì... Ma Mi Prendo Un Maalox»”, 2014) – the support obtained by the FSM (21.2%) is a totally legitimate result for a political formation that only one year previously had made its first *entrée* in the national area.

isolation that was centred on no agreements with other political forces. This took place at both the European and national levels. For instance, concerning the EU, Grillo flew to Brussels to meet the leader of the UKIP, Nigel Farage, in order to create a new Eurosceptic group inside the European Parliament. Although the meeting resulted in the decision of the FSM to simply join the Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD)¹⁹, this underlines a change in the Movement's strategy now aimed in "find an agreement [with the UKIP] and bring the direct democracy in Europe" ("Altro Che Caporetto, M5S è Opposizione", 2014). Concerning the national level, after admitting the victory of the Democratic Party in the European election ("Grillo, Amarezza e Ironia: «Sconfitti? Siamo Lì... Ma Mi Prendo Un Maalox»", 2014), the FSM agreed to have a meeting with the Democratic Party to discuss the electoral reform on the basis of a legislative proposal approved by FSM members through an online vote ("Legge Elettorale, Grillo a Renzi: "Noi Facciamo Sul Serio. Ecco Il Democratellum"", 2014). But the most important indicator of the normalisation (and transformation) of the FSM is the change in its leadership structure. In the autumn of 2014, Beppe Grillo partially stepped back from the party leadership creating a hierarchical *Direttorio* (Directorate) that has to meet him on a regular basis. Although Grillo continues to be influential in defining the strategy of the Movement, the Directorate is perhaps the most

¹⁹On 12 June 2014, the FSM – after having been rejected by the Greens/EFA and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe – asked its activists to vote in an online referendum which group of the European Parliament to join. Although the low turnout, 78% of the participating activists voted for the EFD ("Alleanze in Europa, Il M5S Sceglie l'Ukip Di Farage. Ma La Base Accusa: Votazione Pilotata", 2014). As a consequence of this, on 18 June 2014 the EFD group was reformed, the group name was changed to Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), and David Borrelli of the Five Star Movement was chosen as new group's vice-president (Pisanò, 2014).

significant indicator of the change in the organisation and in the structure of the FSM. Another signal of the normalisation of the FSM is the redefinition of its media strategy. Grillo allowed candidates and representatives to appear on television and during the electoral campaign for the regional and local elections of May 2015 and – for the first time – Grillo decided not to make an appearance, leaving most public events in the hands of FSM parliamentarians (?). Concerning the party’s organisational structure, the FSM created of *Rousseau*²⁰, an evolved version of the platform *movimento5stelle.it* that allows representatives, elected and ordinary members to interact with one another and discuss, approve or reject legislative proposals submitted then in the Parliament by the FSM parlamentar group. This strategy proved to be successful. In the regional elections, the FSM won 16.6% of the total votes in the seven regions where voting took place²¹. Although the FSM was unable to win the majority in any regional council, this electoral round was an important indicator of the consolidation of the FSM that become the second party in Umbria and Marche and the third in the other regions.

In the 2016 municipal elections²², the FSM won 18.5%, a significant increase compared to the 2015 regional elections especially considering that the FSM elected (at the run-off elections) the mayors of two of the most important (politically and demographically) Italian cities, Turin and Rome.

²⁰*Rousseau* is defined as the “operating system” of the Movement and it’s designed to attract new activists (one million by the end of 2018) and to “achieve the direct democracy” (Toniutti, 2017)

²¹The 2015 regional election were extremely relevant since they are representative of the entire Italian peninsula (Paparo, 2015). The vote took place in Veneto, Liguria, Toscana, Umbria, Marche, Campania, Puglia.

²²They were held 5 June 2016 in 1363 municipalities.

This is the best result achieved by the FSM in a local election round and it proves the success of a new political strategy aimed at transforming the FSM into a potential governing actor. Surprising, in the 2017 mayoral electoral round²³, the Movement was able to secure only 7,8% of the vote, the lowest result achieved since 2012. The enormous difference between this result and the 28% registered in the national-level voting intention polls (“Supermedia e Storico Dei Sondaggi Politici Elettorali”, 2017) confirms – once again – the peculiar nature of the FSM. Indeed, although the Movement was able to get to the run-off election only in 9% of the superior municipalities where it was present²⁴, it won eight out of ten run-off elections confirming its electoral strength and ability to attract an incredibly heterogeneous electorate. Compared with other parties and coalitions, the FSM was the most competitive party in run-off ballots. The Democratic Party was able to win approximately 40% of the run-off elections while the right-wing coalition won approximately 55% of the contested municipalities (Valbruzzi & Gentilini, 2017). Furthermore, the 2017 electoral round shows a considerable advancement compared to the 2012 when the FSM was able to win only 2 municipalities (Parma e Mira).

