

Erik Amnå (ed.)

New forms of citizen participation

Normative implications



Nomos

CINEFOGO
CIVIL SOCIETY
AND NEW FORMS
OF GOVERNANCE
IN EUROPE

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**Politics vs. Antipolitics in Italy
in the Age of Monitory Democracy:
The Complex Case of *beppegrillo.it***

The word “democracy” indicates a complex form of government with a history that stretches over many centuries and many different models (see Held 1996; Keane 2009). One of its most widely adopted forms today is based on governing through elected representatives. The representative model of democracy became popular in the eighteenth century, when the amalgamation of the old Greek ideal of democracy and that of representation seemed the best possible solution for governing large nation-states. “Extend the suffrage, and democracy would be enabled by representation” wrote Hanna Pitkin, “since, as John Selden put it, ‘the room will not hold all’, the people would rule themselves vicariously, through their representatives” (Pitkin 2004: 338).

In a typical representative democratic system, the traditional fundamental role of citizens is to take part in regular elections to choose representatives who then govern on their behalf. The simple act of casting a vote, of choosing one candidate (or one party) over others, has, ideally, two main advantages: it guarantees the people a chance to periodically evaluate their political leadership and, at the same time, provides the members of that political leadership sufficient time to earn their voters’ trust for a new mandate. Ideally, in this context citizens should rarely be called into action between elections. Esaiasson used this line of reasoning in an earlier chapter in this volume, arguing that citizens’ political involvement is not always an advantage in such a system; in fact, as I have argued elsewhere, the government’s excessive use of new technology to reach out to its citizens can sometimes bring a representative system to a standstill and crucially hinder the quality of its very essence. Indeed, the elected representative at the core of this system is never simply the “echo chamber” of his or her own constituency’s will, but rather must play a more important and proactive role of mediation between the will of the people and the needs of the state (see Navarria 2009). Successfully fulfilling such a role can only be guaranteed by striking a fine balance between the independence of action of the representatives and the electing constituencies’ need for assessment.

This particular system of democratic government, however, is far from perfect and too often (at least in some established representative democracies), a government or coalition majority in Parliament is equivalent to a “free pass” to do whatever they wish, at least until the next election. For these reasons, among others, in *The Life and Death of Democracy* John Keane (2009) points out that since 1945 the ideal-typical

model of democratic government by representation has seen a radical “sea change” that has deeply altered its essence. The political geography of representative democracy has mutated from its original static, hierarchical and territorially-bound configuration founded on the idea of the nation-state to a political geography where the exercise of power is (willingly or not) more open to questioning and scrutiny, not just from within the state but also from across borders (Keane 2009: 695). Representative democratic systems are progressively morphing into what Keane calls “monitory democracies”. Monitory democracy emerges from the progressive crisis suffered by the representative model throughout the first half of the twentieth century (Keane 2009: 583f). That crisis culminated with the Second World War and the “near-destruction worldwide of democratic institutions and ways of life by the storms of mechanised war, dictatorship and totalitarian rule” (Keane 2009: XVII). For Keane, this is a new historical form of democracy that goes beyond the parliamentary politics that defined the representative model.

The term monitory democracy refers to a complex and intricate structure of government that incorporates all elements of the representative model and adds to them “many different kinds of extra-parliamentary, power-scrutinising mechanisms” (Keane 2009: 688). Keane calls these mechanisms “monitory bodies” and they include, among other things, activist courts, electoral commissions and consumer protection agencies, but also blogs, online forums, and online petitions. These mechanisms of power scrutiny – working from “within and outside states” – serve to make democracy and democrats more accountable and more democratic, especially in “big and complex societies” where an ever-increasing number of people has lost belief in politicians and politics. In twenty-first century democracies, monitory bodies are crucial elements of the politics of everyday life: they work as antidotes against the hubris of power that constantly threaten the functioning of representative democratic systems. Through these power-scrutinising mechanisms, those who represent are constantly reminded that their power is not immune from control, and is never absolute; they must account for their actions throughout their entire time in office, not just before an election. While political parties and parliaments are still important in this new form of democratic government, their grip on citizens’ lives has weakened increasingly during the last half-century. New communication media, especially the Internet, play a crucial role in this democratic context.

