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Beppe Grillo and the Rise of the Five Stars Movement: An Examination of M5S in the Context of Italian Populism

A Thesis in Political Science

by

Mariel Hooper

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Abstract

While many scholars hesitate to classify Beppe Grillo's Five Stars Movement, it shares many characteristics with populist radical rightwing parties and can be defined as a populist party. Examining the party through the lens of populist literature rather than according to the media conception of M5S as a unique leftist youth-driven product of the Internet allows for commonalities to be found between M5S and Italy's older populist radical rightwing party, *Lega Nord*. While the circumstances of their rise differed in many ways, both rose to prominence at a time in which deep flaws in the country's party system and corruption among the political class weakened political efficacy among voters. An examination of the popular explanations of populist electoral success and a historical comparison with the rise of *Lega Nord* suggests that while Euroscepticism and rising unemployment may have influenced the magnitude of M5S's success, declining political efficacy, as brought about by the institutional design of the Italian political system, political convergence among mainstream parties, and political corruption, was a common feature of both *Lega Nord*'s and M5S's rise to prominence.

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Introduction: A New Political Phenomenon?

Populist radical right parties (PRRPs) have been cropping up around Western Europe in increasing numbers since the late 1970s to the increasing alarm of mainstream politicians and academics. They are the most widely studied party type today and the most successful new party type since World War II (Mudde 2013, 2). Writing twenty years ago, Betz (1994, 3) called them "the potentially most dynamic, and disruptive, political phenomenon of the 1990s." Their influence has only grown since. By 2001 most Western European countries had radical right wing parties and, in Italy, the PRRP *Lega Nord* had won up to 20% of Italy's northern vote and 10% of its national vote and has entered the government several times (Zaslove 2003). However, the electoral gains of *Lega Nord* and populist parties all over Western Europe have been rivaled by the meteoric rise of *il MoVimento Cinque Stelle* ("the Five Stars Movement" or M5S), a partially internet-based populist "movement" cofounded by political satirist/former television star Beppe Grillo and Internet entrepreneur Gianroberto Casaleggio which took 25% of the vote in the February 2013 elections in Italy.

At first glance, Beppe Grillo's "movement" bears little resemblance to the PRRPs that have arisen over the last three decades. M5S began as a group of mostly young, educated leftists attending Grillo's rallies before the party was officially launched via blog post. Its supporters lack the xenophobia that has defined most PRRPs. Its inclusiveness and bottom-up agenda-setting via informal "meet-ups" and policy polls, organized over the party's website, beppegrillo.it, seem to be in direct opposition to the authoritarian elements of PRRPs. According to the narrative of the party's leaders and

supporters, M5S is a radically democratic entity using the Internet to transform the people's power to hold their political leaders accountable. The mainstream press and even some scholars have bought into this narrative, reporting on M5S as an entirely new, unclassifiable manifestation of the public's outrage at rising unemployment levels and austerity measures in Italy after the economic crisis of 2008.

The limited scholarship available on M5S avoids classifying the phenomenon. To the extent that scholars do attempt to categorize M5S, they shunt it into a nebulous category such as "dysfunctional party" (Bartlett et al. 2013, 14) that offers little academic framework for study. Other scholars simply allow M5S's self-classification as a movement to stand (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013). Diamanti (2014, 1) outright denies the possibility of classifying M5S, saying that "the most that can be obtained are 'suggestions' and 'hints' rather than hard and fast 'definitions.'" This hesitation to place M5S within larger political trends is a mistake, for it limits the understanding of M5S and its success as well as the application of scholarship on M5S to populist voting in Western Europe generally. It is my contention that M5S shares more features with the PRRPs that have been studied with so much alarm over the past few decades than with amorphous, leaderless, social media-driven movements such as Occupy Wall Street and that to ignore M5S's organizational structure as a populist party isolates the party from the wealth of literature on PRRPs and is detrimental to an understanding of the political actor's popularity.

This thesis seeks to accomplish two tasks: first, to dig beneath the dominant narrative of M5S as a transformational new political phenomenon and examine how it fits

into the pattern of PRRPs as well as when it deviates, and second, to explore the variables in M5S's electoral success within the context of PRRP voting generally and within Italy's history of protest and populist voting. By weighing the influence of variables commonly attributed to PRRP success on M5S's victory – anti-immigrant sentiment, economic factors such as high unemployment and the 2008 recession, Euroscepticism, and political inefficacy resulting from high levels of corruption and an indecisive and unresponsive political system – understandings of M5S's success and PRRP success generally can be augmented. Given M5S's profile and Italy's previous experience with populist and protest voting, it is my expectation that while economic factors will certainly have contributed to the immensity of M5S's electoral gains in 2013, political frustrations represent a much larger factor motivating populist voting. The third and final part of my thesis will expand on both of these points by exploring the history of populist voting in Italy, examining in particular the similarity between the rise of M5S in 2013 and the rise of *Lega Nord*, Italy's other populist party, in the early 1990s. Both parties emerged at a time of political turmoil, when corruption scandals and a failing party system weakened the public's faith in the ability of Italy's democracy to represent their interests.

M5S as a Populist Party

The consensus among political scientists and other observers of and participants in Italian politics is that M5S has distinct populist elements. However, these same individuals refrain from classifying M5S as a populist party, which would place it in a much more useful category of analysis. While M5S has not been connected in scholarship to PRRPs, M5S's populist characteristics have been noted by the mainstream

media, political scientists, and its own leadership. At one of Grillo's rallies, Grillo told his supporters: "They call us populists. We are proud of that, and angry too" (Dinmore and Segreti 2013). However, the label "populist" by itself is too nebulous a category to hold much meaning. Populism can manifest as a rhetorical style, as a political strategy, or as a mass movement. Calling M5S "populist" or saying that it uses "populist discourse" is a broad description that can encompass social and political phenomenon ranging from Occupy Wall Street to the Tea Party and even to the Nazi Party. The common practice in the United States in which candidates campaign for a national political office by campaigning against Washington and trying to position themselves as political "outsiders" is populist, and to the extent that mainstream parties adopt similar strategies and rhetoric, they too are embracing populist sentiment. Even Berlusconi's mainstream right-center party *Forza Italia* brands itself as populist.

Populism is not an ideology per se, but rather a "difficult, slippery concept" that is "omnipresent as a potential movement or set of ideas to be drawn on by movements" in all representative political systems (Taggart 2000, 1-2). Populism is characterized by an opposition to "the elite" who block, out of their own self-interest, the expression and manifestation of the people's will. The "elite" can refer to traditional political parties (such as the Christian Democratic Party during the First Italian Republic) as well as to those in control of the media, major financial institutions, government institutions, international institutions and other states. Margaret Canovan defined populism as being a protest not just against the established political power, but also against the dominant views propagated by mainstream media outlets and academics (1999, 3). The populist

solution to the failures of representative democracy is often to abolish the "structure[s] of mediation" (Grillo 2009) in favor of more direct democracy (Kitschelt 2002, 179).

The utilization of populist ideas and rhetoric is so widespread and varied that the label of "populist" by itself does not present a useful category of analysis. Populism can be simply a "rhetorical posture" adopted by politicians on the left and right and even, for a limited period of time, by mainstream and center parties (Brett 2013, 410), or it can manifest as seemingly spontaneous social movements. Occupy Wall Street is an example of a populist movement which lacks the structure of a populist party. These social movements can critique the system from the outside, but they neither support candidates for political office nor run candidates themselves.

M5S is a different type of political phenomenon. Despite Grillo's attempt to portray M5S as a "Movement with a programme" rather than a political party (Barlett et al. 2013, 13), Grillo's "movement" relies on the authority of a charismatic leader, runs candidates for political office, and holds the potential to become part of the government. By definition, M5S is a political party, even if it does not call itself one. Given its populist platform and organizational structure, M5S can be studied more narrowly as part of an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in Western Europe: the emergence and increasing electoral success of populist parties.

Historically, most populist parties have been tied to a particular ideology. The most prevalent manifestation of populism in Western Europe today comes in the form of PRRPs. Termed "new populism" by Taggart (2000), PRRPs result from the marriage of a radical right wing ideology that emphasizes ethno-nationalism and a return to

traditional values with populist anti-establishment rhetoric (Rydgren 2007, 242). The relationship is seen as symbiotic: populism allows radical right parties to transcend their small base of supporters and appeal to discontented voters in the public at large, and many features of populism are not incompatible with a radical right ideology, as long as "the people" are defined ever more narrowly to exclude anyone outside of the particular traditional ethnic community that the radical right party claims to represent. Nor is the structure of the parties radically different, with both ideologies utilizing authoritarianism to reach their ends. The only difference is that, in theory, the authoritarian nature of a populist party is only a means to help the will of the people manifest in government, while in a radical right party a degree of authoritarianism in government is the end. While PRRPs may not be ideologically identical to M5S, they provide a useful framework through which M5S's populist features can be studied.

Overcoming Definitional Challenges of Populist Scholarship

In order to classify M5S as a populist party, it is necessary to examine the labels typically ascribed to parties deemed "populist," for the literature does not provide a consistent categorization of such parties. The greatest challenge impeding M5S's classification as a populist party comes not from the self-obfuscation of its leaders but from the definitional discordance among scholars of populist parties.

The convergence of populism and the radical right in modern political parties, especially in Europe, makes it difficult to study the two party types individually. Most of political science literature on populism studies PRRPs rather than purely populist parties, and there is a deficit of literature on leftwing populist parties in Western Europe;

however, the scholarship on PRRPs is also beset with definitional challenges. Some scholars conflate PRRPs and rightwing extremist parties such as neo-fascists, despite their differences both in terms of ideology and electoral success (Carter 2005). Others develop specific terminology to distinguish PRRPs from their more extreme cousins. PRRPs, on the rise since the late 1970s or mid-1980s (depending on which parties are included in the definition), have been referred to as the "third wave" of the radical right to distinguish the party type from the fascist parties of the pre-World War II era and their descendants (Zaslove 2003). Taggart (2000) refers to these parties as belonging to "new populism," distinguishing them from 19th century American and Russian populist movements.

Hartleb (2012, 46) creates a distinction between populist "anti-party parties" and extremist "anti-system parties" based on the willingness of a party to communicate and form governing coalitions as an alternative to "an agenda of destructive refusal." Anti-party parties are opposed to the particular party system and political elite of a country, but they are willing to reach compromises with mainstream parties in order to further their own platforms. Anti-system parties refuse to participate in political negotiations or to form alliances with mainstream parties. This categorization raises more questions than it answers. *Lega Nord*'s willingness to form electoral alliances and governing coalitions with the mainstream parties of the right makes it a clear case of an anti-party party. However, in the case of the newer political parties, it is often hard to tell where they would fall. Since M5S refused to be party to a governing coalition after the February

2013 election, does that make it an anti-system extremist party? To what degree does a party have to refuse to participate in "the system" to be labeled extremist?

Schedler (1996, 292) criticizes the imprecision of the terms attached to PRRPs and advocates that they fall under the umbrella term "anti-political establishment parties." This description de-emphasizes the ideological positioning of the party in favor of its populist mission (although Schedler rejects the term "populist" as well, arguing that populism has historically been opposed to the economic rather than political elite). However, Schedler's categorization is also problematic because all populist parties are not equal. The balance in the marriage between ideology and populism varies by party, and that balance affects the party's agenda and in theory should also affect the demographics of its supporters.

Each of these labels carries with them slightly different boundaries of meaning. This has led to an ongoing debate over which parties can be included within the categorization. *Lega Nord,* Italy's most successful populist party up until the emergence of M5S, has been put forth as both a prime example of PRRPs (Hakhverdian 2007, Zaslove 2003, v) and as a party that has a tenuous hold to the title due to its regionalist/separatist platform. M5S does not fall squarely under the definition of PRRPs due to its ideological incoherency, but it would be included as one of Hartleb's "anti-party" (or even potentially "anti-system") parties and certainly counts as an "anti-political establishment" party. Perhaps the mistake is in ascribing strict categorical definitions to a party group that contains such a range of "anti-establishment" platforms.

Instead, populist or "anti-political establishment" parties are best represented on a continuum, wherein at one extreme a party's opposition to the political establishment (manifesting most often through outspoken opposition to corruption and sometimes as support for limitations on the power of elected officials) supersedes any ideological considerations, while on the other, the extremist ideologies of the either the left or the right are the principle focus of the party, with populism being at most a rhetorical strategy. This continuum does not denote a left/right ideological divide, for there are extremist parties on the left and the right. Nor does it encompass all parties, but rather only those who would fall under a standard definition of an "anti-political establishment," "anti-party," or "anti-system" party. Mainstream parties, even ones that employ populist rhetoric, have no place on the continuum. Rather, the populist continuum seeks to model the range of options within the anti-establishment group.

Most PRRPs, such as Italy's *Lega Nord*, exist somewhere in the middle, with populist ideas and a nationalist rightwing platform both featuring strongly as part of the party identity. These parties are distinct from extremist parties on the far right or left, such as the Italian Socialist Movement (MSI), which are characterized by features such as dogmatism, use of conspiracy theories, anti-constitutionalism, friends-versus-enemies stereotypes, economic anti-liberalism, and utopianism. Ultra-nationalism, xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, ideologically based anti-Americanism, and attacks against minorities are the bases of right-wing extremist parties in Europe as identified by Hartleb, while left-wing extremist parties are collectivist, attack liberal and neo-liberal values, are anti-fascist, and nostalgic for Communism (Hartleb 2012, 52-4). As a more in-depth

dissection of M5S's ideological platform will reveal, the party does not exhibit any of the features of extremist parties to any significant degree.