4 The territorial consolidation

Although the previous section outlined the evolution of the FSM in terms of electoral support, evaluating the strength and the consolidation of the FSM just taking into account its electoral performances could be misleading. First

²³The elections were held 11 June 2017 in 1004 municipalities.

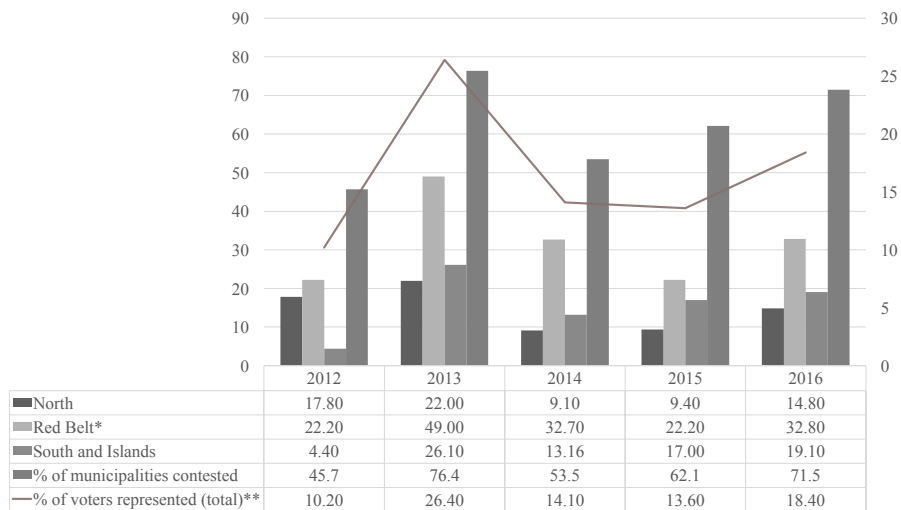
²⁴The FSM was able to reach the run-off election in 10 out of 159 superior municipalities.

of all, the Movement is relatively young and thus – even if we compare two subsequent elections – we lack a reliable touchstone that allows us to draw an accurate comparison. For instance, comparing the electoral performance of the FSM in the last 2017 administrative elections with the previous one held in the same municipalities five years before has little or no sense because in 2012 the Movement was present only in a small number of municipalities and was unknown by the majority of the voters. Secondly – as said before – comparing different types of elections is methodologically inappropriate. For instance, municipal elections are fought on a completely different battleground compared with general or European elections. Thirdly, there is a tendency to use as benchmark the results obtained by the FSM in the 2013 general elections when it reached its higher result. As said before, the 2013 election presented several peculiar conditions that allowed the FSM to win “by too much”, attracting the protest votes of a considerable number of citizens that momentary “lent” their vote to the Movement.

To partially overcome this problem, I decided to include in my analysis a focus on the local dimension to better examine the evolution and the electoral consolidation of the FSM²⁵. First, I consider the degree to which the FSM has participated in municipal elections using the ratio between the number of the municipalities where the FSM participated in the elections and the total number of the municipalities where the vote took place. This allows me to measure (1) the presence of local organisations and their ability to organise an electoral campaign and (2) the strength of the FSM’s political and

²⁵I partially rely on the data and the methods detailed in Vignati (2016).

Figure 1: Number of municipalities contested by the FSM and their demographic weight (%)



Source: Adapted from Vignati (2016). *Notes:* *This geopolitical area is also called “Middle Italy”, “Red Heart” since it is politically orientated toward the left. ** total number of voters of the municipalities where the FSM was present.