This article focuses mainly on Italy and Italian blogger Beppe Grillo and his blog site beppegrillo.it. Italy’s representative democratic system has in the recent past shown many of the signs of the decline that Keane indicates as the foundation of a monitory democracy. [Beppegrillo.it](http://beppegrillo.it) is a particular example of an Internet-based monitory body, and the analysis of the blog’s growing impact on Italian politics will allow us to assess Keane’s claim that we are living in an era of monitory democracy. Analysis of the blog will also allow us to highlight the importance of web-enhanced forms of political engagement and the challenges they pose to democracy.

By definition, a blog is a personal diary posted online by an author (the blogger). In contrast to elected representatives or more institutional forms of power monitoring (such as journalism), a blog does not need to be accountable or representative; nor

does it need to be transparent to exercise its watchdog role. Some blogs are indeed very popular; they attract thousands of readers every day and can act as points of reference in important political debates. The popularity of blogs raises questions about the normative implications of their political status: do bloggers represent anyone? Should they be accountable and transparent or can they do without that? The problem is that bloggers are ambiguous subjects: are they journalists, are they political subjects, or are they merely the voice of a chorus of angry citizens? As such, are bloggers not associated with anyone and not obliged to deal with their internet-based constituency and the problem of representativeness? The answers to these kinds of questions are complicated, and surround the whole issue of blogging on political issues with a vagueness that can undermine its political potential. Beppegrillo.it is a case in point. On the one hand, it is the most important blog in Italy; in 2008 it was ranked ninth and was the first Italian blog in the top 50 list of the world most powerful blogs (Observer 2008: 16). Grillo actively criticises the lack of democratic openness, transparency and accountability in contemporary Italian politics. On the other hand, however, Grillo acts in ways that are often non-transparent and unaccountable. What are the implications of such a contradictory status?

Using Keane's monitory democracy framework as a backdrop, this article argues that it is exactly that kind of institutional ambiguity that strengthens the impact of monitory bodies like *beppegrillo.it* on representative democracy: the ambiguity allows these new forms of political participation and scrutiny to be more daring in their actions. Over the longer term, however, bloggers such as Grillo can see the effectiveness of their political campaigns potentially undermined by their continued use of double-standards on matters of transparency and accountability, which are important pillars of any model of democracy. To avoid that risk, bloggers need to adopt a simple but important code of practice: they must be transparent about how they organise their campaigns, and need to understand that, even if they operate outside the parliamentary context, many consider them to be their virtual political representatives. Willingly or not, such conditions impose on bloggers a higher degree of accountability to those who read their posts and support their campaigns.

The Political Background: Italy under Silvio Berlusconi's Leadership

Italy's recent political past and present has been characterised by the controversial entrepreneur and media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi. Since 1994, Berlusconi and his centre-right coalition have won Italy's general election three times (out of five elections). His last electoral success, in April 2008, was won by a wide margin over the incumbent centre-left coalition. Berlusconi is a democratic anomaly: he is an elected representative who concentrates in his own hands the power of political leadership, wealth and media. Such a peculiar concentration of power gives Berlusconi a degree of influence on Italian politics that is much higher than that bestowed upon him by his institutional role, and this influence consistently undermines the quality of democracy in Italy. The strength of Berlusconi's clout on Italian politics is firmly anchored in his

wealth (for many years Forbes magazine has identified him as the richest person in Italy) and, in particular, his strategic use of his television networks, newspapers and publishing houses to pursue his own personal agenda (Ginsborg 2003).

