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# Beyond left and right: the eclectic populism of the Five Star Movement

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## ABSTRACT

Born in 2009, the Five Star Movement (FSM) has been one of the most electorally successful European populist parties since 2013. While its classification as a populist party is unanimously accepted, some have considered it close to left-libertarian positions, others as an anti-immigrant far right party, and still others have simply deemed it as unclassifiable. This article sets out to shed light on this question, using the official documents issued by the party since 2009, posts retrieved from Grillo's blog during three electoral campaigns, and the opinions of the party's supporters as expressed in three surveys in 2013, 2014 and 2016. Although displaying a clear anti-establishment identity, in economic terms it presents left-of-centre positions inconsistently mixed with more conservative proposals, while on the issues of citizenship and immigration, it has an elusive positioning, mixing national securitisation and international humanitarianism. The conclusions highlight the eclectic nature of FSM's populism.

**KEYWORDS** Five Star Movement; eclectic populism; anti-establishment; economy; immigration

**Eclectic:** 1. In ancient use, the distinguishing epithet of a class of philosophers who neither attached themselves to any recognized school, nor constructed independent systems, but 'selected such doctrines as pleased them in every school' (Liddell and Scott). (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

**Eclectic:** 1. Composed of elements drawn from various sources. 2. Selecting what appears to be best in various doctrines, methods, or styles. (Merriam-Webster)

The 2013 national elections represented a turning point in Italian politics. The economic, political and moral crisis clearly had an unshackling effect on Italian voters, generating a tripolar party system. Based on an incoherent and many-sided ideology as well as a personalistic leadership and 'post-bureaucratic' organisation, a peculiar communication style claiming proximity to the people and expressing anti-establishment sentiments, the Five Star Movement (FSM) was the main beneficiary of the above-mentioned changes (Conti and Memoli 2015; Corbetta 2017; Tronconi 2018).

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The FSM has frequently been depicted as a populist party (Bickerton and Accetti 2018; Bobba and McDonnell 2015; Corbetta 2013; Tarchi 2014). However, it presents original and somewhat contradictory features, distinguishing it from other Western European populist parties. On the one hand, it seems to come close to an ideal-typical image of a populist party as far as its political rhetoric and style of communication are concerned. Its anti-establishment position, the refusal to enter into any coalition-forming negotiations (until the aftermath of the 2018 elections), the rejection of professional politics, an extreme, often offensive use of language, all point to a strong populist character.

Beyond its anti-establishment stance, however, the positioning of the FSM in the ideological space is ambiguous (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Manucci and Amsler 2018; Russo *et al.* 2017). Starting from a green, libertarian platform, it has gradually evolved, incorporating issues such as anti-taxation and Euroscepticism that could also attract right-wing voters, while remaining rather elusive on the crucial issue of immigration. At the European level, this turn to the right was in a sense formalised in 2014 by its agreement with the UK Independence Party (UKIP) to form a joint political group in the European Parliament. At the same time, it has maintained typical leftist positions on the issue of guaranteed minimum income, as well as continuing to hold its environmentalist stance.

In this article we aim to shed light on the ideological positioning of the FSM, a party that eludes the most common classification of populist parties into left-libertarian or anti-austerity on the one side and radical right-wing on the other (e.g. Hobolt and Tilley 2016). We think this is a useful contribution per se, given the relevance of the FSM in the context of European populist parties and the divergent interpretations of its nature. Beyond that, the FSM is one of the main examples of non-radical populist parties, which do not display the typical ideological profile of radical left or radical right. The mutating populism of Italy (Verbeek and Zaslove 2016) in its latest manifestation seems to come closer to 'centrist populism', a phenomenon that is known and often described in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) with reference to the second decade following the democratic transition (Engler *et al.* 2019; Hanley and Sikk 2016; Pop-Eleches 2010; Stanley 2017; Učeň 2007; see also the useful overviews in Van Kessel 2015; Kriesi and Pappas 2015). Conversely, this sub-set of populist parties is not common, and still under-researched, in Western Europe.

The evidence presented in this article is based on the analysis of official documents of the party, posts retrieved from Grillo's blog, and voters' surveys, spanning from 2013 to 2017, and confirms the ambiguous and contradictory ideological positioning of the FSM.

In the next section we look at different possible classifications of populist parties; then we present the data we have referred to and explain the method used to gather it. In the fourth section we observe the diachronic evolution of the FSM on three issues (anti-establishment, economy and immigration) from the perspective of the party and the voters. Finally, the concluding section recaps the main findings in an attempt to define the positioning of this party in the left–right continuum and to refine our understanding of its location, and its peculiarities, in the realm of European populism.

### On the classification of populist parties

Populism can be better understood as a *thin-centred ideology* (Mudde 2004: 544). As such, it does not display the degree of coherence and intellectual sophistication of other ideologies, such as the communist or liberal ones. The thin-centred populist ideology ‘*considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and ... argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people*’ (Mudde 2004: 543, emphasis in the original). This makes populist parties able to combine this *Weltanschauung* with different ideologies.

Until the beginning of the twenty-first century this specification was much more relevant in theory than in practice, as most European populist parties, or at least the most electorally successful ones, belonged to the radical right party family (Mudde 2007). Since the outbreak of the economic crisis, however, several populist anti-austerity parties have gained increasing visibility. This has led some authors to propose a distinction based on different policy proposals and visions of politics and society. On the one hand, anti-austerity parties of the left (e.g. Podemos, Syriza, France Insoumise), have been vocal in rejecting the economic measures endorsed by the European Union and other global financial institutions and in pledging to expand the role of the state in the economy;<sup>1</sup> on the other, right-wing populist parties (e.g. UKIP, Front National) have mainly affirmed a nativist ideology, ‘which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state’ (Mudde 2007: 22). This vision has often been complemented by advocating national sovereignty, ‘claiming that powers should be repatriated from the EU to national institutions and that they can stem the threat of globalisation (especially foreign immigrant labour)’ (Hobolt and Tilley 2016: 975).

The analytical distinction proposed by Mény and Surel (2000), between the people as the bearer of sovereignty, as a class and as a nation is a convenient starting point to clarify the ideological differentiation between populist parties, and guide the empirical analysis.

