Challenger parties in Parliament: the case of the Italian Five Star Movement

Enrico Borghetto

UNIVERSIDADE NOVA DE LISBOA

Abstract

In 2013, the Five Star Movement (M5S) won representation for the first time in the Italian parliament, the heart of the institutions they criticised and aimed to reform. With parliamentary ranks filled mostly with inexperienced politicians and a strong identification with the role of outsiders challenging the mainstream political consensus, the expectation is that their opposition style should differ substantially from that of other parties. This article explores this question by comparing the policy content of oral parliamentary questions submitted by the M5S with that of other Italian opposition parties during the 17th legislature (2013-2018). It analyses to what extent the M5S's issue profile 1) overlaps more with parties of either the left or the right side of the political spectrum, 2) is more likely to deal with matters emphasised in its electoral platform, and 3) is more likely to address issues not attended to by other parties. The results provide new insights into the behaviour of new challenger parties in parliament.

1. Introduction

At the time of their first entry into the national parliament, in 2013, the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle,* M5S) was described as a 'strange animal' wandering around 'the zoo of Italian politics' (Corbetta, 2013; 197). Although other Italian parties had made recourse to anti-establishment rhetoric in the past, the M5S brought the critique of corrupted party elites to a whole new level. It presented itself as an alternative to all political forces and it did not identify with any traditional cleavages, especially the socio-economic distinction between left and right. To further stress its distinctiveness, its parliamentary ranks were filled with non-professional politicians, presenting themselves as citizens and party delegates rather than representatives. All in all, the distance from past and current parliamentary parties could not have been any greater, so much so that it utterly rejected the 'party' label (Tronconi, 2018).

According to Hobolt and Tilley (2016), the M5S should not be considered an outlier in either Italian or European politics but rather a successful example of a new type of opposition party, which they label 'challenger party'. Similar to Podemos in Spain or the Front National in France, the M5S managed to attract disaffected voters by offering 'a clear alternative narrative to the mainstream consensus' (2016: 975) and by stressing its extraneousness to those political elites which were in office when the Euro crisis struck Europe. These parties are well-known for using traditional tools (e.g. protests and rallies)

Contact Author: Enrico Borghetto, Universidade Nova de Lisboa.
E-mail address: enrico.borghetto@fcsh.unl.pt

and new ones (e.g. the web) to challenge the mainstream consensus and influence the political agenda. However, little is yet known on how they employ more institutional channels such as the opposition activity of their MPs in parliament.

The main goal of this research article is to contribute to existing knowledge about the M5S and, more in general, new challenger parties, by analysing their opposition style in parliament. The expectation is that the M5S will attempt to mark its distinctiveness from the other opposition parties (see also De Giorgi and Dias 2018). When entering representative institutions, challenger parties as a rule must walk a thin line. They must prove that they are effective at representing the interests of their voters and militants, while at the same time avoiding being assimilated into the party system, thus losing their alleged purity. Building on the literature on party issue competition (e.g. Green-Pedersen, 2007; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010), this article contends that one way to achieve this goal is to emphasise issues which are different from your competitors. While research shows that all parties practise some form of selective issue emphasis, this article's argument is that new opposition parties have a greater incentive to set themselves apart than the other opposition parties.

To test this hypothesis, the following analysis will look at the issues opposition parties in the 17th legislature (2013-2018) decided to bring to the fore in their parliamentary oversight activities, more specifically during the so-called weekly question time (Russo and Cavalieri, 2016, Borghetto and Russo 2018). Admittedly, this is just one of the arenas where opposition parties are active. Yet, monitoring and challenging the government is one of their core functions (Martin, 2011). Additionally, the stake should be higher when the opposition is given the chance to ask questions on the floor and during a weekly televised debate in the presence of members of the cabinet. Thus, weekly question time represents an important stage where the opposition gains visibility and is able to signal to its voters.

The analysis is set up in two parts. The first step entails a comparison of the Movement's issue profile during the 17th legislature with that of opposition parties active from the 13th to the 17th legislatures and asks whether it overlaps more with parties of the left or the right side of the political spectrum. This way I can test whether the M5S lives up to its word of being indifferent to the socio-economic cleavage (H1). Second, I look closely at the agenda choices of the Movement in comparison with those of other opposition parties during the 17th legislature. On the one hand, the commitment to introduce some form of imperative mandate (which is prohibited by the Italian Constitution) for its MPs should make adherence to the party programme a relevant criterion for selecting the topic of parliamentary questions. H2 expects that the M5S should ask more questions on the key topics in its electoral manifesto than other parties. On the other hand, parties are strategic actors and do not act in a void. If most of their competitors in parliament ask questions on the issue of the day, it would be difficult for a party to avoid it. I argue that this should be less relevant in the case of the M5S. Because of its intention to portray itself as distinct and uncompromising, H3 expects that the M5S will choose topics which are different from the majority of other parties during a specific session.

I argue that this issue-based perspective and the choice to look closer at this less publicised side of the M5S – which is more well-known to the public for its town square rallies, social media campaigns and disruptive protests in parliament (Bordignon and

Ceccarini, 2015) – can provide important insights into the evolution of the Movement, from the pariah in Italian politics to main government partner in the current legislature (18th, which started in 2018). Many important studies have already analysed the Movement from different perspectives, bringing under the lens its communication strategy, organisational profile, charismatic leader and ideology. On the other hand, there is still little knowledge about the behaviour of its elected MPs in parliament (an exception is Pinto and Pedrazzani, 2015, and De Giorgi and Dias, 2018); in other words, on the behaviour of the party in public office, rather than the party on the ground and in central office (Katz and Mair 2003).