To understand Berlusconi as a political anomaly, we need to understand that his dual role (as media tycoon and prime minister) guarantees him a virtual monopoly on Italian media. He is the owner of the largest Italian commercial television group, Mediaset, through which he personally controls three country-wide television networks (Canale 5, Italia 1, and Rete 4). At the same time, as President of the Council of Ministries, he effectively has decisional power over the Italian public service broadcaster, Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI). On average, Mediaset and RAI together account for over 87 per cent of the daily share of the entire Italian television audience (Repubblica 2006). During his second term in office (from 2001 to 2006¹) this virtual monopoly, coupled with the silencing of the center-left press via means of political and economic pressure (Blatmann 2003; Gomez/Travaglio 2004: 217–246), effectively allowed Berlusconi to establish a firm “media regime” on the country and muffle most of the voices that attempted to criticise his government or openly discuss Berlusconi’s many troubles with the law.

A *media regime* allows a single individual to take and maintain control of communication media. The late Indro Montanelli – a strong critic of Berlusconi’s power and one of the most respected Italian journalists of the twentieth century – argued that the example of Berlusconi showed his contemporaries that, in the present day, “to introduce a regime, one no longer needs to march towards Rome, nor does one need to set fire to the Reichstag, neither does one need a coup at the Winter palace. All that is needed are the so-called mass communication media: and among them, sovereign and irresistible is television” (Travaglio 2006: 228). Given his predominant position in the Italian media landscape, Montanelli had no doubt that Berlusconi represented a great danger for democracy: “if Mussolini could have counted on television networks, he would be still around” (Montanelli quoted in Gomez/Travaglio 2004: XIII).

The term regime, however, should not mislead the reader. This was (and still is, see endnote i) not a Stalinist, nor a fascist system. The media regime established by Berlusconi is one that does not need gloomy atmospheres, iron clubs, terror tactics, or even public mobilisation. Berlusconi does not need to impose his will by sending opponents into exile on prison islands or in hard labour camps, or with the help of physical violence. Instead, Berlusconi’s version of a regime is positive: “His media regime is thus one based not on the silencing of all dissenting voices, as under Fascism” wrote historian Paul Ginsborg, “but on the rule enunciated with acumen by the

1 For reasons of coherence and availability of data, the focus of this article is mainly on the period between 2001 and 2006. However, it is worth briefly noting that in April 2008, Berlusconi and his coalition managed to once again win the general election. At the time of writing (October 2009) Berlusconi has been governing for well over a year. Since its early stages, his new government has followed a similar pattern to the previous one: Parliament has been devoted to passing laws to protect Berlusconi’s interests and save him from judicial prosecution (Grossi and Zanca 2008).

talk-show compère, Maurizio Costanzo: ‘Power does not belong to those who talk on television. It belongs to those who permit you to talk on television’” (Ginsborg 2003: 38).

During Berlusconi’s second term in office, his unique media regime (unique for a democratic country) was instrumental in silencing or misreporting information that might have had dire consequences for the President’s image and business interests. In July 2003, for example, Berlusconi caused a wave of indignation throughout Europe and a diplomatic row with Germany by comparing German Member of the European Parliament Martin Schultz to a Nazi concentration camp commander (Guardian 2003). In contrast to most European networks, RAI’s main evening news programme did not even show footage of the incident, and reported on it only briefly; coverage on other networks was “deliberately softened and cut” (Arie 2003). Most of the Italian press downplayed the affair, and many newspapers relegated the story to minor sections.

The problem with Berlusconi’s Italy between 2001 and 2006 was very simple: it was a political and social context where the role of informing citizens on matters of public concern was almost exclusively domain of television. Given Berlusconi’s monopoly of media, the many voices that dared to deviate from the “party line” were almost never heard (Ginsborg 2003: 38) While much of the mainstream media was the target of Government’s continuous pressure, the Internet virtually remained untouched by a regime that seemed more at ease with traditional media such as television than with computers and broadband connections. This atypical freedom from Berlusconi’s tight grip on national media made the Internet a favoured safe harbour for non-aligned audiences and dissident voices. Through the use of the Internet, a re-invigorated web-based civil society has successfully organised nation-wide protests and brought issues often neglected by national media to the attention of the wider public. The best example of this new trend is Beppe Grillo and the community of active citizens orbiting his blog, beppegrillo.it.