On the other end of the continuum are parties in which ideological coherency is forgone or diminished in favor of a mostly populist platform. While there have been a number of minor anti-corruption and other single-issue parties in Europe, very few populist parties other than M5S have such a tenuous hold on a specific ideology. In fact, M5S may be Europe's only successful "pure" populist party, by which I mean that the platform of M5S is tied neither to leftist nor rightist extremism and instead concentrates on the quintessential populist agenda of opposition to political, economic, and social elites and the restoration of democratic agency to the masses. While M5S's platform might lack a consistent ideology, it devotes ample attention to the populist goals of reeling in the power of the elites and increasing the ability of the people to directly express their will. Its most important agenda items include imposing two-term limits on elected representatives, barring citizens with criminal convictions from running for public office, reducing salaries for members of Parliament, and allowing public comment online on prospective laws three months before they come to a vote (Bartlett et al. 2013, 26). Its elected officials have to demonstrate their differentiation from career politicians by voluntarily reducing their salaries, refusing public funding, allowing the public to vote on their performance periodically, and adhering to rigorous standards of transparency (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 8-9). M5S easily falls within the wider category of anti-political establishment or populist parties while still retaining a distinction from the rightwing ideologies at the center of many PRRP platforms.

A Populist Organization and Structure

In addition to fitting within the definition of a populist party ideologically, M5S resembles a populist party in appearance as well. Many of the features of M5S's presentation and organization which lead observers to think that the party is radically different from other political parties are actually common elements of PRRPs.

While M5S may exist further to the left of the populist continuum than the standard PRRP, it shares their organization and structure. While populist parties led by the masses have existed – the prime example being the Populist Party in the United States – PRRPs in Western Europe have conformed to a centralized organizational structure that masks itself as a movement. Heinisch (2003) has identified these two contradictory features – the appearance of a mass, decentralized movement of popular will and the existence of a centralized authoritarian leader – as central to the organization of populist parties in Western Europe.

M5S has both of these features. M5S claims to be adamantly opposed to the party structure. The blog post which officially launched M5S on September 9, 2009 contained the dramatic announcement "*I partiti sono morti"* ("The parties are dead")(Grillo 2009). Nevertheless, Grillo's "Movement with a programme," is far more centralized in structure than Grillo will admit (Bartlett et al. 2013, 13). M5S revolves around the charismatic (and possibly internally dictatorial) leadership of Grillo, who controls the party's external image as well as internal party discipline. The name *MoVimento Cinque Stelle* is copyrighted and Grillo and Casaleggio alone get to decide who can use the label (Bartlett et al. 2013, 24). Grillo controls how his party is represented and even who can

join the party. M5S officials have been banned from appearing on certain media outlets following the expulsion of Federica Salsi for participating in a political talk-show and Giovanni Favia, the regional councilor for Emilia-Romagna, for publically criticizing the internal organization of the party (Mackay 2013). In June 2013, Adele Gambaro, one of the members of Parliament elected in February 2013, was voted out for publically criticizing Grillo's tone and leadership style in a television interview (Davies 2013). Grillo has taken unprecedented measures to ensure party discipline, going as far as asking M5S candidates for seats in the European Parliament to agree to pay a €250,000 fine if they demonstrate "disloyalty" (Armellini 2014). Grillo has demonstrated that he controls who can join M5S and how they represent his party.

While most traditional political parties can differentiate their identities and ideologies from the personalities of the specific individuals who lead them, the leaders of populist parties are not easily replaceable. They often *are* the movement. Heinisch claims that "without Jörg Haider, Jean Marie Le Pen, Carl Hagen, Gianfranco Fini, Umberto Bossi, Pim Fortuyn, Pia Kjaersgaard or Filip de Winter, their respective movements would not have had the political success they enjoyed" (2003, 94). A populist "movement" in practice is often one individual claiming to embody the will of the people.

Grillo also fits the profile of a typical populist leader. The authoritarian leader of a populist party cannot be just anyone. Populist leaders establish their credibility as the people's voice through their opposition to the elite. They need to have "an image of externality and antagonism vis-à-vis the political elite" (Schedler 1996, 298). That is an

image that Grillo has fostered for over thirty years as a political satirist who eschewed elite media sources. His anti-establishment credentials are also boosted by his refusal to run for office himself. With a manslaughter conviction for his participation in a fatal car crash, Grillo is barred from running for office under M5S's requirements that candidates lack a criminal record (Kington 2013). Similarly to his exile from television, Grillo's exclusion from political office allows him to maintain the position of perpetual "outsider," immune to the corrupting influence of the political system. Within the party, however, the leader holds the power, leaving little room for the democratic mechanisms that populist parties claim to support.

Bordignon and Ceccarini (2013, 2) note the juxtaposition between the grass-roots image projected by M5S and Grillo's actual role within the party, saying "he is the inspiration and mouthpiece of participation from the bottom up, but, at the same time, he also exercises a total control over the movement's strategic choices." D'Alimonte also questions the portrayal of Grillo as the "mouthpiece," saying "he is really the orchestra director. And the musicians are not supposed to play their own music (Davies 2013). It is telling in itself that scholars feel free to refer to M5S as "Grillo's party" or "Grillo's movement" and that M5S's supporters have been labeled *grillini*[1]. Diamanti (2014, 3, 9) calls Grillo the "voice, face and body" of M5S, saying that while the party constitutes far more than what Grillo alone provides, it could not survive without him. Grillo holds two seemingly contradictory roles, both speaking for the people and controlling what the people say. Grillo might consider his party a "movement of free citizens," (Mackay

[1] *Grillo* in Italian translates to "cricket;" therefore, *grillini* are "little crickets."

2013) but M5S relies on the ability of Grillo's personality to capture the support of the people; in so much as it is a movement, it is a movement of followers rather than of equals.

To be fair, M5S's claim to be grassroots is not entirely unjustified. The party has mechanisms by which its ordinary supporters can and do influence the party's platform (if only on nonessential policy areas). Grillo's website conducts frequent polls and offers avenues for M5S supporters to communicate freely with each other on- and off-line. The party's internal structure on paper at least is radically democratic. However, Grillo retains ultimate say over the party's direction and has made important decisions contrary to the will of his supporters. Perhaps the most infamous of these instances was when Grillo adamantly refused to join in a coalition government with the Left following the February 2013 election, despite the wishes of many of his supporters. One supporter started a Change.org petition asking Grillo to reconsider his opposition to a governing coalition which 30,000 people signed within hours (Davies and Wearden 2013). How much value do M5S's democratic mechanisms hold if Grillo can unilaterally (although in conjunction with Casaleggio, one assumes) make such important decisions?

M5S meets the definition of a populist party both in terms of ideology and organization and structure. To refuse to call M5S, a political organization which runs candidates for office and restricts the actions of those candidates, particularly in terms of how they represent the political organization, a political party is nonsensical. Moreover, M5S's attempt to portray itself as a grassroots movement rather than a top-down political organization is keeping within the tradition of populist parties. Once the definitional

challenges of populist parties are addressed, allowing such parties to be categorized along a spectrum instead of more narrowly as populist radical right parties, it is hard to argue that M5S does not belong to such a categorization. A further look beyond the media myths surrounding M5S further reveals how the party comfortably fits within the tradition of populist parties, even as the party brings its own variations to the standard populist party.

Beyond the Media Myth

M5S has been treated as a sensational new political actor by the popular press. It has been called a "political tsunami" (Cataldi and Emanuele 2013), with Grillo's "brand of elite-bashing" either transforming Italy's political landscape (Brett 2013, 411) or sending the already beleaguered country further into "political turmoil" (Keating 2014), depending on the optimism of the reporter. The temptation for sensationalism is understandable given the magnitude of M5S's victory. Less than four years after its official launch, M5S won the popular vote nationwide and took the second most seats (behind Pier Luigi Bersani's *Partito Democratico*, the left-center Democratic Party [PD]) with an impressive 23.8% of the votes for the Senate and 25.6% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies (Álvarez-Rivera 2013). Just a little over a month before the election, M5S had only been polling at 13% (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2013), yet the party won more provinces and regions than any other competitor in 2013. No party competing against established political parties has had as many supporters in its first national election in the history of Western Europe. M5S won a share of the vote that has only been achieved by Italy's mainstream parties thus far (Cataldi and Emanuele 2013).

However, the sensationalism of the reporting on M5S obscures meaningful understandings of the party. Coverage focuses on what makes M5S "unique" from any party that has gone before, burying the party's connection to a history of Italian protest voting and to wider trends in Western Europe. According to the mainstream narrative, M5S is an outburst of leftist youth frustration using the Internet in new and innovative ways to expand the potential for democratic expression. This is a narrative that Grillo has been all too happy to foster, and it is not entirely without merit. M5S does have the most youth supporters of any of the political parties, the Internet does play an atypically prominent role in M5S's mission, and M5S is much farther to the left than its PRRP cousins. To what extent does the mainstream narrative of M5S hold up under examination, and what are its implications for M5S's identity as a populist party?

A Leftist Populist Party?: M5S's Ideological Incoherence

I have called M5S "ideologically incoherent" because of the difficulty involved in placing M5S on a left/right spectrum. Although the assumption of the media is that M5S is a center-left party, the ideological orientation of the party is much more complex. Grillo refuses to place himself on such a spectrum, and his policies have elements pleasing to all sides. He claims that M5S is "above" ideology (Hooper 2013b). The "stars" referred to in its name refer to five seemingly apolitical "priorities" for Italy: public water, transportation, development, internet connection and availability, and the environment (Bartlett et al. 2013, 25-26). The reluctance on behalf of populist leaders to place their parties on the left-right spectrum is a common feature of populist parties

(Campbell 1995, Mudde 1994), but few succeed in keeping their place on the ideological spectrum as muddled as M5S's.

A number of M5S's central policies are geared towards the left. Many of Grillo's policies deal with workers' issues. He authored *Schiavi Moderni* (Modern Slaves), a book on workplace fatalities and temporary employment, based on experiences shared on his website, beppegrillo.it (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 7). He supports guaranteed unemployment benefits (Barlett et al. 2013, 26) and a "universal citizen's wage" (Forti 2013). Grillo also takes a strong stand against big business, advocating for the abolition of monopolies, especially of the national motorway and in the energy market (Bartlett et al. 2013, 26). Having publically satirized the company's suspicious debt level the year before, Grillo testified against Parmalat, a multinational dairy and food products company, after it came to light in 2003 that they had been reporting billions in fake assets (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 6; Wakin 2004). Representing shareholders, he has attended the board meetings of Telecom Italia in 2006 and Italy's scandal-ridden banking group Monte dei Paschi di Siena (MPS) in 2013 to publically criticize their executives and call for resignations (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 7).

Another important policy area for M5S is the environment. Grillo joined in an environmentalist grass-roots movement against the construction of a high-speed railway in northwest Italy, a cause he is now facing jail time for supporting after being accused of breaking a police seal during a protest (Agence France-Presse 2014c). M5S's platform includes congestion charges in cities for cars with only one occupant and compliance with the Kyoto Protocols (Bartlett et al. 2013, 26).

Nevertheless, Grillo's stances have some distinctly rightest elements which indicate that M5S is not as ideologically removed from PRRPs as one might assume. He does not support trade unions, claiming that they no longer represent workers' interests (Jones 2013). He also engages in the identity politics of the right. While on the surface, advocating for the availability of free Italian lessons for foreigners might seem innocuous, the policy has nationalist and anti-immigrant connotations, especially when coupled with the requirement that applicants for Italian citizenship take these classes (Bartlett et al. 2013, 26). In 2006, Grillo wrote a blog post entitled "Immigration is Taboo" in which he lamented the difficulty of addressing immigration without being seen as racist and claimed that Italians are losing jobs to immigrants in factories which "import underpaid workers then throw the social costs on the community." He argued that "immigration flows must be handled at the origin," meaning that more development aid should be given to the immigrants' countries of origin so they have less reason to leave (Grillo 2006). Grillo opposes granting citizenship to the children of immigrants born on Italian soil, was against the inclusion of Romania in the EU, and is against the Roma's presence in Italy (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 7).

Even if M5S does not resemble a PRRP ideologically in aggregate, these rightest elements are reminiscent of PRRPs generally as well as of Italy's own PRRP, *Lega Nord*. PRRPs engage in identity politics with a narrow definition of the people which opposes not just the elite but also anyone who does not easily conform to the party's conception of the people. They espouse "an individualist message by rejecting particularistic group claims, whether these are legitimated by status (that is, the privilege of elites),

compassion (for example, groups with special needs), or social and economic disadvantage (such as marginalized groups), as well as race, minority ethnicity and gender" despite populism's distinct communitarian elements (Heinisch 2003, 93). In particular, asylum seekers and immigrants are expected to either assimilate to "the people" or return to their original country. In utilizing identity politics, Grillo is possibly attempting to woo votes from *Lega Nord.*

It is the ideological and demographic make-up of Grillo's supporters that makes the party an unusual entity even in the populist tradition. While in 2007 (prior to the official formation of M5S) Grillo supporters were disproportionately young well-educated urbanites of the left, Grillo's supporters now resemble the voting population at large (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 16-17). In 2010, almost half (48%) of M5S supporters identified themselves as being on the left or center-left ideologically, but after the May 2012 local elections, polls found that only 33% of supporters identified themselves as on the left with 26% of supporters having sympathies for right or center-right ideologies and 33% unable to place themselves on the ideological spectrum. In the 2008 general election, 30% of 2012 Grillo voted for a party on the right – PdL, *Lega Nord,* or *La Destra* ("the Right") - while another 30% voted for a leftist party – PD, *Italia dei Valori* ("Italy of Values," a center-left anti-corruption populist party [IDV]) or *Lista Arcobaleno* (the "Rainbow List," a radical leftist party) (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 18-19). Not only is the ideological platform of M5S a melting pot of policies from the left and right, but the party itself has two ideological poles.