In the first meaning (the *sovereign* people), ‘the people’ is intended not only as the legitimate source of sovereignty, but also as the only subject entitled to exercise it. According to this Rousseauian view, all intermediate bodies claiming to represent the people, and particularly parties, are considered as usurpers of the legitimate government. Parties, which were born as a linkage between civil society and the state, are now clearly located *into* the state (Katz and Mair 1995), and unanimously perceived as part of the elite, as opposed to the people. Moreover, parties by definition aim to represent a segment of society, thus neglecting the unitary view of the general will of the people. This is the core of the opposition between the people and the (political) elite on the one side, and between the people as a monolithic body and a pluralist view of society on the other. From this perspective, the enemy of the people is the establishment (and particularly the *political* establishment, and the political party as its main incarnation), both at the national and supranational level. In second place, a socioeconomic perspective is proposed by Mény and Surel (2000), by which ‘the people’ is meant as a *class*. The people-class is not limited to the Marxist proletariat, but includes instead all the small economic actors: workers and peasants, artisans, shopkeepers and small entrepreneurs. Their enemy is represented by multinational companies, bankers and more generally all the emerging sectors of the globalised financial economy. In third place, we can consider ‘the people’ in terms of a *national community*, bearing certain cultural or racial traits and reinforced by some foundational myth and by a shared history. Here the enemy of the people is the ethnic stranger that puts (again) the supposedly unitary character of the people in danger. In contemporary European societies, migrants are the most obvious targets of this kind of populist discourse.

More recently, a distinction between inclusionary and exclusionary populism has been proposed (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Inclusion and exclusion are defined along material, cultural and symbolic dimensions. In short, the first one refers to the distribution of state resources to specific groups within society, the second one to the degree of openness of political participation, the third one to the boundaries of the nation itself and who is considered part of it. According to these authors, contemporary European populism often displays exclusionary features, while its Latin American incarnations are predominantly inclusionary. The former stresses in particular the sociocultural dimension,

with a nativist approach to citizenship rights; the latter emphasises the socioeconomic dimension, widening the recipients of public resources.

The classifications here briefly recapped have a common ground in the core defining characters of populism as an ideology based on: an anti-establishment discourse, criticism of representative democracy and its actors, emphasis on the incarnation of the general will of the people. They also have a common ground in defining the sub-groups of populist parties and their ideological references. The anti-austerity, the people-as-a-class and the inclusionary versions of populism all broadly refer to the distribution of material resources within society. On the contrary, the nativist, the people-as-a-nation and the exclusionary versions of populism share a general post-materialist focus, based on identity rather than (or beyond) material interests.

While these elements allow discriminating between the main Western European populist parties, they appear less able to provide a convincing frame for many populist actors in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> In order to bridge this gap, scholars focusing on this area have recently proposed a further classification. The labels of 'centrist populist parties' or 'anti-establishment reform parties' (AERPs) have been adopted to describe political actors combining a criticism of corrupt and inept elites and non-extreme policy positions. As noted by Stanley, 'the centrism of these parties might derive from ideological inconsistency rather than intentional moderation, with aggregate policy stances comprising a mixture of apparently contradictory proposals (such as left-wing and right-wing economic policies)' (Stanley 2017: 144). Centrist populist parties distinguish themselves for non-ethnic, non-anticapitalist and non-ideological appeals (Pop-Eleches 2010). According to Hanley and Sikk (2016: 523) AERPs combine anti-establishment appeals with moderate social and economic policies and display three core features: (1) a politics of mainstream reformism, (2) usually framed in terms of anti-establishment appeal to voters, and (3) genuine organisational newness. AERPs 'are committed to mainstream models of liberal democracy and the market economy and display neither the populist radical right's inclination to "illiberal democracy", ethnocentrism and social conservatism nor the anti-capitalism of the radical left'.

In the following sections of this article we locate the FSM within these varieties of populisms. Based on the preceding discussion, we focus on three aspects defining the FSM's ideological positioning and competition strategy. The first one is the anti-establishment nature of the party, making up an important feature of its populist core discourse, and the common ground defining all Western and Eastern European populist parties. The second refers to its positioning in the economic sphere, and determines whether it is close to pro-state or pro-market arguments. This is a

key indicator especially for anti-austerity parties, advocating a shift from policies aimed to reduce the public debt to policies envisaged to support economic growth via increased public expenditure. Podemos is a clear example of these stances (Bickerton and Accetti 2018; Ramiro and Gomez 2017; Rodríguez-Teruel *et al.* 2016). The third aspect concerns the standing of the FSM on the crucial issue of immigration, seen here as a cognitive shortcut to the degree of inclusiveness of the political community of reference. This is particularly relevant for contemporary radical right parties, that insist on the national boundaries of their polity. Indeed, nativism and anti-immigrant policies are core defining features of radical right populism (Ivarsflaten 2008; Mudde 2007).

## Methodology

In order to build a comprehensive image of the party, we focus on both its official positioning and the opinions of its electorate between 2013 and 2017. To do so, we triangulated: (1) survey data collected at the individual level; (2) party manifestos issued since the foundation of the party; (3) posts published on Grillo's blog during electoral and referendum campaigns.

For data on voters, we rely on three surveys, carried out during two election campaigns (the Italian general election of February 2013 and the election of the European Parliament of May 2014) and, in December 2016, in the period when a referendum on proposed amendments to the Constitution was held. The Italian National Election Study (ITANES) conducted the first and the third surveys, while the Italian section of the European Election Study (EES) administered the second one. The three surveys were carried out with face-to-face interviews. For all surveys we compare the opinions expressed by the voters of the FSM with those of the mainstream left and mainstream right (Partito Democratico, PD, and Forza Italia, FI)<sup>3</sup> parties, the radical right populist Lega Nord (LN),<sup>4</sup> and the general Italian electorate. Respondents declaring an intention to vote for the FSM numbered 237 in 2013 (out of 1508 total respondents), 125 in 2014 (out of 1091) and 695 in 2016 (out of 3050). In the latter case, when opinions were collected before a referendum, we consider those interviewees declaring their intention to vote for the FSM in the hypothetical event of an imminent general election. In all our analyses we focus on questions with identical wording across the three surveys.