Beppe Grillo and His Blog

Beppe Grillo is one of the most popular and controversial stand-up comedians to have ever appeared on Italian television. Grillo began his career at the end of the 1970s, and by the early 1980s high audience ratings and critical acclaim made him a national celebrity. Toward the end of that decade, he began criticizing prominent Italian politicians and big corporations for corrupt practices. That kind of satire, however, had dire repercussions on his career (Grasso 1992: 467–468). In the following years, due to mounting pressure from politicians and advertisers regarding Grillo’s satire, TV producers stopped inviting him on their shows. Sent into unofficial exile, Grillo instead performed in theatres, sports arenas and public squares. From the early 1990s on, the comedian appeared on public television only twice. Yet Grillo’s ban from the small screen made him even more popular with the Italian public, which regards him as the outspoken “talking cricket”, a vociferous critic of political and economic corruption and the lack of democratic openness in contemporary Italian politics. Audiences see

in him someone they can trust, who fights to unveil the truth on issues that mainstream media and politicians do not dare address (Israely 2005). Recently, Grillo has increased his popularity by transforming himself into a blogger. Through his website *beppegrillo.it*, he and his staff offer non-aligned and critical political information that is rarely covered in the mainstream media. Moreover, thanks to the comments and countless feedback posted daily on his blog or sent via email, Grillo himself has access to information and stories that otherwise would remain untold.

The Campaigns: Clean up Parliament and V-Day

In a political context defined by a controversial figure like Silvio Berlusconi and thanks in part to the comedian's own personal history of defying the political establishment, Beppe Grillo's website quickly transcended its initial status as a simple weblog of a comedian's thoughts and ideas to become one of Keane's monitory bodies – it is now one of the main reference points through which many Italians, scattered around the country and around the globe, can make sense of the state of politics in Italy. Since its start, *beppegrillo.it* has distinguished itself through the dynamism of its many thousands of daily readers – who use the daily as part of their own monitoring activities, for sharing ideas and information, and for organising political campaigns. The thousands of comments posted daily by Grillo's readers (between 1,500 and 2,000 on average) are clear indicators of the blog's lively activity.

Facilitated by powerful and low-cost tools such as the social networking portal *meetup.com* and the Internet phone software *Skype*, over the past four years the lively and growing civil society orbiting Grillo's blog has been able to organise a number of grassroots campaigns. These campaigns range from efforts to protect and sustain scientific research to economic and political issues. The community has often taken a firm stand on matters that have been under-represented or misrepresented within the mainstream media. Of these campaigns, one stood out for its success in engaging public participation and for the interest that surrounded it: *Parlamento Pulito (Clean Up Parliament)*².

Clean Up Parliament can be considered a two-phased campaign. The first phase, which took place at the end of 2005, aimed to inform the Italian public of a simple but rarely discussed fact: that year, more than 20 candidates with criminal convictions were elected to Parliament (see Gomez/Travaglio 2006). Given that Parliament houses more than 900 members (MPs)³, some could argue that Grillo's list of candidates was relatively small. Yet this was not an insignificant ethical issue for the country, even though many media outlets did not openly discuss it. The issue summarised the non-chalant attitude of Italian politicians towards ethics and truthful information. It seemed

2 This is the English title that appeared in the English version of the blog.

3 The Italian Parliament is divided into two chambers; the chamber of deputies has 630 members and the Senate 315.

only fair to ask that those who had been convicted by the courts should at least have the ethical duty to inform the electorate about their criminal records before entering an election. In Italy, however, and starting from the top with Berlusconi, the opposite usually happens. Being convicted is often not a reason for shame or resignation. Moreover, to be acquitted is often equated to being innocent even when the acquittal is the result of the expiration of the “statute of limitations”.

The second phase of *Clean Up Parliament*, which took place two years later, brought the initiative one step further. The first phase had gone almost unnoticed outside the blog’s circle; neither Parliament nor the media had taken it seriously. As such, the second phase was organised around a public petition that aimed to raise enough public concern and gather enough signatures to force Parliament to officially consider the issue.

