

A Populist Green Party? Discourses and Practices on Green Transition by the Five Stars Movement (2009-2023)

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Abstract

While unanimous in its categorization as 'populist', scholars have little analysed M5S discourse and practices on environmental issues (so central to the very identity of the party since its foundation); nor have they adopted them as the primary lens through which to categorize it and interpret its evolution over time. This paper aims to start to fill this gap. By relying on in-depth interviews with party representatives collected in the past few years, and on a focused analysis of manifestos and key party documents, this paper argues that M5S's discourses over environmental issues mirror the (ideological, strategic, in terms of leadership) transformations of the party. Once inspired by technological utopianism and mobilizing through both forms of pre-figurative politics and ownership of LULU conflicts, the party, particularly under Luigi Di Maio's leadership, for a while downplayed the priority assigned to the green transition and the challenges brought by climate change. In recent years, the M5S has been consistently framing green transition-related policies as tools for stimulating state-led economic growth. In this way, the M5S has gradually combined its environmentalist platform (previously branded as a valence issue and mostly stated in terms of 'good practices') with its 'economic populist' (Dornbusch and Edwards, 1991), inward-oriented, and highly divisive (in the Italian context) proposals, thus actively contributing to further politicizing the issues of green transition and climate change. While M5S's recent 'progressive' turn has increased its similarities to the European Green parties, the party's ongoing populist features discourage its inclusion within the Green party family.

1. Introduction

While unanimous in its categorization as 'populist', scholars have attached many different labels to the Five Stars Movement (M5S), also because of its ideological, strategic and organizational evolution over time. Scholars more attentive to tracing its ideological foundations have defined the M5S as 'polyvalent' (Pirro, 2018), 'syncretic' (Vittori, 2020a), but also 'inclusionary' (Hutter and Kriesi, 2019) and 'antineoliberal' (Padoan, 2020). Scholars emphasizing the centrality of M5S's anti-establishment and anti-corruption stances and its promises of democratic regeneration have defined it as 'web-populist' (Biorcio and Natale, 2013) and 'techno-populist' (Bickerton and Invernizzi, 2018), as well as a pure example of 'valence-issue populism' (Zulianello, 2020). Quite surprisingly, experts have little analysed M5S discourses and practices on environmental issues (so central to the very identity of the party since its foundation), nor have they adopted them as the primary lens through which to categorize it and interpret its evolution over time.

This paper aims to start to fill this gap. By relying on in-depth interviews with party representatives collected in the past few years, and on a focused analysis of manifestos

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and key party documents, this paper argues that M5S discourses over environmental issues have mirrored the (ideological, strategic, in terms of leadership) transformations of the party. Once inspired by technological utopianism and mobilizing through both forms of pre-figurative politics (Leach, 2016) and ownership of LULU conflicts (*Locally Unwanted Land Use*: Biancalana, 2020; Imperatore, 2023), the party, particularly under Luigi Di Maio's leadership, for a while downplayed the priority assigned to the green transition and the challenges brought by climate change. In recent years, the M5S has been consistently framing green transition-related policies not only as goals *per se*, but also as tools for stimulating state-led economic growth. In this way, the M5S has gradually combined its environmentalist platform (once branded as a valence issue and mostly stated in terms of 'good practices') with its 'economic populist' (Dornbusch and Edwards, 1991), inward-oriented, and highly divisive (in the Italian context) proposals, thus actively contributing to further politicizing the issues of green transition and climate change. While M5S's recent 'progressive' turn has increased similarities to the European Green parties, the party's ongoing populist features discourage its inclusion within the Green party family.

The article is divided into five different sections. The first section offers a review of the relevant literature on the issues of the progressive politicization of environmental issues, and the main studies on the Green party family and on the relationship between populism and positions on the environment. Some considerations are also offered on the specific category of populism in which the M5S can be pigeonholed and on its 'eligibility' to be classified as a Green party. The second section presents the methodological strategies of this article. The third section briefly traces the three main phases of the organizational evolution of the M5S. This is useful for grasping the resulting strategic, ideological and leadership evolutions, with important consequences in terms of the salience and positions taken by the party on environmental issues, as detailed in the fourth section. Some brief conclusions and points for further reflection close the article.