2. The M5S outside and inside Parliament

In the context of the ongoing transformations in contemporary democracies, Italy, for once, is no exception, but rather the place where some of the trends observable in most other European countries are amplified and, at times, anticipated. These include the sharp drop in the governing parties' level of support, the rise of new political forces that are often anti-establishment and with a strongly populist rhetoric (Bosco and Verney, 2012), and the increasing divide between parties that govern but are seen as incapable of representing, and parties that mostly do not govern, but that claim to represent (Mair 2011). Until its entry in 2018 into a government coalition with the League (which is still too early to assess) the M5S constituted a remarkable example of the latter type of party, that is, a typical challenger party (Hobolt and Tilley, 2016). Not tainted by government responsibility during the Euro crisis, it managed 'to monopolise the theme of protest against the establishment at a time when political elites reached their lowest level of popularity' (Tronconi 2018: 178).

Eventually, the defiance of the mainstream consensus coupled with a capacity to politicize issues mostly neglected by its competitors (Conti and Memoli, 2015, Passarelli and Tuorto, 2016) paid off. A party at its first electoral competition at national level, it gathered a level of consensus equal, when not superior, to that of the two mainstream parties from the centre right and centre left.[1] Immediately after their entry into the parliamentary arena, M5S MPs rushed to stress their non-involvement in the old party dynamics. In particular, they denied their availability to post-electoral alliances which would have helped overcome the political paralysis that had hit parliament (and the country) following the 2013 electoral results. The M5S wanted to convey the image of a movement from the bottom, close to the citizens and far from traditional party logics. Indeed, such a post-ideological positioning had been functional in their electoral success, since it allowed them to attract voters from all existing parties (Russo et al. 2017). Therefore, their MPs made an effort to appear in the parliamentary arena as an opposition that was alternative to all political forces – regardless of their position on the traditional socio-economic dimension – and with a declared mission to conquer alone the majority of seats and the government in the near future. Thus, the first demarcation line with other parties is that the M5S's issue profile during question time should be equally distinct from that of other opposition parties, whether they come from the left, centre or right pole of the political spectrum.

---

[1] Only thanks to the electoral system, which rewarded the winning coalition and not the winning party, the centre-left Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD) obtained a majority prize in seats, succeeding in overtaking the M5S in the Chamber of Deputies (D'Alimonte, 2013).

H1 – The difference between the issue profile of the M5S and that of other opposition parties should not be correlated with their position on the socio-economic cleavage.

From a programmatic point of view, the first battles of Grillo and his supporters – from whom a large part of the new parliamentary elite is derived – can be traced back to the so-called 'new politics' (Poguntke, 1987). The key themes, at the origin of the Movement, concerned primarily environmentalism and renewable energy, issues of poverty and precarious employment, battles against the power of large enterprises and the effects of globalisation, the morality of politics, civil rights and, in particular, the pledge to open access to specific services and, above all, the internet to everyone (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2015: 460). These very issues found space also in their electoral manifesto. On the other hand, their greatest innovation is probably not in the themes, which clearly lean towards the extreme left (Tronconi, 2016: 220) but in the interpretation given to the role of the representative in parliament. Since its founding in 2009 by the comedian, activist and blogger Beppe Grillo and the entrepreneur Gianroberto Casaleggio, the M5S has been a fierce critic of the delegation principle on which political representation is based. In their view, it inevitably leads to the betrayal of the citizens' will. From an organisational point of view, the Movement's self-declared inspiration is 'the horizontal network'. They claim that this same model should be applied to Italian political institutions through an increasing recourse to direct democracy and the exploitation of internet capabilities, especially social networks (Bickerton and Accetti 2018). Being connected in the network is considered by its founders as one of the essential tools to reform the model of representative democracy from the bottom. It is the only effective means through which citizens can keep control of their representatives and avoid the risk of being 'betrayed'. MPs, in turn, should be considered as temporary 'employees' bound by an 'imperative mandate'. Betrayal of the spirit of the mandate should be punished with expulsion from the parliamentary group. Although most parties nowadays stress the importance of mandate fulfilment, I expect that these constraints hold even more true in the case of the M5S. So, the second hypothesis reads as follows:

H2 – The congruence between the M5S issue profile during question time and in their electoral manifestos should be higher than for other opposition parties.

Their anti-elitist stance indisputably moulded their repertoire of action in parliament, which consisted of virulent protests and constant attacks against the 'caste' in their parliamentary interventions (Bordignon and Ceccarini, 2015; Tronconi, 2018). The goal was to convey to the media and the public at large an image of uncompromising opposition, marking a difference from the rest of the political forces. This distance is also visible in their collaborative stance towards other parties. De Giorgi and Dias (2018) provided evidence that M5S (likewise another anti-establishment party, the Northern League, LN, *Lega Nord*) tended to be less cooperative (measured as number of bills co-sponsored with other parties' MPs) than the average. On the other hand, there is still little research on their use of oversight tools such as parliamentary questions and their explicit issue choice in parliament. Another way to present themselves as extraneous to the system is, I expect, to address topics that are different from those most debated during a specific question time session. Thus, the final hypothesis reads:

H3 – The M5S should be less prone than other opposition parties to asking a question on the most debated topic of the day.