Clean Up Parliament and its organising process represented an important blueprint of how this particular Italian web-based civil society works: on the one hand it showed the strengths of the blog in functioning as one of Keane’s monitory bodies and as a virtual public sphere in which it a community of active citizens can shed light on and debate social and political matters that are often neglected by over-politicised mainstream media. On the other hand, the first phase of the campaign in particular raised some important questions about its organisational process: the strength of citizens’ involvement, the procedures of accountability inherent to the campaign, and the campaign’s ultimate political impact.

As has often been the case with the blog’s campaigns, *Clean Up Parliament* actually originated from outside the blog, based on an early initiative of the *Beppe Grillo Meetup Group* in Milan. The ultimate aim of that initiative was to protest the lack of adequate legislation for preventing convicted politicians from becoming Members of Parliament (Grillo n.d.). What started as a simple leaflet with a list of names of convicted politicians soon became the focus of a heated debate on the blog. Twenty-five posts were published on the blog, receiving a total of over 29,000 comments (1,175 per post on average). The comments focused principally on the campaign’s issues and on the tactics that could be employed to transform the campaign into a successful nation-wide protest. Eventually the campaign raised enough funds (almost €60,000) to purchase a one-page advertisement in a newspaper and publically denounce the presence of convicted politicians in the Italian Parliament. This move was intended to make the *Clean Up Parliament* campaign known to the wider public, and at first Grillo attempted to publish the advertisement in one of the Italian dailies. After many of the papers declined his request, however, Grillo turned his attention to the international press, eventually placing the advertisement in the *International Herald Tribune* (IHT). The one-page text advertisement drew significant attention to the issue and demanded that Members of the Italian Parliament whose names were among those convicted to resign (Grillo 2005, 2005a).

After the advertisement appeared in the IHT, some members of the blog’s community openly criticised the lack of transparency in Grillo’s modus operandi. Some attacked the use of Grillo’s name as the recipient of the donations, believing that he should have used a bank account with the name of the initiative, as some had sug-

gested. Others criticised the choice of the IHT, as there was no discussion about which newspaper should publish the campaign's poster. Moreover, the text that was eventually published was quite ambiguous, and read almost as an advertisement for the blog rather than for the campaign (the text was a short summary of the campaign's objectives but did not include the names of the convicted politicians, as the original proposal that initiated the campaign had called for. In addition, neither the list of contributors nor the invoice of the payment made to the IHT was ever uploaded to the blog (see comments in Grillo 2005a).

In hindsight, this campaign did not achieve much in terms of political results: no law ever reached Parliament, and not a single MP resigned. Although politically ineffective, this campaign was instrumental in consolidating support for the blog at an early stage in its existence. After the full-page advertisement appeared in the IHT, it became clear to the members of the community that their electronic activism could achieve tangible effects. Almost two years later, Grillo and his followers followed up the 2005 *Clean Up Parliament* initiative with another campaign to not only to inform the Italian public of the number of convicted politicians sitting in the Parliament, but, more importantly, actively attempt to change Italian law from below. They called it the *V-Day* campaign or *Vaffanculo Day* (*vaffanculo* is Italian for "fuck off"). The day chosen was September 8, 2007, the date when Italians commemorate the 1943 armistice between Italy and the Allied armed forces during the Second World War. For this campaign, Grillo asked his fellow bloggers to sign a petition proposing a new electoral law to Parliament. Although the power to initiate the legislative process generally belongs to the executive and legislative branches of Parliament, Article 71 of the Italian Constitution provides the means for citizens to directly propose laws outside of the normal institutional procedures. If the *proposta di legge popolare* (a proposal for a law initiated by the people) is accompanied by a petition of at least 50,000 signatures, Parliament must discuss the proposal. Grillo's *proposta* was composed of three different proposals: that candidates convicted by courts of law should be forbidden from running for public office; that political careers should be limited to only two terms; and that Members of Parliament should be directly chosen by the people (Grillo 2007).