The analysis of party manifestos is based on the two official national electoral programmes that were developed in 2009 and 2017, plus a short manifesto drawn up for the 2014 European elections. Although general elections took place in 2013, the national electoral programme of the FSM was launched by the party at the time of its official foundation, in

October 2009, and remained basically unchanged until 2013. Since then no national elections took place until 2018. In 2014 the party published a one-page seven-point manifesto for the European election. The party manifesto for the 2018 national election has been drawn up during 2017 via online ballots organised on 23 different topics. For each topic both large documents and more synthetic leaflets are available. The long documents are sometimes extremely detailed.<sup>5</sup> The leaflets consist of two pages: the first one includes a slogan on the specific topic while the second one comprises a summary of the programme on the issue and, afterwards, the programmatic points voted for online by the members.

Alongside our analysis of party manifestos, we also examined posts published on Grillo's blog, as the latter is considered the official organ of the Movement. Initiated well before the foundation of the party (2005), it is the only place where all decisions concerning the FSM (i.e. expulsions of dissidents, creation of representative bodies, etc.) have been disseminated despite having been taken without any formal procedure or physical assembly and lacking any other written form. Since its foundation the blog has frequently hosted written interventions from people close to the cultural milieu of the Movement. However, over time it has changed from a personal blog (Grillo's blog, [www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it)) to the official organ of the Movement (blog of the stars, [www.ilblogdellestelle.it](http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it)), where interventions from elected representatives have gained more and more relevance and visibility (Doc. 1).

Despite the fact that the name of the blog was only changed in 2016, its function as a collector of contributions coming from different levels of the Movement started much earlier. As such, in our analysis contributions not authored by Grillo have also been considered as relevant in defining the FSM's official position in the public sphere. We collected all posts published in the 30 days before the 2013 and 2014 elections and the 2016 constitutional referendum ( $N=83$ , 170 and 171, respectively). Concerning the time frame of gathering posts, although not representative of all content published in the blog over the years, we restricted our focus – as many other studies did (e.g. Schärkel and König 2017) – to the period of the electoral campaign, which is the one where more shifts and extensions from the point of view of the party programme may occur as parties can be forced to take positions on issues downplayed in their manifestos. It is also the period when parties make hard decisions on the priorities of their communication strategy, emphasising the issues on which they presume to be able to mobilise their electorates.

**Our unit of analysis was the single post.** The posts were analysed using a codebook focused on our three main issues: anti-establishment claims, economic claims and claims on immigration. As the three issues are not



mutually exclusive they could be detected simultaneously in the same post. Moreover, such dimensions are not exhaustive of the content of the posts. In fact, some of the posts did not fit into our coding scheme and could not be classified along the three dimensions.

First, we quantified all references to the three issues in the posts in order to identify the changing salience of a specific topic during campaigns. For the anti-establishment issue we coded any claim opposing the elites in different sectors of society (the political, the media, the financial and banking systems) as well as stances against corruption, criticism of representative democracy and alternative democratic conceptions, and reference to moralisation of politics and its costs. Regarding the economic issue, we coded any reference to policy proposals concerning austerity, taxes, military budget, telecommunications, public services, welfare state, education, poverty, labour and the common currency. Concerning immigration, we looked for references to foreigners, non-EU citizens, immigrants, migrants, refugees, clandestine, Roma people and nomads. Second, we analysed the framing of the different issues in a more qualitative way in order to infer the position of the party on these topics. With reference to the economic issue we discriminated between pro-market and pro-state statements, while on immigration we noted differences between national securitisation (restrictive stance) and international humanitarianism (permissive stance).

**Party discourse and voters’ attitudes between 2013 and 2017**

Our analysis of Grillo’s blog during the campaigns of 2013 (general election), 2014 (European election) and 2016 (constitutional referendum) clearly shows that anti-establishment stances outnumber any other type of stance. However, there has been a small but constant decline of the anti-establishment discursive component over the years (from two-thirds of the posts in 2013 to half of them in 2016) (see Table 1). While being much less prominent, there have been frequent references to economic issues (around one-fifth of the posts, with little variation over the three years). The issue of immigration, however, was never explicitly touched upon during the three electoral campaigns we analysed. For this reason,

**Table 1.** Topics of posts published on Grillo’s blog, over the total of posts in campaign periods (percentage values).

Topics	2013	2014	2016	Total
Anti-establishment	68.7	79.4	53.2	66.7
Economy	16.9	22.4	19.3	20.0
Immigration	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
(N)	(83)	(170)	(171)	(424)

Source: Own elaboration based on [www.ilblogdellestelle.it](http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it).

**Table 2.** Self-positioning of voters on the left–right axis.

		2013	2014	2016
FSM	Mean	3.9	4.6	5.2
	Standard deviation	2.4	2.0	2.5
	Refuses left–right positioning (%)	16.5	8.0	27.1
	(N)	(237)	(125)	(695)
LN	Mean	6.7	7.4	8.2
	Standard deviation	1.6	1.5	1.4
	Refuses left–right positioning (%)	0.0	9.7	8.6
	(N)	(22)	(31)	(302)
PDL/FI	Mean	7.7	7.3	7.9
	Standard deviation	1.6	2.0	1.4
	Refuses left–right positioning (%)	3.1	3.9	1.1
	(N)	(159)	(78)	(180)
PD	Mean	2.4	3.2	4.4
	Standard deviation	1.7	2.0	1.9
	Refuses left–right positioning (%)	3.9	0.0	2.3
	(N)	(332)	(279)	(619)

Note: 0 = extreme left; 10 = extreme right.

when dealing with this issue we also took into consideration other arenas, such as the parliamentary one.

From the point of view of the voters, the FSM displays a very peculiar identity, which explains why observers do not agree on its ideological profile. Table 2 summarises the self-positioning of FSM's voters on the left–right axis, compared to those of the two mainstream parties, PD and FI, and the LN, which is often described as a radical right populist party. In all of the three years covered by our analysis, the average FSM voter is located between those of the two mainstream parties. At the same time, the dispersion of voters around the mean is higher for the FSM than it is for its competitors in 2013 and 2016. Also, the percentage of those who refuse to position themselves is greater than its opponents in 2013 and 2016, when it reaches a remarkable 27%. In 2014 it is overcome by the value of the LN, although the low number of respondents for this party should lead us to be particularly cautious when interpreting this evidence. All this points to an ideologically elusive electorate, mixing elements from the left and the right, or even impossible to classify according to such categories. That is why a more accurate profile of the FSM needs to be drawn, focusing on specific issues.