3. Data and analysis

The study presented in this article relies on the content-coding of oral parliamentary questions on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies during the 17th legislature. According to the rules of procedures, each parliamentary group is allowed only one question for each weekly session, regardless of the size of its delegation in parliament (Russo and Cavalieri 2016). Authorship was attributed on the basis of the party membership of the first signatory at the moment the question was presented; i.e. I do not consider the party affiliation of the remaining co-sponsors. To each question was attributed one of the 230 policy codes making up the Italian Policy Agendas codebook (Borghetto et al., 2018). These comprehensive range of topics can be aggregated into 21 policy topic areas.[2]

Figure 1 selects the ten most frequent topics (out of 21, counts on all topics are reported in appendix A) addressed by the M5S and shows the share of attention devoted by the M5S (triangle) and on average by the other four main opposition parties (circle) during the 17th legislature: Go Italy (FI, *Forza Italia*), LN, Left, Ecology and Liberty (SEL, *Sinistra [Ecologia] e Libertà*) and Brothers of Italy (BI, *Fratelli d'Italia*).[3] The start and end of the dashed line around the circle represent the opposition party with respectively the lowest and highest attention share.

The first finding worthy of note is that 'government operations' is by far the top-ranked issue: with its 41 questions, the M5S clearly stands out from the other parties (BI=15, FI=26, LN=9, SEL=19). 'Government operations' is a rather heterogeneous category including political, institutional and public administration issues as well as scandals and corruption connected with public offices. For the most part, this emphasis is driven by M5S's populist attacks against the so-called 'political caste': 32 percent of the questions (n=13) challenge government appointments to public offices; 34 percent (n=14) question the executive conduct from a political and legal perspective; finally, 12 percent (n=5) deal with electoral matters. Overall, it seems that the message they want to pass on is that their mission is to act as the watchdog of the 'elites' on behalf of the 'people'.

As regards other issues, the Movement does not differ remarkably from the average opposition party and this holds true regardless of the importance of the issue in the electoral programme. For instance, 'Justice and Crime', which ranked 13th in terms of importance in its manifesto, is the second main topic addressed by the M5S during question time. Vice versa, even for a signature issue of the M5S, clean energy and environment, they do not differ significantly from the average (a decline in the salience

---

[2] The Italian Policy Agendas Project has been part of the Comparative Agendas research network since 2009 (Borghetto and Carammia 2010). For more information, visit: www.comparativeagendas.net. The data and R code used to conduct the analysis are made available by the author upon request.

[3] SEL was part of the centre-left alliance supporting Luigi Bersani as candidate for Prime Minister which won the relative majority of seats in both houses of the Italian parliament in 2013. After Bersani's failure to garner a majority in the Senate led to his resignation and the creation of a grand coalition led by Prime Minister Enrico Letta, SEL decided to move to the opposition in April 2013. At the beginning of the legislature, also FI, then called 'People of Freedom' (PDL) was part of the 'grand coalition' supporting the Letta cabinet. However, in September 2013, the PDL was dissolved and Berlusconi decided to launch a new 'Go Italy' party in the opposition.

of these issues was already detected by Manucci and Amsler 2018, 123). These findings suggest that issue selection during question time responds to a strategic reasoning. There are issues which parties cannot entirely 'disregard' because of their centrality in the public debate. Not focusing on them would mean surrendering the power of framing the issue to competitors. Although M5S MPs would theoretically prefer to focus exclusively on issues that are advantageous to them, they cannot entirely avoid issues 'owned' by their opponents (an emblematic case is 'Justice and Crime' which is a signature issue for the LN). From an issue competition perspective (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010), the M5S does not seem to behave differently from other parties.

Figure 1. Distribution of attention across issues
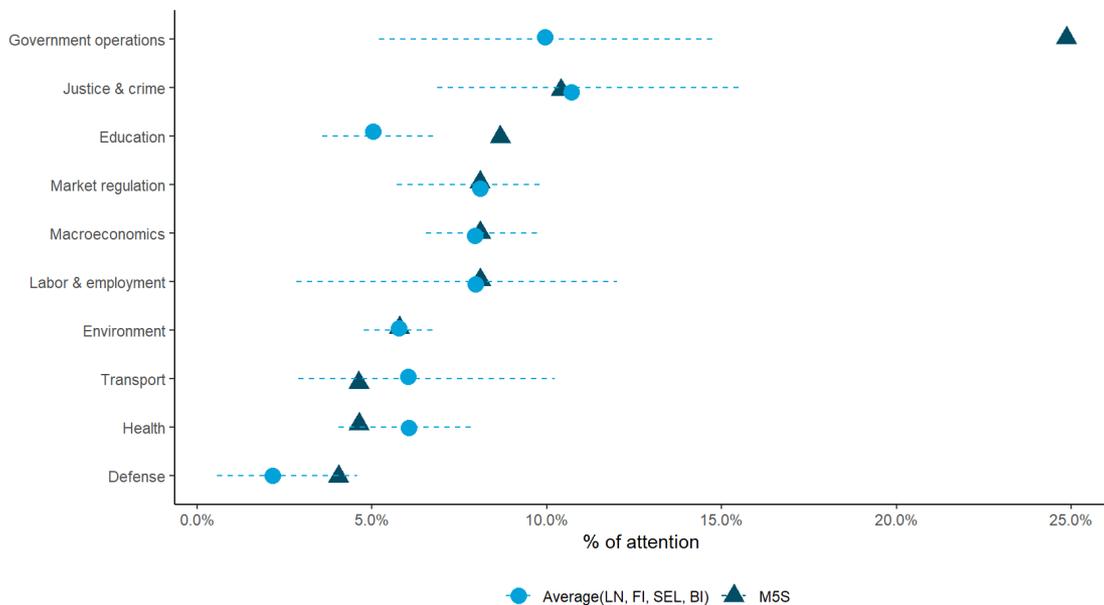
To gain further insight into how different the Movement behaved in comparison with other opposition parties and the extent to which its opposition style was innovative, I proceed in two steps. The first question I address is to what extent the overall issue profile of the M5S differs from the one adopted by other opposition parties, both on the left and right wing of the ideological spectrum. To answer this question, I merged the data on the 17th legislature with a database containing the content coding of all parliamentary oral questions submitted on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies during question time from the 13th to the 16th legislature (Russo and Cavalieri, 2016). For each legislature and opposition party, I calculated the share of questions devoted to a specific topic (using one of the 230 subtopics) and compared it to the issue distribution of the M5S in the 17th legislature. In order to measure the overall difference for each pair of issue profiles, I use issue convergence scores as developed by Sigelman and Buell (2004). This index sums the absolute differences in attention proportion for each of the issues included. This sum is subtracted from 100 and divided by 2, so that the index goes from 0, when the distribution of attention diverges completely, to 100, indicating a perfect overlap between the

