

“Social media is  
changing politics  
across Europe...”

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**NEW POLITICAL ACTORS IN  
EUROPE: BEPPE GRILLO  
AND THE M5S**

Jamie Bartlett  
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Duncan McDonnell



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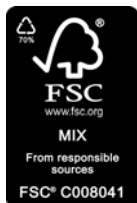
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This research is based primarily on an online survey of Facebook supporters of the Movimento 5 Stelle. The results do not, therefore, necessarily reflect the views of the movement. Demos is an independent think-tank committed to undertaking innovative research in areas of public interest. We are non-party political. Our results are set out objectively and accurately without normative judgement.

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All errors and omissions remain our own.

Jamie Bartlett  
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February 2013



## A note on terminology

This study concerns the Facebook supporters of Beppe Grillo and his Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S – 5-Star Movement). It is based on a survey of 1,865 Facebook fans of Grillo and the M5S. Although the data set is drawn from supporters of both Grillo and the M5S, we refer to them throughout this report as ‘Beppe Grillo Facebook fans’.

Where possible, we present this information within the context of broader Italian society and make comparisons to similar data on other non-mainstream parties in Western Europe, as presented in the Demos report *The New Face of Digital Populism*.<sup>1</sup> By drawing such parallels, we are not claiming that the M5S is a populist movement of the same type as those in that report. Whether the M5S can and should be classified as ‘populist’ is not a concern of ours here. Rather, this comparison is useful for us in understanding how – as a new political actor – the movement is similar to, and differs from, other movements and parties which challenge the establishment.

In this paper, we are not concerned with what Beppe Grillo Facebook fans think of the M5S and its internal organisation. That is a topic for social movement and political party experts to research and consider. We do not claim that the respondents of this survey are representative of either the M5S’s official views, or of voters. This sample consists of social media supporters of the party. We are interested primarily in who these individuals are, what motivates and concerns them, and how far their political activism encompasses both offline and online engagement.

Further papers by Demos looking at new political actors in Europe will be released later in early 2013, including reports on the Pirate Party in Germany and the Syriza Party in Greece.

Throughout this paper, we also draw on European-wide survey data from the autumn 2011 Eurobarometer survey and the

## A note on terminology

2008 European Values Study to make comparisons where possible. These studies are cited where relevant below.

## Executive summary

Changes in the way we communicate – from the Gutenberg printing press to the first televised US presidential debate – always have an effect on political parties and movements. The internet is no different: analysts have long argued that mass communication through the web would facilitate collective action by bringing groups together around single issues, lowering barriers to entry and thereby fundamentally changing the nature of political movements.<sup>2</sup> Social media – sometimes called Web 2.0 – is now at the forefront of this change. More and more of us live more of our social, professional and political lives online. Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and LinkedIn are all examples of the rapid transfer of people's lives – interactions, identities, arguments and views – onto a new kind of public sphere, a vast digital social commons. Europeans spend an average of four hours a day online, and have around 250 million Facebook accounts.<sup>3</sup>

Inevitably, this is changing politics too. The size, diversity and dynamism of social media platforms allow people to connect and form social movements outside the existing political channels far more quickly and easily than ever before. New social movements are emerging using social media, and challenging existing parties in a way unthinkable a decade ago. The English Defence League in the UK, the Pirate Party in Germany, and the Occupy movement are all examples of movements that have employed social media to grow rapidly and create a significant political and social impact – all in the last three years.

At the same time, mainstream and established political parties are beginning to recognise the power of social media. Increasingly, most major political parties and movements have a social media presence – blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds – that they use as an additional way to recruit new supporters,

release messages, respond to events, and in some instances even to formulate policies. Such is the growth that the online social media following of political parties on Facebook and elsewhere for many of these groups often dwarfs their formal membership, consisting of tens of thousands of sympathisers and supporters – and is growing quickly.<sup>4</sup> For example, the French Union pour un Mouvement Populaire party has around 55,000 Facebook fans, the UK Labour party has around 130,000 fans, and the Dutch populist politician Geert Wilders has over 200,000 followers. The 2012 US election was dubbed the first ‘Facebook election’ as the Democratic party invested millions of dollars in targeted adverts and network analysis using social media platforms.<sup>5</sup> This shift towards online political activism is taking place at a time when formal party membership of Western European political parties has been falling, almost universally, both in absolute terms and (even more dramatically) relative to the size of the electorate.<sup>6</sup>

This mélange of virtual and real-world political activity is the way millions of people – especially young people – relate to politics in the twenty-first century. This nascent, messy and more ephemeral form of politics is becoming the norm for a younger, digital generation: the MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics found that 41 per cent of young Americans engaged in at least one political act through social media during the last 12 months.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly significant given that a growing number of people use social media as a source of breaking news. According to a December 2011 survey by the Pew Research Center, over 50 per cent of people learn about breaking news via social media rather than official news sources.<sup>8</sup> Being part of a political social media group allows people to be part of the movement, to connect with like-minded people across the country and stay up to date with events at their own speed – to interweave their political activism into their social activities. Social media politics vary greatly, from single-issue campaigns to established political party Facebook accounts with strict control over the content. But they share in common the idea of a direct, free and easy involvement (or disengagement); regular updates and information; and active participation

from members. This can help generate a sense of ‘virtual belonging’ towards the specific online group enhanced also by the possibility of interacting directly with like-minded people from all over the world.

Political parties of all shades increasingly recognise the potential of social media to respond quickly to events – and even to shape those events. With such low barriers to entry, recruiting huge numbers of people is relatively easy, and can make movements difficult to ignore. Indeed, some analysts argue that the distinction between actions taken in ‘space’, and actions taken in ‘cyberspace’, has become dissolved as social movement theories have moved on from traditional media to social media.<sup>9</sup>

## Grillo

Beppe Grillo is one of the first politicians to have embraced this transformational change, and by using social media as the primary medium of communication, recruitment and organisation, his movement has grown from practically nothing to a major political force in Italy in the space of three years. The creation of the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S – 5 Star Movement) was announced by Grillo, then a popular Italian comedian and blogger, in a blogpost dated 9 September 2009.<sup>10</sup> It began:

*On 4 October 2009, a new National Five Star Movement will be born. It will be born on the Internet. Italian citizens without a criminal record and who are not members of any political party can join... the parties are dead. I do not want to found ‘a party’, an apparatus, a structure of intermediation. Rather I want to create a Movement with a programme.<sup>11</sup>*