If anything, M5S's ideological incoherency both in terms of supporter demographics and platform items strengthens its identity as a populist party. Even though most populist parties have embraced ideologies on the right or the left to gain a base of supporters, populism lacks the core values of the other –isms. It has what Taggart calls an "empty heart" (2000, 4). Ideology is not central to M5S's identity. Therefore, M5S can sustain a patchwork of ideologies, at least for a short time, because those items are on the periphery of M5S's agenda. No matter what its five "stars" stand for, M5S exists first and foremost to fulfill the populist mission of attacking the entrenched political elite and rendering them accountable to the will of the people. Those agenda items are the only ones that matter when it comes to policy formation; the rest serve as devices to attract voters. Ideologically, M5S is a catch-all party, and its platform exists to maximize voter turnout. In this, M5S stands out from the rightwing populist parties of Western Europe, but it is a distinction that reinforces the importance of studying M5S within the context of populist parties.

M5S and Generational War

M5S's curious ideological alliance begets the question of who belongs to the party. If ideology is not an important factor determining support for Grillo, what is? The prevailing narrative of M5S is that it is populated by students and other youth – presumably those hit the hardest by the unemployment crisis. This narrative explains M5S as an outburst of youth frustration, a refutation of the older parties by young, tech-savvy Italians with a radical vision of democracy that is fueled by a combination of disgust at the tired political system that they inherited from their parents and a youthful

optimism about the revolutionary capacity of individuals. Grillo plays into this narrative by calling Italy's political crisis a "generational war" (Hooper 2013c). Such an explanation would account for the difficulty in placing M5S on the ideological spectrum, for according to this conception of M5S, the central identification of its supporters is generational rather than political.

This conception of M5S has some obvious flaws. If M5S is a youth movement, then it seems somewhat incongruous that the face of the party is a 65 year old man (Grillo's co-founder, Casaleggio, is 59). It is true that M5S definitively won the youth vote in 2013 (winning 38.4% of the votes among Italians aged 18 to 29) and performed badly among voters 55 and older, especially in the 65-plus demographic, in which M5S won only 8.8% of the vote compared to 32.9% going to PD and 33.7% for PdL, according to pre-electoral data from the CISE Electoral Panel. Nevertheless, it is important to note that M5S did nearly as well among voters aged 30 to 54 as they did among the youngest demographics, a cohort of voters who can hardly be called "youths." They won over 35.4% of voters aged 30 to 44, almost as many voters in that age group who voted for the PD and PdL combined. The 45 to 54 year-olds also voted for M5S over the other party options with M5S taking 32.3% of their vote, trailed by PD with 23.6% for a distant second (De Sio 2013).

This is not to say that the party is not younger overall than its competitors. While older supporters may be latecomers to the party, Italians older than 45 now make up 45% of M5S's supporters. This is still far below the national average of 57% (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 17). Nevertheless, surveys which break down the data into smaller

demographics reveal that M5S performed quite well among people in mid to late-middle age, suggesting that the small proportion of M5S voters over 45 stems mostly from a lack of elderly voters – voters who might have less opportunity to be exposed to M5S due to its use of the Internet rather than television or newspapers as its primary media outlet.

Even though M5S "won" more of the youth vote than the other mainstream parties, it did not uniformly steal votes from the other parties' youthful supporters. The center-right parties failed to attract many youth, but the PD did not do badly in the youth vote, and *Sinistra Ecologia Libertà* (SEL), a democratic-socialist party, won a greater percentage of the youth vote than it did in any other age bracket (De Sio 2013). According to CISE Electoral Panel's pre-electoral data, 16.8% of M5S supporters are between the ages of 18 and 29, which is twice the percentage of youth in the mainstream parties. However, SEL has an even greater claim to the title of "youth party" with 20.6% of its supporters being between the ages of 18 and 29 (De Sio 2013).

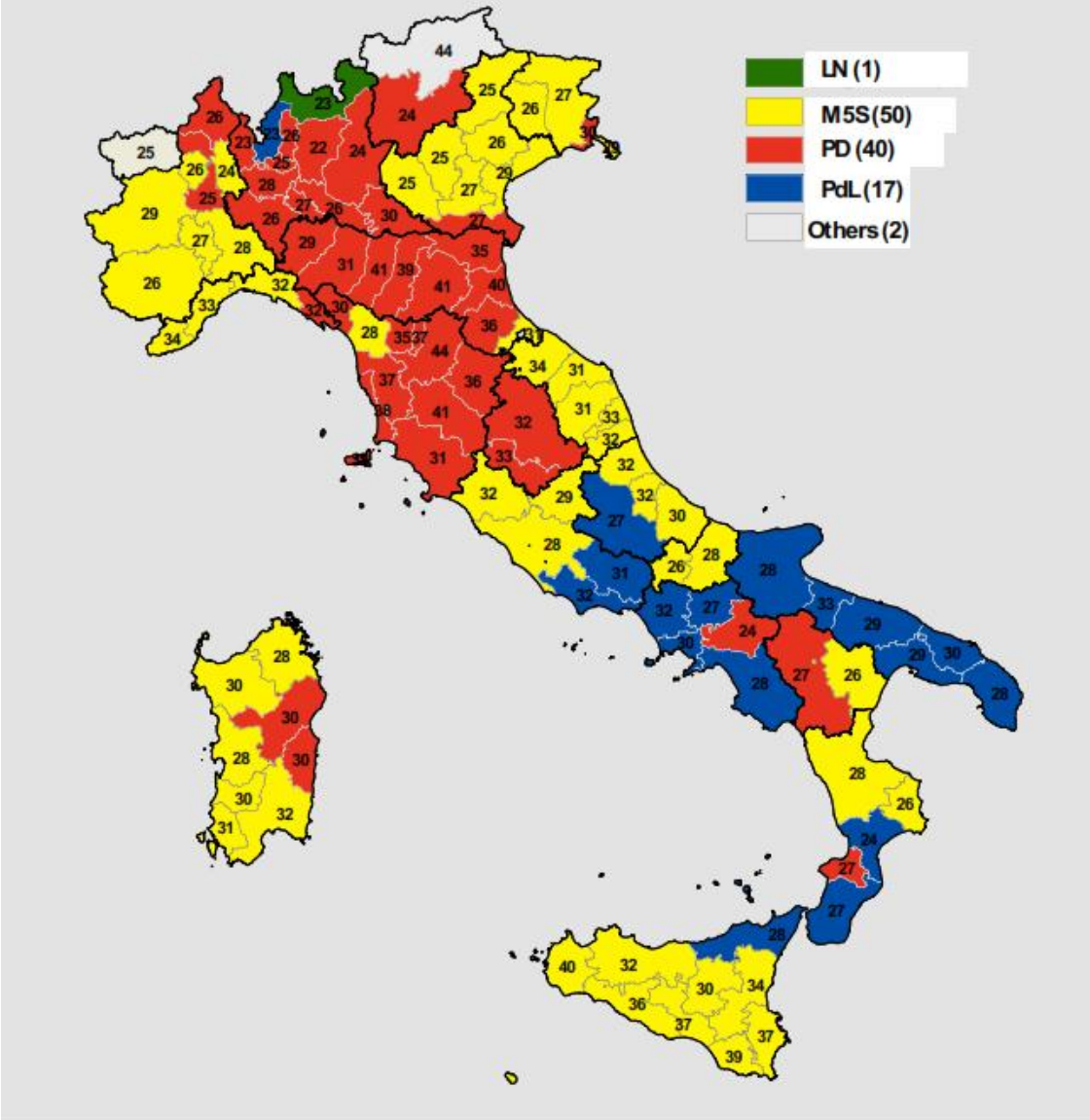
The classification of M5S as a "youth" phenomenon also begets the question as to how it succeeded in *both* houses of the Italian Parliament. While the voting age for the Chamber of Deputies is 18, only Italians 25 or older can vote for Senate candidates. If M5S is primarily a youth movement, how did it do so well in an election in which its primary demographic of supporters was barred from voting? While M5S won a greater percentage of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies (25.6%), it won 23.8% in the Senate – hardly a paltry sum – without the help of the youth. While many youth have been inspired to vote for Grillo's party, age is not the primary identifier of a Grillo supporter.

To the extent that there is a generational divide, it is between those aged between 18 and 54 and the late middle-aged to elderly demographic.

M5S has few other distinct demographic features, with the profile of a typical M5S voter resembling the average Italian voter. It is no longer weighted towards city-dwellers, and although it is composed of more employees than the Italian population at large (reflecting its attention to labor issues) at 50%, the number of self-employed and entrepreneurial voters who support M5S has increased to 18% by 2012 (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 17). Among Grillo's Facebook fans,[2] 27% have a university degree, above the national average of 11.7% (Bartlett et al. 2013, 31). M5S does better among men than women, who represent about 60% of its supporters. Geographically, M5S supporters are not concentrated in any particular area of the country. Grillo used to draw a large percentage of his supporters from central and northeastern Italy; however, by 2012 this geographical disparity had mostly disappeared (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 17). M5S won 50 provinces in the 2013 election across Italy, more than any other political party, as Figure 1 demonstrates.

[2] I will be using the data collected by Bartlett et al. (2013) at various points in this paper to help understand the mindset and demographics of those who identify with Grillo's party. While normally it might not be advisable to treat a sample of a party's Facebook fans as representative of the entire movement (even with a sample size of 1,865 [out of 911,000 fans total] weighted against M5S's online demographics), because so much of M5S's advertising and organizing occur over the Internet, the survey data can elucidate the demographics and beliefs of many people likely to vote for Grillo. It should be noted that only 19% of the respondents are formal members of M5S; however, that is probably an even higher proportion than would be found among the voters for M5S on Election Day 2013. Bartlett et al. (2013, 32) posits that this is due to M5S's "'liquid structure'" and portrayal of itself "as an unconventional political group," so "formal membership" might constitute something other than what would be typical in a mainstream political party. 63% of Beppe Grillo's Facebook fans are male and 37% are female, a demographic that matches the gender split of Grillo supporters in the 2012 local elections (2013, 29-30).

Figure 1: Winning Party by Province in February 2013 by Percentage of Vote



Source: Cataldi, Matteo and Vincenzo Emanuele. 2013. "An electoral tsunami hits Italy: 50 provinces washed away from PD and PdL." In *The Italian General Election of 2013: A dangerous stalemate?*, eds. Lorenzo De Sio, Vincenzo Emanuele, Nicola Maggini, and Aldo Paparo. Rome: Centro Italiano Studi Elettorali.

In a country in which political affiliation is so tied to region, the spread of M5S's win is particularly impressive. M5S is a catch-all party in practice, not just in platform, with voters who cannot be isolated into one region, age group, or ideology. There is one

area, however, in which demographics can clearly identify a likely M5S supporter: internet use.

A Party of the Internet

The notion that M5S is a "new" political phenomenon is driven in large part by Grillo's innovative use of the Internet. In scholarship and popular reporting on Beppe Grillo and M5S, disproportionate emphasis is placed on the impact of the Internet and social media and its transformational effect on politics. M5S's founders have fostered such attention. Casaleggio believes that the party represents "the erosion by the Internet of all forms of mediation" (Hooper 2013a). Mackay attributes Grillo's success in large part to "a romantic faith in the revolutionary potential of online media," noting that Grillo has referred to his vision of a more accountable democratic system as an "e-democracy" (2013).

This paper makes no claims that the Internet plays an irrelevant part in M5S's electoral success, for there is no doubt that Grillo's media presence allowed him to attain far greater visibility, especially among younger Italians, than would be possible before the advent of the Internet and social media. As many politicians, both mainstream and fringe, are discovering, social media provides public figures with ample opportunity for advertising, building a rapport with supporters, and expanding their reach to potential supporters who might not be reading print newspapers or watching the news on television.

In this sense, Grillo's online popularity gives M5S a significant advertising advantage: almost one million people joined his Facebook page and his twitter had

700,556 followers as of November 6, 2012, while at the same point in time Nichi Vendola of *Sinistra Ecologia Libertà* (SEL) had 236,436 followers, Pierluigi Bersani of *Partito Democratico* (PD) had 146,088, and Roberto Maroni of *Lega Nord* had only 5,676. As of November 2012, Grillo ran the most widely read blog in Italy and the 7,177th most viewed and visited site in the world and the 159th in Italy (Bartlett et al. 2013, 13). This access to the voting public is significant, especially, one would imagine, with younger and first-time voters. However, I will refrain from drawing any conclusions about Grillo's online popularity, for his overwhelming number of online "followers" (to use the term in a general sense) could be attributable to his greater facility with and use of the Internet and social media. In addition, his greater Internet presence may be necessary to rectify his exclusion (if partially by choice) from the mainstream media.

This is not to downplay the significance of the Internet as a centerpiece of Grillo's party. Internet availability is one of the five "stars" in M5S's name, and Grillo allows his followers to have a say in M5S's platform through voting on his website. De Sio (2013) identifies use of the internet as the main source of political information as the primary indicator of a voter's likelihood to vote for M5S (the next most important indicator being age). Of the Italians who identified the Internet as their primary source of information about politics, 42.5% voted for M5S. PD had the second most votes at 21.7%, while PdL only won the votes of 9.4% of the people who used the Internet to gather political information.

However, M5S's embrace of the Internet must be understood within the context of the Italian media landscape. For decades, Italy's broadcast media has been controlled by a "duopoly" consisting of the public broadcasting company *Radio Audizioni Italiane* (RAI) and Finivest, Berlusconi's broadcasting company despite Italy's constitutional court repeatedly calling for anti-trust legislation. Its few national and many local newspapers have also been bought out by corporate entities. Political parties have been strongly connected to media companies, both public and private (Barile and Rao 1992). When Berlusconi came into office, he had the power to control both.