Overall, V-Day was a success both in terms of the number of people engaged and media exposure. It also showed that the movement behind Grillo had matured and had, to some extent, become independent from the comedian. By and large, the event was a product of the grassroots groups that supported Grillo. The volunteers used the blog and, in particular, the network of contacts created by the thousands of members of the *Beppe Grillo Meetup Groups*⁴ to raise funds and coordinate the many simultaneous events. On September 8, it was estimated that over two million people gathered in more than 200 cities worldwide to shout *vaffanculo* to the entire Italian political

4 The meetup.com group category "Friends of Beppe Grillo" has about 77,000 members, themselves organized in 437 groups, located in 325 cities and 17 different countries. The groups meet regularly and have organised over 17,000 meetings (Data updated December 2008, source: meetup.com).

class (Mueller 2008). Eventually, however, the number of signatures collected on the petition did not match the impressive number of people that attended the events. Grillo explained this by saying that the volunteers ran out of forms, as they did not anticipate such a turnout (Grillo 2007a). The final tally of signatures, however, was over 330,000 (Grillo 2007b) – more than six times the number required to submit a proposal of popular law to Parliament.

V-Day was a crucial moment in the young history of the web-based civil society inspired by Grillo. For the first time since the birth of the blog, the many thousands of members that were actively involved with the blog's online community materialised on a national (and international) stage. They demonstrated to the media and to themselves that they constituted a significant movement of committed citizens who have the ability to organise nation-wide protests, to sign petitions, to vote in elections, to influence others, and to potentially change the status quo of the country over the longer term. The V-Day example demonstrates that we now live in an age where the meaning of democracy is changing radically and rapidly. In this new age of political engagement, as Keane rightly points out: "the bullheaded belief that democracy is nothing more than the periodic election of governments by majority rule is crumbling [and] the rules of representation, democratic accountability and public participation are applied to a much wider range of settings than ever before" (2009: 689–90).

Politics vs. *Antipolitics*?

In the aftermath of the V-Day protest, the issues raised by the event were debated in Italian newspapers and on television programs. The behaviour of Grillo and his *Grillini* (Little Crickets), as many in the media referred to those who attended the protest, sparked harsh reactions from politicians from both sides of the political spectrum, as well as from representatives of Berlusconi's media regime⁵. Grillo and his followers were branded as *anti-political* – that, in the words of one commentator, they were aiming to bring down the division between government and governed in order to promote dangerous forms of assembly-based democracy that can easily lead to dictatorship (Scalfari 2007). Following this line of argument, the Grillini were accused of lacking respect for the institutions that govern the country and of shallow demagoguery and populism (Povoledo 2007). They were even accused of fostering terrorism: "what would happen if a crazy man listening to Grillo's accusations decided to take a gun and pull the trigger against those attacked by the comedian?", asked the alarmed director of RAI 2 News, Mauro Mazza (*Corriere della Sera* 2007). To explain the *Grillismo* phenomenon (the name given by the press to Grillo's movement), many compared it with Guglielmo Giannini's *qualunquismo*. Having tired of the Italian political establishment, in 1946 Giannini launched the *qualunquismo* by founding *Il Fronte dell'uomo qualunque*, based on the slogan *non rompeteci le scatole* (don't

⁵ For articles and news about V-Day, see <http://www2.beppegrillo.it/vaffanculoday/>.

bother us)⁶. In that year's elections, this new party, participating in "anti-politics" and gaining the support of the "common people" unexpectedly won 30 seats in Parliament. Giannini's ascendance to fame, however, lasted only one term and many critics foresaw a similar meteoritic rise for Grillo. These critics believe that Grillo's politics and his V-Day (as with Giannini's exploits in 1946), were simply inconsequential anti-politics, "a mediocre and vulgar matter" (Scalfari 2007). Those critics, however, are wrong. Grillo and his *grillini* are not like Giannini. They are not the antithesis of politics, but are rather reclaiming their right to be involved in the government for the common good – the right to decide who gets what, when, and how. Moreover, the impact of Grillo's movement is significant, particularly if considered from a longer-term perspective. The *Grillini* are neither vulgar nor mediocre, but rather the opposite. V-Day was the *gestalt* switch that demonstrates a paradigm shift in the approach that many Italians – a large portion of whom were new to politics – took towards politics. Those who signed the petition and crowded the squares of more than 200 cities represent a new and bold civil society that is not afraid to ask questions, that believes that they can collectively build a better country. They are not against politics; on the contrary, they fully understand and embrace political life as a continuous struggle for power and a never-ending process of questioning and trying to improve the quality of the status quo. That struggle always requires individuals to see themselves as political beings that must act, often publically, to defend and support their beliefs. Grillo and his *Grillini* did exactly that – they acted together, outside the boundaries of the traditional and institutional realms of Italian politics, and together dared to shout *vaffanculo* to a political class (some correctly use the term *caste*) that they felt no longer represent them. These individuals initiated a complex political process that, in the long term, may have serious repercussions for the way in which politics is understood and experienced in Italy. This may well be a clear sign of the shape of things to come.