Grillo has repeated many times since then that he does not want to create a political party, but rather a new movement that changes the party political system in Italy, one that gives more power to ordinary people – a new version of direct democracy. Social media is central to this vision. Grillo has an enormous social media following: almost one million people have joined his Facebook page. Grillo tweets regularly and on 6 November 2012 had 700,556 followers. Generally, Italian parties have made

very poor use of internet and social media. For example (again as of 6 November 2012) Nichi Vendola of the left-wing Sinistra Ecologia Libertà (SEL – Left, Ecology and Freedom) has 236,436 followers, Pierluigi Bersani of the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD – Democratic Party) has 146,088, Antonio di Pietro has 137,220, Pierferdinando Casini of the centrist Unione di Centro (UDC – Union of the Centre) has 71,900, and Roberto Maroni of the regionalist Lega Nord (LN – Northern League) has 5,676. According to the ‘BlogItalia’ rankings, Grillo’s is by far the most widely read blog in Italy and, according to Alexa, the 7,177th most visited and viewed site in the world and the 159th in Italy.<sup>12</sup>

Grillo has used his internet presence and social media network to raise issues and communicate his views on them, arrange and advertise offline events, and foster discussion and mobilise activity at grassroots level on those issues, for example arranging piazza events, local meet-ups, demonstrations and getting the vote out. Grillo has been able to transform this online following and support into real world political impact. Nationally, the M5S has consistently been placed second or third in opinion polls since mid-2012, with up to 20 per cent of respondents in surveys for most of the second half of the year saying they would vote for the movement. Certainly, Grillo has identified political themes that tap into the concerns of many Italians – and made them mainstream: corruption, bribery, sexual scandals and the politics of privileges and favours that he argues has created the so called ‘Casta’ (caste).

### This study

We believe it is profitable to understand the movement as a new political actor, which works rather differently from parties, rather than seeking to analyse it within the lenses used to examine parties, an approach that inevitably ends by characterising the M5S as a ‘dysfunctional party’.

Therefore, the survey data presented in this report were collected in August 2012, by targeting the Facebook fans of a number of Facebook groups deemed to be Grillo related (see the annex for details). Facebook was selected because it is the most



widespread and popular social media site in Italy. Members of these groups were shown an advert inviting them to participate in a survey, and on clicking the advert, individuals were redirected to a survey that they were invited to complete. The survey and adverts were presented in Italian, and were then translated back into English for the purposes of this report.

In total, 2,245 people responded to our survey. Following the removal of data that were either corrupt, intentionally misleading or incomplete, a final data set of 1,865 survey responses was produced. The results were weighted against the groups' online demographics available through Facebook's advertising tool. This was done in order to improve the validity and accuracy of any inferences made about the online population. Although online recruitment in social research is widespread, self-select recruitment via social network sites brings novel challenges. Because this is an innovative research method with both strengths and weaknesses, we have included an in-depth discussion of the methodology in the annex.

## Results

### Age and demographics

Overall, 63 per cent of Beppe Grillo Facebook fans are male and 37 per cent female – which tallies with existing research on the subject. Beppe Grillo Facebook fans are also older than the average Facebook user. There are 64 per cent of fans over the age of 30, compared with 51 per cent of all Italian Facebook users.

### The educated unemployed

Just over half of respondents – 54 per cent – said their highest educational achievement was a high-school diploma (which is above the Italian average of 34.8 per cent) This may reflect the fact that – in general – those with higher education levels are more likely to use the internet regularly for news and political information. However, Grillo Facebook fans were more likely to be unemployed than the average Italian citizen (19 per cent vs 7.9 per cent).

### Not just an internet group

Around 20 per cent say they are ‘formal members of M5S’. When asked about what sort of political activism they have or would consider being involved with, it is striking how few Beppe Grillo Facebook fans refused to rule out particular actions, compared with the general population. For example, while 51 per cent of Italians said they would ‘never’ participate in a boycott, only 9 per cent of Beppe Grillo Facebook fans expressed the same view. A high proportion of respondents would not answer this question, which suggests that those surveyed did not feel comfortable talking about their offline political activities.

### Economics and unemployment are the top concerns

When asked to list their top two concerns from a list of 18, Beppe Grillo Facebook fans were most likely to cite economic issues as one of the top two. The economic situation (62 per cent) and unemployment (61 per cent) are by far the two themes most often selected, with taxation in third place (43 per cent)

### Generally positive towards immigration

Respondents were also directly asked what they thought about immigration. It appears that Beppe Grillo Facebook fans are more likely than the general public to view immigration as an opportunity (56 per cent compared with 28 per cent). It is of note, however, that those under 30 were more likely to list immigration as a top concern than those over 30.

### Pessimistic about Italy's future

In general, Beppe Grillo Facebook fans were more likely than the Italian public to be pessimistic about the future, across a range of measures:

- 31 per cent thought their lives would be worse in 12 months, compared with 18 per cent of the Italian public.
- 66 per cent thought the economic situation in Italy is going to get worse, compared with 43 per cent of the Italian public.

- 49 per cent thought the financial situation of their household is going to get worse, compared with 24 per cent of the Italian public
- 78 per cent thought that things are going in the wrong direction in Italy, compared with 65 per cent of the Italian public.
- 70 per cent thought that things are going in the wrong direction in the EU, compared with 40 per cent of the Italian public.

### Highly dissatisfied with democracy and party politics in Italy

The overwhelming majority (83 per cent) of respondents are not at all satisfied with democracy in Italy, and just 4 per cent express satisfaction. This is not surprising given Grillo's campaigning themes. Indeed, dissatisfaction in democracy in Italy is high overall, which could suggest significant potential for further growth in Grillo's support. Further, when asked in an open question why they support Grillo, supporters say they do so because of disillusionment with the main parties or wanting change (41 per cent of respondents) or because they adhere to the values of the movement (28 per cent). According to respondents, the problems that drive their support for the M5S are the Italian parties and the Italian political system, less so the broader idea of 'democracy' and 'representation'. Overall, their support is strictly related to the idea of 'changing' the system, the ruling elites and the traditional ways of making policy.

### Supporters tend to be left of centre

We asked respondents to position themselves on the political spectrum ranging from 1 to 10, with 1 being furthest left and 10 furthest right. The average score for respondents was 3.88, suggesting Beppe Grillo Facebook fans consider themselves to be generally left of centre. In our sample, 23 per cent said they voted for the Italia dei Valori (IDV – Italy of Values) and 22 per cent for the PD at the 2008 general election. That said, a significant share (13 per cent) of our respondents also voted for the PDL, while 5 per cent had supported the Lega Nord. The

remaining 25 per cent were either not old enough to vote in 2008 or had abstained.

### Trust in political and social institutions low

Consistent with the anti-establishment rhetoric of the M5S and Grillo, less than 20 per cent trust the European Union; only 8 per cent trust the government; 3 per cent trust political parties; and 2 per cent trust parliament. The organisations seen as being at the heart of the financial crisis are especially mistrusted: just 2 per cent trust banks and financial institutions, and 6 per cent trust big companies. These proportions are lower, on every measure, than those for the Italian general public.