two agendas. For instance, a value of 40 means that 40 percent of the party agenda is similar to the agenda of the M5S.

Figure 2 plots on the y-axis convergence scores and on the x-axis the position of opposition parties on the left (0) – right (10) dimension. The estimation of party positions for each legislative term relies on various waves of the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys (Bakker et al., 2015; Polk et al., 2017).[4] A regression line was drawn to fit the data. If one just considers parties from the 17th legislature, it does seem that the issue profile of M5S during question time is equally as close to that of parties from the left- and right-side of the political spectrum. For instance, both SEL and FI share more than 50 percent of the agenda with the M5S.[5] On the other hand, incorporating the comparisons with parties of past legislatures yields a different picture. Overall, the relationship between issue convergence and party position on the left-right axis is negative (the more we move to the right, the smaller the convergence score) and it reaches a conventional 0.05% level of significance if we remove the comparisons with parties of the 17th legislature (coefficient = -1.82, standard deviation = 0.72). The highest convergence scores are with Italy of Values (*Italia dei Valori*, IDV) in the 16th legislature (45 percent).[6] Moreover, there is some overlap with the PD in the 14th legislature (43 percent), Communist Refoundation Party (*Partito della Rifondazione Comunista*, PRC) in the 13th legislature (43 percent) and both PD and the Union of the Centre (*Unione di Centro*, UC) in the 16th legislature (around 40 percent). Vice versa, the M5S differs the most from both the LN (17 percent) and the UC (19 percent) in the 15th legislature. Although comparisons across time should be treated with caution, it appears that the M5S agenda tends to share more issues with that of left-wing parties.

The rest of the analysis implements a multivariate regression design, where the unit of analysis is the individual question. Two different models were developed, each testing one of the two remaining hypotheses. Model H2 tests the effect of the questioner's party affiliation on the probability of a question being about one of the top three topics in the party platform (H2). To measure topic salience in electoral platforms, each manifesto was divided into (quasi)sentences and to each of them was attributed one of the 21 topics of the Italian Comparative Agendas reflecting its policy content.[7] Once the share of sentences for each topic in each manifesto was computed, I assigned 1 to questions falling into the three most important topics, 0 to others (Appendix B lists the top three topics for each party).

---

[4] I use the question 'Position of the party in YEAR in terms of its overall ideological stance. 0 = Extreme left : 5 = Center : 10 = Extreme right'.

[5] By default, agenda overlap between the M5S with parties from the same legislative term (17th) should be higher, regardless of the ideological leaning, because parties are responding to the same range of contingent events (such as media pressures and domestic/international events).

[6] The proximity between the M5S and the IDV comes as no surprise given that both are protest parties sharing a 'populist/anti-party elite' discourse. In 2009 Grillo expressed his support for two independent candidates in the IDV lists in the European elections, see: http://www.beppegrillo.it/2009/03/comunicato_poli_14.html.

[7] A similar approach was applied by Carammia et al. (2018). Note that FI and LN ran on a common platform in the 2013 general elections.

