



'Gentlemen, all aboard!' ICT and party politics: Reflections from a Mass-eParticipation experience



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ABSTRACT

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) use is becoming an ever more popular way to involve citizens in political decision making. And yet, despite their recently increasing number, few eParticipation initiatives have achieved their intended aims. If nothing else, this shows that the internal processes, challenges and opportunities of using ICT to engage citizens in politics deserve further examination. The present paper attempts to undertake such an investigation by analysing Italy's Five Star Movement, a mass-eParticipation-based political organisation recently founded by private citizens. Using an interpretive case-study approach, this paper assesses the goals, participation, technology use, internal governance, external consequences, and challenges endemic to employing ICT in citizen engagement, to answer the following question: what consequences, challenges and opportunities does mass-eParticipation present to organisational stakeholders? Results of the study bring to light several additional research questions whose answers will surely advance the current discourse on eParticipation, and they also provide practical guidance and direction for those launching eParticipation initiatives.

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1. Introduction

In the past two decades, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have figured increasingly in attempts to involve citizens in political decision making (Medaglia, 2012), with the intent of recapturing otherwise declining interest (Sæbø, Rose, & Skiftenes Flak, 2008). The term *eParticipation* has been coined to indicate the processes and structures through which ICT supports relationships amongst citizens, governments and public organisations (Rahman & Ahsan Rajoin, 2012; Veit & Huntgerburth, 2014). Such implementations of ICT might change the political landscape (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan, & Gil-Garcia, 2013) and present new opportunities for communication, consultation and dialogue between public organisations and citizens (Medaglia, 2012).

Exploring how ICT usage functions in eParticipation initiatives, as well as how related consequences, challenges and opportunities for those being involved is a matter of serious interest to researchers (Borins, 2005). A vast majority of eParticipation studies thus far have focused on how traditional government stakeholders, such as political parties, citizens and public administrations, use ICT-based services in conjunction with traditional communication channels (Criado et al., 2013; Kavanaugh et al., 2012). In general, such initiatives neither attract large groups of citizens nor significantly change the way politicians

work (Chadwick, 2008). In fact, only a few eParticipation initiatives have achieved their intended aims (Sæbø, Flak, & Sein, 2011), and many of these initiatives remain local or small-scale (Medaglia, 2012). Less attention has been paid, thus far, to successful national and international, citizen-initiated eParticipation initiatives, which though few, are fascinating subjects for further study (Medaglia, 2012; Susha & Grönlund, 2012).

In this context, the Italian Five Star Movement's ('*Movimento Cinque Stelle*'; henceforth, M5S) use of ICT to encourage direct citizen participation in politics represents an exceptional example from which to glean information on eParticipation for many reasons. First, the M5S is new to Italy's political landscape and has, in only a few years, become influential at both the local and national levels, being the second-most voted-for party in the country's 2013 parliamentary elections; indeed the M5S has probably garnered more influence in less time than most (if not all) other eParticipation political initiatives. Second, unlike many eParticipation political initiatives—which are overwhelmingly founded on existing political systems and focused on the interests of traditional stakeholders—people who were not part of the established political elite created the M5S. Third, the organisation has, since its inception, coordinated all its activities using ICT tools, and this has allowed each of its supporters to participate in political debates and decision making.

In short, the M5S represents the successful use of a mass-mobilization eParticipation initiative originated by citizens who unexpectedly entered the political processes, and it now has representatives elected to positions in not only Italy's national and local institutions but also European

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parliament. Through the M5S's online channels citizens receive information and post comments on a daily basis. As such, the organisation has introduced several innovations to the political landscape, challenging the political status quo and how Italian politics operate. Due to its novelty and pioneering efforts in promoting political engagement through mass-eParticipation, the M5S can be seen as a large-scale experiment, and it is consequently the subject of great interest for many international observers (Bartlett, 2014; Scherer, 2012). Still, current literature on the M5S focuses solely on the role it plays within Italy's political landscape (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013), on how the source of its strength lies in the positions it has taken on local issues (Mosca, 2014) and on the democratic processes intrinsic to the organisation itself (Miconi, 2014). Hence, more research should be conducted into how the organisation orchestrates participation and activities and how these efforts are perceived amongst its followers.

This paper contributes to the existing literature on eParticipation by investigating the dynamics of mass-eParticipation initiatives organised mainly by their followers. In particular, the present research aims to answer the following question: *what consequences, challenges and opportunities does mass-eParticipation present to organisational stakeholders?* To answer this question we conducted an empirical case study analysing interviews and archival data; in so doing, we bring to light several additional questions whose answers will undoubtedly advance the current discourse on eParticipation and provide practical guidance and direction to those launching eParticipation initiatives.