### Trust in the internet and small and medium sized enterprises is high

The only two institutions, organisations and media outlets that command the trust of over half the respondents are the internet (76 per cent) and small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) (61 per cent). The internet score is in stark contrast to the low levels of trust in other media. Only 11 per cent trust the press (compared with 34 per cent of Italians overall) and less than 4 per cent trust television (compared with 40 per cent of Italians overall). Given Grillo's long-running and vehement criticism of traditional Italian media, these results do not seem surprising.

### Implications

Grillo has tapped into major concerns about the way politics is being conducted in Italy. By standing on an anti-establishment platform, and using modern communications, he has combined medium and message to create a genuinely novel type of movement. Grillo's remarkable success shows the effectiveness of communicating and organising through the internet – and the potential that has to speak directly to millions of people: especially those who are disenchanted with existing political structures.

But the implications of Grillo's success extend far beyond Italy. Many of the concerns of Grillo's supporters are shared by people across Europe. Over the last decade, trust in the EU and national governments and parliament has been on a downward trend across the continent. In 2002, 39 per cent of Europeans trusted national government and 42 per cent trusted parliament while in 2012 only 28 per cent do so.<sup>13</sup> That, combined with falling party membership and voter turnout, suggests that the appeal of movements like M5S – which combine an anti-establishment rhetoric with smart ways of using modern media – could grow across Europe.

Of course, social media is only part of the story. Grillo's success also demonstrates that communicating and organising through the internet is not a substitute for real-world political activism, rather something that can facilitate it. The M5S also acts locally, and its strength appears to be the way it combines online and offline activism effectively. The 'meet-ups', made up of people who gather and meet offline in their local communities every week or so, are critical for the movement's success: they often drive the debates and discussions, for example reviewing the extent to which city councils or regional governments are performing. Grillo himself recognises that online campaigning is not enough; he is very active with rallies across the country, which attract large numbers of people and media coverage. It is the interaction of traditional, offline political activism and new ways to communicate and organise that activism that has been so transformative.

Social media politics also presents challenges to policy-making and political systems. For example, social media campaigning tends to benefit those who are active and skilled at social media use, and they are not always representative of the population as a whole. Moreover, as more political parties begin to use social media for political and policy purposes, this could become a new site for lobbying and campaigning – which might have a detrimental effect on use of social media as a site for open, free exchange and information sharing.<sup>14</sup> Online movements with a broad supporter base are also less able to be disciplined to

follow a single party line, with potentially unpredictable consequences for the leaders of those movements.

Nevertheless, Grillo and the M5S are responding to the concerns of Italians (and Europeans more generally) and using modern communications effectively to do so. His remarkable success demonstrates an appetite for change. Mainstream parties would do well to take the movement seriously, understand what is driving the concerns of supporters, and respond to the challenges the movement has presented, as well as learning from the success it has so far enjoyed.

# 1 Background

As one of Italy's best known comedians, Beppe Grillo had often exposed political and business scandals as part of his routines, but in 2005 he published his first post on his blog, [www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it), which established him as a public figure focusing primarily on political and societal issues. In the ensuing years, this became the most visited political blog in Italy and was the launching pad for other online and offline initiatives. Through the blog, Grillo encouraged readers to organise offline using [meetup.com](http://meetup.com) and discuss the topics he raised in his blog. Beppe Grillo meet-ups were quickly established all over Italy. As of 8 November 2012, there were officially 532 Grillo meet-up groups, containing 87,895 members and spanning 446 cities and 12 countries (although they were mainly based in Italy).<sup>15</sup> In 2007, Grillo organised an event called 'V-Day', which brought the movement to a much wider media and audience. V-day, as Grillo explained in his blog, was short for 'Vaffanculo day' ('Fuck-off day'), a message directed in particular towards Italy's party political class.<sup>16</sup> The event's main objectives were to campaign for a ban on politicians with a criminal record serving in Parliament, prohibiting parliamentarians from serving more than two terms, and a return to an electoral system which would allow citizens to choose their representatives (rather than the closed lists system introduced in 2005). V-day events took place in approximately 200 squares across Italy, with the largest – featuring Grillo – in Bologna.<sup>17</sup> Following this success, Italian television and press devoted considerable coverage to Grillo, with much commentary seeking to dismiss him as 'anti-political'. The second V-day took place on 25 April 2008, focusing on freedom of information, a referendum removing public subsidies for newspapers, and making it easier to get permission for new publications.

The success of these events, along with that of the blog and the meet-ups, inevitably led to questions about whether (and how) Grillo and his supporters would interact with formal politics. This was an issue of some contention inside the meet-ups, with some activists calling for no participation in electoral politics, some suggesting using civic lists, and others supporting cooperation with existing parties (in particular, the Italia dei Valori party). In a few cases candidates standing for Italia dei Valori were also supported by Grillo, but over time the most common solution agreed on was that of Grillo-sponsored lists running independently. This happened in eight cities in the 2008 local elections, where candidates were endorsed on the basis that they:

- did not belong to any party
- had never received a criminal sentence
- promised not to serve more than one term in office
- resided in the constituency where they stood for election

These candidates ran under the banner ‘amici di Beppe Grillo’ (‘friends of Beppe Grillo’). A section of Grillo’s website was created to certify and publicise such lists and Grillo took part in local campaign events. However, while some of these candidates did manage to get elected as councillors, none gained over 4 per cent. Nevertheless the supporters, followers and friends of Beppe Grillo kept growing, along with his desire to ‘conquer’ and change Italian politics.

This success led to the founding of the M5S movement in 2009. The conditions for joining the M5S were (and still are) based on the ‘Non-Statute’, a document produced in December 2009 and published on Grillo’s website, which contains seven articles setting out some of the main rules of the movement and basic information. The Non-Statute also states some of the objectives and rationale underpinning the creation of the M5S. For example, article 4 states that the movement aims to build on the experiences of the blog, the meet-ups, the large-scale events, other public initiatives and the lists presented in the 2008 and 2009 local elections.<sup>18</sup>



The 2010 regional elections were a moderate success, with the M5S most notably receiving circa 6–7 per cent and electing two councillors in Emilia-Romagna (in the centre-north) and Piedmont (in the north-west). Indeed, in the latter case, the M5S took enough support from the outgoing centre-left regional president to swing the vote in favour of the centre-right candidate. In the 2011 local elections the proportion of M5S votes improved further, and the movement obtained around 10 per cent in some areas of north-central and north-western Italy. It was at the 2012 round of local elections, however, when the M5S really leapt forward electorally.<sup>19</sup> Confounding expectations, in those constituencies in which it stood in the north and centre-north, it received well over 10 per cent of the vote. In Genoa, its candidate reached the second round mayoral election run-off, while in Parma, Federico Pizzarotti of the M5S became mayor. Although the movement extended its presence by increasing candidates and city councillors across the north, the same did not occur to anything like the same extent in the south – something which many commentators identified as a weakness, suggesting that the M5S was likely to find it hard to break through in the supposedly less ‘civic’ southern areas, where voting logics have traditionally been based more on patronage and ties to candidates.<sup>20</sup>