Figure 2. Agenda convergence between M5S and other opposition parties
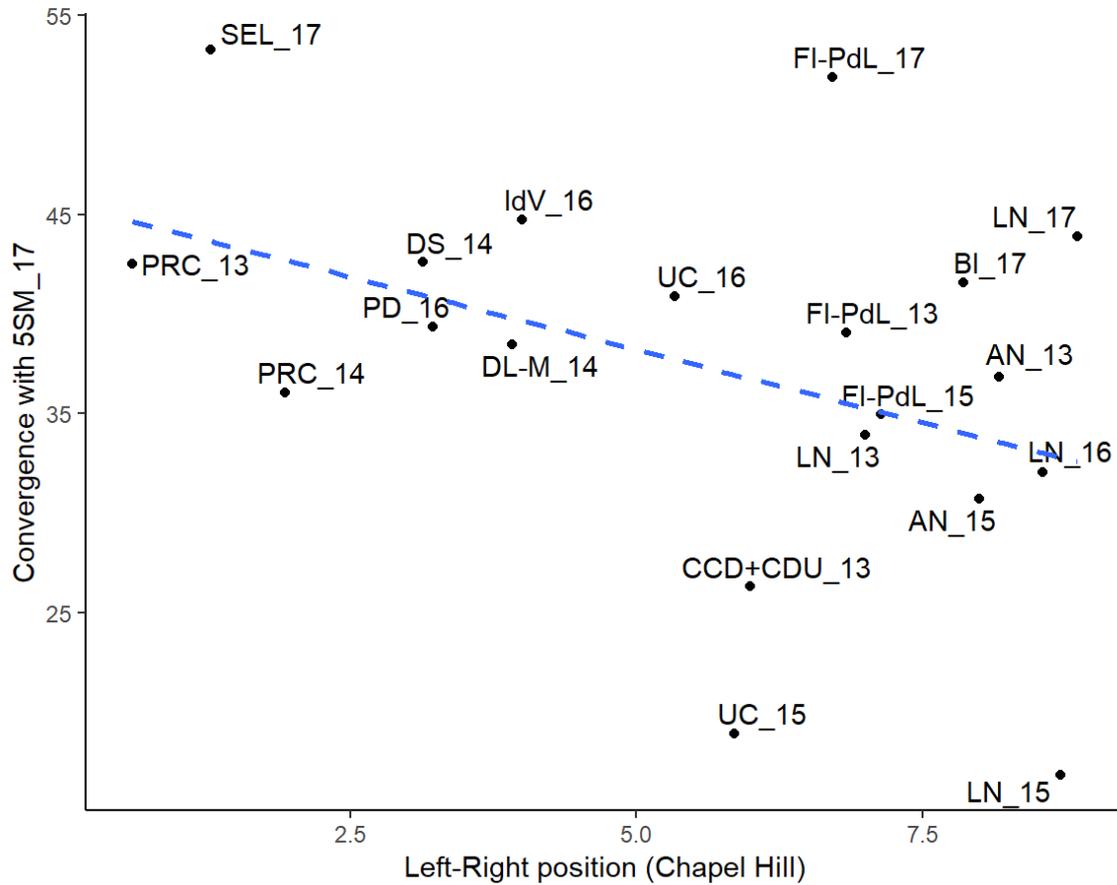
Note: SEL (Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà); PRC (Partito Rifondazione Comunista); DS (Democratici di Sinistra); PD (Partito Democratico); DL-M (Margherita); IdV (Italia dei Valori); UC (Unione di Centro); LN (Lega Nord); FI-PdL (Forza Italia, Popolo della Libertà); AN (Alleanza Nazionale); CCD+CDU (Centro Cristiano Democratico); BI (Fratelli d'Italia).

Model H3 tests the party impact on the likelihood of a question being about the topic receiving the most questions in that weekly session (H3). Since during a session each parliamentary group is allowed one question, I tallied all questions addressed by majority and opposition groups by topic (always out of 21 topics) and gave 1 to those questions related to the most popular topic(s) that week (i.e. receiving more questions), 0 to the rest. The main predictor of model H2 and H3 is the party membership of the questioner, considering only the five main opposition parties analysed in Figure 1. This predictor was fitted as a categorical variable with the M5S as the reference category. Furthermore, both models incorporate a control for the timing of the question, measured as the legislature year (it equals 1 for the first year since the elections, 2 for the second year, etc.). In model H2 this is introduced as both a control (H2a) and moderating (H2b, in interaction with party authorship) variable, as it is likely that the probability of a party addressing one of

its three most important electoral topics during question time will decrease as we move away from elections and new priorities hit the agenda.[8]

All models fit a binary dependent variable, so the recommended model specification is a multivariate logistic regression. All models fit clustered standard errors with the week as the cluster variable. The model results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Logistic regression model testing H2 and H3

	H2a	H2b	H3
	1 if the question is about one of the top three topics in the party platform, 0 otherwise		1 if the question is about the topic receiving more questions in a session, 0 otherwise
(Intercept)	-0.59 * (0.23)	-0.03 (0.38)	-0.69 ** (0.25)
BI	-0.21 (0.24)	-0.72 (0.56)	0.37 (0.26)
FI	0.00 (0.23)	-0.96 (0.55)	0.50 (0.26)
LN	-0.33 (0.24)	-1.35 * (0.58)	0.21 (0.27)
SEL	-0.81 ** (0.26)	-1.04 (0.60)	0.42 (0.26)
year in the legislature	-0.09 (0.06)	-0.30 * (0.13)	-0.27 *** (0.06)
year*BI		0.19 (0.19)	
year*FI		0.35 (0.18)	
year*LN		0.37 * (0.19)	
year*SEL		0.08 (0.21)	
N	867	867	867
AIC	974.35	976.34	959.35
BIC	1002.94	1023.99	987.94
Pseudo R2	0.03	0.04	0.04

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Week-level clustered standard errors are reported inside parentheses

Starting from H2a, namely the first model in table 1, all coefficients (except for FI) are negative, meaning that the odds that the M5S asks questions on one of the three most salient topics in the electoral platform is greater than the odds for other parties. The coefficient for FI is 0, meaning that the odds are the same as those for the M5S. On the other hand, none of the party effects, except the one concerning SEL, are significant at a conventional 95 percent confidence level, meaning that I can reject the null hypothesis of independence only for the pair M5S-SEL. To summarise, while the difference in odds between M5S and FI is nil, it increases when I compare M5S and, respectively, BI and LN, and it is statistically significant only between M5S and SEL. This first piece of evidence provides us with some clue that the M5S does differ from other opposition parties, although for the most part this claim is not statistically supported.