2. The politicization of environmental issues in populist times

The M5S is quite famous for its populist rhetoric, which found fertile terrain in a country that has been repeatedly defined as 'the promised land of populism' or a 'populist heaven' (Tarchi, 2015). However, since its origins, the party has also strongly focused on environmentalism, which apparently finds less promising structural conditions in Italy. Environmental concerns have traditionally been, and still are, much lower in Southern Europe (and in Italy in particular) than in the rest of the continent, both at the demand-side (van Haute, 2016) and at the supply-side levels, as measured by party manifestos (e.g., Schworer, 2023). Studies focusing on the specific 'green' policy proposals advanced by different party families underline the role of ideology. According to Batstrand (2014), both the 'new' and 'old' left tend to praise the role of the state (through bans, regulations, or public ownership) for driving the ecology transition (and only the 'new left' places emphasis on reducing consumption), while the 'old' right (but also both 'new' and 'old' left) tends to insist on policy tools such as quotas and market incentives. In turn, what Batstrand defines as the 'new right' – i.e., the populist radical right – is the only party family explicitly rejecting pro-environment measures and/or insisting on climate change scepticism.

To understand the extent to which environmental issues have become politicized, it is thus important to look, from a supply-side perspective, at both saliency and positioning (Carter and Little, 2021). Farstad (2017) rightly argues that environment, nowadays, can no longer be considered a valence issue (Stokes, 1963). Gemenis et al. (2012) found that the understanding of environmental issues as valence or positional issues is highly affected by framing, and that issue positionality becomes clear when they are framed in terms of the green transition vs economic growth/job protection dilemmas. Pollex and Berker (2022) have highlighted that parties differ both in terms of saliency assigned to environmental issues but also, and more crucially, in terms of ‘simple’ or ‘complex’ understandings of the environmental question (i.e., the connection of environmental proposals to several political issues, thus going beyond greenwashing rhetoric). Recent surveys confirm the increasing positionality of environmental issues. According to a survey by the European Investment Bank, in the whole of Southern Europe, recognition of the green transition as an economic opportunity is much higher than the rest of the continent (Italy vs the EU-27 average: 76 percent vs 56 percent). On the one hand, this would suggest the resilience of environmental issues as valence issues in Southern Europe; on the other hand, the fear of losing jobs because of the green transition is higher than the EU-27 average (34 percent in both Italy and Spain vs 25 percent), and particularly higher amongst younger people (56 percent amongst 15-29 years old, 44 percent amongst 30-49 years old), and this can be interpreted as a sign of increasing positionality. This paper will detail how such a broad shift of environmental issues (from valence to positional) has been reflected in the M5S’s environmental discourse over the years.

The growing literature on party polarization on climate change (e.g. Dunlap et al. 2016; Tranter, 2013) and, crucially, on populism and climate change, also reports this trend. Since populism in Europe is mostly, albeit not entirely, a right-wing phenomenon, much literature focuses more broadly on the connections between populist right-wing / far-right politics and ACC (Anthropogenic Climate Change) denial as part of environmental politics (Forchtner, 2019; Lamb et al., 2020). (Right-wing) populism and ACC scepticism correlate because of the ‘top-down nature of environmental politics’, and its ‘transnational nature’ (Boehmelt, 2021), as well as the threat that climate policies may imply to traditional lifestyles and existing forms of production (e.g. Frischlich et al., 2023; Ofstehage et al., 2022). Rarer studies focusing (also) on European left-wing populisms (mostly concentrated in Southern Europe – the M5S is *de facto* increasingly included in this category [e.g. Hutter and Kriesi, 2019]) found that left-wing populists, when in government, are particularly likely to push forward strong pro-environment agendas (Jahn, 2021). Chazel and Dain (2023) have recently coined the term ‘green populism’ to capture how the left-wing populist party *La France Insoumise* has combined its eco-socialist ideology with anti-elitism and people-centrism to blame the environmental crisis on the ‘oligarchy’ and to promote a ‘popular’ green transition.