These predictions are being confounded by the M5S’s rise in national opinion polls and the movement’s performance in the Sicilian regional elections on 28 October 2012. In an IPSOS survey conducted on 10 April 2012, 5 per cent of respondents said that they would vote for the M5S.<sup>21</sup> Just two months later, another IPSOS survey, conducted on 11 June, found that 20.6 per cent would vote for the M5S.<sup>22</sup> This put it in second place in the polls, after the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD – Democratic Party) and ahead of Silvio Berlusconi’s centre-right Popolo della Libertà (PDL – Party of Freedom). Nonetheless, in mid-October 2012, pollsters were predicting that the M5S candidate in Sicily would secure little more than 5 per cent in the upcoming regional elections on the island. Grillo’s unconventional approach to campaigning, however, appears to have dramatically improved the party’s fortunes: Grillo swam to Sicily

from Calabria before embarking on a series of rallies in piazzas attended by thousands of Sicilians (although these events were mostly ignored by Italian television). The M5S candidate for regional president Giovanni Cancelleri subsequently secured 18.2 per cent (and third place), while the M5S, with 14.9 per cent of the council chamber vote, finished ahead of all other lists, including those of the PD and PDL.

### Movement organisation and leadership

Grillo stated from the beginning that he did not want to found ‘a party’; the M5S continues to reject this label and calls itself a ‘movement’. There is a strong link between the movement and its founder, which is affirmed in several places in the Non-Statute. For example, article 3 states that Grillo is the only holder of the right to use the name ‘Movimento 5 Stelle’, while article 1 says ‘the headquarters of the ‘5-Star Movement’ is the web address [www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it)’ and that ‘contacts with the movement should only take place via the email address [MoVimento5stelle@beppegrillo.it](mailto:MoVimento5stelle@beppegrillo.it)’. In this sense, the M5S seems to have some similarities with a franchise – the label ‘Movimento Cinque Stelle’ remains the property of Grillo alone and only he can decide – on a case-by-case basis – who may use it for political (or any other) purposes. This is re-emphasised in article 7, which says that the M5S gathers candidatures and decides who ‘will be authorised to use the name and brand “Movimento 5 Stelle” when competing in any election’.

In recent months, Italy’s mainstream press and television media – which tends to be very critical and/or dismissive of the M5S – has devoted a lot of attention to internal democracy in the movement and the leadership. In particular, the media focused on an off-camera remark (which was nonetheless recorded and broadcast) by a M5S regional councillor in Emilia-Romagna, Giovanni Favia, about the lack of democracy in the M5S and the role of Gianroberto Casaleggio – an ‘internet strategies expert’ who is Grillo’s key adviser.<sup>23</sup> Casaleggio’s lack of public profile and visibility compared with Grillo has allowed the media to paint him as a shadowy figure controlling the movement from

behind the scenes. However, Casaleggio himself has been very open about his involvement. In a letter to the *Corriere della Sera* on 30 May 2012, he said that he had planned the blog [www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it) with Grillo, along with the two V-days. Defining himself as ‘effectively the co-founder with Grillo of this Movement’, he added that he and Grillo had written the ‘Non-Statute’ together.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the issue of internal democracy has been present since the beginning; a small number of the meet-up groups, for example, have requested increases in the internal democratic procedures of the group, such as how candidates are selected.<sup>25</sup>

Another source of recent contention within the M5S – which the media has again devoted considerable attention to – is whether its representatives should appear on television, particularly transmissions discussing politics. When the Bologna City councillor Federica Salsi participated in the RAI 3 state television Ballarò talk show on 29 October 2012, the following day, Grillo – without naming her – published a post on his blog condemning those from the M5S who went on television as essentially just doing so for their own ego and damaging the movement in the process.<sup>26</sup> In another blog post on 6 November, Grillo added that while television interviews with M5S elected representatives are not currently prohibited, ‘their participation in talk shows is strongly discouraged and in future will be banned’.<sup>27</sup>

Many media outlets have suggested, based on these incidents, that the M5S is an undemocratic movement, utterly controlled by Grillo and Casaleggio. We pass no judgement on this point. It does seem worth noting that an often-repeated statement by M5S activists and elected representatives is, as the mayor of Parma Pizzarotti, put it: ‘Grillo is our megaphone, rather than the official leader.’<sup>28</sup> Grillo himself has said many times that he has no intention of standing for elected office.

### Key issues

The five ‘stars’ of the M5S represent five of its main themes: public water, transportation, development, internet connection and availability, and the environment). The goals and key issues

of the movement are explained in further detail in its programme, published on Grillo's website.<sup>29</sup> This document is 15 pages long and is divided into seven sections, on state and citizens, energy, information, economy, transport, health and education. The two longest parts concern energy and health (each three pages). Many of the proposals in the programme focus on political reform and reducing the costs of politics, increasing access to internet and broadband coverage, boosting government transparency at all levels, enhancing the pluralism of information, improving the free market, safeguarding universal health care, protecting the environment and promoting sustainable development. There is not the space here to go through each individual proposal, but a few of those which we consider most significant and representative are listed below:

- abolition of election campaign reimbursements for political parties
- two-term limit for all publicly-elected representatives
- citizens with a criminal record not able to stand for election
- MPs' salaries to be reduced to average national wage level
- laws to be published online three months before their approval in order to allow the public to comment on them
- elimination of public subsidies for newspapers
- limit of 10 per cent maximum single shareholding in national television stations and national daily newspapers
- state broadcaster to be reduced from three national channels to just one, which will not carry advertising and be free from party influence
- abolition of monopolies enjoyed by the national motorway company, Telecom Italia, and the companies ENI and Enel in the energy market
- guaranteed unemployment benefit (at present, this is not the case for all those who lose their jobs in Italy)
- adherence to Kyoto protocols
- congestion charges for single-occupant cars in cities
- banning of incinerators
- provision of free Italian lessons for foreigners (obligatory for foreigners who have applied for Italian citizenship)

While it is certainly not true (as some have claimed) that the M5S does not have a programme, there are a number of areas not covered in the document. For example, other than the provision of Italian lessons, it says nothing about immigration. Likewise, there is nothing about foreign policy or ethical questions (such as civil unions – an issue which has been a source of controversy in Italy). There is also nothing in the document about the EU, although Grillo has often expressed criticism of the EU bureaucracy and the Euro. On 6 November 2012, Grillo wrote on his blog that ‘the decision whether to remain in the Euro should be taken by Italian citizens via a referendum. I believe that Italy cannot afford the luxury of being in the Euro, but it should be the Italians who decide this and not a group of oligarchs or Beppe Grillo.’<sup>30</sup> Similarly, no explicit reference is made in the programme to the crisis and to the austerity measures. Indeed, the part of the programme on the economy only takes up two pages. This may reflect the provisional nature of the document, given that – in Grillo’s speeches and blog posts – he takes a very strong position against austerity and the actions of the Monti government.