## The anti-establishment issue

### *The party's position*

In mobilising anti-establishment resentment, Grillo's blog has three main targets: politicians, journalists, and financial and economic players. This comes as no surprise as the founding events of the movement – the 'V-

days' of 2007 and 2008 – were directed exactly against the first two (Mosca 2015). A Manichaean discourse opposes the FSM to the political 'caste' that is considered responsible for the catastrophic situation of Italy. According to the blog the collusion among traditional parties is proven by bipartisan agreements demonstrating programmatic alignment between centre-right and centre-left coalitions that even supported a technical government 'imposed' by Brussels eurocrats (Mosca 2013). The mainstream conservative and progressive parties are deplored as fraternal twins: it is no coincidence that they refer to the centre-left PD as 'PD minus L', where PDL (Popolo della Libertà, People of Freedom) is the name of the main centre-right party. The opening section of the 2013 electoral manifesto, on 'State and citizens', claimed that 'Parliament does not represent citizens any longer, as they cannot vote for candidates, but only party symbols ... Parties have replaced popular will and avoid its control and judgment' (Doc. 2).

The second target of Grillo's blog is journalists and traditional media. Like politicians, they are considered a 'caste' but also named as a 'calotte' (*cupola mediatica*: 'cupola' being the name of the governing body of the criminal organisation *Cosa Nostra*) generating a fake reality to accommodate politicians' will. Mainstream media are harshly criticised and journalists are personally attacked as they are seen as part of the discredited establishment. Over time the blog reacted to criticism voiced in the traditional media attacking both left-wing and right-wing columnists and even journalists who were considered closer to the Movement. Both politicians and journalists are perceived as belonging to the same corrupt system, which flourishes thanks to public funding. In a post published during the 2013 electoral campaign Grillo established a connection between politicians and journalists stating:

[Parties] have occupied the State. They have sold it off. They have taken out its flesh from the inside. Now, thanks to the newspapers and the TV channels that they control, they present themselves as the saviours of the fatherland, they, the very people who have fleeced it and used it for their own interests. (Doc. 3)

The financial and banking system is the third target of the movement. Reference is often made to the irresponsible nature of international investors, public money used to save banks instead of people in need, and austerity policies imposed by the EU through its domestic executors. In the words of Grillo:

International finance is fighting its war for predominance, for the draining out of democracies and of the States. It's a super-organism that takes no notice of anyone, which can make use of the media, the politician-waiters and the governments themselves. The Third World War is not fought on the battlefield or with bombs, but in the editor's office of the newspapers,

on TV channels, in the top floors of the banks, in the rating agencies, in the multinationals. (Doc. 4)

The 2018 manifesto advocates ‘a banking system less prone to the requests of the financial system’, the need to ‘fight speculation’, and a strict compulsory system of public audit reporting for multinational companies (Doc. 5).

Although to a lesser extent, beyond the political–media–financial circus, there are many other concrete incarnations of the FSM’s anti-establishment discourse, ‘part of a wider project of elite denigration’ (Ivaldi *et al.* 2017: 6): the EU and Eurocrats, domestic institutions (government, parliament, president of the republic), trade unions, bureaucrats, industrial giants, intellectuals, lobbies, technocrats and the powers that be.

The FSM’s discourse repeatedly emphasises the opposition between corruption and organised crime on the one hand and legality, morality, and transparency embodied by the Movement and its representatives on the other. These values are seen in light of the common citizen who tends to be considered naturally honest by the Movement. Proof of this romanticised vision is offered by quotations from popular figures such as Imposimato (Italian magistrate and Honorary President of the Italian Supreme Court) and Lannutti (president of a national consumers’ association), who refer to the FSM’s candidates as ‘capable and honest young people’ ‘fighting for the common good’ (Doc. 6) and to the Movement as ‘young, clean, transparent’ opposed to ‘genetically modified parties ... [that] defend the bankers, the great powers’ (Doc. 7). Both endorsed the FSM in the last mass rally before the 2013 elections that was held in Piazza San Giovanni in Rome, a square traditionally associated with mass demonstrations of the labour movement.

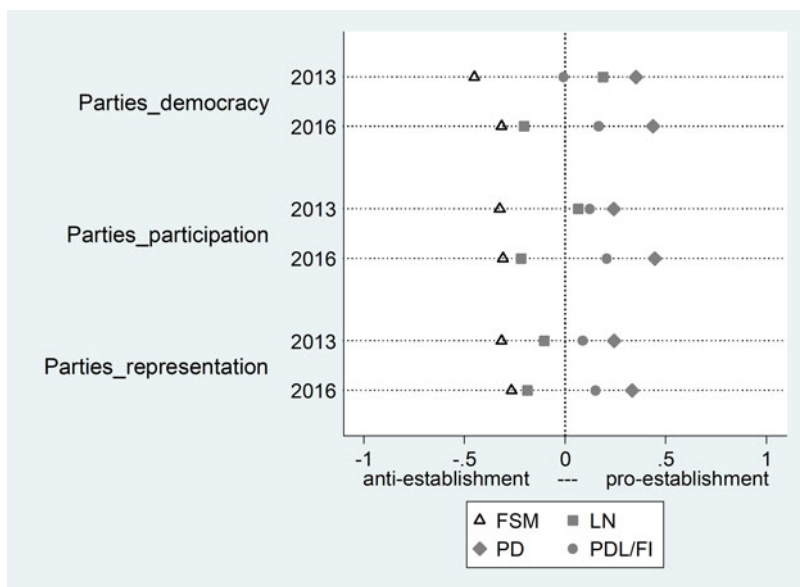
Another important topic is related to the reduction of the costs of politics and the ending of unjustified privileges of elected representatives. In this respect, the main proposals advocated by the Movement are: the reduction of salaries and the total elimination of life annuities for all elected representatives, as well as the abolition of electoral reimbursements for political parties.

