

Screaming more, Listening less?

An investigation of participation and deliberation dynamics in the Italian Five Stars Movement

Abstract

This paper investigates the tension between participation and deliberation in the Italian “Five Stars” Movement. This grassroots movement has based its activity almost entirely on the internet, becoming a political organization able to receive more than 25% in the last national elections. While its success seems to be a good outcome for democratic participation, the effects on deliberation seems to be more complex. This study analyzes the comments on the communication platform of the Movement, its leader Beppe Grillo’s blog. The comments reveal a low level of criticism towards the leader’s opinions, a high uncivil tone, a tendency to avoid policy discussion, a low level of justifications for claims expressed and, lastly, very few diverse points of views presented. Overall, the implications for political deliberation are not very positive: while the Five Stars movement, through the internet, has promoted civic engagement and participation, his members do not seem to be engaged in a civil and rational discussion, at least on the Movement’s most important communication platform.

Keywords

Italy; mobilization; deliberation; internet; grass-root movement

Introduction

The financial crisis that shocked the global world economy in 2008 had a tremendous impact on the lives of millions people in terms of job losses, diminished purchase power, and an overall decline of the quality of life (World bank, 2009). Recent research in political science and economics (Hacker & Pierson, 2011) shows that, over the last 25-30 years, income inequalities and poverty have risen unrestrained in Western countries and this phenomenon has been exacerbated by the global economic crisis (World Bank, 2009).

In this economic context, several protest movements have emerged over the last three years. In particular, in Southern Europe, the Spanish indignados and other national groups in Italy and Greece have successfully organized rallies and garnered significant buzz and media coverage. However, their impact on traditional forms of politics and on the implementation of policies has been very mild, mainly for two reasons. First, we have to consider the increasingly diminished power and autonomy of individual European national governments that, often, have to follow austerity economic policies dictated by Bruxelles technocrats and governments of more powerful nations such as France and Germany. Second, we have to take into account the fact that these movements are very different from traditional political organizations. Indeed, a lot of new grassroots political movements are less likely to have a hierarchical structure (Bimber, 2003) and tend to be organized around online communities. In fact, the Internet has become a sort of lifeblood for these movements, which need the web to recruit volunteers, mobilize them, and share information without the filter of traditional news media.

An exceptional case among the European movements is the Italian "Five Stars movement", a grass-roots political movement funded by the comedian Beppe Grillo. The movement has fought the culture of corruption and the gerontocratic system of Italian politics, pushing for a series of innovative reforms that could drastically change the face of Italian politics. The movement developed from a group of loyal followers of Beppe Grillo's own blog and it has become a political phenomenon, which received circa 25% of votes in the last Italian national elections. The movement has been harshly criticized by traditional news media and political parties for its populist tones and policy proposals, rooted in the "anti-political" message of its leader and main spokesperson.

Participation versus Deliberation

The success of this movement poses very interesting questions for political communication researchers, in particular concerning the relationship between two of the most cherished democratic

outcomes, participation and deliberation. On one hand, the fact that this grass-root movement has its base online seems to reinforce the idea that information and communication technologies can actually have a positive effect on participation outcomes, allowing citizens who have been on the sidelines of the political process to be more engaged and make their voices heard. On the other hand, it is important to understand whether this positive effect on participation could have a boomerang effect on deliberation. How much rational discussion is there among people's involved in the movement? Are people who participate to the discussion on Beppe Grillo's blog open to listen and evaluate different ideas?

This question goes back to a fundamental tension in the political communication literature. If we look at who's politically active on the Internet, several studies have shown that the users who tend to get their political information from the internet and participate in online public debates tend to be already politically engaged (Prior, 2007), and more partisan (Di Maggio and Sato, 2003; Inoue, 2003; Iyengar and Hahn, 2003). These very partisan and informed individuals often are part of so called "eco-chambers": they would tend to look for information online on websites that are more closely aligned with their political views. The effects of eco-chambers for democratic outcomes seem to be mixed: on one hand these individuals tend to become more engaged and participate more in the political process, on the other hand they tend to increase their level of polarization and avoid exposure to cross cutting information (Sunstein, 2001).

Methodology

This study begins to investigate whether the communication platform of the movement offers some opportunities for rational debate. I started analyzing online deliberation in the Five Stars political movement, focusing on the discussion to Beppe Grillo's posts on his blog. Comments to more than 100 of Beppe Grillo's posts on the blog were analyzed over three months before the election.

Five specific variables were considered in the analysis:

1. Number of comments
2. Negativity or positivity of the comment, focusing in particular on the comments that would contradict the opinion of the movement's leader
3. Tone of the comment, civil versus uncivil
4. Subject of the comment, focusing on the differences between policy-oriented comments versus not policy-oriented comments
5. Number of justified argument for each comment
6. Number of different points of view included in the comments.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

Preliminary results indicate that comments rarely contradict the opinions of Beppe Grillo (there is a 78% for positive comments). The tone of the comments was mostly divided between civil (47%) and uncivil (53%). A majority of comments were not focused on policy issues (62%). Justifications for arguments were somewhat rare in comments (mean of 0.3 justifications for comment). Lastly, different points of view were seldom included in comments: only 12% of individuals who commented on the blog were bringing in different points of views. These results pose us very important questions in terms implications for democracy. Is criticism tolerated in the Five Stars movement? Is there a dangerous adoration for the movement's leader? Would we encounter the same results in different communication spaces, such as a forum or facebook pages? And, more broadly, if this movement has contributed to increase participation in some segments of the Italian population, should we really worry about the outcomes for deliberation? Answering this last question, I would argue that an equilibrium between participation and deliberation is vital for democratic life, especially in a young democracy like Italy, a country particularly fascinated by autocratic political personalities. However, further research is necessary to understand the complex effects of the development of the Five Stars movement on Italian politics.

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