Conclusions: A Blueprint for the Future?

Regardless of what some critics argue, Grillo is not an Internet age clone of Berlusconi, a populist who strives for power and defends his own interests. Of course, Grillo is not perfect. His tours as a comedic performer have certainly benefited from his new life as a blogger, and the lack of transparency in the organisation of some of his campaigns shows that there is plenty of room for improvement. Yet in the age of monitory democracy, what is true for elected representatives is also true for non-conventional leaders like Grillo: no one is immune from control and hence everyone must account for their actions.

⁶ *The Common Man's Front*. The Italian denigratory term *qualunquismo* derives from Giannini's Front. It cannot really be translated in English. Generally speaking, the term refers to a cynical approach towards politics and political leadership as potentially dangerous for the stability of the life of the common man. For a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of *qualunquismo* and the history of Giannini's movement see Setta 2005 and Zanone 2002.

The success of the blog, however, goes beyond Grillo and his blog, becoming a symbol and an instrument of change. The growing success of *beppegrillo.it* and of initiatives like V-Day is evidence that the Italian political sphere is increasingly morphing from a democracy based on representation to one founded on monitory bodies. Could Grillo's experience be a blueprint for the future? It is an open question. At the moment some aspects of the experience seem certain to be repeated, while others still need to be proven.

It is clear that those who read and comment on Grillo's posts are members of an active public who are inspired by the comedian, but who are not blind to his faults; indeed, they openly criticise him when he makes mistakes. In addition to posting thousands of comments on the blog, they post videos on external platforms, create and participate in social and political campaigns, publicise the blog and the work of its community, and organise regional and international gatherings via *meetup.com*. In these ways, they challenge the political establishment and actively attempt to give life, substance and direction to a form of politics that aims to create a better alternative to the existing status quo. They believe that change can, in fact, be achieved, and consider the Internet an important instrument for enacting that change from below. After all, in the age of monitory democracy the power of the political caste is fundamentally less effective on the Internet than in traditional media. The content of some of the comments posted on the blog reflect this belief. Many, in fact, demonstrate a sense of shared faith in the possibility of changing and improving the quality of life of the Italian people, although many equally acknowledge that the road is long and difficult (see, for instance, comments in Grillo 2006).

At first glance, if one examines the political achievements of the blog's many campaigns, little or nothing has changed in Italy since Grillo started blogging. Grillo himself has sometimes admitted that his battles seem to be quixotic and ultimately lead nowhere. One year after V-Day, Grillo bitterly wrote: "The collection of signatures for a Clean Parliament has been ignored" (Grillo 2008). There is much evidence supporting this view: those in power have politely overlooked the many thousands of people that gathered in the streets to protest against the government, Berlusconi continues to look after his own interests, and the left is uninterested, or, worse, is an irrelevant copy of the right. Upon much closer inspection, however, there is evidence that the trend is slowly changing, and that Grillo's politics may ultimately represent an important blueprint for the future.