The ‘green populism’ concept is quite different from the concept of ‘eco(logical)-populisms’ as independently coined by Koutnik (‘[a set of] broad appeals to everyday people to assert themselves against developmentalist elites, norms, and institutions that threaten their environs with destruction’; 2021: 49) and Escobar-Fernández and Hart, who define it as ‘socio-environmental movements that have scaled up their struggle and have employed both universal rhetoric and approach to inscribe their demands’ (2023:

8). Both definitions point to the populist articulation of local-level, ‘home-based’ struggles: as this paper will detail, ‘eco-populism’ partially fits with the very genesis of the M5S and some of its early strategies, while the ongoing phase of M5S’s evolution – ideologically inspired by statist visions – shares some elements with Chazel and Dain’s ‘green populism’ label.

Since, as we have seen, the literature emphasizes the key role of party ideology to explain the saliency of environmental issues and their positioning at the supply-side level, focusing on the M5S’s environmental platform(s) may contribute to better capturing and portraying the (highly debated) ideological leaning(s) that the party has been assuming since 2009. The party has merged positions which are typical of the ‘new Left’ (e.g., emphasis on waste reduction, forms of pre-figurative politics, support for LULU campaigns), prevailing in its early phase, with more recent positions that are closely connected to a specific declination of populism, echoing some features of Latin American ‘classic populism’. Collier and Collier (1991: 788) defined them as ‘political movements [...] typically of a personalistic and/or charismatic character and [with] an anti-status-quo, nationalist [in the case of the M5S, “sovereigntist”]: Basile and Mazzoleni, 2021] ideology and program’ consisting in ‘a reformist set of policies tailored to promote development without explosive class conflict’ (Drake, 1982). Such ‘reformist policies’ have been (polemically) defined as ‘economic populism’ by neoliberal economists Rudi Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards (1992: 9) in the following terms: ‘an approach to economics that emphasizes growth and income redistribution and deemphasizes the risks of inflation and deficit finance, external constraints, and the reaction of economic agents to aggressive nonmarket policies’. As the empirical sections will show, the M5S has increasingly and consistently endorsed such an ‘approach to economics’ (implying both a clear statist vision and a rejection of class conflict while, instead, aiming to create cross-class coalitions of social actors benefitting from inward-looking economic growth), *particularly* in order to define its platform on the green transition.

As we will further discuss in the concluding sections, the centrality of such populist components of the M5S throughout its history also becomes relevant when discussing the relationship between the party and the Green party family, both in analytical (can the M5S be classified as a Green party?) and organizational terms. Party families are commonly identified by their origins and social bases, transnational links, policy and ideology, and party name (Essner, 2010; Mair and Mudde, 1998). Despite being younger than other party families, the Greens in Europe have increasingly become a homogenous party family according to all the dimensions considered (Dietz, 2000; Carter, 2013). Despite a few exceptions, Green parties are characterized by ‘strong environmental, libertarian and left-wing policy positions’ (Carter, 2023: 74). Mostly originating in the ‘new social movements’ of the seventies, Green parties have increasingly ‘professionalized’ (in Panebianco’s terms), while also ‘standing (very) close to the amateur/activist ideal-type’ (Rihoux and Frankland, 2008: 266). Their electorate, according to Dolezal’s study on 12 European countries (2010), tended and tends to be young, highly-educated, overrepresented amongst socio-cultural specialists or students, urban, and not very religious. Most parties classifiable as ‘Greens’ include in their party name terms such as ‘Green’ or ‘Ecolog*’, and, although they are often reluctant to position themselves on a left-right scale (van Haute, 2016), only a small number of them are currently positioned

in the centre/centre-right of the spectrum (Carter, 2023). Cross-country cohesion is also reflected in the importance of umbrella organizations, such as the Global Greens and the European Green Party (EGP), as well as in the very high cohesion shown by the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament (van Haute, 2016). In contrast to the past, pro-EU stances are the norm nowadays, and tend to be even stronger where competition for recognition by the EGP is fierce (van Haute, 2016).