Grillo himself is a testament to the control that the political parties have over the media. Formerly a television star, Grillo was ousted from the RAI in 1986 after making a controversial joke at the expense of the Socialists, who were part of a governing coalition at the time. His relationship with the broadcasting networks remained strained after his departure, and he has completely eschewed television appearances since 1993 (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 3). The media companies are among the elite interests that M5S is diametrically opposed to. Grillo's second V-Day rally was devoted to railing against journalists (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 4-5). His followers share his distrust for mainstream media: a survey of Grillo's Facebook fans in 2012 revealed that only 4% of his fans trust television as an institution (compared to 40% of the Italian public as a whole), whereas 91% of his Facebook fans tend not to trust television (compared to 49% of the Italian public). The press does not fare much better, with 11% of Grillo's fans expressing trust in that institution compared to 34% of Italy at large (Bartlett et al. 2013, 42).

For the purposes of this paper at least, I view the Internet and social media as a new, more far-reaching medium of communication but not necessarily a transformational one. I do not see M5S's use of the Internet as undercutting its classification as a traditional populist party. It is not uncommon for populist parties to use new and innovative channels of communication to reach "the people," especially as many populists distrust the mainstream media. *Lega Nord* used graffiti to spread its message; similarly, the Internet is another tool which populist parties may utilize to talk directly to the people.

Nor are M5S's activities all virtual. While much of Grillo's rise to political prominence can be attributed to his ability to capitalize on the visibility of his blog, M5S's early formation centered on Grillo's massive *Vaffanculo* Day or "V-Day" (a name which translates roughly into "Fuck-Off Day") rallies in public squares. It was at the first of several V-Day demonstrations in 2007 that Grillo gathered 350,000 signatures for a bill espousing provisions which became the central tenets of M5S's platform: a two-term limit on seats in the Italian Parliament, preferential voting for parliamentary seats, and a ban on candidates with convictions (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 4). Like any other populist party, Grillo espouses a variety of tactics to reach out to the people, ranging from the use of a form of media not ensnared by elite institutions to mass rallies in the streets. The use of the Internet, while an important feature of M5S, is keeping in the tradition of populist parties.

M5S's ideology (or lack thereof), its composition, and its use of the Internet as a primary media outlet and tool for the expansion of direct democracy not only fit

alongside its identity as a populist party but also highlight the importance of studying this populist party in particular. Without a coherent ideology, M5S is a "pure" populist party, allowing scholars to differentiate phenomena related to radical right wing parties from ones related to populist parties. This is a unique opportunity for studying populist parties, since so many of ones emerging today rely much more heavily on radical right platforms. M5S is worthy of study for the magnitude and spread of its victory as well. With its supporters not confined to the youngest voters or to any region of Italy or to any ideological identification, M5S has achieved unprecedented success. Its use of the Internet is not only keeping with the populist tradition of eschewing elite media for more democratic ways to reach out to the masses but also may provide a template for other populist parties to follow. The Internet is a much more democratic avenue for exchanging information than traditional media sources and allows populist parties to reach out to more supporters than rallies alone can draw in. M5S demonstrates the potential for populist parties to utilize more effective outreach strategies and to appeal to a large segment of a voting population, even without a coherent ideology.

Popular Explanations for M5S's Success

How did M5S achieve such unprecedented success? Many of the most common explanations for the unexpected popularity of M5S among Italian voters and populist parties more generally rest on short-term variables which can fluctuate based on time and circumstance, rather than long-term structural causes for populist voting. Rising anti-immigrant sentiment, high unemployment and the lingering effects of the 2008 economic crisis, and rising Euroscepticism have all been posited as *the* explanation for M5S's

exponential growth. Nor are these explanations unique to M5S, for these hypotheses are commonly explored by political scientists in connection to the electoral success of populist parties. If M5S is classified as a populist party, as I argue it should be, then studying the circumstances of its success will further illuminate the variables conducive to populist parties in Western Europe more broadly.

Because of its unusual ideological composition, M5S presents a unique opportunity to study explanations for populist parties in isolation from explanations for radical rightwing extremist parties, a separation that most studies on populist electoral success fail to make due to the lack of real world examples of "pure" populist parties. While the common explanations for the electoral success of populist parties in political science may not be a precise fit for M5S as it is not, by definition, a PRRP, it will be examined through this lens due to the lack of more comprehensive studies of populist parties in the literature.

Multiple hypotheses explaining the electoral success of PRRPs have been put forth and studied extensively in political science literature, often to inconclusive or conflicting results. For the purposes of this paper, three of the most common hypotheses explaining the electoral success of populist parties will be explored in the context of Italy. None of these have been conclusively proven to attribute significantly to the success of populist parties, although there have been studies linking them.

However, the debate on the primary contributing factors to M5S's success does not take place within an ivory tower. The stakes are high in the debate over the casual explanations for M5S's electoral success outside academia, as Hooper, writing in *The*

Guardian, explains: "Most of what has been written about the M5S has put its success down to the euro crisis and Italians' anger at the austerity measures imposed by Mario Monti's government, a favourite target of Grillo's witty, ranting monologues. By this reckoning, it is an archetypal protest movement that will disappear along with the cause that promoted it" (2013a). If M5S is the product of one or two short-term variables which may no longer be present in Italy in the following years, then M5S's significance as a political actor is negligible. I agree that at least some of the hypotheses supplied by political scientists and mainstream reporters have merit in the case of M5S, although, as a closer examination of each hypothesis will reveal, none of the previously stated hypotheses on their own can account for M5S's success, especially when studied in the context of PRRPs across Europe and within Italy's history.

Anti-Immigrant Sentiment

Traditionally, PRRPs have been associated with anti-immigrant sentiment due to the radical right ideologies at the core of their platforms. Most Western European populist parties' claim to speak "for the people" is based on a conception of "the people" centered on national identity – the people who embody what Taggart (2000) calls "the heartland" of a country – and therefore excludes and is even downright hostile to outsiders, viewing them as a threat to the sovereignty of the people. When PRRPs do enter government, their primary agenda item is often the strengthening of anti-immigration policies. Accordingly, scholars have searched extensively for evidence of a link between anti-immigrant sentiment or high levels of immigration and the electoral success of populist parties.

As is common in literature on populism, studies on the correlation between PRRP success and immigration have had mixed results. Many scholars have found a correlation between the number of immigrants and asylum seekers in a country and the electoral success of PRRPs (Knigge 1998, Lubbers et al. 2002, Swank and Betz 2003, Van der Brug et al. 2005), although other studies failed to find a correlation (Norris 2005). Golder (2003) found that PRRP support did increase in countries with a high immigrant population, but only if the unemployment rate was higher than 1.3%. Rydgren (2007, 250) argues that the research altogether weakly supports the theory that people who are competing with immigrants for jobs or who are exposed to a visible presence of immigrants in their community are more likely to vote for a PRRP. An anti-immigrant viewpoint is the number one indicator that a particular voter will vote for a PRRP, according to Lubbers and Scheepers (2000), among others.

There is no doubt that anti-immigrant sentiment is high in Italy. The Spring 2007 Pew Global Attitudes Survey found that 64% of Italians viewed immigration as "a very big problem," which is a far greater percentage of the population than in any of the other 46 countries surveyed. In the same survey, 94% of Italians saw immigration as "a big problem," and in 2009, eight in ten Italians reported that they would like to see greater restrictions on immigration. In the 2007 survey, 73% of Italians also said that "the influence of immigrants on their country is bad" (Horowitz 2010).

It is possible that Grillo has tapped into some of this anti-immigrant sentiment. In October, Grillo publically opposed abolishing a law that classified illegal immigrants as criminals (Agence France-Presse 2014a). Grillo has been winning over the electoral base

of *Lega Nord*, which has been an anti-immigrant party in Italy for over twenty years now and has not shied away from comparisons between himself and Umberto Bossi, *Lega Nord*'s charismatic leader (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 19).

However, *Lega Nord* remains much more hardline on immigration than M5S. Once it left Berlusconi's alliance, *Lega Nord* warned against "uncontrolled immigration" and connected rising crime, especially in Northern cities, to illegal immigrants. It led anti-Muslim demonstrations as well in 2000 (Betz 2001). Anti-immigrant policies are a key piece of *Lega Nord*'s platform, while they are only implicitly included in M5S's as part of the relatively low priority agenda item of providing free Italian classes to foreigners. If anti-immigrant sentiment is the primary motivator of populist voters, why would they choose to vote for M5S over *Lega* Nord? *Lega Nord* saw its percentage of the vote return to pre-recession levels, going from 8.3% of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies and 8.1% in the Senate in 2008 to only 4.1% in the Chamber of Deputies and 4.3% in the Senate (Álvarez-Rivera 2013). While the 2008 vote is almost twice what the returns for *Lega Nord* have been in the past decade (and similar to the levels that *Lega Nord* received during the pivotal 1992 elections), most likely reflecting popular discontent at the economic crisis, *Lega Nord*'s electoral gains should not have been obliterated by a party which is much less outspoken about immigration five years later if anti-immigrant sentiment drives people to vote for *Lega Nord*.

In addition, if high anti-immigrant sentiment and high levels of immigration are important variables correlated with M5S's electoral success, then a significant percentage of M5S's supporters would logically feel adversely affected by immigrants. The data

collected by Bartlett et al. in an August 2012 survey of Grillo's Facebook fans indicates otherwise. 56% of respondents expressed a belief that immigration is more of "an opportunity" for Italy than "a problem," a much higher portion than the national rate of 28%. While 39% believed that immigration is more of a problem, that is still below the national rate of 48% (2013, 35). Only 20% of respondents listed immigration as one of their "two biggest concerns" (2013, 34). After administering a survey to 3,000 potential Grillo supporters in May 2012, Maggini (2012) found that the largest divide between center-right and center-left supporters was over socio-economic issues, while people on both sides of the ideological spectrum were more supportive of granting Italian citizenship to the children of Italian immigrants than the Italian public at large, along with being more liberal on "moral" issues that rightist groups tend to oppose such as civil unions and abortions. Strangely enough, the strongest issue unifying both right and left-leaning Grillo supporters was concern for the environment.

Even more tellingly, members of M5S challenged Grillo's stance on the law classifying illegal immigrants as criminals. When he submitted the question to his supporters through an Internet poll, they voted to abolish the law despite their leader's public support for it (Agence France-Presse 2014a).

Comparative cases in Western Europe also erode the purported link between anti-immigrant sentiment and rising support for populist parties. France's population is far less anti-immigrant than Italy's, with only 29% of the population believing that "immigration is a very big problem," and only 47% of the French believe that the influence of immigrants is bad, as opposed to 73% of Italians (Horowitz 2010).

Nevertheless, their ultranationalist PRRP National Front's leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, came in second in the 2002 presidential election (admittedly losing by 82% in the second round), and, according to an October 2013 poll for the Nouvel Observateur, the party is projected to win 24% of the vote in the May 2014 elections for the European Parliament (Ramdani 2013).

Spain, on the other hand, in which 42% of people find immigration to be "a very big problem," a much higher rate than in France and the sixth highest among countries participating in the Pew Research Poll (Horowitz 2010), only recently developed a PRRP, Vox, with the capacity to challenge the mainstream political parties (Spongenberg 2014). Although 80% of Spaniards reported a belief that there should be further restrictions and controls on immigration (similar to 83% of Italians) in the poll conducted in 2007 and only 64% of the French reported having the same belief (Horowitz 2010), Vox was not founded until January 2014 and the other Spanish populist parties have never been anything more than marginal (Spongenberg 2014). While Spain's populist parties are expected to get a sizeable portion of the vote in the European Parliament elections in May 2014 (the two mainstream parties, the *Partido Popular* and the Socialist Workers Party, are only expected to win 54.4% of the vote altogether, an all-time low for the two parties), anti-immigrant sentiment has been extremely high for at least seven years (Spongenberg 2014). The timing of the growth of the populism in Spain does not coincide with what would be expected if immigration were an important variable in populist success.

Despite Italy's high levels of anti-immigrant sentiment, it is unlikely that such sentiment contributed much to Grillo's success. While Grillo's anti-immigrant statements may have attracted some *Lega Nord* defectors to his party, his supporters overall have displayed little animosity towards immigrants. In addition, historical patterns of support for *Lega Nord* and comparative studies erode the link between anti-immigrant sentiment and populist success. Immigration can be dismissed as a significant determinant of M5S's success.

Economic Explanations

Of all the situational factors potentially contributing to the success of M5S, the economic crisis and the high levels of unemployment in Italy have the strongest links to the populist party's electoral gains, although it should be noted that the elections in which Grillo won a quarter of the vote took place five years after the beginning of the economic crisis. There is no doubt that Italy is suffering from high unemployment, and demographics show that Grillo's followers in particular have suffered under the current economic conditions.

One theory explaining the success of PRRPs is relative deprivation theory, an economic explanation for support of radical right or populist parties that links their success to the decline of economic opportunity for certain groups or individuals (Rydgren 2007, 248). Bell (2002) and Lipset (1959) argue that the loss of status or fear of impending loss can be just as important as dwindling economic opportunities in encouraging support of populist parties.

A related theory is that people who are "modernization losers," i.e. they are unable to adjust to society's technological, social, and economic transformation, and are left out, may be facing unemployment or other indications that they have become superfluous, are likely to vote for populist parties (Rydgren 2007). Betz (1994) considered "modernization losers" people who were unemployed or risked unemployment, while Minkenberg (2000) believes that the definition can include people who are secure in their employment but still stand to lose out economically in the new society. This theory suggests a link between levels of unemployment – or widespread fear of impending employment – and the success of populist parties. It also suggests that populist parties are likely to have a higher proportion of supporters who are unemployed than other parties and the population at large.

However, the link between populism and unemployment is highly contested, for although PRRPs tend to have a disproportionate amount of unemployed supporters, scholars have found no correlation – and even in some studies a negative correlation – between unemployment rates or economic decline and the electoral success of PRRPs (Rydgren 2007, 249). As previously mentioned, Golder (2003) found a positive correlation between the unemployment rate and the success of PRRPs, but it was contingent on the countries having a large immigrant population.

