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International observers have looked at the Italian elections as the latest symptom of austerity malaise: Voters go to the ballot box to rebel against fiscal tightening imposed by the European Union élite on unwilling populations. While there is certainly a hint of truth here, the movie we are watching in Italy is not merely a sequel of the one we saw in Greece. There is a lesson no less applicable to Europe at large—but it is a different one.

Italy's election witnessed the momentous rise of the Five Star Movement that, led by the histrionic comedian Beppe Grillo, became the nation's leading party in Parliament without having ever run in a national race before. This happened amid almost total ignorance of virtually all the movement's candidates and proposals. There will be 108 Five Star MPs in the lower house and 54 Five Star senators. Italy's national media paid attention to none of them, until they got elected. A parliamentary force of more 150 (out of 945 members of Parliament all together) has coalesced—and Italian leading thinkers and opinion makers barely noticed it.

Mr. Grillo's is a coalition of bashers of the status quo. It includes critics of heavy taxation, but also prophets of the so called "de-growth" movement—a prophecy that contemporary Italy has more or less already fulfilled—and critics of industrial capitalism altogether. These include members of the Five Star Movement who advocate for women to use "mooncups" as a "natural" alternative to sanitary pads. You may feel fascinated or repulsed by these ideas, but you would expect them to be discussed—with Mr. Grillo scoring so big. And yet they weren't.

Italy's is a case of unintended consequences. So many faceless and yet successful candidates can only be explained by the electoral system itself: a proportional system based on party lists that makes electoral campaigns by individual candidates virtually useless. Italians can cast a vote only for a party and its leader. The major parties prefer this system because they believed it would cement their hold on power. Yet it was precisely this mechanism that allowed Mr. Grillo to get hold of a quarter of the votes.

Such a system seriously restrains voters' freedom of choice. Italy's head of State Giorgio Napolitano exhorted the parties, during Mario Monti's tenure, to reform it. In 1994, 1996 and 2001, Italy voted with a mixed system that allocated 75% of seats using a first-past-the-post mechanism. Such a rule anchored politics to its local roots, whereas the current system makes it a game for national leaders and nobody else.

Politicians have also so far spared themselves the effects of austerity. Common sense suggests that a reshuffle of the Italian government machine can both save money and help growth (thereby making people's lives easier). The Monti government unsuccessfully tried to abolish Italian provinces, an administrative layer between the municipality and the regional governments. Though provinces' duties could be split between city and regional governments, the parties spared them in the end, lest they see their patronage opportunities diminished. Conservative estimates suggest that €2 billion a year could be saved by abolishing Italian provinces all together, without firing a single public employee.

Privilege breeds privilege and so Italy—as many other democracies, to be fair—sees a proliferation of useless entities: public bodies, agencies and "institutes" that live on taxpayers' money without producing anything that vaguely resembles a public good. Some of those bodies are routinely singled out for being closed down, but action does not typically follow intention. Bureaucracy is resilient.

But extraordinary times require extraordinary measures. Italians have lived through painful tax hikes in the past couple of years. They needed to see their representatives set a good example. But they didn't. Spending for representative institutions was not severely cut; the different layers of government were not rationalized; bodies in which politicians appoint their friends as board members were kept alive. Add to this the awareness that you cannot quite choose your representatives, but only a party symbol, and you have an easy recipe for populism.

Italians who defaced their ballots or voted for Mr. Grillo were, for the most part, outraged by what they consider political treason by their own elected leaders. The established parties could acknowledge this election as a warning and work together to allow Italians to choose their representatives more effectively and to reduce the cost to voters of supporting their politicians' lifestyles. If they don't, the day might soon dawn when Italians will consider the compulsory use of "mooncups" a price they'd happily pay to evict their own self-serving elites.

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