### Who votes for and supports the M5S?

In the absence of research on what it means to be a grassroots member of the M5S or what that participation actually consists of, it is very difficult to discuss the organisation at local level. Based on the data available on the web pages of individual meet-ups, it seems that only a small fraction of the listed supporters regularly meets offline to discuss the impact of the issues raised on Grillo’s blog on their communities. That said, there is clearly a hard core of activists who do meet at least several times per month in cities across Italy, scrutinising decisions made by local city councils and, where appropriate, opposing them and proposing alternatives. This seems worth noting, especially given the lack of grassroots presence and activity in some of Italy’s major political parties.<sup>31</sup>

Considering the remarkable speed of M5S’s growth, the profile of M5S voters is hard to examine with any confidence –

however, some evidence does shed light. As a forthcoming study shows, in surveys conducted in October and December 2011, when asked to place themselves on a 1–5 ‘left-right’ scale, the average M5S voter was located around 2.<sup>32</sup> This was to the left of Italia dei Valori voters, but to the right of voters of the main centre-left party, the Partito Democratico. This situation is likely to have changed considerably over the past year. In a recent article, analysts Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini find that now the percentage of M5S voters placing themselves on the centre-left or left is 32 per cent (down from 48 per cent at the end of 2010), while those placing themselves on the centre-right or right has risen since the end of 2010 from 11 per cent to 28 per cent.<sup>33</sup> According to an ISPO survey, over 30 per cent of those who voted for the M5S in the 2012 local elections had abstained in the 2008 general election.<sup>34</sup> Bordignon and Ceccarini found that 60 per cent of the M5S electorate was male, while the percentage of voters over 45 (previously around 30 per cent) at the 2012 local elections rose to 45 per cent. They noted that this is still a significantly lower figure than the national average of people voting (57 per cent).<sup>35</sup>

Geographically, the M5S did best in central-northern and northern areas in the 2012 local elections, but given its growth in the opinion polls and performance in the Sicilian regional elections, it now appears to enjoy widespread support across the country. Interestingly, the Italian researcher Nicola Maggini has recently investigated the potential of the movement to grow, through a survey of 3,000 people in May 2012.<sup>36</sup> He found that the potential electorate of the M5S – from both centre-left and centre-right – tended to be far more concerned (than those who were not potential voters) about environmental issues. They were also more in favour of granting Italian citizenship to children born in Italy to immigrant parents, and more liberal on ethical questions such as abortion and civil unions. The main divide between centre-right and centre-left potential M5S voters concerned a broad range of socio-economic issues, such as the freedom to hire and fire.<sup>37</sup>

## 2 Findings

### Grillo's Facebook supporters

This chapter presents the socio-economic characteristics, age and gender data regarding the 1,865 Beppe Grillo Facebook supporters surveyed in August 2012. Before discussing the results, it is worth recalling the context in which the survey took place. As discussed above, by the end of the summer of 2012, the M5S had risen in the space of just a few months from 5 per cent in the polls to between 18 per cent and 20 per cent. The technocratic government led by Mario Monti, supported by the main parties of the centre-right and centre-left, was coming towards the end of its first year in power. The Monti government's popularity had declined considerably, but mainstream parties had failed to regain public trust, which remained at extremely low levels for both political parties and parliament.

Where data allow, we compare the survey results to the Italian general public, and occasionally make comparisons to other non-mainstream parties in Western Europe, as presented in the Demos report *The New Face of Digital Populism*.<sup>38</sup> We do not make the argument that the Movimento 5 Stelle is analogous to those in that report. Rather, this comparison is useful for us in understanding how – as a new political actor – the composition of Beppe Grillo Facebook supporters as a group compares with those we have found among other European movements and parties that challenge the establishment.

Using Facebook's publicly available advertising tool, it is possible to identify the age and the gender of all Italian users of Facebook, as well as the basic demographic information of Facebook users who follow sites linked to Beppe Grillo and the M5S.

Across the country as a whole, Italian Facebook users are slightly more likely to be male than female (54 per cent vs 46 per cent,  $n = 20,731,520$ ). Overall, 63 per cent of Beppe Grillo

Facebook fans are male and 37 per cent female – the gender split tallies almost exactly with that found among M5S voters at the 2012 local elections.<sup>39</sup> Beppe Grillo Facebook fans are also older than the average Facebook user (table 1). Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) are over the age of 30, compared with 51 per cent of all Italian Facebook users. This is slightly surprising given Bordignon and Ceccarini’s finding cited in the previous chapter that the average M5S voter tends to be younger than those of other parties, although it may reflect differences between M5S voters and Beppe Grillo Facebook fans and/or changes in the composition of supporters in the months following the local elections. Given the rise of the M5S in those months, this latter option seems plausible.

Table 1 **The age of Beppe Grillo Facebook Fans (n = 911,000) (national statistics in brackets)**

Age group	Beppe Grillo Facebook fans (Italy total) (%)
16-20	6 (18)
21-25	13 (17)
26-30	17 (14)
31-40	30 (25)
41-50	22 (16)
51+	12 (10)

Participants were also asked what city they lived closest to. It is important to stress that this is just a general overview of location, and we cannot distinguish between those who live in the city, and those in the countryside. Of our respondents, 19 per cent said they lived closest to Milan; 17 per cent were closest to Rome; 11 per cent lived closest to Naples; 9 per cent lived closest to Turin or Bologna; 8 per cent lived closest to Florence; and 7 per cent were closest to Venice.



## Education and employment

We asked respondents about their highest level of education and current employment status (table 2). The proportion of Beppe Grillo Facebook fans with a high-school diploma was 54 per cent. This may reflect the digital divide in Italy: in general those with higher education levels are more likely to use the internet regularly for news and political information.

Table 2 **The highest educational attainment of Beppe Grillo Facebook fans (n = 1,865) (national statistics in brackets)**

	Total (%)
Primary school diploma	1 (21.6)
Middle school diploma	18 (32)
High-school diploma	54 (34.8)
University degree	27 (11.7) <sup>40</sup>

We also asked respondents about their current employment status (table 3). Beppe Grillo Facebook fans were more likely to be unemployed than the average Italian citizen (19 per cent vs 7.9 per cent). Only 18 per cent of respondents were classified as students. This is surprising given that M5S voters have generally been considered younger than average and with higher education levels. It is far lower, for example, than the equivalent figure for Facebook fans of the Pirate Party in Germany, of whom students make up 36.3 per cent.<sup>41</sup>

Table 3 **The employment status of Beppe Grillo Facebook fans (national statistics in brackets)<sup>42</sup>**

	Total (%)
Employed	50 (61.2)
Unemployed	19 (7.9)
Part time	9 [not available]
Student	18 (2.9)

## Membership and involvement

We asked respondents whether they were ‘formal’ members of the M5S (table 4). In our sample, 80 per cent of the respondents do not define themselves as formal members of the movement and this proportion is higher among respondents aged over 30 (92 per cent).