The M5S has passed through quite different organizational, strategic and ideological phases throughout its history (Vittori, 2020b; Padoan, 2022; see below). As we will detail and discuss, the M5S has, in some respects, moved close to the Green party family; however, the party has at the same time distanced itself from it over time. Some genetic characteristics (origins and social bases, some aspects of its policy platform) could be associated with the Greens, while others were at odds with this party family. Some aspects of the M5S evolution, particularly in recent years, further contributed to an eventual rapprochement, while other features still mark strong differences. In sum, this analysis can contribute to the discussion on the fittest categories in which to classify the M5S as a political party.

3. Data and methods

This paper uses a mixed-method strategy to reconstruct the evolution of the discourses and practices pursued by the M5S on environmental issues throughout its history, mostly from a supply-side perspective. In terms of data collection, this study focuses primarily on the electoral manifestos drawn up by the M5S in view of the parliamentary elections (at national and European level) from 2009 to the present (parliamentary elections in 2013, 2018 and 2022; European elections in 2014 and 2019). A series of official documents considered particularly relevant for grasping the evolution of the M5S political discourse were also considered, always with particular attention to the salience and declination of environmental issues. Thus, the following were considered: i) the main book written by Beppe Grillo in the embryonic phase of the M5S (Grillo, 2007); ii) the so-called ‘Government Contract’ signed by the M5S and Lega (M5S and League, 2018) in view of the creation of the coalition government led by Conte in 2018 (a useful document for understanding the possible compromises, as well as the ‘non-negotiable’ points of the M5S in the environmental sphere); iii) the internal document *After the Coronavirus. The political culture of the M5S* (M5S, 2020), produced with the collaboration of the sociologist Domenico De Masi, which collects the considerations of a dozen of the party’s senior figures regarding the (past and potential future) evolution of the party’s political culture.

All these documents were analysed, in the first instance, on the basis of the principles of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis started by identifying meaning units (MUs), (i.e., a portion of the text that is relevant to the research questions and that carries meaning that can be coded), firstly selected by a word search based on specific keywords (*environment**, *clim**, *sustainab**, *ecology**, *transition*). The goal was to identify ‘themes’, i.e. ‘something important about the data in relation to the research question, and [representing] some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 82). This preliminary phase was therefore useful in identifying the main frames and policy proposals of the M5S on the topics of interest. In the overall analysis, the relative salience assigned to environmental issues was taken

into account, as well as the main characterizing themes in each document, also in order to better contextualize the ‘themes’ emerging from the thematic analysis.

To complement the analysis of the manifestos, the transcripts of 27 interviews (quoted here as ‘INT#’: see the Online Appendix) of national and regional party figures collected by the author in two different phases (in 2016-2017, when the M5S was in opposition, and in 2018-2019, during the experience of government in coalition with the League) were also considered. These semi-structured interviews, initially collected for the purposes of other research (Padoan, 2020; Caiani and Padoan, 2021), included, within the questionnaires, several questions that focused on the early membership recruitment phase and on the principles and values that characterized the party in the opinions of the interviewees, in two rather different phases of M5S history. These data were therefore very useful for capturing the importance of environmental issues in defining the positive identity of the party, but also in understanding the way in which, as will be seen, these themes have been differently expressed and emphasized over time.

Survey data collected by ITANES (Italian Elections Studies) through a representative sample of the Italian population were also used to integrate a demand-side perspective of our reflection. Since ITANES data referring to the 2022 elections are still embargoed, this research relies on data collected for the 2013 and 2018 elections (post-electoral questionnaires: N=1465 [2013] and N=2573 [2018]). These data offered the possibility of confirming the low salience of environmental issues among Italian voters in the two elections considered, but also the relative importance of the same issues among Five-Star voters and (especially) militants.