In fact, the unemployment rate in many of the countries with the most successful PRRPs is surprisingly low. In 2000, Switzerland's unemployment rate was only 2.0%, in Austria it dropped to its lowest since 1992 at 5.8%, and in Italy in 2000, while the unemployment rate for the entire country was 10.0%, the unemployment rate in the

North, where *Lega Nord*'s supporters come from, was less than 5% (Betz 2001). Shortly afterward, in the May 2001 elections, *Lega Nord* won 3.9% of the proportional vote in the Chamber of Deputies, a rate similar to its February 2013 return of 4.1% (Álvarez-Rivera 2013). The unemployment rate in northeastern and northwestern Italy remains low at 5.0% and 6.3% respectively.

Assuming that the literature backs up unemployment as a contributing factor to PRRP electoral success – which clearly remains a matter of debate – there should be higher levels of unemployment (and the sense that these levels will not come to an end anytime soon in Italy) leading up to Grillo's electoral victory and, logically, a greater percentage of people who are either unemployed or fear worsening financial security within Grillo's party.

In the popular press, the success of M5S has been linked to high levels of unemployment, particularly among Italian youths, who had an unemployment rate over 40% in 2013 (Dinmore and Segreti, 2013). It is true that a far higher percentage of M5S supporters are unemployed than the Italian population at large. 19% of Grillo's Facebook fans are unemployed, as opposed to 7.9% of the general Italian population (Bartlett et al. 2013, 31). Economic concerns are by far the biggest concerns of Grillo's supporters, with 62% listing "the economic situation" and 61% listing unemployment as one of their two biggest concerns (Bartlett et al. 2013, 34). They are also much more pessimistic about the future of Italy's economy than the population at large with 66% predicting that the economic situation will get worse in the next twelve months, compared to 43% of the

general population, and only 10% predicting that the economy will improve over the same time period, compared to 21% of the population at large (Bartlett et al. 2013, 36).

However, despite the temptation to ascribe M5S's success to high unemployment and other lingering effects of the 2008 economic crisis, such an assessment ignores several vital questions. First, where were all the votes from unemployed or otherwise financially discontented voters for PRRPs and other populist parties between 2008 and 2012? Second, why vote for M5S over the pre-existing populist party, *Lega Nord*, especially if Golder (2003) is correct that high immigration and high unemployment together are correlated with populist success, given that *Lega Nord* has a much stronger stance on immigration? Third, why are the other European countries suffering from high unemployment not experiencing the same level of populist success (or populist success to any significant degree at all for that matter)?

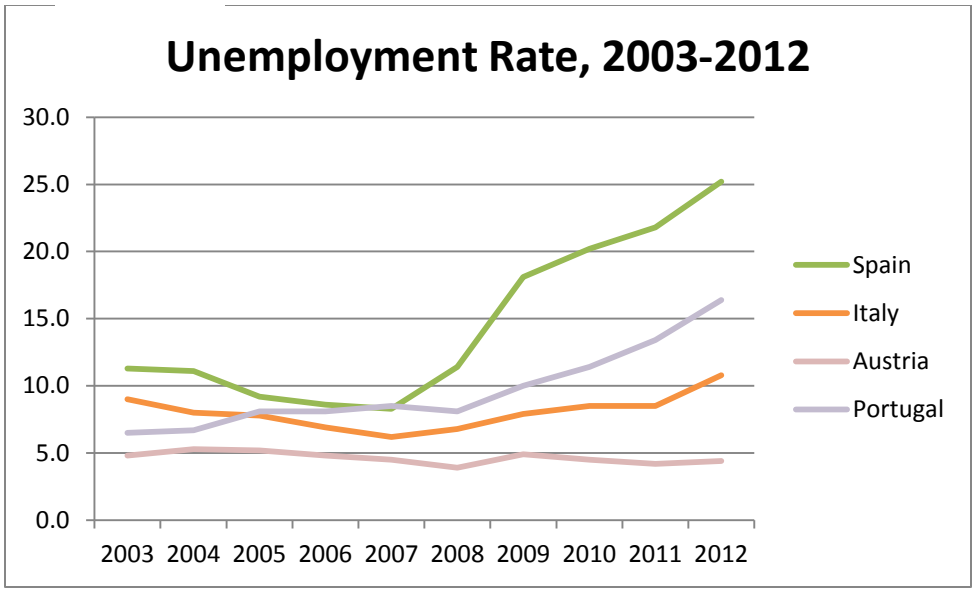
The first two questions are fairly easy to account for. There *was* a significant surge in support for *Lega Nord* in 2008. Its 8.3% of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies was nearly double what it had been receiving in recent elections, and for a regionalist party that would not have much attraction outside of Northern Italy, that is a significant percentage (Álvarez-Rivera 2013). Such a surge does indicate a correlation between economic discontent and populist voting. In addition, the unemployment rate in Italy, despite rising steadily from 2007 onwards, rose even more sharply between 2011 and 2012 (see Figure 2). In addition, *Lega Nord*, as a rightwing and regionalist party, is limited in the amount of votes that it can capture, for no matter how discontented some

voters are with the system, leftwing and Southern voters would be exceedingly unlikely to vote for such a party.

That partly answers the question of "why M5S?" as well. M5S, by refusing to be pinned down to one side of the ideological spectrum, has the ability to attract votes from the discontented left, right, and center. It is unsurprising that it has a far greater percentage of the vote than a PRRP with a more restrictive ideological platform. However, it doesn't explain why M5S managed to erode *Lega Nord*'s vote, although I suspect this is because *Lega Nord* can no longer genuinely market itself as an "anti-system" party after having been in government off and on for the past twenty years. I further explore *Lega Nord*'s diminishing legitimacy as a populist "anti-system" party later on.

The assumption that a high unemployment rate and an economic crisis would elicit support for populist parties is strange if voters are assumed to be voting strategically to maximize their own self-interest. The logical choice for a voter facing unemployment would be to vote for a leftist party offering vital social services. This did happen to a degree in February 2013, for the leftist SEL did disproportionately well among the youngest voter demographics – the voters who are also disproportionately unemployed. However, even more youth voted for a populist party offering very little in terms of useful social services.

Figure 2



Source: *Eurostat, "Harmonized Unemployment rate by sex."* *http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&language=en&pcode=teilm0. Acc20&tableSelection=1&plugin=1. (February 12, 2014)*

The third question is even much more troubling. Two of the countries depicted in Figure 2 (Italy and Austria) have at least one strong populist party; the other two (Spain and Portugal) only have marginal or fledgling populist parties. M5S and *Lega Nord* together received nearly 30% of Italian votes in 2013, and the Freedom Party of Austria, a PRRP, received 24.0% of the Austrian vote in the same year (Álvarez-Rivera 2013). And yet Spain's unemployment rate has grown astronomically from 2008 to 2012, exceeding 25% of the population, and Portugal's is at least 5% higher than Italy's. Austria's has shrunk in the same time period.

I do not seek to discount the economic crisis and rising unemployment as a significant variable in the growth of populist voting in Italy. The disproportionate number of unemployed Italians among Grillo's supporters compared to the population at large along with the surge of success for *Lega Nord* during the 2008 economic crisis shows that economic factors do influence support for populist parties. However, the

weak evidence for a correlation within political science literature as well as the lack of a successful populist party in Spain and Portugal, countries which are suffering much more under the current economic crisis than Italy or Austria, indicates that there are variables at play that are much more significant than unemployment in determining both the existence and the success of populist parties.

Euroscepticism

Many scholars have attributed the rise of PRRPs to rising discontent with the European Union. Euroscepticism is a term used to describe a European phenomenon that dates from the early 1990s, in which European integration (especially the furthering of existing integration) is opposed and critiqued by political actors and the populace within both current member states of the European Union (EU) and potential EU member states. Euroscepticism has increased nearly uniformly across European states, although this could in part be a reflection of the increasing flexibility with which the term is applied (Harmsen 2010, 334). Another distinction is necessary here between complete opposition to the integration of Europe and Euroscepticism, as Hartleb argues that PRRPs do not oppose the unification of Europe in total, instead choosing to criticize the way it is proceeding (2012, 50).

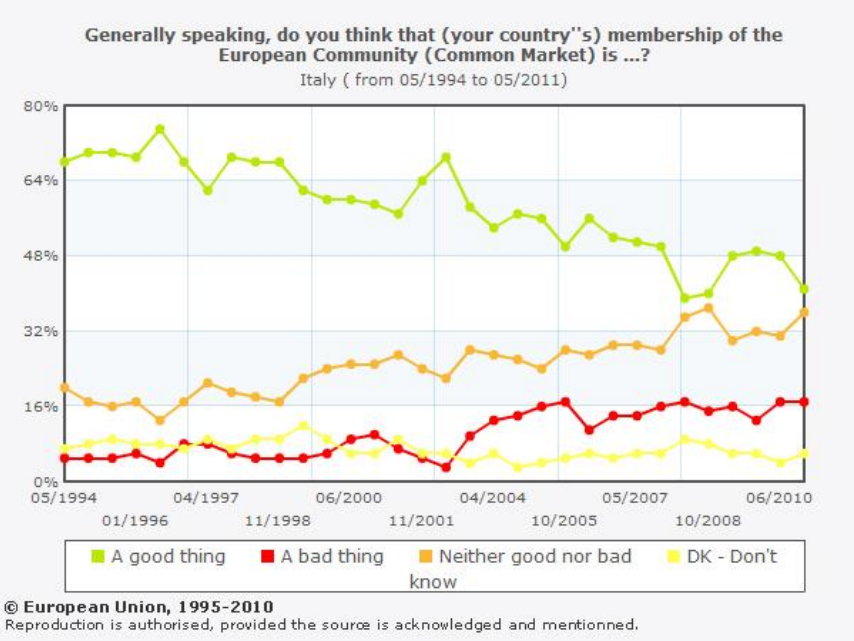
Krouwel and Abts link contemporary populism to Euroscepticism and argue that rather than passively responding to growing anti-European integration sentiment, populists "mobilize, generate, and generalize" political discontent (2007, 253). Elites in the EU are no longer perceived to be acting in the public interest (Hayward 1996, 10). Populist parties on both the left and the right might share a stake in Euroscepticism, as

Halikiopoulou, Nanou, and Vasilopoulu found that radical right and radical left parties converge in interest when it comes to Euroscepticism in response to the threat of the cultural integration as well as the potential solidification of the EU's power in the future (2012, 527). However, Halikiopoulou, Nanou, and Vasilopoulu do not have empirical evidence that growing Euroscepticism among voters increases the electoral success of these parties, nor do they differentiate between radical right and left extremist parties and radical right and radical left populist parties. Structurally, the existence of the European Parliament may even benefit populist parties who cannot get elected in "first order" national elections, as voters have demonstrated more willingness to support protest parties in "second order" European Parliament elections that have fewer political risks attached (Harmsen 2010, 338). In fact, Grillo has been confidently stating that his party will win the largest portion of the votes in the May 2014 European elections (Keating 2014).

Not all scholarship sees a link between the electoral success of PRRPs and Euroscepticism, and the historical experience of PRRPs runs counter to the possibility of a link. Mudde argues that fluctuations in public opinion on European integration, measured by the Eurobarometer, have no correlations to the electoral success of populist parties (2013, 7). Nor have Italian PRRPs been consistently Eurosceptics. While *Lega Nord* is oriented towards Euroscepticism, opposing (at times) European immigration, enlargement of the EU, and the euro as Italy's currency, its stance towards the European Union has been inconsistent, possibly due to political opportunism, and takes a backseat to *Lega Nord*'s domestic agenda (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2013, 27). In 1996, Bossi of

Lega Nord used the threat of Italy not being invited to the European Monetary Union as incentive to push for Northern secession (Betz 2001). His party's primary goal – mobilization against a perceived "Other" (in this case southern Italians) – superseded Euroscepticism. Taggart and Szczerbiak (2008) identified Italy as a country in which Euroscepticism had "hardly any relevance."

Figure 3



Source: Eurobarometer surveys, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/index_en.cfm

However, as Figure 3 (taken from the Eurobarmeter surveys by the European Commission) demonstrates, Euroscepticism has been increasing. Italians who say that the European Community is "a good thing" has been falling dramatically since 2001, while those who believe that Italy's membership to the European Community is "neither bad or good" has risen nearly as dramatically. Grillo has tapped into the public's wariness towards the EU, calling for a referendum on Italian membership to the euro (Dinmore and Segreti 2013). He insists that he is not "anti-European," believing instead

that "there are various ways of looking at Europe" (Agence-France-Presse, 2014a). This, of course, does not preclude him from being a Eurospectic nor from attracting Eurosceptics, since Euroscepticism by definition does not necessitate a total rejection of the EU.

Grillo's supporters do appear to be disproportionately Eurospectics. The 2012 survey of Grillo's Facebook fans revealed that 70% of respondents do not think that things are going in the right direction in the EU, compared to 40% of Italians overall (Bartlett et al. 2013, 40). Only 19% of respondents reported tending to trust the EU (compared to 32% nationally who report that they tend to trust the EU) although that number is much higher than the portion of Grillo supporters who trust domestic political institutions (Bartlett et al. 2013, 40). While studies have failed to prove a link between Euroscepticism and populist electoral success, Euroscepticism does appear to be an important feature of the M5S electoral base.