This seemingly low figure may be because the M5S has a ‘liquid structure’ and portrays itself as an unconventional political group. Therefore understandings of what constitutes a ‘formal member’ may be different in the case of the M5S than it is in traditional political parties. This is especially so since the M5S openly refuses conventional forms and labels of political participation. Interestingly, in the case of the Pirate Party in Germany, a similar percentage of respondents (28 per cent) were prepared to say that they were a ‘formal member’.<sup>43</sup> It is also worth noting that the comparative figure for those parties studied in the ‘Digital Populism’ series was not much higher: only 32 per cent of respondents in that survey said they were formal members of the party or group.

Table 4 **Whether Beppe Grillo Facebook fans are formal members of the M5S, by age**

	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Yes	24	8	19
No	76	92	80

The M5S is one of a number of new types of political movements that use social media to arrange offline activities. We therefore asked respondents about the extent of their political activism (not necessarily M5S related) over the past six months (table 5).<sup>44</sup>

Even if it is difficult to make a direct comparison with the Italian general public because of the large number of people who did not answer the question, we can see that among those who did answer, there is a fairly high degree of willingness to

contemplate the various actions listed: ‘might do’ is consistently the highest category selected.

Table 5 **The extent of political activism of Beppe Grillo Facebook fans in past six months (national statistics in brackets)**

	Have done	Might do	Would never do	Don't know	Did not answer this question
Signing a petition	47 (51)	10 (33)	1 (17)	3 (3)	39 (1)
Joining in boycotts	7 (12)	22 (38)	9 (51)	6 (5)	56 (2)
Participate in unauthorised strikes	4 (8)	12 (15)	10 (78)	10 (3)	66 (2)
Occupying buildings or factories	2 (9)	17 (18)	17 (72)	17 (5)	47 (2)

Likewise, it is striking how few Beppe Grillo Facebook fans refused to rule out particular actions compared with the general population. For example, while 51 per cent of Italians said they would ‘never’ participate in a boycott, only 9 per cent of Beppe Grillo Facebook fans expressed the same view. The high degree of non-response rate suggests that those surveyed did not feel comfortable talking about their offline political activities.

### Top two concerns

When asked to rank their social and political concerns from a list of 18 current issues, Beppe Grillo Facebook fans were most likely to cite economic issues as one of the top two (table 6). The economic situation (62 per cent) and unemployment (61 per cent) are by far the two themes most often mentioned: almost 20 points separate these from the third-place issue, taxation. Unlike the right-wing populist movements researched in the Digital Populism project, immigration (in 12th position) is not a key concern for Beppe Grillo Facebook Fans, but it is not negligible either, given that almost 20 per cent of respondents mention it. This may partly reflect the different political backgrounds of

M5S supporters, especially the increase in 2012 of former voters of the Lega Nord and the PDL.

It is interesting to note here the difference between those under 30 who are concerned about immigration (24 per cent) and those above 30 who agree (16 per cent).

Table 6 **The top two biggest concerns of Beppe Grillo Facebook fans, by age**

	Total (%)	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)
Economic situation	62	56	67
Unemployment	61	63	60
Taxation	43	38	47
Rising prices and inflation	36	28	32
Education	33	41	26
Environment	33	37	31
The educational system	33	41	26
Crime	31	35	28
Energy	29	35	25
Healthcare system	29	34	26
Pensions	23	23	24
Immigration	20	24	16
Housing	16	22	12
Terrorism	15	21	10
Defence and foreign affairs	13	18	10

We asked respondents directly what they thought about immigration (table 7). Beppe Grillo Facebook fans are more likely to view immigration as an opportunity (56 per cent) than as a problem (39 per cent), and there is a higher proportion of them than among the national public with this view (56 per cent compared with 28 per cent).

Table 7 **Whether Beppe Grillo Facebook fans think that immigration is a problem or an opportunity for Italy (national statistics in brackets)**

	(%)
Immigration is more of a problem for Italy	39 (48)
Immigration is more of an opportunity for Italy	56 (28)

### Expectations for the future

We asked respondents a series of questions about the extent to which they were optimistic or pessimistic about their future, and that of Italy (table 8). In general, Beppe Grillo Facebook fans were more likely than the Italian public to think that their personal situation would change either for the better or for the worse. Only 26 per cent think that the situation will remain the same, compared with 55 per cent of the Italian public. More specifically, one-third of Beppe Grillo Facebook fans thought their life would be worse, while less than a third (27 per cent) thought it would improve.

Beppe Grillo Facebook fans are substantially more pessimistic than the Italian public concerning the economic situation in Italy (66 per cent vs 43 per cent among the Italian public) and the financial situation of their household (49 per cent vs 24 per cent among the Italian public). In general, respondents over the age of 30 are more pessimistic than those under 30 concerning their life in general (40 per cent over 30 are pessimistic vs only 20 per cent among the under-30s), the economic situation in Italy (68 per cent vs 63 per cent) and the financial situation of their households (54 per cent vs 44 per cent).

Table 8 **Whether Beppe Grillo Facebook fans expect their lives in general, the economic situation in Italy and the financial situation in their households in the next 12 months to be better, worse or the same, by age (national statistics in brackets)**

Your life in general	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Better	40	16	27 (19)
Worse	20	40	31 (18)
Same	23	28	26 (55)
Did not answer (D/k)			11 (8)
.....			
The economic situation in Italy	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Better	13	7	10 (21)
Worse	63	68	66 (43)
Same	10	15	13 (30)
Did not answer (D/k)			5 (6)
.....			
The financial situation of your household	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Better	11	9	10 (16)
Worse	44	54	49 (24)
Same	27	24	25 (54)
Did not answer (D/k)			10 (6)

We asked respondents about the extent to which they were satisfied with the current state of democracy in Italy (table 9). The results show that the overwhelmingly majority (83 per cent) are not at all satisfied. Just 4 per cent express satisfaction. This is not surprising since the M5S bases part of its appeal on its opposition to the current set-up and actors of Italian democracy. As we have seen, Grillo has for many years identified the parties and traditional media (television and newspapers) as the major culprits of this dysfunctional political system. Generally, faith in the institutions and agents of democracy has declined considerably in Italy over the past year. This has become particularly evident since the fall of the PDL-LN government in November 2011 and its replacement by Mario Monti's technocratic government.<sup>45</sup> In a survey published in *La*

*Repubblica* in early January 2012, only 3.9 per cent expressed ‘faith’ in the parties and 8.9 per cent in parliament.<sup>46</sup> A survey by ISPO and *Corriere della Sera* at the beginning of February 2012 produced similar results, with 91 per cent of respondents saying they had ‘little’ or ‘very little’ faith in political parties.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, turnout in second-order elections has also noticeably declined (this was down 7 percentage points in the 2012 local elections compared with 2007, the last time the same cities voted).