4. The trajectory of the M5S: Organization and Leadership

The literature on the M5S is already vast and covers many aspects of the party, also in diachronic and comparative perspective. Several books (e.g., Biorcio and Natale, 2013; Tronconi, 2015; Vittori, 2020a; Padoan, 2022) provide comprehensive analyses of the party, sometimes in a comparative perspective (Della Porta et al., 2017; Padoan, 2020).

After some local level electoral appearances under the *Amici di Beppe Grillo* (‘Beppe Grillo’s friends’) umbrella, the M5S was officially founded on 4 October 2009, when its statute was also circulated. The first M5S statute excluded any party role apart from the leader (Beppe Grillo, also the legal owner of the party’s name and logo) and celebrated direct and digital democracy. The latter was conceived as the only mechanism able to avoid any bureaucratization and the full adherence of the party in public office (Katz and Mair, 1995) to the will of the digital membership. While emphasis on grassroots democracy and control over the party in public office (PPO) are also typical organizational traits of Green parties (van Haute, 2016), M5S’s practical functioning has always been clearly plebiscitarian. Overall, from 2009 until at least 2017 (when, in view of the 2018 elections, Luigi Di Maio was elected as the ‘political leader’ [*capo politico*] of the party), the M5S had a dual and cohesive leadership, with Beppe Grillo as the charismatic political and media leader, and with Gianroberto (later Davide) Casaleggio in charge of the internal organization of the party web platform Rousseau (where internal referendums and candidate selection processes were held: Biancalana and Vittori, 2023) and of the party’s communication. The party in the central office (PCO, namely Grillo and Casaleggio) acted, thus, as a whip imposing strong discipline on the party in public office, with the

party on the ground (organized in informal local circles) mostly reduced to ratifying pre-determined political decisions (Caiani et al., 2022).

On the one hand, therefore, the M5S saw a (consciously pursued) disempowerment of the party on the ground. But, on the other hand, the PPO (especially those at the parliamentary level first, and then at the governmental level) gradually assumed stronger autonomy *vis à vis* the PCO.

While Grillo exploited his role as father-founder and ‘guarantor’ to endorse all political decisions of the utmost importance¹, Casaleggio was *de facto* forced to exit, thus sealing: *i*) the abandonment of the ideal of democratic regeneration through digital democracy; *ii*) the end of ‘anti-systemic’ positioning (Zulianello, 2019) and of its equidistance with respect to centre-left and centre-right coalitions (Padoan, 2022).

Di Maio’s leadership, however, was heavily affected by the difficulties faced by the M5S in government, also reflected in the very disappointing electoral results in the 2019 European and local elections. In January 2020, Di Maio resigned as political leader, opening up to the weak interim leadership of Vito Crimi. Following the break with Matteo Salvini’s League (August 2019), and even more so following the outbreak of the pandemic emergency (March 2020), Giuseppe Conte acquired enormous political weight within the M5S (Saccà and Selva, 2023).

Conte served as PM in both governments in which the M5S enjoyed the status of major partner: Conte I (June 2018-August 2019: M5S and League) and Conte II (September 2019-January 2021: M5S, Democratic Party and other minor centrist or left-wing parties). After the fall of the Conte II government, the ‘guarantor’, Grillo, commissioned Giuseppe Conte to prepare a new party statute and to assume also *de iure* leadership of the party. The new statute incorporated a comprehensive ‘Charter of Principles and Values’ (M5S, 2021) oriented towards a ‘progressive’ political culture (see also the internal document M5S, 2020), no longer hard-Eurosceptic, and centred on social justice issues. The ‘5 Stars’ of the party changed: from ‘public water, environment, sustainable mobility, development and connectivity’ they now stand for ‘common good, integral ecology, social justice, technological innovation and the eco-social market economy’. In organizational terms, the extremely vertical character of the party was not changed. Beppe Grillo was confirmed in the role of guarantor, and thus the ultimate interpreter of the statute itself.

