

Waves of support: M5S between 2010 and 2013

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The M5S has achieved a historical result in the last political elections. As we have already emphasized, its vote share is the highest ever reached in Western democracies in its first general elections.¹ However, the M5S did not present itself to the electorate for the first time in 2013. In fact, although in 2008 it was absent from electoral competition, during the 16th legislature, it had already run several local and regional elections.

In 2008, Grillo decided not to run for the general elections. But he had already joined, with his own candidates, some important electoral competitions, among which the regional one in Sicily and the municipal elections in Rome, although with modest results. Then in 2009 the 5-Stars gained momentum. Civic candidates could get the approval from the movement provided that they fulfilled some requisites: as the residence in the municipality where the elections are held and no crime sentences.

The movement was founded in September 2009, and its visibility grew in 2010. It presents its own candidates in 5 out of 13 regions having elections: Piedmont, Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, and Campania. The presidency candidate in Emilia-Romagna, whose name is Favia, got the best result with 7% of the votes. In 2011, it runs basically in every province capital in the center and north of Italy while participating only a third of the local elections in southern Italy.

The year 2012 represented the turning point: The movement's presence in northern Italy becomes consolidated, and it participates in half of the local elections in the south.² The movement scores its first successes: in Parma and in three other municipalities, 5-Stars' mayors are elected. The very last electoral test before the general elections

has been represented by the renewal of the Sicilian parliament. The 5-Stars' candidate came close to 20% of the votes, scoring the first significant success in the south.³

In the present article, we engage in an outline of the various growth phases of the 5Ss during the last few years, making use of the electoral flows technique. We have selected some regional capitals densely populated in various parts of Italy where there have been elections in 2010 and 2013. We have then reconstructed the composition of M5S's votes in the various elections in terms of the results of 2008. We are thus able to identify the source of the former electoral support for the movement and which groups have then increased it. For every regional or local analysis, we have taken into account the results from the majoritarian election of the president or mayor. This choice comes from various reasons of opportunity: the number of valid ballots is greater, thus reducing the non-voting voters portion and giving the most accurate result for each party or coalition in terms of shares of the whole electorate; competitors are fewer, and then the not-advisable aggregation of different political subjects is not needed; results for the candidates of the M5S are usually better than those of the party list, and they, thus, represent the greatest expansion in a given local election and time.

Table 1 synthetically presents the empirical results. In the first part, results from the M5S or from its own candidates in the various elections are shown. The central part of the table reports the electoral shares that cast their ballot for the M5S in that election. The last column shows the electoral shares for the center-left in 2008 (including PD, IdV, SA) and for the center-right (PdL, LN, MpA) with respect to the M5S's votes.

¹ . See. Cataldi and Emanuele in the present volume.

² . On this point, see also De Lucia (2012).

³ . For a detailed analysis of the Sicilian electoral results, see Emanuele (2013a).

Table 1. Vote shifts for the M5S between the 2008 general elections and various ones in Turin, Milan, Genoa, Bologna, and Palermo

Municipality	Election	Electoral result		Destinations from 2008 electorates of various parties								Source c-l/c-r
		votes	% voters	SA	IdV	PD	UdC	PdL	LN/MpA	Others	No vote	
Turin	Regional el. 2010	17,217	2.4%	11	12	2	1	0	6	6	1	66/15
	Municipal el. 2011	22,403	3.2%	12	16	2	1	0	11	10	1	54/18
	Chamber of Deputies 2013	128,149	19.3%	43	60	15	10	10	19	36	16	48/18
Genoa	Mun. el. 2012	36,579	7.3%	23	35	10	10	1	22	1	1	77/16
	Chamb. 2013	112,124	23.6%	43	62	24	0	3	63	73	16	53/14
Milan	Reg. el. 2010	20,120	2.0%	6	10	3	2	0	3	4	1	64/19
	Mun. el. 2011	21,228	2.1%	8	10	1	3	0	6	7	1	41/33
	Chamb. 2013	121,408	12.8%	31	32	6	15	2	26	35	16	31/25
Bologna	Reg. el. 2010	18,602	6.2%	20	54	5	0	0	18	12	0	80/10
	Mun. el. 2011	19,969	6.6%	5	44	8	0	0	13	5	2	84/7
	Chamb. 2013	43,636	15.1%	17	45	14	0	0	35	45	15	58/9
Palermo	Mun. el. 2012	10,910	1.9%	7	7	5	0	1	0	6	0	67/23
	Reg. el. 2012	55,966	9.9%	25	30	22	10	5	6	15	0	70/20
	Chamb. 2013	105,714	19.5%	48	25	27	30	22	26	23	6	35/40

In chronological order, we start from the data of the 2010 regional elections. At the dawn of its electoral experience, the M5S seems to gain from the disappointed voters of the center-left bloc. We have to consider that at the time, the Berlusconi IV government was still in charge, and *Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia* had not left the center-right coalition. Therefore, the early M5S seems to derive from the center-left: as we can observe, they are about two-thirds of the total voters in Turin and Milan, while only about one-fifth come from the opposite political bloc (in particular, from the LN).