Last but not least, repeated mentions of direct democracy, participation and popular will are also present in the manifestos of 2013 and 2018 and frequently referred to on the blog. During the campaign on the 2016 referendum and in the 2018 manifesto constitutional reform was portrayed as a violation of democracy. As stated in the blog: ‘Renzi is selling a reform that has as its real goal the centralisation and control of power over itself, erasing the voice of citizens and weakening their participation in democratic and political life’ (Doc. 8).

## The position of voters

In order to ascertain the view of the FSM voters on the anti-establishment issue, we refer to a set of questions from two surveys (2013 and 2016).<sup>6</sup> These questions allow us to investigate a crucial aspect of populist attitudes, namely the anti-party sentiment of the electorate. This is only one of the dimensions of the concept of populism as an ideology (Mudde 2004) or as an attitude (Akkerman *et al.* 2014): however, as stated above, anti-party sentiment is certainly a crucial component of the more general concept of populism.

Respondents were asked to declare their agreement with three statements on a Likert scale with four alternatives.<sup>7</sup> For each statement, we compare the percentage of FSM supporters with the overall opinion of Italian voters and with the opinion of voters of the two mainstream leftist and rightist parties (PD and PDL in 2013, PD and FI in 2016), and the far right LN. The three items cover different aspects of the role of parties within the political system: (1) their role for the functioning of democracy; (2) parties as promoters and channels of political participation; (3) parties as representatives of a plurality of interests within society (Figure 1). On



**Figure 1.** Opinions on the role of political parties in democracy for major parties (2013 and 2016, standardised values); value zero represents the position of the average Italian voter.

Question wording: For each of the following statements, could you tell me the extent to which you agree? *Parties and democracy*: There cannot be democracy without political parties. *Parties and participation*: Thanks to political parties people can participate in politics in Italy. *Parties and representation*: Political parties are necessary in order to defend the interests of different social classes and groups.

all three indicators, FSM voters show much higher anti-party sentiments than the average Italian voter, both in 2013 and in 2016. In 2013 more than half of the respondents do not consider parties a necessary feature of a democratic political system, 60% believe parties are not necessary to defend the interests of different social classes and groups, and more than two-thirds think that parties are not useful instruments for political participation. The perception of parties of FSM voters is between 0.3 and 0.45 standard deviations lower than the Italian average. In both surveys, FSM voters have by far the worst opinion of parties on all the three dimensions considered. This is true when compared to PD and PDL/FI voters, but even when compared to LN's voters. The profile of the latter becomes more similar to that of the FSM in 2016, because the LN sharpens its anti-establishment orientation, while the views of the FSM remain stable, at least relative to the average Italian voter.

## The economic issue

### *The party's position*

The economic programme of the Movement is far from being clearly articulated. The FSM refuses any ideological connotation and considers traditional cleavages out-dated. As observed on the blog, the party proposes 'a new way of doing politics, a way that is neither to the right nor the left, but straight ahead!' (Doc. 9).

Nonetheless, previous studies have shown that, compared with the manifestos of other Italian parties, its 2013 electoral programme provided the greatest saliency to welfare expansion and market regulation (Conti and Memoli 2015). Others noticed, however, that 'redistributive issues are virtually absent ... there is no direct reference to "equality", "rights" or welfare – either in inclusionary or in exclusionary terms' (Font *et al.* 2015).

Considering electoral programmes, '20 points to bring Italy out of the dark' were issued during the 2013 campaign as a summary of the electoral manifesto. They actually added to an apparently left-wing platform also programmatic stances intended to appeal to traditional right-leaning constituencies (Tronconi 2015). They included measures intended to re-launch small and medium enterprises (SMEs), the abolition of municipal property tax and opposition to the repossession of people's first home, as well as the abolition of the Italian tax enforcement agency *Equitalia*. One peculiar and distinguishing proposal of the party introduced during the electoral campaign of 2013 regards a universal basic income (*reddito di cittadinanza* – citizenship revenue)<sup>8</sup> that is often linked to a slogan claiming that 'no one should be left behind' (Tronconi 2015). This is a

distinctive claim of the Movement that has been backed up through the organisation of a national demonstration called 'Five Star March' which was repeated twice in order to ensure that public attention remained focused on this proposal (della Porta *et al.* 2017).

As with the previous manifesto, the fiscal section of the 2018 electoral programme also stresses the need to reduce taxes on enterprises. The section of the manifesto concerning labour includes proposals such as reducing the working week to 40 hours, allowing a more flexible retirement age, workers' participation in management, and greater rights, especially for trade unions not affiliated to the main confederations. The section regarding banks includes the creation of a public investment bank to fund innovative and sustainable businesses. Regarding education, the positioning of the Movement is very clear, placing state schools – defined as 'free, democratic, open, inclusive and innovative' – at the core of its programme. No public money should be allocated to private schools; more resources should be devoted to state schools; and teachers' salaries should be increased. The foreign policy section reveals another important aspect of the economic stance of the Movement: opposition to austerity and neoliberalism as prompted by the 'Troika' and the European Stability Mechanism, bodies that have outsourced the democracy of peoples, imposing the infamous 'strict conditionality' without any popular mandate (Doc. 11).

Another relevant topic frequently raised in the two manifestos and during the campaigns that we have analysed, concerns opposition to cuts to social expenditure (school, health and welfare more generally). This resistance is not restricted to defending existing standards but also calls for the restoration of pre-crisis funding as well as demanding further expansion of the welfare state. In connection with this point, military expenditures and particularly the programme of purchasing F35 fighters has frequently been targeted, proposing instead to divert these resources to social policies. In the 2013 manifesto it is proposed to fund public health research drawing money from 'military research' (Doc. 2, p. 14), while the 2018 manifesto advocates a 'stop to the F35 [purchasing programme] and military equipment expenditure', to prioritise instead 'investments in cybersecurity' (Doc. 12).

Finally, the central role of the state is the recurring feature of the section on economic development: the economic, regulatory and monetary role of the state is to be restored. Public intervention is conceived as the pillar of a new development model that could even include protectionist measures (i.e. import quotas and customs duties) as well as debt-financed public investments. The 2013 electoral manifesto called for the nationalisation of the physical infrastructure of the telephone and data network, a position that was somewhat softened, but not abandoned, in the 2018 manifesto.

The ambiguous positioning of the FSM on the economy is masterfully summarised in the following sentence: ‘Neither neoliberalism nor autarchy but a fair compromise protecting and reviving Italian quality in the world’ (Doc. 13).