Explaining Inconsistencies in Italian Populist Success

If Euroscepticism is an integral motivator in populist voting, then why was *Lega Nord* able to become electorally successful in the early 1990s, when Italians were supportive of and benefitted from European integration? *Lega Nord* reached its zenith during a time of relative economic prosperity and positivity towards the EU. Unlike M5S, its platform was much more openly anti-immigrant and identity politics a core feature of the party's mission. Using the metrics of anti-immigrant sentiment, economic conditions, and Euroscepticism alone, the factors contributing to the success of *Lega Nord* and M5S seem to be fundamentally different. However, a closer look at the

circumstances that gave rise to the two populist parties reveal remarkable similarities in the political situations that they were responding to. While there is little consistency between the variables posited above as contributing factors to populist electoral success, both parties arose during a time in which dissatisfaction with Italy's party system and political class reached all-time highs. By 2013, European integration had progressed far beyond the level of the early 1990s to the point that the EU could actively constrain the choices of domestic political actors, further restricting the ability of the government to respond to the will of the people and deal with harsh economic conditions such as high unemployment in the manner that the people might demand. Both economic conditions and Euroscepticism as contributing factors to populist success can be seen as symptoms of a much larger ailment: the failure of the Italian political system and the parties and politicians which inhabit it to demonstrate accountability and responsiveness to the popular will.

Populist Voting and Political Inefficacy

Populism, by definition, opposes elite control of power and seeks to make the will of the people the ultimate arbiter of government legitimacy. Theoretically, holding politicians accountable to the popular will is the *raison d'être* of populist parties. Therefore, populist voting would logically increase as political efficacy – the people's faith in the responsiveness and accountability of government – decreases. Canovan (1999, 12) identifies the gap between democracy's promise to represent the people's will and its actual ability to do so, as measured in part by the responsiveness of elected

officials as one instigator of populist voting. There is ample evidence to suggest a correlation between populist and protest voting and levels of political inefficacy.

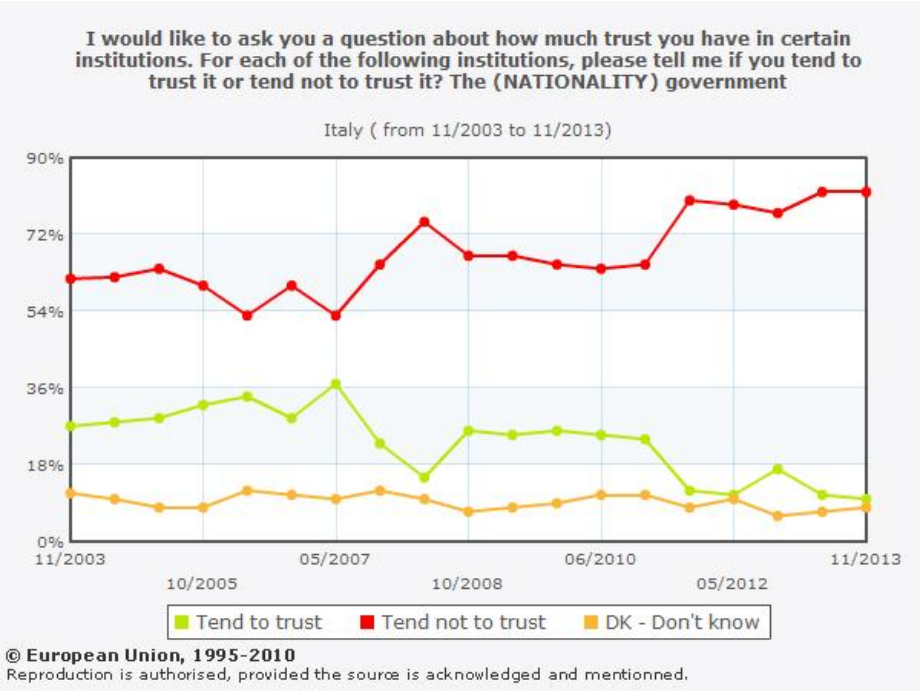
Measurements of Political Inefficacy

Part of the difficulty in linking populist voting to political inefficacy, despite its logical connection, is the difficulty of measuring efficacy as a variable. Political inefficacy by itself is an intangible concept, difficult to quantify – although opinion polls have tried. In such polls, Grillo's followers have expressed a level of dissatisfaction with democracy far greater than the Italian population as a whole. Only 4% of his Facebook fans reported being either "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with "the way democracy is developing in Italy" (compared to 32% of the entire population), while 83% reported being "not at all satisfied" (compared to only 19% of the population). The greatest portion of the Italian population reported being "not very satisfied" with the way democracy in Italy is developing (49%), but only 10% of Grillo's fans reported such moderate dissatisfaction (Bartlett et al. 2013, 37).

Distrust of political institutions is another indication of low voter efficacy. Grillo's Facebook fans report distrust of nearly all elite institutions, both political and otherwise, in Italy. Only 8% reported that they "tend to trust" the government (compared to 12% nationally), 3% reported trusting political parties (9% nationally), 6% big companies (33% nationally), 4% television (40% nationally), 2% Parliament (14% nationally), 2% banks and financial institutions (no national statistics), and 11% the press (34% nationally) (Bartlett et al. 2013). While it is hardly surprising for the base of anti-establishment party to distrust elite institutions, other national indicators show that the

decline in Italy's democratic health is not limited to the most radical members of society. Figure 4, taken from the European Commission's Eurobarometer Surveys, shows that distrust in Italy's national government has been rising over the last decade:

Figure 4: Italian Public's Trust in the National Government, 2003-2013

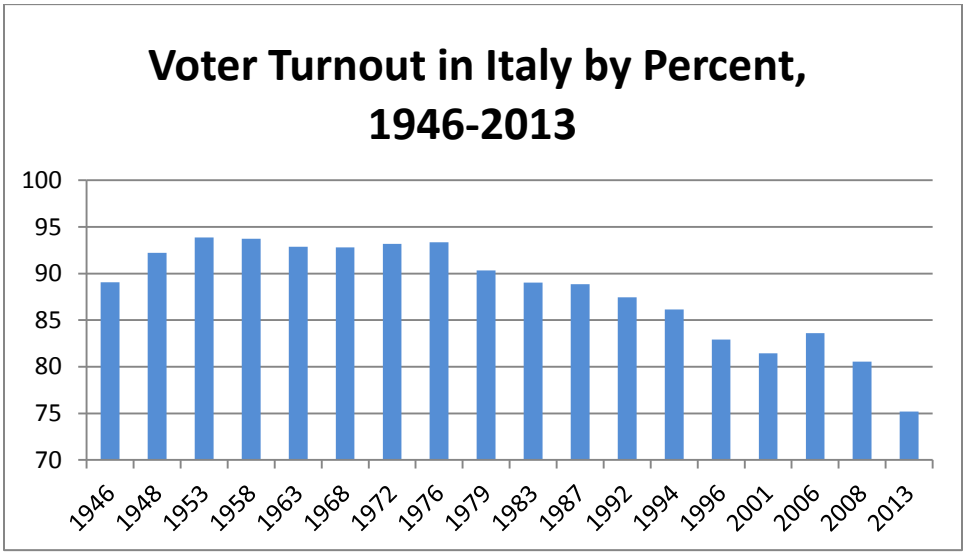


Source: Eurobarometer surveys, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/index_en.cfm

One traditional indication of the failing health of a democracy is declining voter turnout. As Figure 5 depicts, voter turnout in Italy has been on the decline since 1976, hitting an all-time low in February 2013 of 75.2%, a full 5.3 percentage points (equivalent to 2.5 million voters) lower than in 2008 (De Lucia and Cataldi 2013). This argument requires some qualifications. While the decline in Figure 3 looks (and, in recent times, is) dramatic, a few factors must be considered in order for the data to be interpreted accurately. First of all, Italy's turnout rates historically have been consistently

higher than nearly all other liberal democracies. Turnout rates above 90% for nearly thirty years in a row are unheard of in most of Europe. Secondly, the initial decline in voter turnout depicted in Figure 5 is misleading, as from 1979 to 2001, the reported voter turnout numbers included Italians residing outside the country who are much less likely to vote (De Lucia and Cataldi 2013). The sudden increase in the voter turnout rate in 2006 could be explained by the exclusion of Italian citizens abroad from the count.

Figure 5



Source: "Voter turnout data for Italy." 2014. *International IDEA Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.* http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=IT (February 23, 2014).

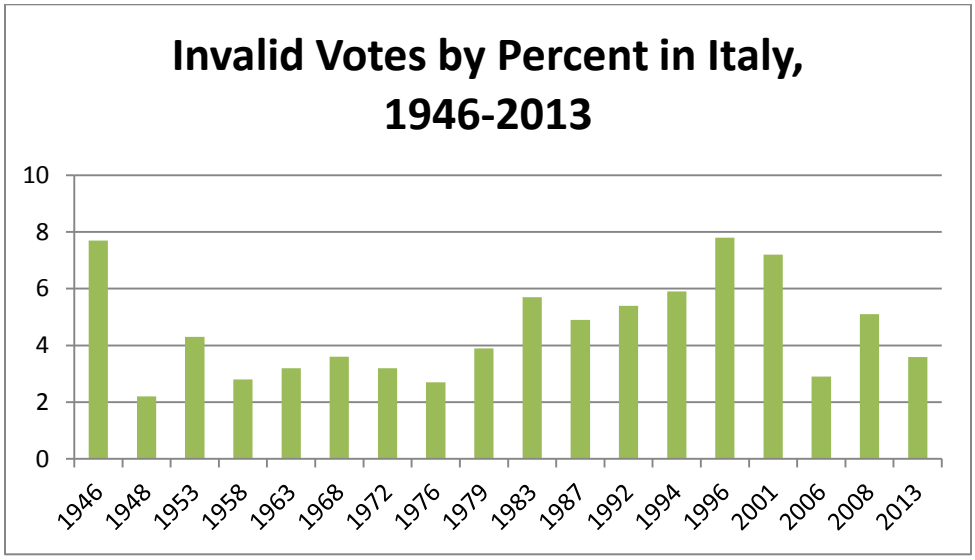
However, even taking this into consideration, there is no doubt that voter turnout in Italy has been in decline since the end of the First Republic, and that the decline accelerated even more rapidly between 2008 and 2013. De Lucia and Cataldi (2013) identify two possible reasons for the decline: first, that the demographics of voters have changed, with younger voters without strong ties to particular parties replacing the voters

who had participated in the Cold War era ideological competition between the contrasting worldviews of the Christian Democrats and the Communists, and second, because of the perception over the last twenty years that the Second Republic's political system is "inefficient." However, the accelerated decline of the voter turnout rate between 2008 and 2013 exceeds the estimated "physiological decline of participation due to generational turnover" of 2% (D'Alimonte and Maggini 2013). De Lucia and Cataldi attribute such an abrupt decline to a wide variety of factors ranging from the November 2011 political crisis that resulted in Berlusconi's resignation and the formation of a technocratic government, the government inability to reform the electoral laws, the failure of the parties to establish a bipolar system in the past few years, and the growth of populism.

I would argue, however, that De Lucia and Cataldi's hypotheses are not independent explanations but rather symptoms of the same systemic failing of the Italian political system. Following the end of the Cold War, external forces could no longer compel ideological voting and generate a sense of competition in a party system with one dominant party. Yet a healthy competitive party system should not require a global ideological conflict in order to artificially generate competition. The leadership crisis of 2011 and the ensuing technocratic government only served to further bring the political system's inefficacy before the public eye and alienate voters from the democratic process. DeLucia and Cataldi cite growing populist sentiment as a separate factor influencing declining voter turnout, but populism is another symptom which rarely exists independent of any cause.

While Italy has always had an extraordinarily high (if declining) voter turnout, it also has had a tradition of voters sending in spoiled or blank ballots, a phenomenon that has been growing since the 1980s and peaked in the 1990s, after the constitutional reforms which were intended to remedy the lack of a competitive, bipolar party system (see Figure 6). Uggla's comparative study of invalid and extra-parliamentary voting in 200 elections across Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and the Americas between 1980 and 2000 links invalid voting and voting for extra-parliamentary parties (marginal "outsider" parties without seats in Parliament) to party systems in which voters have "little effective choice in the form of clear alternatives" (Uggla 2008, 1141). Declining voter turnout, invalid ballots, and voting for extra-parliamentary parties all are positively correlated to each other, indicating that studies which look at these factors independently are underestimating the public's abandonment of the established political parties (2008, 1149). Italy's democracy is much less healthy than it would appear at first glance.

Figure 6

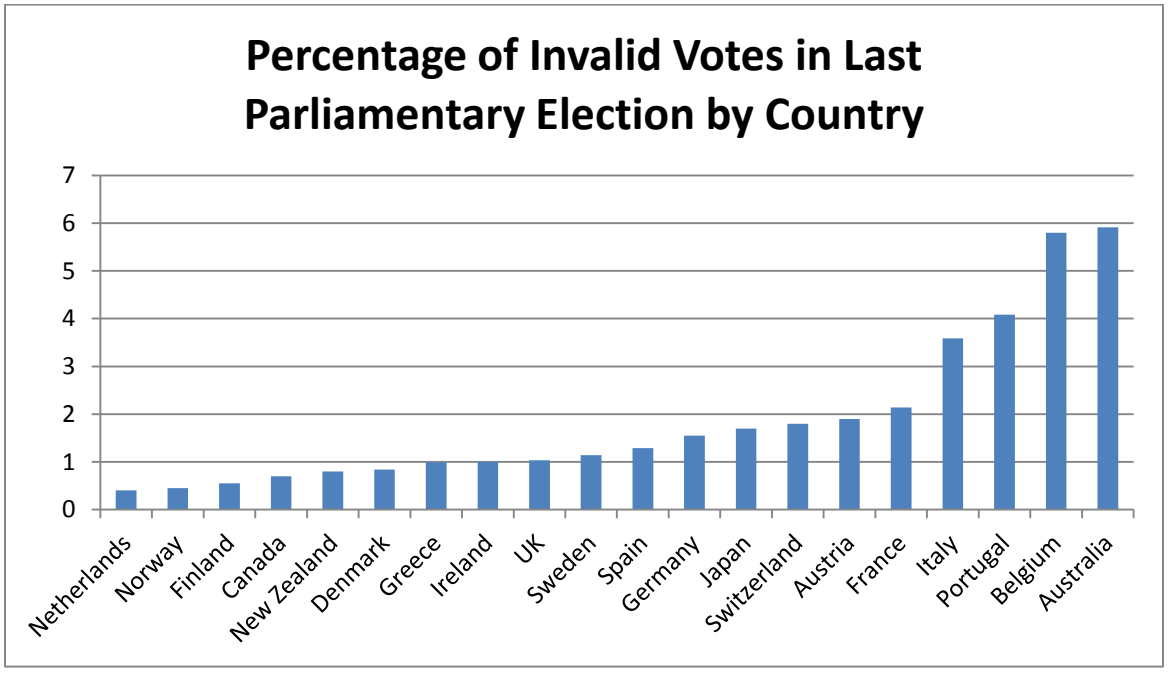


Source: "Voter turnout data for Italy." 2014. *International IDEA Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.* http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=IT (February 23, 2014).