5. The Ideological Evolution – and the Declinations of Environmental Politics in the M5S

To each of these distinct phases in the history of the M5S in terms of organization and leadership, it is possible to associate certain specific characteristics in ideological terms. Although the M5S largely continues to define itself as a ‘post-ideological’ movement, the party has adopted quite different meta-political discourses and narratives at different stages of its trajectory. Recently, the party has been consistently defining itself as part of the Italian ‘progressive camp’ (to use the formula conceived by Conte himself). Quite coherently with these ideological evolutions, the way the M5S has approached

¹ First and foremost, the choice of forming several parliamentary alliances (in 2018, 2019 and 2021) to enter and remain in government.

environmental issues has also transformed over time, as summarized in Table 1 and explained in detail in the following subsections.

Table 1. Ideological and Organizational Evolution of the M5S (2009-onwards) and Declination of Environmental Issues

	Early Phase (2009-2013)	Antagonist Phase (2014-2019)	In the 'Progressive Camp' (2019-)
Leadership	Grillo (Casaleggio)	Casaleggio (Grillo); growing Role for PPO: Di Maio (since 2017)	Conte (Grillo)
Core Issues	Anti-Establishment; Digital Democracy; Environment	Anti-Austerity/Euroscepticism; Sovereignty; Digital Economy; Safety-Net Policies	Social Justice; State-led economic growth; Green transition
Environment Declined as...	Good Practices (e.g. Circular Economy, waste reduction); Support for LULU struggles	Support for LULU struggles (when in opposition); Green Economy (economic growth and job creation); Soil Protection and Circular Economy	Key Issue for State-led, inward-oriented economic model

Source: own elaboration.

5.1. Early phase (2009-2013)

The (typically populist: Mudde, 2004) opposition between a 'virtuous' people and a 'corrupt' elite was at the core of the original political discourse of the M5S, pitting the 'Citizens' against the 'Caste'. The very first public demonstrations convoked by Grillo, in 2007 and 2008, were called 'V-Days', against the 'caste of politicians' and the 'caste of journalists'. The struggle against politicians' 'privileges' was put forward through bill proposals and through performative practices. Overall, the struggle against 'corruption' was the first, and strongest, flagship of the party (Zulianello, 2020).

However, and since the beginning, the elites targeted by the M5S in its original discourse were more variegated than the political class or the media system. For sure, there have been several public positions of the party targeting some 'cultural elites' – positions that justified conservative stances on migratory or civil right issues (e.g. Pirro, 2018; Caiani and Padoan, 2023). However, these stances have not formed the core discourse of the party (Caiani and Padoan, 2021), which also refuses (as one of the party's flagships, the 'citizens' income', testifies) producerist views typical of the populist Right (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni, 2019). Instead, it is noticeable that one of the most famous of Grillo's books (2007) was divided into six sections: 'Clean Parliament – No to High-Speed Trains – Unipol – Telecom – Incinerators – Stock Exchange'. The second (referring to Grillo's support for the struggle of a local community against a mega-project in its valley) and the fifth section focused on environmental issues, while the remaining sections focused on political-financial scandals denouncing revolving doors between the political and the financial spheres.

While emphasis on political-financial scandals, 'revolving doors' and corruption, along with attacks on political and media establishments, marked the negative identity of the party and its bases, their positive identity was developed around environmental sensibilities, together with the appropriation of the so-called 'moral question' and with

the techno-utopian celebration (inspired by Casaleggio) of forms of disintermediated democracy (Tronconi, 2015). In the ‘pre-genetic phase’ (2006-2009), i.e., when the local ‘Five-Stars lists’ began appearing, environmental issues were clearly dominant. The *Carta di Firenze*² (published in Grillo’s blog on March 2009) included twelve programmatic requisites for a municipality to be symbolically awarded as a ‘Five-Stars Municipality’. Eight points focused on green measures (e.g., public water, urban greenery/stop with land use, sustainable local transport/bike lanes, energy efficiency...), two on connectivity, one on architectural barriers and one on ‘local production’. At the same time, such a document full of (valence) environmental sensibilities was accompanied by Grillo’s emphatic anti-establishment tones:

‘these insane mayors gambled with us, invested in hedge funds instead of administering people’s money. And it’s clear that now they don’t have a dime, they have to look for money. How? By selling off citizens’ land, by proposing improbable bridges - all improbable things. With our lists, if we get in, we will nip this little game in the bud!’³