The fact that the M5S registered its best result in Emilia-Romagna, the only historically “red” region where its lists were presented, can be read as further confirmation of such consideration. Even in 2008, the share of left-wing voters for the M5S in Emilia-Romagna remains the highest, while the LN’s is minimal. Finally, the three parties of the

center-left coalition register the greatest coefficient toward the M5S in the Emilia-Romagna capital, Bologna. The first penetration of the movement appears to have affected particularly the smaller parties of the center-left coalition rather than the PD, and in particular, it involved the *Italia dei Valori* party. In fact, in Milan and in Turin, more than 1 out of 10 IdV 2008 voters cast their ballot for the M5S, and in Bologna, even half.

At the following year’s municipal elections, the electoral results of the 5S’s candidates had grown in all the three cases considered, although in a marginal way. In Turin and Milan, we can observe a convergence in the shares of former voters for the two main political coalitions: in both cases, the share of former LN supporters gets doubled, while the share of former PD’s voters decreases. Conversely, in Bologna, the former PD’s electorate represents an even greater share of the M5S’s voters

with respect to the regional elections: if the share of switchers of former IdV and Sinistra Arcobaleno decreases, as is the case for the LN, the one concerning the PD had substantially increased.

The cases considered for 2012 are the cities of Palermo and Genoa. They both confirm the feature of the first M5S's wave: more than two-thirds of its votes proceed from former center-left supporters, and this is even more true where the left was stronger (as in Genoa). It is interesting to emphasize this consideration as it holds even some years of the initial stage of the movement when it had already expanded its potential electorate. A few months later, at the Sicilian regional elections, the M5S's electoral support grew up to five times the earlier results, although it remains substantially unaltered in terms of the left-right composition.

If we look at the final wave of the 2013 general elections, we can observe that Grillo's supporters that had cast their ballot for the center-left in 2008 are directly proportional to the electoral strength of the left. This share is about one-third in Milan and in Palermo, about half in Turin and Genoa, and about 60% in Bologna. The same effect is discernible for the center-right: the proportion of its former supporter out of the total votes for the M5S is lower than one-tenth in Bologna, one-sixth in Genoa and Turin, one-fourth in Milan, and 40% in Palermo. During the six months between the regional and the general elections, there has been a sudden overturn in the political colors of the M5S's electorate.⁴

The correlation between the result of the 2008 coalition and the share of Grillo's supporters reaches 0.92 for the center-left and 0.93 for the center-right, both significant results at the 95% level. This dynamic seems to suggest the ability of the M5S in attracting different kinds of electorates in different contexts. This was also made possible with the use of differentiated political messages mobilizing more the locally stronger political coalition.

Obviously, the present analysis makes reference to a handful of cases chosen among big cities. We have seen that the M5S was able to mobilize across ideological lines and in a differentiated way: more from the center-left, where this coalition is more deeply rooted; more from the PdL in the Sicilian electoral barn; from the LN in the first stage, where it had recently grown; and finally also in Milan.

Precisely for this ability as well as for the substantially stable results with respect to the dimension of the municipalities, we can infer that in smaller cities the M5S could have attracted the electorate of the stronger parties in such kind of cities.⁵ For all these reasons, it seems proper to argue that the nationwide composition results that have been presented here regarding the M5S's electorate can be hardly extended to other kinds of elections.

In any case, some empirical findings remain particularly significant: in almost every case considered, the smaller center-left parties lose more votes than the PD, which, on the other hand, has lost growing vote shares approaching the general elections. A gradual reduction in the percentage share of Grillo's supporters proceeding from the center-left in 2008 appears, while the former center-right share of voters increases progressively. Finally, the relative weight of the 2008 political coalitions on the total share of M5S's supporters in the various municipalities is strongly linked to the electoral results registered five years ago.

Methodological note: All the analyses that have been presented were conducted at the constituency level based on the Goodman model, corrected by the Ras algorithm. The estimates were computed separately by groups of homogeneous polling stations differently identified and then aggregated in municipal-level matrices.

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⁴ . This is further underlined by Emanuele (2013c).

⁵ . A detailed analysis taking into account the demographic variation of municipalities is in Emanuele (2013b) in the present volume.

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