It should be noted that the percent of invalid votes drops sharply in the 2000s (with a brief resurgence during the recession-era election of 2008). The two lowest points in terms of invalid ballots in the past thirty years are the 2006 and 2013 elections. When the voter turnout rates and the rates of invalid ballots for each of these elections is taken side by side, it appears that there are very different explanations for these two low points. In 2013, the decline in invalid ballots corresponds to a decline in voter participation, indicating that the voters who would normally turn in spoiled ballots are either sitting out the race entirely or have found a party which presents a clear alternative – presumably, since they had been protest voters, M5S.

Uggla (2013, 1157) found that none of the traditional explanations for invalid ballots and extra-parliamentary voting – literacy (a measure of the ability of a voter to make an informed choice), urbanization (to test the "modernization losers" hypothesis explored earlier), and unemployment (also explored as a major factor in protest voting above) – have any correlation to the casting of invalid votes. The only two significant explanatory factors are the number of political rights afforded to citizens (with more invalid ballots in countries with weaker democracies) and, with an even stronger correlation, the existence of a clear choice between competitive parties in elections.

Figure 7



Source: "Invalid Votes." 2014. *International IDEA Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*. http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=IT (February 23, 2014).

As Figure 7 reveals, Italy has a much higher percentage of invalid votes than is typical amongst Western democracies. Only Portugal, Belgium, and Australia had a higher percentage of invalid votes in their last parliamentary elections, and only five of the countries have an invalid ballot rate above 2%. If this chart had compared invalid ballot rates in the 1990s the contrast may have been even starker, for the invalid ballot rate has fallen to less than half of its 1996 peak (see Figure 6).

Like all of the other variables examined previously, political inefficacy is a symptom of an underlying ailment rather than the cause itself. It is the unresponsive and unaccountable political institutions which are to blame for inefficacy, and there is a multitude of ways in which political institutions can render themselves unresponsive and

unaccountable to the people's will. The Italian political system has several egregious institutional failings which would erode levels of voter efficacy.

Convergence Theory and Consensus Democracy

Two general hypotheses studied by political scientists that deal with the structural failings of a party system are that *consensus democracy* contributes to the success of populist parties and that populist parties thrive when *political convergence* among mainstream parties occurs. While the mechanics of these two structural problems are different – consensus democracy is strongest in a proportional representation system that necessitates government coalitions of multiple parties while political convergence can occur in a majoritarian electoral system when the platforms of two competing parties become close enough to be effectively indistinguishable to most voters, the practical result of both is a lack of clear choice for voters which alienates them from the democratic process. Italy suffers from both phenomena simultaneously.

Consensus democracy has been cited as a contributing factor to the increase in populist voting across Europe (Katz and Mair 1995, 24; Andeweg 2001). Hakhverdian (2007) reaffirms the connection between populist electoral success and consensus democracy as demonstrated by the executive-party dimension in addition to finding a correlation between populist voting and federalism, another form of consensus democracy. Consensus democracy is one of the most popular institutional models used in Western Europe. Unlike the "winner take all" majoritarian systems, in which only one party emerges as the victor, consensus democracy allows smaller parties to join governing coalitions and form cooperative alliances with parties they might not share

ideological positions with. The problem with this model is that governing coalitions are decided on after an election through a process of negotiation among party elites, effectively taking the decision out of the hands of voters. The party which wins the most votes is not necessarily the party which forms the government, and smaller "kingmaker" parties have been able to wield a disproportionate amount of power.

While politicians attempted to fix the electoral uncertainty that comes along with consensus democracy by requiring coalitions to be established before rather than after elections, the voters' power to determine the make-up of a governing coalition is still impeded (Mignone 2011, 49). The problems that the 1993 Italian electoral reforms were designed to fix – political fragmentation that leads to complex and instable governments and erodes voter efficacy – continue to linger under the new electoral system. Through electoral alliances, small parties that could not surmount the 4% vote threshold on their own continue to gain seats in parliament and extract policy concessions from larger parties, a practice which results in government instability when coalition partners find their political differences to be too stark once a government is formed.

As a parliamentary system, Italy's government relies on the parties to form strong coalitions in the absence of any one party holding the majority. Italy's president is in charge of nominating the prime minister (the head of the government), but the prime minister needs to win a vote of confidence in the parliament and can be voted out of office at any time. In order to create a government, parties with differing views often help each other win elections and then form governing coalitions together. Mignone writes that "these alliances have been largely geared to win elections first and sort out

policy differences among coalition partners later," a political tactic which takes policy decisions out of the hands of the voters and establishes volatile governments quick to collapse from internal policy disputes (Mignone 2011, 43). Even the very political party that the 1992 election was seen as a referendum against, the Christian Democratic Party, seems to have survived the political turmoil under the guise of Silvio Berlusconi's party *Forza Italia*, a party which also historically has allied itself with the Christian Democratic Centre, a party established by the leaders of the centre-right faction of the old Christian Democratic Party (Mignone 52).

While consensus democracies might harm political efficacy by obscuring accountability and leaving the final decision of a government's composition to the political elite, political convergence also deprives voters of political efficacy by preventing them from having any real choice in the first place. Scholars have argued that political convergence benefits anti-establishment parties such as M5S because the mainstream parties appear to be "components of a basically undifferentiated political class" (Amir Abedi 2002, 553). Grillo refers to the two main Italian parties as "PDL and PD-minus-the-L" in his speeches to emphasize their similarity (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 10).

Within the context of Italy, the political convergence theory can be taken a step further, for supporters of M5S might not just be protesting the lack of a party system that gives voters real choices on Election Day but also the technocratization of the Italian government, brought on in part by Italy's membership to the euro. Populists oppose the technocratization of policy-making (Hakhverdian 2007), yet the prime minister prior to

the February 2013 elections, Mario Monti, was a professor of economics and a former adviser to Goldman Sachs who led a "technocrats" cabinet "above the factional politics." To make matters even worse, Monti's ascendency did not even follow the democratic process, as he was chosen to replace Berlusconi without Berlusconi undergoing a no-confidence vote. His government was supported by both of the main parties from November 2011 to the end of 2012, leaving only Italy's small populist parties in the opposition and denying the Italian public the opportunity to coalesce behind a major opposition party (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 13-14).

The voting Italian public's displeasure at the technocratic imposition can be seen in Monti's embarrassing loss in February 2013, where he took in only 10% of the vote despite being openly supported by the leaders of the industrial and business community in both Italy and Europe at large and even by the Vatican (through the Italian conference of Bishops) (Forti 2013). It is not surprising that voters, left with a choice between a centrist Monti, a complacent centre-left which went along with Monti's technocratic scheme, and a center-right alliance led by Berlusconi, a man embroiled in scandal and associated with the inept government, latched onto the alternate option presented by Grillo, despite M5S's lack of a coherent platform.

In 2013, 23.8% of the Italians who turned out to vote supported members of M5S running for seats in the Senate and 25.6% voted for M5S in the Chamber of Deputies. While many of these voters were siphoned off from mainstream parties (which by itself is telling), and others came from existing populist parties, there are also indications that a good portion of M5S's supporters came from people who had not voted in the previous

election at all. In the local 2012 elections, 30.5 percent of M5S's supporters were people who had sat out the 2008 general election (*Corriere Della Sera* 2012). While some of the people in this category may be young first-time voters, many of them may be people who have become so disillusioned with the democratic process in Italy and the party options available to them that they retreated from politics entirely until a protest party capable of channeling their frustration at the system came along.

The appeal of the political convergence theory is that it can explain M5S's bipolar ideological demographic. While the majority of the above theories explain the electoral success of PRRPs, a political vacuum on both sides of the spectrum due to convergence would create a demand for a populist protest party both on the left and on the right, a demand that M5S could fulfill by virtue of its refusal to commit to any particular ideology on the left-right spectrum.

La Classe Politica: Opulence, Stagnation, and Corruption

While political convergence typically refers to the convergence of policies, voters would not expect that politicians from different parties to offer different results if they also expected all of these politicians to be susceptible to corruption and greed. In the case of Italy, the assumption that political elites will operate in a similar manner, regardless of party affiliation, is hardly a stretch. The political class in Italy has been the subject of derision for some time. Italy's politics have long been marked by corruption and clientelism, which provide further barriers between the people and the democratic expression of their will. 43% of Grillo supporters on the Demospolis poll claimed that their vote was motivated by a desire to "radically change the political class," an even

greater percentage than the ones who feel unrepresented by the political parties in Italy (Bartlett et al. 2013, 37). Such disgust with the men and women who purport to represent the people in a democratic government is not unusual in Western Europe, even in countries with less egregious corruption. A report on the state of democracy in the United Kingdom found that "political disaffection" stems not from "declining civic virtue" or political apathy, but rather from "disenchantment, even hatred, of politics and politicians" (Pinelli 2011, 7).

In Italy, voters have even more reasons than in most advanced industrial democracies to be disenchanted with their politicians. Despite the government's financial difficulties, Italy's legislature still seats three times as many politicians as the U.S. Congress, politicians who are rewarded with the highest compensation of any national legislators in the world. *La classe politica* is the least respected in Italian society, for good reason, given the history of rampant corruption among Italy's elected officials (Mignone 41).

Between 1994 and 2000, 4,000 corruption, fraud, and other political indictments were handed out to politicians from the leadership and rank and file of all the major political parties of the First Republic. However, most of these politicians received *de facto* impunity, for the justice system was too backed up to review all the cases, and the charges get automatically dropped after a certain period of time (Rossetti 2000, 173). In terms of public perceptions of political accountability, this is a disastrous situation, for the public is made aware of massive accusations of corruption without also seeing the politicians being held accountable for their actions. The anger and disillusionment

expressed by Grillo supporters at *la classe politica* is unsurprising given the Republic's long history of high profile corruption scandals coupled by a lack of justice, a pattern which became even more prominent following the recent political scandals.

When corruption is visible on such a large scale, the voting public cannot trust its politicians to represent the people. Moreover, voters cannot simply vote out the corrupt individuals and expect the problem to disappear, for the incentives for corruption will remain in place to tempt the next holder of higher office. There is no one party at fault for such widespread corruption, so disillusionment towards the party system as a whole, along with political elites generally, is a logical response. A positive relationship between populist voting and corruption scandals would be expected, but does this relationship hold true for both of Italy's most prominent populist parties?

A Populist Trend in Italy: The Parallel Rise of *Lega Nord* and M5S

Perhaps the strongest argument for studying M5S through the lens of scholarship on PRRPs, especially in the context of Italy, comes from M5S's structural resemblance to its rightwing older cousin, *Lega Nord* ("The Northern League"). Like M5S, *Lega Nord* refuses to label itself as a party; instead, it is a "league." Its justification for rejecting the party label is even thinner than M5S's, for *Lega Nord* can make no claim to have an internally democratic structure. Like M5S, *Lega Nord* revolved around the charismatic and dictatorial leadership of one man, Umberto Bossi. Bossi, the "undisputed leader" of *Lega Nord*, even declared himself "the savior of Italy" in 1992 (Betz 1994, 7). Other than structure, however, are there really any similarities between the two parties, given the very different circumstances of their rise?

While anti-immigrant sentiment, economic variables, and levels of Euroscepticism do not point to a pattern connecting the circumstances of the rise of *Lega Nord* and the rise of M5S, the political inefficacy argument does apply to both parties. A comparison of the emergence of both parties reveals many common elements in terms of voter efficacy, although the origins of inefficacy may diverge slightly.

Familial Resemblances

While rightwing identity politics are at the core of *Lega Nord*'s platform of regionalism and Northern superiority, *Lega Nord*'s opposition to the South stems from populist ideas as much as it does from identity politics. *Lega Nord* is not opposing "the Other" solely for economic and cultural protectionist reasons, but also for its perceived connections to clientelism and corruption. Like M5S, *Lega Nord* "concentrated and amplified Italians' political anxieties, directing it against the parties and government institutions" (Diamanti 2014, 4).

Similarly, Euroscepticism among Grillo's supporters stems not from an opposition to the cultural integration, both in terms of a pan-European identity and in terms of the movement of immigrants across Europe, but rather from anger at the political constraints (including the ones constraining economic policy) that accompany such integration. The main difference between the two parties is that while *Lega Nord* filled its "empty heart" with regionalist and nationalistic identity politics, M5S is content to be unabashedly populist.

No matter how *Lega Nord* and M5S present themselves, their critique of the Italian political system and its occupants is the centerpiece of their platform, at least

leading up to their first electoral successes – an unsurprising position to take, given the political atmosphere in which they came to power. Both parties emerged at a time when the Italian party system was failing to provide responsive, accountable, and coherent government and when the corruption of the political elite was readily apparent to the Italian public, and both parties represented themself as offering a more democratic alternative. For *Lega Nord*, the "more democratic" model consisted of stronger local government and a federal system, returning the power back to the people and away from the corruption of Rome. M5S has a higher tech model of Internet voting that allows people to have a direct say in policy positions. Although their methods might be different, both populist parties responded to the political turmoil of their time by offering an alternative to the corruption and unresponsiveness of the political elite.