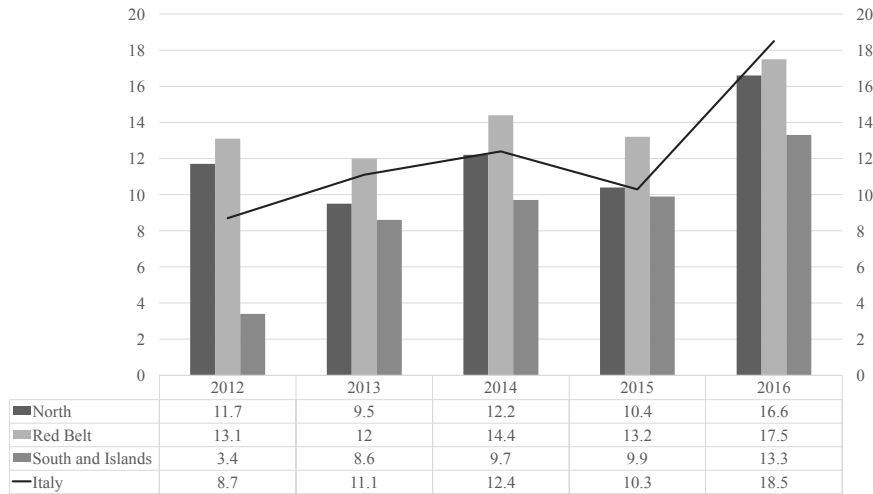
social network and its consolidation over time. In spite of this, using just the number of municipalities contested by FSM is not methodologically accurate since it is a comparison between different types municipalities across different elections. To partially mitigate this problem, I also examine the size of the municipality to assess the demographic weight of each election round using the ratio between the number of voters in the municipalities where the FSM was present and the total number of voters in all the municipalities where the vote took place²⁶. Together with this, I analyse the electoral performance of the Movement at local level using the percentage of valid votes for the municipalities in which the FSM was present at each electoral round²⁷. Lastly, I analyse how FSM supporters use the preferential voting. The decision to aggregate the data per geopolitical area is motivated by the relevance of the geographical context in explaining vote choice (?, ?, ?). These areas incorporate homogenous cultural, political and economic traditions and are a good proxy for various elements such as economic development, social capital, civic and political subculture, clientelism and they reflect the profound inhomogeneity of the Italian peninsula.

The first two indices (Figure 1) show how the FSM had increased its organisational and network capacity since 2012, the first time when it was consistently present in a local competition. The territorial consolidation of Grillo's movement steady growth through the considered period with a peak in 2013. This could be explained by the fact that the unexpected success

²⁶This indicator is heavily influenced by how many metropolitan cities (which are densely populated) go to vote in each electoral rounds. For instance, in 2016, the presence of four of the biggest Italian cities (Rome, Milan, Naples and Turin) greatly impacts the index.

²⁷These data are detailed and extensively discussed in the previous section of this paper.

Figure 2: Electoral performance of FSM in administrative elections (2012 - 2016, %)



Source: Author's own elaboration on Ministry of Interior data (Eligendo).

in the general election and the increasing media attention over-boosted the consolidation on the next round of the administrative elections when the FSM was able to contest 76% of the municipalities where the vote took place and obtained 12,4% of the total vote (Figure 2). The subsequent period of difficulty that followed the 2014 European elections provoked a significant decrease in the FSM electoral support that went down to 10.3%²⁸. In spite of this, the number of municipalities contested at the local level increased from 54% to 62%. The strategy adopted by the FSM after the 2014 European election to regain visibility and consensus (*vedi supra*) has been proven to be effective, leading the FSM to contest 71% of the total municipalities (a

²⁸This trend is also confirmed by a considerable decrease in the average support at the national level as reported by public opinion surveys (“Supermedia e Storico Dei Sondaggi Politici Elettorali”, 2017)

figure very close to the 2013 one) and to reach 18.5% of the total vote in the 2016 round, by far the best result achieved by the Movement in a municipal electoral round.

The geographical aggregation of the data underlines how at the beginning the FSM was stronger in term of geographical consolidation (Figure 1) and electoral performance (Figure 2) in Northern and Central part of Italy, especially in Veneto and Emilia-Romagna regions. Since the success of the 2013 general election, the FSM started a process of “southernization” that is still going on. The percentage of southern municipalities contested by the FSM (Figure 1) rose from 4.4% in 2012 to 19.1% in 2016 making the the Movement the first party in the South per number of contested municipalities (Fruncillo, 2016)²⁹. Since the 2013 administrative round³⁰ the percentage of municipalities contested in the South is always bigger compared to the percentage in the North. The FSM electoral performances follow the same trend: the votes obtained by Grillo’s movement in the South constantly rose from 3.4% in 2012 to 13.3% in 2016. Specifically, in the 2016 round the Movement has grown in all southern regions becoming a competitive and pivotal actor able to win 12 municipalities and ranking second as most voted party³¹.