Another interesting effect is the interaction of year in the legislature and party effects (H2b). Only the interaction terms of LN and the negative constitutive term 'year in the

---

[8] I do not have theoretical expectations about the impact of time on the probability of addressing 'popular issues'. Furthermore, none of the interaction terms between time and party factors are significant in case H3. As a result, I did not include it in the analysis.

legislature' (which is the marginal impact of time when all other categorical variables equal to 0, namely in the case of the M5S) are statistically significant. Since interactions are difficult to interpret in logistic regression, I plot the predicted probabilities. Figure 3 reports the predicted probability of the impact of time since the start of the legislature (in years) on the probability of asking a question on the top three electoral topics by party. The difference between the M5S and the other opposition parties stands out, especially in the case of the LN. At the beginning of the 17th legislature, the predicted probability of the M5S asking such questions is the highest, around 42 percent, and it decreases sharply as time goes by, so much so that at the end of the legislature the odds drop to only 18 percent. I interpret this finding as evidence of the progressive learning process undertaken by M5S MPs over the course of the legislature. At the outset, at their first mandate in parliament, and lacking in experience, they stuck firmly to the topics emphasised on the party platform, which is the pattern expected by H2. Next, as new topics reached the public agenda and started being discussed on the web, they showed a greater propensity to embark on new topics.

Figure 3. Predicted probability of asking a question on one of the top three electoral topics at different times in the legislative term by party membership
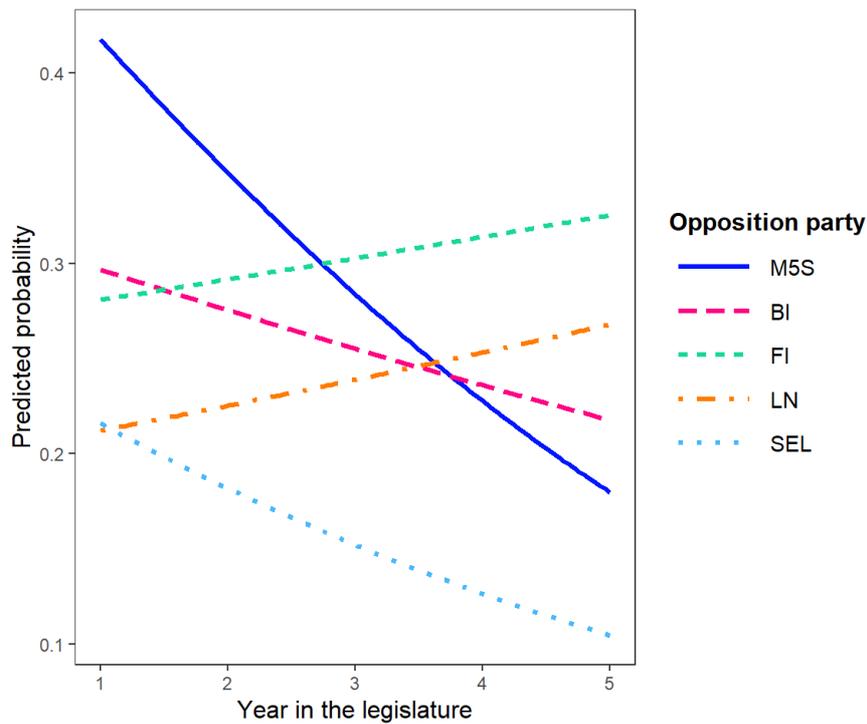
Note: Figure derived from Table 1, model H2b

Model H3 tests which parties show a greater tendency to ask questions on topics that are 'hot' (receive the most questions) in a specific weekly session (recall that each parliamentary group is allowed only one question per week). As in the previous model, none of the party coefficients is statistically significant, which suggests that we cannot reject the hypothesis of independence between the M5S and the other parties. Indeed, this is what we observe in Figure 4, which plots the predicted probabilities for our categorical party predictors. The M5S occupies the lower end of the spectrum, with a probability of asking

this type of questions of around 19 percent. As expected by H3, the odds of M5S MPs asking a question on popular topics are the lowest in the cluster of parties. On the other hand, the probabilities for other parties are rather close, hovering between 23 and 28 percent.