A recent survey by Demopolis<sup>48</sup> showed that the roots of Grillo’s support can, to some extent, be found in public feelings of disenchantment towards traditional parties: 28 per cent of those who voted for the M5S at the 2012 local elections explained that they did so because they did not feel represented by the traditional parties. Moreover, 43 per cent of respondents declared that they voted for the M5S in order to radically change the political class.

Table 9 **The extent to which Beppe Grillo Facebook fans are satisfied with the way democracy is developing in Italy, by age (national statistics in brackets)<sup>49</sup>**

	Under 30 (%)	Over 30 (%)	Total (%)
Very satisfied	1	2	2 (2)
Somewhat satisfied	3	2	2 (30)
Not very satisfied	11	10	10 (49)
Not at all satisfied	82	84	83 (19)
I do not know	1	<1	<1 (5)

More broadly, we asked respondents whether they thought – in general – things were moving in the right direction in Italy, and in the European Union. In table 10 we compare these data with those of the autumn 2011 Eurobarometer (the most recently available data set).

Nearly eight out of ten people (78 per cent) surveyed felt that things were going in the wrong direction in Italy (compared with 65 per cent of the population in general). Seven out of ten

(70 per cent) felt that things were going in the wrong direction in the EU. Although these views are slightly less pessimistic than they are over the question regarding Italy, they are still 30 percentage points higher than the Italian national average (albeit recorded in 2010) of 40 per cent. Given Grillo's criticisms not just of Italian democracy and politics, but also of democracy and politics at European supranational level, these results do not seem surprising to us.

Table 10 **Whether Beppe Grillo Facebook fans think that things are going in the right direction in Italy and the European Union (national statistics in brackets)<sup>50</sup>**

	Right direction	Wrong direction	Neither	Don't know
Italy	6 (8)	78 (65)	12 (21)	1 (6)
The European Union	7 (25)	70 (40)	13 (26)	4 (9)

### Political positioning

We asked respondents to position themselves on the political spectrum ranging from 1 to 10, with 1 being furthest left and 10 furthest right (table 11). The average score for respondents was 3.88, suggesting Beppe Grillo Facebook fans consider themselves to be generally left of centre. This is broadly in line with the findings of Ceccarini, Diamanti and Lazar cited in the opening chapter; they found M5S supporters to be around '2' on a 1–5 left–right scale.<sup>51</sup>

We also asked Beppe Grillo Facebook fans which party they voted for at the last general election in 2008 (when the M5S did not run) (table 12). In our sample, 23 per cent said they voted for the party led by former anti-corruption magistrate Antonio Di Pietro, Italia dei Valori (IDV – Italy of Values), and 21.6 per cent voted for the PD. These two parties ran together in the 2008 general election. The share for IDV is well above that party's overall result in 2008 of 4.4 per cent and indicates that



Table 11 **Where Beppe Grillo Facebook fans position themselves on a political spectrum (national statistics in brackets)<sup>52</sup>**

Left				
1	2	3	4	5
16.6 (8.0)	11.8 (5.0)	16.6 (11.7)	9.6 (10.8)	19.8 (21.4)
.....				
Right				
6	7	8	9	10
6.6 (12.8)	3.9 (9.4)	2.0 (10.2)	1.0 (3.2)	3.5 (7.5)

Note: 8 per cent did not answer this question.

Table 12 **The parties Beppe Grillo Facebook fans voted for in the 2008 general election**

	(%)
Italia dei Valori	23.0
Partito Democratico	21.6
Popolo della Liberta	12.9
Lega Nord	5.0
Unione di Centro	1.8
Movimento per l'autonomia	1.3
Other	25.0

the IDV and the M5S have a similar appeal for Beppe Grillo Facebook fans. It is also far higher than the share of former IDV voters found in an IPSO study in early May 2012<sup>53</sup> (3.6 per cent). Although it is important to remember that our survey concerns Facebook fans and not voters, this disparity between the May figure and our results suggests that many of those who have switched to the M5S in opinion polls over the summer are likely to be coming from IDV.

It is worth noting, however, that a significant share of our respondents also voted for the PDL (13 per cent), while 5 per cent had supported the Lega Nord. The remaining 25 per cent were either not old enough to vote in 2008 or abstained.

Overall, what these data confirm is that, while Grillo and the M5S seem so far to still be taking more supporters from the centre-left, former centre-right voters are also moving.

### Trust in institutions

Trust in other people, as well as political and social institutions, is generally considered to be an important indicator of social capital in democratic societies. The Italian general public tends to be relatively untrusting: only the police, army and small and medium size enterprises commanded the trust of over half of citizens (results taken from the 2010 and 2011 Eurobarometer data). However, among Beppe Grillo Facebook fans, levels of trust are even lower, with some surprising results (table 13).

Table 13 **The extent to which Beppe Grillo Facebook fans trust institutions, organisations and media outlets<sup>54</sup>**

Institution	Tend to trust		Tend not to trust	
	M5S (%)	Italian public (%)	M5S (%)	Italian public (%)
Police	31	58	50	34
Army	27	65	52	28
European Union	19	32	62	49
Justice and the legal system	25	42	64	52
Religious institutions	7	48	82	43
Trade unions	11	32	75	56
Government	8	12	86	80
Political parties	3	9	94	84
Big companies	6	33	80	54
The internet	76	37	10	40
TV	4	40	91	49
The radio	23	39	56	40
Parliament	2	14	93	76
SMEs	61	53	20	33
Banks and financial institutions	2	-	92	-
The UN	21	34	55	46
The press	11	34	83	53

Consistent with the anti-establishment rhetoric of the M5S and Grillo, every major political institution fares poorly in the eyes of Beppe Grillo Facebook fans: less than 20 per cent trust the EU; only 8 per cent trust the government; 3 per cent trust political parties; and just 2 per cent trust parliament. Even the United Nations fares poorly, with only 21 per cent tending to trust it. The organisations seen as being at the heart of the financial crisis are especially mistrusted: just 2 per cent trust banks and financial institutions; and 6 per cent trust big companies.

However, the two notable exceptions give clear clues to the motivations for Grillo supporters. First, the only two institutions that command the trust of over half the respondents are the internet, with 76 per cent, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with 61 per cent. The internet score is in stark contrast to the low levels of trust in other media. Only 11 per cent trust the press (compared with 34 per cent of Italians overall) and less than 4 per cent trust television (compared with 40 per cent of Italians overall). Given Grillo's long-running and vehement criticism of traditional Italian media, these results do not seem surprising.

The high trust levels in small and medium sized enterprises is also of note. These are also generally quite trusted across the Italian public too. Further research might be useful to understand these figures, but we would speculate that it is the 'local' element of such organisations that could account for this result. Indeed, other research on trust levels suggest that personal experience – such as knowing someone inside the institution – correlates with higher levels of trust and confidence. As the world becomes more complicated, and institutions more distant from people's lives, trust levels fall.<sup>55</sup>

We also asked respondents about the trust levels they have in other people (table 14). Trust in other people is generally considered to be an important indicator of social capital in democratic societies, and a useful proxy for what is sometimes called 'social capital'. In general – taking into account the 'I don't know' option – levels of generalised trust of Beppe Grillo Facebook fans are not significantly different from those of the Italian public overall. In fact, they are slightly above average.