This picture is confirmed by our analysis of Grillo’s blog. The most prominent issue related to the economic dimension concerns the dignity of labour and opposition to the so-called ‘Jobs Act’, a new piece of legislation on the labour market passed by the parliament in December 2014 and accused of spreading precarious work and reducing rights for new employees. There is also opposition to taxes on labour and SMEs. Very telling of the elective affinity with the latter is the fact that part of the salary of elected representatives is given back and used to provide microcredits to SMEs, considered by the Movement as the healthy component of Italian capitalism (Caruso 2015), as opposed to multinationals and large financial companies. The FSM fights against the financial receipts of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), against trade agreements such as The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and The Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), against EU-driven measures such as the Stability and Growth Pact, the bail-in legislation and the Fiscal Compact. According to the blog:

the policies pursued by this caste over the past few years have failed, inspired by old formulas that are no longer followed in the United States, China, anywhere in the world, and are inspired by a tight liberalism of IMF derivation, are inspired by the dogma that debt, basically, public debt, is fundamentally paid not through virtuous growth, but through social carnage, austerity and spending cuts. (Lucio Di Gaetano, financial adviser and former employee of Bankitalia) (Doc. 14)

Finally, discussion has taken place on the euro as the Movement advocated a consultative referendum to leave the common currency (Doc. 15). This proposal was the first of the ‘seven points for Europe’ that were adopted for the 2014 European election campaign (Doc. 16), but it has since been abandoned for tactical reasons, and it was not included in the 2018 electoral programme. The partial reconsideration of the position on the European currency was part of a broader strategy to soften the FSM’s anti-EU position. Indeed, in January 2017 the party tried to join the European parliamentary (EP) group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), one of the most enthusiastic supporters of European integration since ‘a mainstream affiliation in the EP was a political signal about the “respectability” of the M5S as a party of government’ (Bressanelli and De Candia 2018: 18). The request was approved with an online vote by FSM members but eventually rejected by the Liberals themselves (*La Repubblica*, 9 January 2017).



How can we summarise this composite picture? Many references to leftist economic policies (on the labour market, on social expenditure, on nationalisation of infrastructures) are balanced by some proposals that are meant to appeal a traditional conservative electorate (tax cuts on small enterprises and on house property). Most notably, these mixed economic views are overarched by typical populist stances regarding the big financial players (banks and multinational corporations), international actors like the IMF and the European Central Bank and a Eurosceptic position that has only recently been reconsidered.

### ***The position of voters***

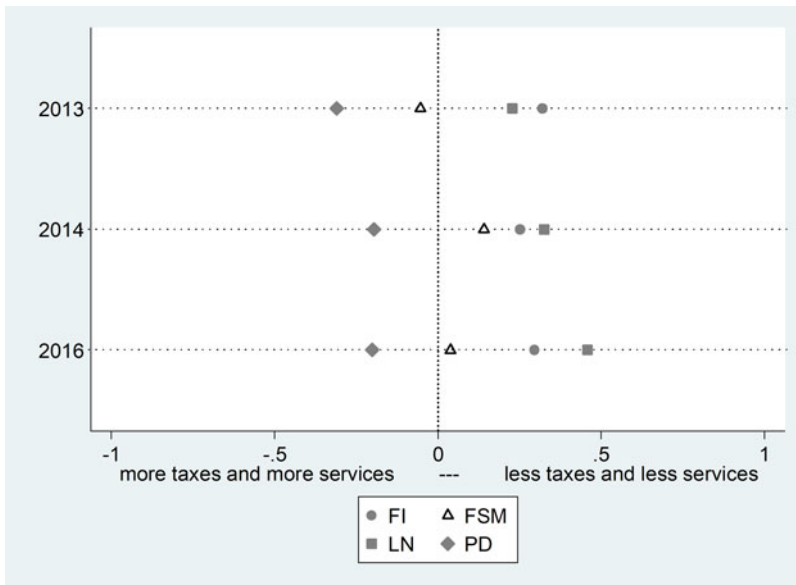
The position of voters on the economic issue has been observed through a traditional question on the preference of respondents between increased services (at the expense of more taxes) and reduced taxation (at the expense of less services). We think this question, which referred explicitly to the economic dimension of the left–right spectrum and was anchored to a concrete and well identifiable issue, is more valid than the question about self-positioning as rightist or leftist. This is because, as we have seen in the opening part of this section, FSM voters openly refuse to be located on the left–right axis (Table 2), because they consider it obsolete.

In contrast with the positions expressed by the party in its official documents, in all the three surveys, FSM respondents are located close to the average Italian voter (Figure 2). A moderate shift towards the right can be observed between 2013 and the following two waves, reflecting a well-known redefinition of the social and demographic profile of voters (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013; Pedrazzani and Pinto 2017). The call for stronger state regulation and an increased degree of public intervention in the economy resonates only partially in the opinion of its voters. Strikingly, in comparison with the two major mainstream parties, the FSM is always located in a median position. Here the distinction between the FSM and the LN is also clear: the strong pro-market position of the latter is not matched by the centrist orientation of the former.

## **The issue of immigration**

### ***The party's position***

Coming to the third issue of our analysis, no clear statements from the Movement on immigration can be found on the blog. Very tellingly, the words ‘immigration’, ‘migrant/s’, ‘foreigner’ or synonyms were never mentioned in the 424 posts published in the month preceding the three elections that we analysed (see Table 1). However, the issue of



**Figure 2.** Opinions on taxes vs. services for major parties and Italian voters (2013, 2014 and 2016, standardised values); value zero represents the position of the average Italian voter.