Figure 4. Predicted probability of asking a question on the most debated issue in question time
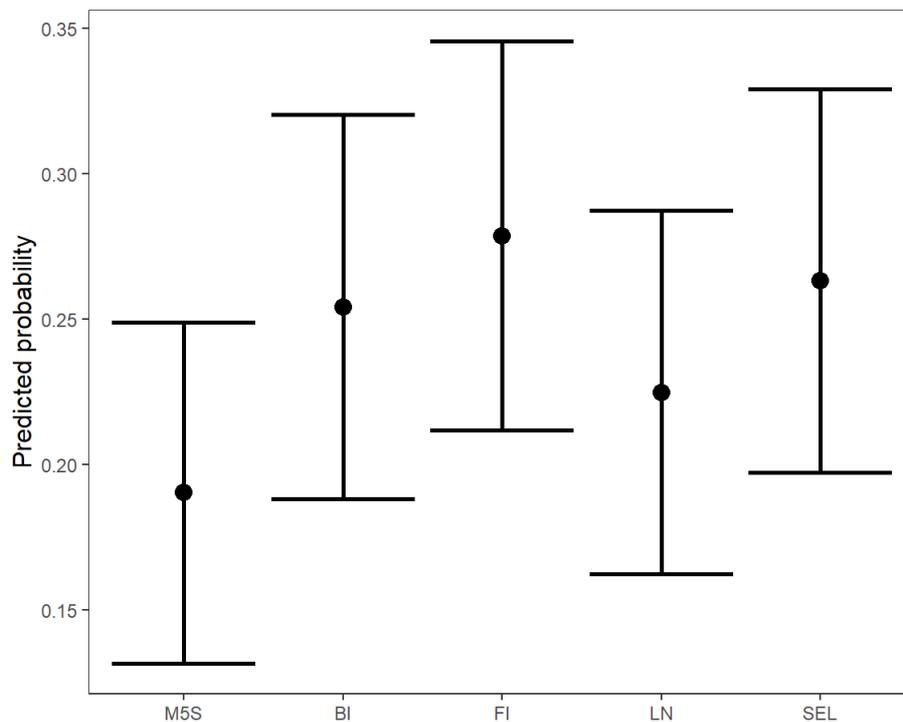
Note: Figure derived from Table 1, model H3

4. Conclusions

More than five years after the 2013 elections, the M5S is no longer the unidentified political actor it used to be at its origins. More and more pieces of the puzzle have been collected over the years, providing increasing insights into this new and successful actor in Italian politics. This research article has tried to contribute to this endeavour by casting light on its opposition activity in parliament during the 17th legislature. It argues that learning about the M5S can provide insights into the wider category of challenger parties (Hobolt and Tilley 2016), which are currently on the rise in European politics. In particular, starting from the premise that an issue-based perspective allows us to bring to the surface a rather unexplored side of the communication and political strategy of the party in public office, it focuses on the policy content of its parliamentary oversight activities.

Descriptive results reveal that the M5S stands out for its emphasis on political-administrative issues. In particular, it shows a tendency to question cabinet appointments and general conduct, especially when a potential scandal is in sight. This issue selection strategy is indicative of an attempt to portray itself as the 'watchdog' of the elites on behalf of the 'people'. On the other hand, it does not altogether disregard issues such as 'law and order', which have been salient in the political discussion but that are not its 'signature' issues. As far as the descriptive evidence is concerned, the agenda profile of the M5S

does not differ substantially from that of other parties. This can be interpreted as a sign that the M5S is not oblivious to considerations of issue competition (Green-Pedersen, 2007). It also confirms previous findings pointing at the 'ideological flexibility of M5S and its ability in strategically raising different topics at different times in order to remain constantly attuned to the people's mood and the ou tcome of the latest polls' (Manucci and Amsler, 2018: 127).

These results were refined by means of a statistical analysis. First, I set out a comparison between the M5S thematic profile during question time and that of current and past opposition parties. I found that the issue focus of the M5S crosscuts the left-right divide when taking into consideration parties from the 17th legislature, thus confirming Grillo's portrait of the Movement as 'post-ideological'. On the other hand, when the comparison is limited to opposition parties from past legislatures, there is a slightly stronger convergence with parties on the left side of the political spectrum. This finding corroborates previous studies showing that the identity of the M5S parliamentarians is 'ideologically much closer to the left on both socio-economic and socio-cultural issues' (Farinelli and Massetti, 2015: 222).

Second, I found some limited evidence that, compared to most other opposition parties of the 17th legislature, the M5S tends to ask more questions about the three most salient topics of its political platform (H2) and about topics that do not attract a lot of attention from other party actors (H3). On the other hand, these findings should be treated with extra care due to their lack of statistical significance. Another interesting finding – one that warrants more attention in future research – is the impact of time on the behaviour of the M5S's agenda decisions: the emphasis on the most salient electoral priorities declined dramatically as the time of the legislature went by. Of course, one can only speculate on the reasons accounting for such a pattern. I suggest that it might indicate the learning process M5S MPs have gone through. At the same time, it might reveal a change of communication strategy in the Movement, which was forced to progressively switch attention to new issues to stay in tune with the requests of its very heterogeneous electorate.

Be that as it may, these results speak to previous studies that point to a normalisation of the Movement (Tronconi, 2018) and an increasing capacity to flexibly adapt its message to changes in the public mood (Manucci and Amsler, 2018). One can conjecture that this careful adjustment of its image over the course of the legislature played a role in the broadening of its electoral base during the 2018 elections. Although more research is needed to generalise this finding beyond the Italian case, this flexibility in issue emphasis paired with a radical anti-elitism might be one of the distinctive characteristics of challenger parties' opposition style in parliament. Both untarnished by the stigma of holding office before or during the recent Euro crisis and unafraid of damaging their coalition potential by taking extreme or risky political stances, challengers are in a better position to engage the priorities of a changing public opinion while preserving their distinctiveness in the party system.

References

Bakker R, Vries C de, Edwards E, et al. (2015) Measuring party positions in Europe The Chapel Hill expert survey trend file, 1999–2010. *Party Politics* 21(1): 143–152. DOI: 10.1177/1354068812462931.

Bickerton CJ and Accetti CI (2018) 'Techno-populism' as a new party family: the case of the Five Star Movement and Podemos. *Contemporary Italian Politics* 10(2): 132–150. DOI: 10.1080/23248823.2018.1472919.