Table 14 **The extent to which Beppe Grillo Facebook fans think that most people can be trusted (national figures in brackets)<sup>56</sup>**

	(%)
Most people cannot be trusted	49 (69)
Most people can be trusted	32 (31)
I don't know	17 (3)

Although this survey has been conducted at a time of economic and financial crisis, and in other countries we saw that economics was among the major concerns that pushed people to support anti-establishment parties, economics is not among the main reasons that M5S supporters list when explaining their support for the M5S (only 2 per cent of our sample refer to economics as the key reason for supporting Grillo's Movement) (table 15).

Table 15 **Reasons given by Beppe Grillo Facebook fans for supporting the M5S**

	(%)
Disillusioned with the main parties and political system/want change	41
Adhere to the values of the movement	28
Movement represents the people	20
Integrity of the leader	6
Economic concerns	2

Rather, most of Grillo's supporters say that they support the M5S either as a reaction towards the 'disillusionment with main parties/change' (41 per cent) or because the movement 'represents the people' (20 per cent). It seems worth highlighting that this disenchantment towards traditional politics and traditional actors is nationally focused (anti-Europeanism does

not seem to be so important in shaping support). The problems that drive respondents' support for the M5S are the Italian parties and the Italian political system, less so the broader idea of 'democracy' and 'representation'. Indeed, from the possible answers to the questions we see that Europe is rather conceived as a 'good example', which cannot be followed in Italy because of the inability of Italian political representatives to do so. Overall, the support is strictly related to the idea of 'changing' the system, the ruling elites and the traditional ways of making policy. As one respondent says, the M5S represents 'the hope of a real change... of a total regeneration and a radical change of the system in Italy'.



## 3 Method

### About the survey

The methodology employed in the collection and analysis of our data is set out in detail in *The New Face of Digital Populism*<sup>57</sup> and this section offers only a condensed discussion, focused mainly on issues specific to this particular research project.

### Participant recruitment

As in *The New Face of Digital Populism* we decided to use Facebook principally because the site is a popular mode of communication for supporters of Beppe Grillo. We targeted survey adverts to people who were resident in Italy and members of groups deemed related to Beppe Grillo. These included *Beppe Grillo News*, *Movimento 5 Stelle*, *Movimento cinque stelle*, *Beppe Grillo*, and *Amici de beppe grillo roma*.

While we acknowledge that some of those surveyed may be fans of Grillo in his role as a comedian, we do not believe this poses a significant problem for the validity of our sample. The content of his internet output and his public profile over the past five years overwhelming concern Grillo the political figure, not Grillo the comedian. As even a cursory glance at his website [www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it) shows, the focus there is on political issues and the Movimento Cinque Stelle.

We recruited respondents by placing adverts in Italian on the right-hand side of the Facebook page. They invited participants to complete a short survey, and on clicking redirected them to a digital questionnaire hosted by the Survey Monkey website. This was entirely in Italian, and began with a short statement outlining the purpose of the research, providing a widget allowing users to signify their consent before starting the survey. If consent was given, users then proceeded through

several pages of questions, concluding with a brief overview of the research project's aims and the contact details of the lead researcher. Table 16 presents a detailed breakdown of completion rates alongside information on the number of responses and the size of the sample frame.

Table 16 **Data collected for survey on Beppe Grillo**

Date of survey	Specific Facebook interest groups targeted	Size of population reached	Total Facebook link clicks	Surveys started	Surveys completed	Final data set
August 2012	7	708,828	4,480	2,245	1,875	1,865

### Data analysis

Weights were employed to increase the external validity of our results. To do this, we gathered background information on the composition of the groups used to recruit participants using Facebook's advertising tool (which is freely available for any user to access), and assigned each participant a score value on the basis of the prevalence of their demographic profile (in this instance, age and gender). We analysed the data using simple descriptive statistics, presenting the total occurrence for each response category in the weighted data set.

### Limitations

Although our use of weights allowed us to achieved some degree of population representativeness by correcting for systematic age or gender related bias, it is possible that other biases remain. Therefore care must be taken when interpreting our results, and it is with the following caveats that our findings are presented.

Care must be taken when considering the activities and views of the 'offline' Beppe Grillo groups. It cannot be assumed that those who are members of the online group do not differ



from the offline group, so our findings cannot be claimed to offer insight into the views and activities of the broader offline movement. Likewise, our findings cannot be claimed to represent the ‘official’ views of the group or its leadership, and should not be represented as such.

Furthermore, the use of social network surveys is subject to a well-known technical and methodological critique focusing on the nature of self-entry interest classification and the lack of content reliability on social networking sites. Therefore it cannot be claimed that our data illuminate the views or opinions of all Facebook users who support Beppe Grillo. Rather, our results offer an insight only into the views of those *publicly declared* supporters who formed part of the membership of the Facebook groups identified above.

It is important to note that as many of the subjects in our questionnaire are drawn from the Eurobarometer survey, differences in data collection methodology make it difficult to compare results. In particular, we believe that Eurobarometer’s use of face-to-face interviews leads to significant differences in rates of missing data for questions addressed to sensitive issues. In our sample, rates of non-response to questions on political protest were high, whereas the Eurobarometer survey recorded significantly lower levels of participant non-response.

It is impossible to infer the true meaning of these refusals; where non-response was high we sought to identify our interpretation alongside re-scaled figures presenting just the responses of those participants who chose to answer. While it is accepted that this second set of figures may present an imperfect picture, we offer them by way of speculation as to the ‘true’ distribution of participant responses. We invite the reader to exercise care in their use and interpretation.



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New social and political movements from radically different political positions are emerging across Europe using social media, posing a new challenge to existing political parties and structures. The Pirate Party in Germany and the Occupy movement are examples of movements that have employed social media to grow rapidly and create a significant political and social impact – all in the last three years.

Beppe Grillo, the Italian comedian and blogger, is one of the first political figures to have embraced this change. He has used social media to communicate, recruit and organise, growing the Movimento 5 Stelle from practically nothing to a major political force in Italy in the space of three years, with it expected to play a crucial role in the 2013 Italian elections. His anti-establishment message has resonated with many against a backdrop of declining trust in political institutions, falling political party membership and ever-lower voter turnout.

This report presents the results of a survey of 1,865 Facebook fans of Beppe Grillo and the Movimento 5 Stelle. It includes data on who they are, what they think, and what motivates them to shift from virtual to real-world activism. It also compares them with other similar parties in Western Europe and their attitudes to those of the Italian population. This report is the seventh in a series of country specific briefings about the online support of populist parties across Europe.

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