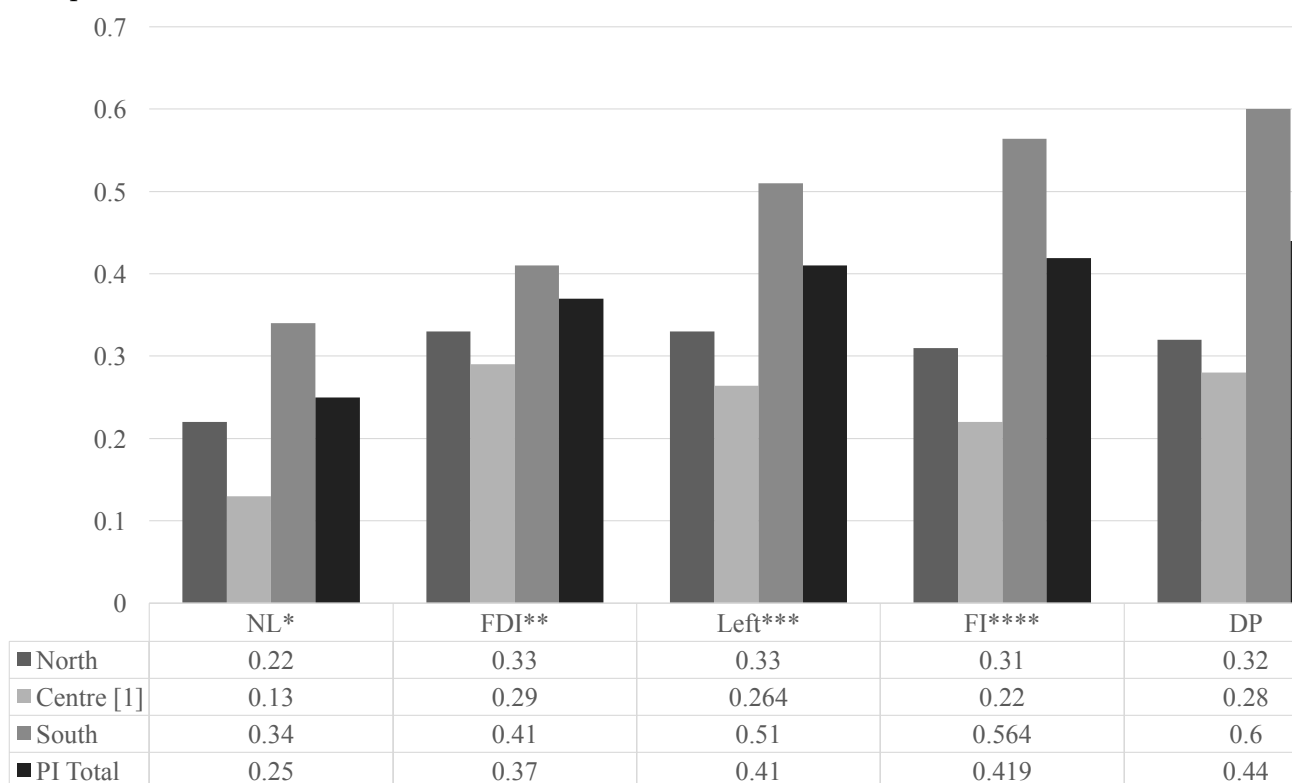
In spite of this, the performance of the FSM remain higher in the re-

²⁹The FSM is followed by the Democratic Party (13%) and Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (7,3%) (Fruncillo, 2016).

³⁰In the 2013 administrative round, the FSM contested 26.10% confirming the performance over-boost produced by the 2013 general election

³¹To be sure, in the most populous municipalities (> 15.000 inhabitants) the Democratic Party is just one percentage point above the FSM with 14.3%.