In sum, the coexistence of valence issues and of anti-establishment rhetoric formed a coherent narrative: the ‘caste’ prevented the ‘citizens’ from achieving and enjoying unquestionably positive goals, such as ‘honesty’ and environmental protection. Anti-establishment tones were particularly important in ensuring the rapid and spectacular growth of the M5S electorate. Indeed, the environment was far from being one of the issues Italians felt most strongly about in the run-up to the 2013 elections (Table 2; see also Giannetti et al. 2022). M5S voters, however, were particularly sensitive to the environment, at least in terms of lifestyle choices (Table 3a).

Table 2. Most important issues according to Italian electorate, per party voted, by percentage (ITANES post-electoral questionnaire, 2013 Elections).

	Economic					Environment
	Unemployment	Development	Corruption	Taxes		
M5S	80.23	22.98	30.49	13.51	0.87	
Radical Left	92.92	26.30	25.18	8.31	0.00	
Democratic Party	84.47	25.85	27.74	12.80	0.34	
People of Freedom (Centre-Right)	79.74	16.17	22.30	28.55	0.00	
Civic Choice (Centre)	83.61	32.08	26.70	9.36	0.00	
Abstention	81.27	25.23	30.70	17.06	0.00	
Total	82.89	25.25	29.54	15.13	0.29	

Source: Author’s elaboration of ITANES Data (2013). Maximum two issues per respondent. Exact question wording: ‘In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing the government in Italy today? And the second most important problem?’

² Retrieved from: www.trentino5stelle.it/carta-di-firenze/

³ Retrieved from: <https://beppegrillo.it/beppe-grillo-e-la-carta-di-firenze/>

Table 3. Percentage of voters (a) considering political, ethical or environmental reasons for their consumption choices and (b) members of environmental organizations, per party voted (ITANES post-electoral questionnaire, 2013 Elections).

	(a) % Refused Purchase for Ethical/Environmental Reasons (last two years)	(b) % Participate in Environmental Associations
M5S	17.87	7.23
Radical Left	35.48	8.06
Democratic Party	13.15	5.20
People of Freedom (Centre-Right)	5.16	3.87
Civic Choice (Centre)	9.21	3.95
Abstention	6.17	2.47
Total	11.6	4.85

Source: Author's elaboration of ITANES Data (2013). Exact questions wording: 'Tell me whether you have bought or refused to buy a product in the last two years for political, ethical or environmental reasons'; 'tell me whether you are affiliated with, or you are a member of, or you participate in environmental associations'.

Crucially, and as also suggested by ITANES data (Table 3b), the positive identity imagery linked to environmental issues was central to recruiting the first nuclei of activists and in general to fixing the main issues debated locally and to some extent nationally⁴, at least during the phase of extra-parliamentary and parliamentary opposition (2009-2018). Several interviews with MPs and former MPs of the M5S collected between 2016 and 2017, and tracing the early phase of building the party on the ground, underline both how often activists approached the M5S because of environmentalist battles or sensibilities, and how close the relationship with local environmental committees was in those years⁵:

In 2005 we all heard about the events in Venaus (Susa Valley), when for the first time [No TAV] demonstrators were beaten by the police. Then I started to read Grillo's blog; it became my obsession [laughs], so since 2007 [being a M5S activist and a No Tav activist] have gone hand in hand. Then I started to delve into environmental and health-related issues (INT1).

To date, I have never found the party members and the committees consulted, e.g. the water committees, to be in conflict (INT3; similarly, INT12).

We did not want to be avatars, we wanted to be visible people and to help give the M5S logo credibility. Many felt this need because they had a background of activism in associations: local committees, Red Cross, environmental groups (INT5; similarly, INT11).

On social policies and especially on labour issues we were weak, it is true: we came from the environmental sphere (INT6).