2. About the Five Star Movement

The M5S is a political organisation founded in 2009 by prominent former comedian Beppe Grillo and entrepreneur Gianroberto Casaleggio. Grillo was quite popular in Italy in the 1980s for his TV shows, which were characterized by strong and staunchly critical stances against the country's business, financial and political establishment. Banned from TV in 1986 for his politically incorrect rhetoric, Grillo continued to perform in theatres and other venues across Italy. In 2005 he started a blog with the support of Casaleggio Associati Ltd., a company founded by Gianroberto Casaleggio.

Grillo's popularity and reputation continued to grow as a result of his blog posts, and in 2009, he was ranked the world's seventh-most influential Web personality by Forbes Magazine (Ewalt, 2009). Over the years Grillo's fans across Italy began organising groups that were active in local politics. Using Grillo's blog as its main meeting place, a group called 'Amici di Beppe Grillo' ('Friends of Beppe Grillo'), formed in 2005 to coordinate these local groups' activities. The smaller groups started using the social-networking platform Meetup.com,¹ as per one of Grillo's suggestions, and the word *meetup* soon became synonymous with local group. These groups, moreover, organised nation- and region-wide events at which members met face-to-face and at which Grillo himself was often in attendance.

In 2008, several of these groups began creating candidate lists naming citizens unaffiliated with specific political parties. Furthermore, as stated above, the M5S was officially founded in 2009 to expand and build upon the Friends of Beppe Grillo and to provide a common political agenda for all the listed candidates. Grillo trademarked 'Movimento 5 Stelle', reserving all rights to the organisation's brand to him, and since, he has granted its usage to groups that adhere to a specific set of rules available online.

Since 2009 the number of active M5S groups on Meetup.com has grown from an initial 40 to 1482 across 1191 cities in 21 countries. In Italy the M5S has rapidly become a national political party and is

currently second-most voted-for party both in the 2013 national elections and 2014 EU elections.

The M5S sharply distinguishes itself from Italy's traditional political parties by claiming to be more open, transparent and representative. Notably, too, the M5S does not define itself as a party but as a platform for consultation and confrontation that originated on Grillo's blog. To distinguish itself even more thoroughly from traditional political parties, the M5S refers to itself as a 'non-association' regulated by a 'Non-Statute' (M5S, 2009).

The M5S challenges Italy's established political-representation processes by aiming to turn elected representatives into spokespersons. To do so, a set of ICT tools is used to help *followers* share information, hold discussions, make decisions and set agendas. Elected representatives are expected to assert M5S subscribers' collective will, as it is developed and expressed online. At the same time, representatives are required to inform citizens via ICT channels about on-going activities within the political institution to which they have been elected.

The M5S uses several ICT tools, some of which are accessible to all M5S *followers*, including online content and comment posting. A restricted set of tools with enhanced participation features, such as voting, polling and decision making, are accessible only to *subscribers*. To become a *subscriber* a citizen must register on the M5S national website and submit a scanned copy of her ID card. Unlike other parties, M5S subscribers are not required to pay a registration fee. The status of a certified subscriber is granted exclusively to those whose requests have been fully processed, in order to satisfy the individual-identification requirement for becoming a M5S subscriber. Verification is performed by the M5S's small staff.

The M5S has gained a large number of subscribers in just a few years and currently boasts a membership roll of approximately 800,000 persons. Only about 100,000 of these are *certified subscribers*, while the rest continue to await the processing of their applications. Still, these figures exceed the registration numbers of Italy's other political parties, which have suffered membership declines in recent years. For instance, the most voted-for party has experienced a membership decline from about 800,000 members in 2009 (Labate, 2013) to 240,000 in 2014 (Lo Sardo, 2014).

3. Research design and context

The M5S uniqueness as a successful mass-eParticipation political organisation has been taken into account in designing the present study. We suggest that the views of those involved in the M5S and the context in which the organisation operates are the most important pieces of evidence, and thence the research shall start from that. Also, as Cavaye asserts (1996), a hypothesis-testing research approach is inappropriate in such circumstances. With such an approach, in fact, hypotheses would have to have been based on previous literature or on the prior eParticipation experiences of the present study's authors. Hence, such an *a priori* research strategy would have prevented this study from discussing aspects of eParticipation unaddressed by existing literature. Consequently, this study adopts an interpretive, *a posteriori* research approach that investigates the M5S in its natural context using qualitative-data collection. As per Eisenhardt's recommendation (1989, p. 541), then, this study uses theory as an iteratively contrasting medium to data collected and analysed. The study's aim is to determine why the M5S is unique amongst eParticipation-based organisations, a point not yet discussed in the current literature, and to reveal, as a result, information that might be useful to other organisations.

3.1. Research context

The research project described in this paper took place over 13 months, from July 2013 through July 2014. It began with an exploratory study (Sæbø, Braccini, & Federici, 2015) that allowed this paper's

¹ Meetup.com is a commercial online social-networking platform (<http://www.meetup.com>) owned by Meetup Inc. It facilitates offline group meetings in various localities worldwide and helps individuals find and join groups of people with similar interests, i.e., hobbies, careers or politics.

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