Failure of Party Systems

Both parties emerged out of a period of political turmoil, when the viability of the current party system and its ability to represent the interests of the people was under threat. Governance in Italy's First Republic (1946-1992) was marked simultaneously by high instability and stagnation, an unusual situation for a Western democracy. Mignone writes that "in addition to having had the highest number of governments in the postwar period, Italy is also the only Western democracy in which one political party dominated the government for about 50 years" (Mignone 2008, 52). Many Italian governments lasted less than a year, but invariably the Christian Democratic Party, backed by the United States, would dominate each replacement government. In addition to political stagnation on the party level, individual politicians also became impossible to dislodge

from government. Rather than leave office following a controversy, politicians would simply change position or even assume the same position after a brief hiatus, such as in the case of Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti, who resigned in 1991 only to be reinstated a few weeks later (Mignone 2008, 56).

The enduring reign of the Christian Democratic Party can be attributed to the structure of the First Republic's electoral system and the resultant relatively unchangeable party system that characterized Italian politics for much of the First Republic, as well as the influence of outside forces. Because Italy's First Republic had a proportional representation system[3] with a low vote threshold of 1 percent (Mignone 2008, 71), it was extraordinarily easy for small parties to form and gain representation in the legislature. The plethora of smaller parties gave the Christian Democratic Party ample choice of coalition partners to help them form a government, partners which were easily replaceable with other smaller parties should internal disagreements lead to the fall of the government. The only opposition party which persistently won a substantial proportion of the vote was the Italian Communist Party (PCI), regularly winning one-quarter to one-third of the vote, but the PCI had little chance of becoming part of the government for the duration of the Cold War. The United States, which held immense influence over Italy as a key ally and financial supporter, had a *de facto* ban on the inclusion of any communist party in the government of its NATO ally, and Italians

[3] In a proportional representation (PR) system, voters choose between party lists rather than individual candidates (although Italy did have a preferential vote in which voters could support specific individuals within a party list) and seats in the legislature are allocated based on the proportion of votes that parties receive overall. Representatives elected in this manner reflect the ideological make-up of a country or a region as a whole rather than representing a particular geographical constituency. This system tends to favor the creation and representation of smaller parties, as a party only needs a small percentage of the vote to gain a seat in the legislature. Most countries have vote thresholds that a party must surpass in order to be represented in order to limit the proliferation of small parties.

themselves feared a communist takeover. Without any parties willing to form a coalition with the communists, the *PCI* was not a potent threat to the Christian Democrats domination despite its high level of support among voters (Mignone 2008, 51-53).

The ideological construct of the Cold War managed to artificially generate a sense of bipolar party competition despite the unquestioned supremacy of the Christian Democratic Party. The Communist Party and the Christian Democratic Party were seen as genuine competitors, even if the Communist Party had little to no chance of ever becoming part of the government. The Italian Communist Party (PCI) had been the channel through which discontented Italian voters expressed their frustration with the dominant political party. Mignone asserts that "many Italians voted communist…not because they firmly believed in communism, but because they disliked the other parties" (Mignone 2011, 51). Possibly as a result, the PCI had an unusual voter base for a communist party, as it "was supported by many practicing Catholics and, contrary to all expectations, it was strongest in some of the wealthiest regions of the peninsula and often weakest in the poorest regions" (Mignone 2011, 51).

All of this changed in the late 1980s. While the Christian Democrats had not lost their stranglehold on Italy's government, there was a growing sense in Italy that they did not represent the interests of the voters. Historically, the Christian Democrats had represented the interests of the large industrial firms that prior to Italy's economic restructuring had driven the northern Italian economy. The growing small and medium businesses felt unrepresented by the Christian Democrats, but they were left with no viable democratic alternative (Zaslove 2011, 49). The PCI was not ideologically

compatible with small business owners either, leaving them feeling increasing disenfranchised.

As the political support for the Christian Democrats waned in the industrial North, the party appealed to the religious persuasions of Southern Italians in order to maintain a base of supporters. This move further alienated Northern Italian business owners, for it was seen as an abandonment of ideological purity for political gain. Without a clear ideological and policy focus, the Christian Democrats were more vulnerable to the clientelism that came with a Southern alliance, further alienating the small business owners of the North. Political inefficacy increased over this period, as evidenced by the large number of blank or spoiled ballots turned in at the polls: between 1979 and 1987, invalid ballots increased from 1.5 to 2.6 million votes (Zaslove 2011, 54).

Lega Nord emerged in the 1980s, right in the midst of the growing voter dissatisfaction with the party system that had remained more or less stagnant for the last thirty years. *Lega Nord* originated from an alliance of separate regional leagues, all located in the northern regions of the country outside of the traditional Industrial Triangle represented by the Christian Democrats. The support for *Lega Lombarda*, the party in Lombardy headed by Umberto Bossi, exceeded that of any of the other regional leagues and the leagues decided to unite behind Bossi's leadership. The resulting party, *Lega Nord,* rejected the centralized state and the current, unresponsive political parties in favor of a federal system with immense regional autonomy (Zaslove 2011, 3). *Lega Nord* had the advantage of being unassociated with the old party structure and the patronage that came along with it, and even more importantly of being untouched by the *Tangentopoli*

scandal, which brought Italy's rampant political corruption to the attention of the mass media (Heinisch 2003, 98). Having never been part of the government, its candidates could campaign as the alternative to a corrupt system.

The standing political parties and immigrants were not the only targets of the Northern League. The supporters of *Lega Nord* feared another "external" threat to the power of the common people – the South. *Lega Nord* managed to turn the "Southern Question" of how to help the Southern economy catch up to the industrial North into a "Northern Question" of how to prevent the South from dragging the North's economic growth backwards and being a drain on the money of Northern taxpayers. At times, *Lega Nord* advocated seceding from Italy, although when they become part of the government they modified their demands to ask instead for devolution (Zaslove 2011, 68).

Factors outside Italy were threatening the status quo of the old party system as well. The Cold War ended shortly before the 1992 elections. Before, "the [Christian Democratic Party] and the PCI had reinforced one another: fear of the communists kept the Christian Democrats in power, and popular dissatisfaction with the government kept the communists strong" (Mignone 2008, 71). That system was no longer in place. For the first time, the PCI was not seen as a threat to Italy's democracy and therefore as a viable competitor, and without the fear of communism motivating people to vote for what had become a catch-all party, voters could throw their support behind alternate parties such as *Lega Nord*. The result was mass chaos: in Italy's 32 electoral districts, there were 531 party lists and 9,742 candidates for the chamber of deputies (the lower house of the Italian parliament) alone – 20% more parties than had been in the previous election

(Mignone 2008, 72). *Lega Nord* won the most votes with 8.6 percent of Italy's national vote and 17.3 percent of the Northern vote. In response to the disastrous election, Mario Segni, a prominent Christian Democrat, and other supporters of electoral reform gathered signatures for a referendum on reforming the Italian electoral system, which won 82.7 percent of the valid vote on April 18, 1993 (Mignone 2008, 40).

Similarly, the party system which led to the rise of M5S was in the process of collapse. Berlusconi, the man who stepped in to fill the void left by the collapse of the First Italian Republic, has seen his legitimacy crumble as the result of a series of corruption scandals. Italy's bipolar party system "crumbled and then partially reformed" following the imposition of Monti's technocratic government, and PdL is experiencing an identity crisis following Berlusconi's fall (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 13-14). M5S is filling the "void left by the traditional parties" following the accelerated "de-structuring of the Italian party system" (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 2). Like *Lega Nord,* M5S is rising to fill the gaps left by political parties unable to represent the interests of the Italian republic or retain voter confidence after shattering revelations of systematic corruption.

Corruption Scandals

In many ways, the environment in which Italy's older PRRP *Lega Nord* thrived in 1992 is very different from the conditions surrounding the rise of Beppe Grillo's M5S in 2013. In 1992, Italy's unemployment rate in the North at least was low. The country was a much more enthusiastic supporter of the European Union, and immigration was less visible. The electoral system and party system were different, with the Christian Democratic Party dominating a system full of small parties which managed to become

part of the government despite their size due to a PR system with a low voter threshold. However, in both eras, corruption scandals exposed the public to the deep flaws of their political systems.

In 1992, the *Tangentopoli* ("Kickback City") scandal broke after the arrest of a Milan official discovered in a retirement facility in the process of flushing bribe money led to revelations of the system-wide practice of officials demanding kickbacks in exchange for issuing contracts. It was estimated that about 6.5 trillion lire or 4 billion US dollars had been paid in bribes for contracts a year in the 1980s. As many as 5,000 of Italy's economic, political, and social elite were implicated in the scandal, with half of the members of Parliament under indictment at one point and 400 local councils disbanded due to corruption charges (Koff and Koff 1999, 2). The scale of this scandal shattered the people's trust in both their political elite and in their democratic institutions as a whole. Koff and Koff (1999, 3) view the ensuing breakdown of the First Italian Republic as a "massive de-legitimation process" following the public revelations of such systematic corruption.

Similarly, Italy's parties and political elites experienced "widespread social delegitimation" leading up to the 2013 national election (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 14). Both the mainstream parties and smaller, "anti-corruption" parties have been implicated in scandals. In 2011, Berlusconi, the man who had been the face of the Second Republic's government off and on for the past twenty years, was pushed out of his own government after a tax fraud conviction finally cost him his parliamentary immunity. The man who has been the face of Italy's government on and off for the past

twenty years is under indictment for a variety of corruption charges. He is currently undergoing a trial for bribing a senator from the anti-corruption Italy of Values party with €3 million in an effort to get him to join Berlusconi's party and undermine the center-left governing coalition in 2006 (Agence French-Presse 2014b). *Lega Nord,* the former standard bearer against the corruption of the First Italian Republic, has been implicated in corruption scandals as well, with Bossi resigning from the party's leadership after family members were accused of mismanaging public funds (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 14). The leader of a parent party to the PD has been accused of embezzling large sums of money (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 14). Scandals "have hit the apparatuses of both governing and opposition parties, as well as a number of regional administrations" (Diamanti 2014, 4).

The corruption scandals are so widespread that even the anti-corruption parties in Italy are implicated. Like in the case of *Lega Nord* in 1992, Grillo's party alone can stay above the fray, having never been party to the corrupting influence of government. Grillo's history of publically denouncing corruption only boosts his credentials as the only "moral" force in politics. Normally, a voter may turn to the party that best represents that voter's interests on a particular policy, especially during an economic crisis. However, when voters cannot trust any of the political parties to deliver solutions, who else fills the void other than radical populist parties? When established political parties lose their legitimacy in such a dramatic fashion, it provides ample room for anti-political establishment populist parties to move in and capture the votes of a public disillusioned with the failures of the elite.

Both political parties rose at a time when the party system failed to offer definitive and representative choices to the voting public and the Italian public was experiencing massive disillusionment with the Italian political class as a whole. Historically in Italy, populist voting has been a response to declining voter efficacy as a result of the failures of representative democracy in the country, regardless of the specific ideology of the populist party in question. While the other variables examined in this paper may have contributed to M5S's success, they are not sufficient explanations for the rise of both populist parties. Only corruption scandals and the failure of the party system to represent the people and offer clear choices has precipitated the rise of both populist parties.

Conclusion

By examining M5S under the framework of studies on populist parties and within a historic tradition of political disaffection within Italy, I do not seek to detract from the originality that the party has to offer as a political actor. M5S is an unusual populist party, not just because it utilizes the new technology available to it, but because it defies demographic and ideological expectations, representing the Italian electorate at large and campaigning on rightist and leftist agendas simultaneously. Whether such a party can remain a viable political actor remains to be seen. Already splits between the left and right poles within the party are appearing, although it has not descended too far in the polls as of yet. If M5S manages to implement its central reforms – limiting the terms of parliamentarians and forbidding those with criminal records from running for office, along with more structural electoral reforms – it is unlikely to be able to maintain its

supporter base for much longer afterwards, as the common ground which brought voters from the right, left, and everywhere in between will no longer be relevant. However, if M5S makes it that far, it will be able to claim far greater accomplishments than any of its neighboring populist parties have managed.

What happens next for M5S is far less important than the fact that M5S *happened* in the first place. M5S is a testament to the ability of democracy to reassert itself and to punish those complicit in a political system which has disaffected a nation's voters. Other liberal democracies should take note, for despite the "perfect storm" of economic and political crises which hit Italy in the past five years, paving the way for such a successful populist party, the lack of democratic accountability both in terms of a nonresponsive party system and the politicians themselves, embroiled in corruption scandals and alienated from the common voter, are not circumstances that only occur in Italy. Populist parties are on the rise throughout Europe, yet the growth of parties such as M5S are still met with such sensationalism and surprise in the media.

Politicians and political parties, not just political scientists, should pay more attention to the causal explanations of populist parties should they wish to avoid being refuted in such a resounding manner in the polls. Dismissing the success of these parties as the inevitable result of anger and frustration following an economic crisis is a mistake because it implies that the danger is nearing an end and that populism will fade away as the economy improves. However, if populist parties are thriving because of the results of an inefficacious political system and a nonresponsive and corrupt leadership, then there are actions that politicians can take to prevent future outcroppings of populist outrage.

As De Sio et al. (2013) described the Italian election of 2013: “this problematic vote outcome appears not as a strange behavior of Italian voters, but as a rational reaction by voters to a strange behavior of Italian political elites.” Such “rational responses” will continue to occur as long as people feel disaffected from the governments that claim to represent them.

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