Figure 3: Preferential vote index (PI) in 2016 in the 24 superior municipalities¹



Source: Author's own elaboration on Ministry of Interior data (Eligendo) *Notes:* ¹ The so-called "superior" municipalities are the most populous one and they have important political and administrative functions. [1] The different geopolitical areas aggregation is motivated by the fact that was impossible to aggregate per "Red Belt" due to the low number of municipalities in the data set. *NL: Northern League ** FDI: Fratelli d'Italia (nationalist-right) ***Left: aggregation of left lists excluding the Democratic Party (DP) **** FI: Berlusconi's Forza Italia (centre right)

gions of the North and in the so-called “Red Belt”³². This could be related to the peculiar voting behaviour that characterises the South that is more influenced by clientelistic network and patronage, elements that are probably missing in the FSM due to its relatively young age. Furthermore, at the local level the vote is more “personal” and it requires candidates who are locally visible and able to persuade the voters that they will be reliable local administrators. In this regard, it is interesting to assess how “personal” is the FSM vote using a preferential vote index. The index is the ratio between the number of preferential votes obtained by the candidates and the total number of expressible preferences. In the case of the 2016 elections, the expressible preferences are equal to twice the valid votes due to the presence of the double gender preferential voting³³. The higher the index, the greater is the personalisation of the vote. Although the FSM is one of the political force that is favourable to the introduction of the preferential vote at national level³⁴ (Giannulli, 2014), its electorate is the one who uses less this option (Figure 3). In the 2016 administrative round, only 25% of FSM voters expressed (at least) one preference. Moreover, in the South the usage of preferential voting by FSM supporters is just above the North League one, a regionalist party with little support and practically no organisation in the

³²The incredible performance and consolidation of the Movement in the “Red Belt” could be related to the fact that initially Grillo’s followers were mainly former centre-left voters who chose for the Movement to “give a signal” to the Democratic Party and to express their desire to a more inclusive participation. This could have helped the movement to create a better organisation and create a less volatile electoral base (Florida, 2016).

³³This gender equality mechanism has been introduced in 2012 with the law n. 215. The voters can express two preferential votes for two candidates of the opposite gender. If the voters do not respect the gender equality the second preferential vote is invalid.

³⁴At the moment of the writing of this article the electoral law at national level does not include any type of preferential voting.

Souther regions. In this sense, FSM local candidates seem to be less able to build strong personal (and/or clientelistic) networks that could make the difference in local (and regional) elections.

Although the territorial distribution of the FSM support is becoming more homogeneous across all the Italian peninsula, it is still unclear why at the local level the Movement is generally the third pole of the competition and its growth is slower and more gradual compared to its growth at the national level. As said before, this phenomena could be explained by the peculiar nature of the local elections and consequently by the different mechanisms to obtain and manage consensus. One of the most important factors concerns the very nature of the mayoral elections where the voting choice is less ideological and more related to local dynamics. Additionally, the FSM electorate is highly heterogeneous (*vedi infra*) without “unifying ideological principles and sociological vote-stabilisers” (? , ?, p. 514). These elements could advantage the Movement at the national level (and in the run-off elections) but could be a weakness in the first-round of municipal elections where it is necessary to take a clear stand with regards to local and territorial issues.

5 The socio-demographic profile of the FSM voters

The transformation of the FSM above discussed reflects a change in the socio-demographic profile of its supporters. As pointed out by several authors (? , ?; Natale, 2014; Passarelli & Tuorto, 2016), between 2012 and 2013 the FSM electoral base changed due to the beginning of a phase of institutionalisation and normalisation. In the period before the 2012 municipal elections, almost

Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics of FSM voters (% on the total electorate)

	2013	2015	Variation 13-15
Gender			
Male	28,00	32,80	4,8
Female	22,90	20,80	-2,1
Age			
18-29	31,60	34,10	2,5
30-44	36,20	35,80	-0,4
45-54	30,60	28,60	-2
55-64	25,30	27,80	2,5
65 and over	9,00	11,70	2,7
Education			
Primary School or lower	15,50	14,40	-1,1
Secondary school	28,30	28,20	-0,1
High School/University degree	25,90	19,90	-6
Socio-Economic Condition			
Blue-collars	38,40	33,40	-5
White-collars	27,20	30,30	3,1
Craftsman, artisans, entrepreneurs	44,30	38,80	-5,5
Self-employed professionals	32,40	36,00	3,6
Students	27,80	36,00	8,2
Housewives/Househusbands	24,40	22,70	-1,7
Unemployed	40,00	34,80	-5,2
Pensioners	11,80	15,30	3,5

Source: Adapted from Ceccarini & Bordignon (?). *Notes:* The 2011 data are not reported in the table since they are aggregate per 100 FSM voters and not per categories. For further details please refer to Bordignon & Ceccarini (?) and Natale (2014)