Even if it took almost two years, on June 10, 2009, Beppe Grillo, on behalf of his bloggers, appeared before the Senate Committee for Constitutional Affairs to discuss the V-Day proposal (Grillo 2009). This was not a grand victory; in fact, at the time of writing there are no indications that the law will ever be discussed by MPs in Parliament.⁷ Yet, here again, Grillo's feat was no small achievement – it demonstrated to the many thousands of people that signed the petition that the movement started

⁷ The progress of the law archived as *Atto Senato n. 1936* can be checked online at the following address: <http://www.senato.it/leg/15/BGT/Schede/Ddliter/29393.htm> (Retrieved July 10, 2009).

by the blog is not insignificant and that its existence has an impact beyond the traditional political institutions. In fact, it showed that the movement is capable of producing tangible political effects. Since the first blog post in 2005, and particularly since the first V-Day in 2007, the blog and its movement has been moving forward. Slowly but steadily, it has initiated a long process of change, from being merely the disorganised hideout of a dissatisfied civil society to one that is not only able to make proposals, but is ready to take action if needed. Consider what happened in the aftermath of V-Day: riding the momentum of the 2007 V-Day, Grillo launched *Liste Civiche* (civic lists), a new initiative aimed at openly challenging the political establishment.

Liste Civiche are collaboratively created lists of local administrators that meet, among other things, the quality standards for electoral candidates that were promoted with the V-Day petition. To receive the blog's stamp of approval, those on the lists cannot be linked to existing political parties, must have a clean legal record, should reside in the same location as his or her constituents, and may not have previously served more than one term in office at the local or national level (see Grillo 2007c). After publishing the lists, however, Grillo remarked that his intention was not to create a new political coalition. In fact, he said that "I am not promoting any Civic List, whether local or national. The participants of the V-Day do not lend their voices to anyone. They are megaphones of themselves. They are citizens that do their own politics" (Repubblica 2007). But the importance of the initiative goes further: it advocates an understanding of politics freed from the chains of higher interests and with its essence in the grassroots. It is in the city councils that important decisions are taken and most mistakes are made. As such, to take back the country, one must start at the ground level, one council seat at a time. This understanding of politics aims to change the mentality of those involved in the political process, while using the Internet as the indispensable instrument of expression and control. The ideal citizen from Grillo's perspective should walk into a city council meeting with a webcam on his/her head and record everything, and then upload the film to YouTube for everyone to see. In this case, the activity of monitoring power is coupled with the activity of being dynamically involved in shaping the process of the politics of everyday life.

Overall, during the 2008 local elections, 19 civic lists⁸ received the blog's stamp of approval. On average, the candidates on these lists gathered about 2.8 per cent of the votes in their constituencies⁹. The most significant results were in Rome and Palermo, where the two candidates supported by Grillo (Serenetta Monti as Mayor of Rome, and Sonia Alfano as Governor of Sicily) received almost 45,000 and 70,000 votes, respectively¹⁰. This was not an insignificant result for political outsiders who were

8 See <http://www2.beppegrillo.it/listeciviche/amministrative2008.html> (retrieved June 21, 2008).

9 Data retrieved from the Italian Interior Minister website: (June 20, 2008): <http://amministrative.interno.it/amministrative/amm080413/G0700900.htm>.

10 For Sicily data retrieved from the election Website: http://www.elezioni.regione.sicilia.it/public-site/rep_7/riepilogoRegionale.html; for Rome from the Italian Interior Ministry website: <http://amministrative.interno.it/amministrative/amm080413/G0700900.htm>.

promoted mainly through the Internet. Grillo promised that this was only the start: “They will never give up, neither will we” (Grillo 2008).

Only time will tell if Grillo is right or wrong. In the meantime, in less than four years, a blog that started with a simple line of text in January 2005 has evolved far beyond expectations. It has become an important instrument in the hands of a new breed of civil society consisting of bold individuals who believe in the importance of a healthy political class to democracy, and who continuously monitor those in power and openly contest their authority. These are citizens who are conscious of their strength and are capable of joining the political fray if action is indeed required. Contrary to many of the representatives of the traditional Italian political class who comfortably occupy their Parliament’s seats, the civil society that orbits Grillo’s blog is composed of citizens who know how to harness the power of new communication media such as the Internet to challenge Italy’s political status quo and achieve their intended goals.

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