Question wording: Some people say that taxes should be reduced, even if it means cutting public services. Others say that public services should be expanded, even if that means higher taxes. What is your opinion?

immigration has been touched upon only every now and then over the years in the blog.<sup>9</sup>

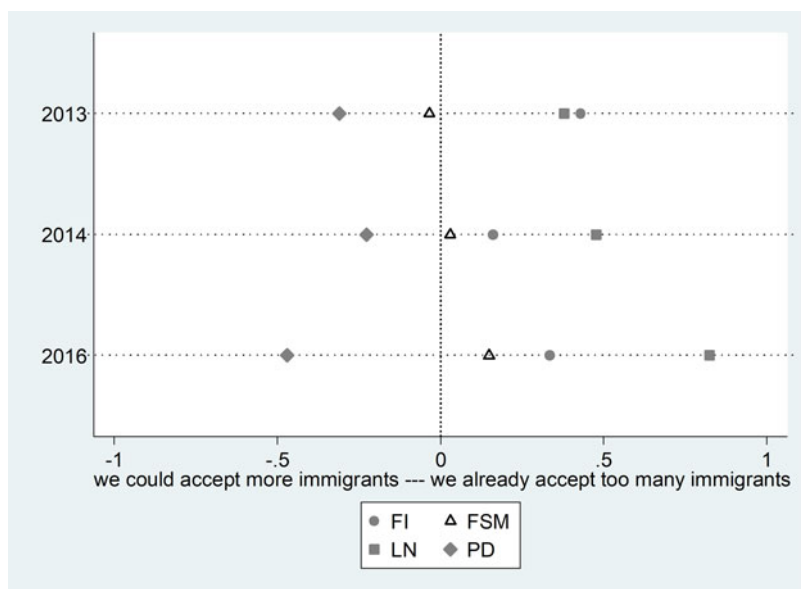
While the 2013 manifesto did not include any reference to the immigration issue, the 2018 manifesto contains a policy section devoted to it. The slogan attached to this section states 'Zero landings of immigrants. Italy is not the refugee camp of Europe'. This restrictive stance is however complemented by four policy proposals based on a humanitarian approach to the phenomenon concerning: (1) the establishment of safe and legal channels of access to Europe; (2) a revision of the Dublin III regulation aimed at a fair distribution of asylum seekers in EU member states according to objective parameters such as population, GDP and unemployment rate; (3) the strengthening of local commissions in charge of recognising the status of refugees to make their decisions faster; (4) an embargo on the sale of weapons to countries engaged in civil wars, the end to the exploitation of developing countries and a drive for true international cooperation.

The ambiguity of the party on this issue is confirmed by other studies that broaden the analysis beyond official documents. An analysis of the parliamentary debate on the refugee crisis between May 2015 and June 2016 comparing the FSM with other populist parties in Italy and the UK

shows that ‘while LN and UKIP represent the refugee peak as a national threat, which raises criminality and insecurity within host societies, FSM tends to position itself closer to the left continuum of the spectrum, underlining the humanitarian emergency’ (Gianfreda 2018: 103). Recently, in the parliamentary debate and the vote on a draft law recognising ‘Jus soli’ as the criterion for obtaining Italian citizenship, the FSM MPs abstained as, in the words of the candidate to the premiership, Luigi di Maio, ‘this is not a priority for the country’ (*La Repubblica*, 17 June 2017). Interestingly, in 2013 the FSM elaborated a draft law on citizenship that was even less restrictive than the one rejected four years later (Doc. 17). At the European level, the EP passed a reform of the Dublin Regulation on asylum seekers in November 2017. FSM’s MEPs voted against it, while even the LN abstained on it. The press release of the parliamentary group of the FSM on that day was tellingly entitled ‘Renegade Northern League: All economic migrants [will be allocated] to Italy’ (Doc. 18).

### ***The position of the voters***

Although barely present in the official documents and in the blog posts of the Movement, the issue of immigration has become prominent in the



**Figure 3.** Opinions on immigration for major parties and Italian voters (2013, 2014 and 2016, standardised values); value zero represents the position of the average Italian voter.

Question wording: Some people say that we accept too many immigrants. Others say that the current situation is under control. Still others think that we could easily accept more. What is your opinion?

political debate of the last years (Geddes and Scholten 2016). The views of voters on this topic can be traced again for three points in time (Figure 3). As we already observed for the economic orientation (Figure 2), the FSM presents a median position between PD and PDL/FI and an almost identical positioning to that of the Italian electorate, with a slight movement towards anti-immigration views through time. Differences with the LN are also very clear, and they increase in 2016 compared to 2013, as voters of Salvini's party become more radical on this topic.

## Conclusion: an eclectic populism

In the theoretical section of this article we set out a framework for the analysis of the ideological positioning of the FSM. In our empirical analysis, we captured these broad concepts referring to three topics: the anti-establishment claims and the positions on the economic and immigration issues. According to our analyses, the FSM displays a clear anti-establishment character. Anti-establishment views and a rejection of any kind of intermediation can be detected in the political discourse of the party with reference to different spheres of social life: political (parties), mediatic (professional journalism), economic and financial ones (banks, unions) (Caruso 2015). Other qualifying traits of FSM's identity are moralisation of politics, abolition of the privileges of the 'caste', as well as frequent references to direct and participatory democracy. On this set of issues, there is a convergence between the message originated by the *party in central office* and the attitudes of voters, at least considering the role of parties within the democratic system, since data is not available on the other aspects of the anti-establishment dimension. Also, FSM voters display a much stronger anti-party sentiment when compared with the supporters of the mainstream parties and even compared to the populist LN.

When we turn to the other two dimensions that we have analysed (the position on the economy and immigration), the picture is very different. Concerning the economy, the FSM presents certain traits of leftist parties (indeed radical leftist ones), focusing on welfare expansion and a strong role of the state in the economy, requiring European institutions to put a halt to austerity policies and proposing an ambitious universal basic income programme, but also adopts quintessential anti-tax discourse to appeal to conservative voters. This policy profile, however, is not reflected in the positioning of its voters. Since 2013, with limited movements in the following years, the average FSM voter has been closely aligned to the average Italian voter, positioned between the PD and PDL/FI and distant from the average voter of the LN.

Finally, we considered the issue of immigration as a shortcut to the wider sociocultural definition of the borders of the political community. In this case party documents are particularly elusive, to the point that this issue is absent from the 2013 manifesto and from the blog in the three campaign periods here considered. However, the 2018 manifesto devotes a section to the topic where traditionally opposing views of left and right are blurred, mixing international humanitarianism (typical of the former) with national securitisation (emblematic of the latter). From the perspective of the voters, views are again similar to those of the average Italian and located on a median position between the PD on one side and PDL/FI and LN on the other.