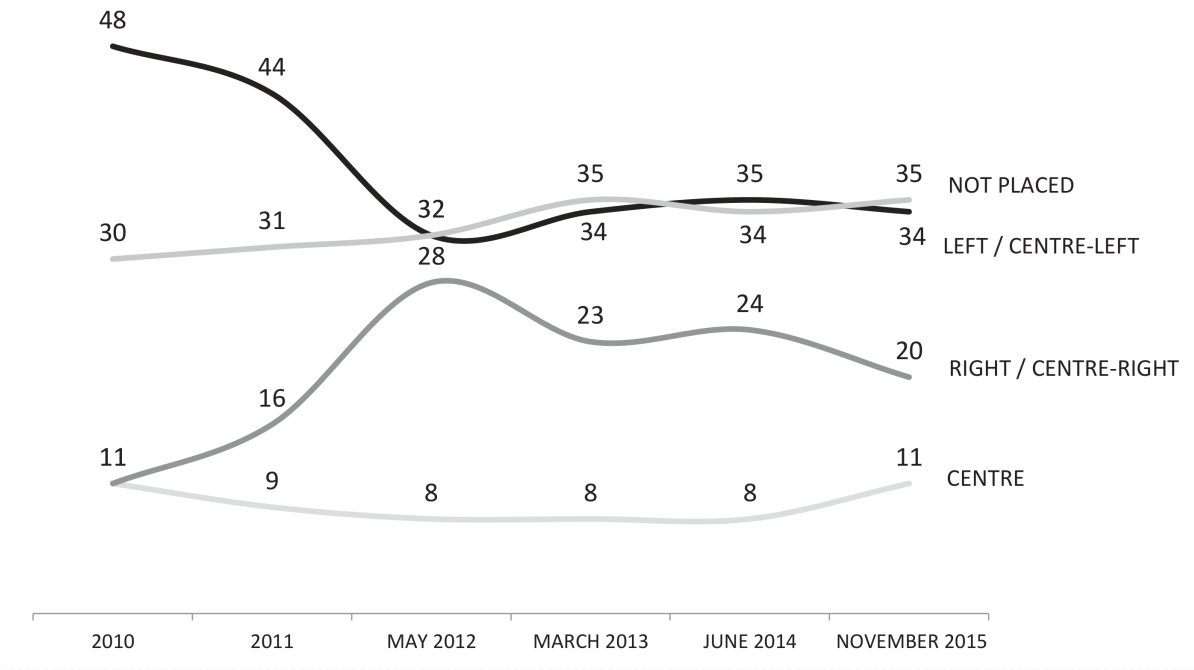
50% of the FSM supporters were left-wing or centre-left voters while only 10% identified themselves as rightwing. This peculiar ideological profile is confirmed by the analysis of the vote flow in the 2011 municipal election of Milan where the centre-left candidate, Giuliano Pisapia, was able to win about the 60% of Grillo's votes (De Sio, 2011). In this initial phase, the FSM electorate was composed of young people with high levels of education, disappointed by the traditional parties, with a background in local and social initiative and with a strong interest in those issues that characterised the initial phase of the Movement (internet, environmental protection, ethical consumerism, and generic leftist issues) (?; Natale, 2014; ?). The first sign of transformation in the Grillo's electorate can be seen in the 2012 municipal round. Left-wing and centre-left voters decreased from around 50% to one-third while right and centre-right increased from 10-15% to 28% creating a perfectly balanced profile. In this sense, the Movement stopped to be chosen almost exclusively by left-wing voters and it became a political formation able to attract the support of those disappointed with the centre right, especially ex-Berlusconi and ex-North League voters. Additionally, its rhetoric became more cutting against the political establishment helping the Movement to become a collector of dissatisfaction rather than an eco-leftist formation. The victory of Pizzarotti in Parma in the 2012 municipal elections confirms this trend. More than 50% of voters that supported the FSM candidate in the run-off election came from the centre-right and one-third came from those who had previously abstained or voted for the first time (Cataldi, 2012).

The exceptional results of the 2013 general elections were achieved thanks

to a consistent enlargement of the FSM vote base that started to being much closer to the median voter. This change led to a peculiar party profile that had come to be defined as a “catch-all anti-party” party (?, ?, ?). Although the FMS electorate was still skewed towards male and young voters with a low level of religious attachment, medium to high levels of education, and high levels of employment, the Movement gained the support of those social classes among which it had initially been weaker. It became the largest party among entrepreneurs and self-employed (44%), white (27%) and blue (38%) collar workers, students (28%) and unemployed (40%). Concerning the ideological outlook of the FSM electorate, it remains similar to 2012 with a slight decrease of right-wing and centre-right voters (23%) and an increase in centre-left (34%) and in voters who did not place themselves on the left-right spectrum (35%). The analysis of the vote flows between 2008 and 2013 general elections further confirms this trend. Approximately 40% of the votes came from the right-wing block with a high number of swing voters in the “Red Belt” (47%) and in the South (51%). The swing from left-wing parties to FSM – although more uniform – was slightly higher reaching 46% (Russo, Riera, & Verthé, 2017).