Bordignon F and Ceccarini L (2015) The Five-Star Movement: a hybrid actor in the net of state institutions. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 20(4): 454–473. DOI: 10.1080/1354571X.2015.1066112.

Borghetto E and Carammia M (2010) L'analisi comparata delle agende politiche: il Comparative Agendas Project. *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 2(Agosto 2010): 301–315.

Borghetto E and Russo F (2018) From agenda setters to agenda takers? The determinants of party issue attention in times of crisis. *Party Politics* 24(1): 65–77. DOI: 10.1177/1354068817740757.

Borghetto E, Carammia M and Russo F (2018) Policy agendas in Italy: introduction to the special issue Enrico Borghetto, Marcello Carammia and Federico Russo. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 48(3): 265–274.

Bosco A and Verney S (2012) Electoral Epidemic: The Political Cost of Economic Crisis in Southern Europe, 2010–11. *South European Society and Politics* 17(2): 129–154. DOI: 10.1080/13608746.2012.747272.

Carammia M, Borghetto E and Bevan S (2018) Changing the transmission belt: the programme-to-policy link in Italy between the First and Second Republic. *Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 48(3): 275–288. DOI: 10.1017/ipo.2018.13.

Conti N and Memoli V (2015) The Emergence of a New Party in the Italian Party System: Rise and Fortunes of the Five Star Movement. *West European Politics* 38(3): 516–534. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2014.996377.

Corbetta P (2013) Corbetta: Un web-populismo dal destino incerto. In: Corbetta P and Gualmini E (eds) Il Partito Di Grillo. Bologna: Il Mulino, pp. 197–214.

D'Alimonte R (2013) The Italian elections of February 2013: the end of the Second Republic? *Contemporary Italian Politics* 5(2): 113–129. DOI: 10.1080/23248823.2013.807599.

De Giorgi E and Dias A (2018) Standing apart together? Common traits of (new) challenger parties in the Italian parliament. *Italian Political Science* 13(2): 64–77.

Farinelli A and Massetti E (2015) Inexperienced, leftists, and grassroots democrats: a profile of the Five Star Movement's MPs. *Contemporary Italian Politics* 7(3): 213–231. DOI: 10.1080/23248823.2015.1076122.

Green-Pedersen C (2007) The Growing Importance of Issue Competition: The Changing Nature of Party Competition in Western Europe. *Political Studies* 55(3): 607–628. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00686.x.

Green-Pedersen C and Mortensen PB (2010) Who sets the agenda and who responds to it in the Danish parliament? A new model of issue competition and agenda-setting. *European Journal of Political Research* 49(2): 257–281. DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-6765.2009.01897.x.

Hobolt SB and Tilley J (2016) Fleeing the centre: the rise of challenger parties in the aftermath of the euro crisis. West European Politics 39(5): 971–991. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2016.1181871.

Katz RS and Mair P (1993) The Evolution of Party Organizations in Europe: The Three Faces of Party Organization. *American Review of Politics* 14(4): 593-617

Mair P (2011) Bini Smaghi vs. the parties: representative government and institutional constraints. Available at: http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/16354 (accessed 15 January 2019).

Manucci L and Amsler M (2018) Where the wind blows: Five Star Movement's populism, direct democracy and ideological flexibility. *Italian Political Science Review / Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 48(1): 109–132. DOI: 10.1017/ipo.2017.23.

Martin S (2011) Parliamentary Questions, the Behaviour of Legislators, and the Function of Legislatures: An Introduction. *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 17(3): 259–270. DOI: 10.1080/13572334.2011.595120.

Passarelli G and Tuorto D (2016) The Five Star Movement: Purely a matter of protest? The rise of a new party between political discontent and reasoned voting. *Party Politics*: 1354068816642809. DOI: 10.1177/1354068816642809.

Pinto L and Pedrazzani A (2016) From 'Citizens' to Members of Parliament: The Elected Representatives in the Parliamentary Arena. In: Tronconi F (ed.) *Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement. Organisation, Communication and Ideology*, Farnham:Ashgate, pp. 99–126.

Poguntke T (1987) New politics and party systems: The emergence of a new type of party? *West European Politics* 10(1): 76–88. DOI: 10.1080/01402388708424615.

Polk J, Rovny J, Bakker R, et al. (2017) Explaining the salience of anti-elitism and reducing political corruption for political parties in Europe with the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey data. *Research and Politics* 4(1): 2053168016686915. DOI: 10.1177/2053168016686915.

Russo F and Cavalieri A (2016) The Policy Content of the Italian Question Time. A New Dataset to Study Party Competition. *Rivista Italiana di Politiche Pubbliche* 11(2): 197–222.

Sigelman L and Buell EH (2004) Avoidance or Engagement? Issue Convergence in U.S. Presidential Campaigns, 1960–2000. *American Journal of Political Science* 48(4): 650–661. DOI: 10.1111/j.0092-5853.2004.00093.x.

Tronconi F (2016) Conclusion: The Organisational and Ideological Roots of the Electoral Success. In: Tronconi F (ed.) *Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement: Organisation, Communication and Ideology*. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 213–229.

Tronconi F (2018) The Italian Five Star Movement during the Crisis: Towards Normalisation? *South European Society and Politics* 23(1): 163–180. DOI: 10.1080/13608746.2018.1428889.