The relative positioning of voters of the three parties shows a clear pattern: FSM voters are far more extreme in their anti-party positions, while they are consistently located between the two mainstream parties on substantive policy issues. They are also clearly distinct from the voters of the LN: more extreme as far as anti-party sentiments are concerned, and more moderate on economic and immigration issues.<sup>10</sup>

From a chronological point of view, we do not observe dramatic developments in the positioning of the party and the voters on the three issues – this would indeed be surprising in such a short time range. Beyond a partial moderation in pro-state economic arguments in the 2018 manifesto, when compared to the 2009 one, the party shows a remarkable stability.

All this allows us to safely locate the FSM within the broad group of European populist parties. Differently from most Western European populist parties, though, the views of the FSM on economic and immigration issues are not well defined. Beppe Grillo himself has frequently refused any definition of his party as leftist or rightist, considering these categories as out-dated. Indeed, the FSM displays an ‘eclectic’ form of populism, combining contradictory or elusive visions on policy issues crosscutting traditional cleavages with a strong anti-party and anti-establishment rhetoric.<sup>11</sup> The FSM’s political identity includes, at the same time, a supportive orientation towards both left- and right-wing issues and related policies.

The eclectic nature of FSM’s populism seems able to attract voters with moderate views, as happens with the ‘centrist’ populism that has been observed in CEE countries in recent decades (Hanley and Sikk 2016; Stanley 2017). The FSM is an anti-austerity but not an anti-capitalist party. It proposes mixed or contradictory policies on immigration but is not xenophobic. Its voters consistently have non-extreme views on these issues, contrary to those of the LN, which displays instead a clear radical rightist, nativist profile.

If this interpretation is correct, the following step consists in understanding what conditions favour the success of centrist populist parties

instead of (or in addition to) radical ones, beyond explanations focused on single cases or on the legacies of post-communist transitions. A comprehensive answer to this research question clearly goes beyond the scope of this article. Here we limit ourselves to a few possible hints, as a note for a developing research agenda.

The Italian party system is eccentric in the Western European context in several respects. Indeed, it shares with CEE countries a number of characteristics that could be used as a starting point for generating hypotheses on the emergence and electoral viability of 'centrist' or eclectic populist parties. In the first place, Italian parties (and the party system) have a short history and a weak institutionalisation, determined by the dramatic renewal following the corruption scandals of the beginning of the 1990s. This could imply that not only some extreme fringes, but also the bulk of moderate voters, have been available to abandon mainstream options and turn to new anti-establishment actors (the LN, FI and FSM). Second, the salience of the issue of corruption sets a favourable context for anti-establishment parties, beyond the economic and immigration issues. As demonstrated through a comparative analysis of party manifestos (Curini 2018: 89–90), Italy, together with Greece, shows by far the highest salience of corruption in Western Europe, and values that are similar to most CEE countries. Widespread distrust in the functioning of democracy is another feature that characterises Italy more than other Western countries (van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017: 91). This could open the way to parties advocating a deep reform of political institutions, as well as forms of direct democracy, without necessarily contesting the principles of liberal democracy.

The FSM represent an unusual case of populism in the Western European scene. Quite surprisingly it displays instead some features that make it similar to several CEE 'centrist' populist parties. Low party system institutionalisation, salience of the corruption issue in the political debate and diffused dissatisfaction with democracy could represent promising paths to understand what explains the emergence and success of these parties.

## Notes

1. Left-wing populist parties, although less common in Europe than in Latin America, were present before the Great Recession, too. For instance, the German Linke or the Dutch Socialist Party (see March 2011).
2. And in Latin America. Argentine Peronism is in fact considered as the archetypal example of ideologically diffuse or eclectic populist party (Roberts 2017), a label also providing an accurate description of the initial appeal of Fujimori in Peru (Pop-Eleches 2010).
3. Or the PDL (Popolo della Libertà, People of Freedom), as Forza Italia was called between 2008 and 2014.

4. 'Nord' (Northern) was dropped from the party name in October 2017, as part of a strategy aiming to expand its electoral base to the southern regions.
5. Ninety-two pages for economic development, 89 for energy, 38 for agriculture, 28 for constitutional affairs, 25 for the environment, 23 for mobility, 20 for telecommunications and the others between 6 and 12 pages.
6. We also consider a third time point (2014 European elections) on the other two dimensions analysed in the following pages. However, since the questions related to the populist attitudes of the voters were not comparable across the three surveys, the 2014 data have been excluded in this section.
7. Since not all the scales were identical in the three surveys, the data presented in this and the following figures have been standardised, so that zero corresponds to the general mean and the standard deviation is equal to one.
8. During the XVIIth legislative term, the FSM Senate group presented a bill on this topic (Doc. 10). According to this proposal (<https://www.senato.it/service/PDF/PDFServer/DF/308596.pdf>), all people below the poverty threshold (calculated as earning less than six-tenths of the annual median national revenue) should be given a monthly salary of €780. This measure, although referred to as a universal basic income, should actually more properly be referred to as an unemployment benefit.
9. Its saliency increased only in recent years particularly in the aftermath of the 'Mafia Capital' scandal (December 2014) and the controversies that emerged in 2017 on the role played by NGOs in the migrants' rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea, on a parliamentary bill endorsing 'Jus soli', and on the reform of the Dublin Regulation in the EP. Interestingly enough, the FSM repeatedly criticised both centre-left (PD) and centre-right (FI, but also the LN) parties advocating the fairness of 'common sense' solutions on the topic, located in between the political correctness ('*buonismo*') of the former and the opposite stance ('*cattivismo*') of the latter.
10. Analysing a wider set of issues, Colloca and Corbetta (2015) find the same 'centrist' positioning, leading to the conclusion that the FSM is better understood as a post-ideological party.
11. After the 2018 elections, the FSM started negotiations in view of a coalition government with both the LN and the PD, once again confirming the ambivalent nature of its ideological positioning.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Doc. 1 – Blog post – The dream of M5S continues. The Rousseau association is born (25 April 2016)

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Doc. 2 – 2013 Elections Manifesto

<https://www.slideshare.net/misterno/programma-movimento-5-stelle>

Doc. 3 – Blog post – Letter to Italians (6 February 2013)

[http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/02/lettera\\_agli\\_italiani.html](http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2013/02/lettera_agli_italiani.html).

Doc. 4 – Blog post – The third world war is under way (6 February 2013)

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