According to the last data available (?, ?) the voting base of the Movement shows stabilisation both in terms of ideological outlook and social-demographic profile. Although the FSM enlarged its support among males (5%), the young (2.5%), students (8%), self-employed professionals (3.6%), pensioners (3.5%), and white-collar (3.1%), these changes are not significant as in 2012 (Table 2). Additionally, the Movement’s electoral base continues to show considerable ideological pluralism with a slight decrease of right-

Figure 4: Ideological self placement of the FSM electorate (2010 - 2015)



Source: Ceccarini & Bordignon (?), Demos&Pi survey.

wing voters (20%) and a slight increase of those who describe themselves as “centrist” (11%).

6 Conclusions

As said before, the young age of the FSM, its peculiar political profile and its continuous evolution make extremely complex to analyse the reasons behind its electoral success. In spite of this, the data detailed above show how the Movement has been able to adapt its strategy and its message to a phase of profound political and social transformation. After the 2013 general election, the FSM started to profoundly change its message, internal organisation and leadership structure. The normalisation and the stabilisation of the FSM were natural consequences of the 2013 general elections when it was able to enlarge its electoral base intercepting voters from different social and ideological backgrounds. In this sense, the FSM is able to gather a consistent cross-party support going beyond the cultural, political, territorial and class-based cleavages of the First and the Second Italian Republic. After the crisis that followed the 2014 European election, the FSM fastened this transformation: it increased its presence on televisions and talk shows and became more open to discuss with others political forces. Although the FSM electoral base remains extremely heterogeneous without unifying ideological principles except for a strong anti-elitist and anti-system attitudes (Biorcio, 2014), its peculiar catch-all (anti-)party profile blends together both post-materialistic, environmental and new left values with anti-European, anti-Euro, right-wing and (sometimes) xenophobic positions. In the last two years, the FSM revised some of its founding principles becoming more hierarchical (the Directorate)

and abandoning its initial intransigence towards the institutions. This change reflects a new political and electoral strategy at both national and local level that suggests the intention of the Movement to become a legitimised competitor in the next general elections and not just an opposition party or a protest movement. The last two administrative election rounds clearly show that the Movement has become more directed towards winning rather than only collecting protest votes. The cases of Milan³⁵, Turin and Rome confirm this intention.

The success of the FSM has proved that Italy is – once again – a political laboratory in which populism has been the driving force of a rapid and unexpected transformation. In spite of this, evaluating the growth of the FSM as a results of the economic crisis or of the rising support for populist formation across Europe is misleading. The FSM electoral consolidation – both at national and local level – is related to specific country-related peculiarities. Indeed, the Italian political system remains an exception in Europe showing a strong and enduring support for populist formations (Bobba & McDonnell, 2015; ?, ?), low level of trust in politics and institutions (Diamanti, 2016), comparatively high levels of public dissensus on social and economic values (Bartels, 2013, p.50), and high electoral volatility (Chiaramonte & Emanuele, 2015). Moreover, the growing conflict within the traditional party coalitions (both left and right), their tendency to split into smaller political formations

³⁵Although the Movement did not make an explicit agreement with the centre-right candidate, some of its exponents support the centre-right candidate at the run-off ballot in order to avoid another five years of centre-left municipal government. This scenario is confirmed by the analysis of the vote flows between the first and the second round (electoral fluxes) (“Ballottaggio, per Sala l’incubo 5 Stelle: Molti Potrebbero Votare per Parisi”, 2016; Paparo, 2016; D’Alimonte, 2016).

and the lack of a serious political agenda, make the traditional parties unable to “absorb” the votes drained by the FSM. Although this work needs to be intended as an overview of the various studies conducted on the electoral and territorial consolidation of the FSM, further analysis and research are needed to better understand the composition of the FSM electorate, the differences between the various FSM territorial organisations, the profile (issues and traits) of the FSM candidates, and the underlining psychological attitudes of its electorate.

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