The first [M5S groups] were formed by citizens who were interested in defending public assets first and foremost. They therefore participated alongside

⁴ Local environmental conflicts in Val di Susa, in Puglia (over the gas pipeline TAP and the conversion of a major steelworks), and in Sicily, as well as the *no-incinerators* policy in Rome, all became nationally debated issues.

⁵ Critics referred to the M5S 'issue-ownership' strategy, which ended up 'cannibalizing the issue' advanced by the movements (INT2; INT4).

committees, public water for example, to defend the common good (INT7; similarly, INT13).

The articulation of local environmental struggles occurred in a very consonant way with the concept of ‘eco-populism’ recalled in the second section (e.g. Escobar-Fernández and Hart, 2023). The ‘populist’, anti-establishment component is self-evident in many interviews, (e.g. INT3; INT7; INT13) in which the ‘establishment’ is *always* identified with ‘political parties’, prone to be captured by economic interests (unlike the M5S, which is ‘proudly *ab-solutus*’: INT13). Environmental and public health issues appeared, moreover, particularly suitable – in the eyes of the activists themselves – for confirming the M5S’s supposed adherence to ‘common sense’ (INT1) and their mission to defend ‘the common good’, as well as the party’s distance from ‘old [and divisive] categories’, such as ‘left and right’, thus increasing the possibilities of reaching citizens of different ideological tendencies. However, as the following subsection will further explore, even environmentalist battles were later wielded with the aim of asserting the antagonistic and sovereignist image that the M5S steadily decided to assume, particularly when assuming the role of parliamentary opposition:

At the local level, regarding the battle against the MUOS [a US military infrastructure in Sicily], the M5S initially adopted transversal arguments – environment, health – also because it has a transversal electorate. However, in a second phase, the M5S in the European Parliament turned, and began to include the MUOS issue within the anti-NATO frame (INT4).

5.2. ‘Antagonist Phase’ (2014-2019)

The M5S transition from the ‘early’ to the ‘antagonist’ phase (Table 1), with strong sovereignist characteristics, is clearly captured by an analysis of the party manifestos produced by the M5S in view of different elections (parliamentary elections in 2013 and 2018; European elections in 2014 and 2019).

In the rather narrow manifesto for the 2013 general election, prepared by Grillo and divided into seven sections, environmental issues recur mainly (but not exclusively) when dealing with transport (fifth section) and energy (second section). The opening section focuses on the relationship between ‘state and citizens’ (mainly, cutting public funding for political activities and, secondarily, envisaging tools to encourage participation and transparency). As far as energy policies were concerned, the M5S focused on the goal of reducing industrial and domestic consumption (explicitly citing the energy labelling system in force in South Tyrol as ‘good practice’), possibly to be incentivized by general taxation, as well as a general emphasis on waste reduction. This was, after all, not only compatible with the ‘happy degrowth’ inspiration that had imbued the party’s discourse and aesthetics (Caiani and Padoan, 2023) until very recently (see M5S, 2020), but also had the goal of reducing the waste of public money – perfectly fitting the anti-corruption frame. The M5S also emphasized decarbonization as a primary goal. As for transport policy, the M5S again insisted on ‘good practices’, adopting a vocabulary that was innovative at the time (bike lanes, but also *car sharing* [in English]). Even within the section on the economy, ‘good practices’ to protect the environment were advocated⁶.

⁶ E.g., ‘disincentives to companies that generate social harm (e.g. bottled water distributors)’.

Positional framing of environmental issues was limited to a clear rejection of wasteful ‘megaprojects’ such as the High-Speed Train (Tav) in the Susa Valley and the Sicilian-Calabrian bridge.

Already in view of the 2014 European elections, the situation looked different. In the very short manifesto officially circulated – just seven points – the environment was barely mentioned. Six of the seven points were dedicated to the restructuring of the EU economic-financial architecture (e.g., abolition of the Fiscal Compact, adoption of Eurobonds, referendum on Italian permanence in the Eurozone and creation of a common alliance between Southern European countries). Only the fifth point vaguely touched environmental issues, again within a sovereigntist frame (‘funding agricultural and livestock breeding activities aimed at domestic consumption’). In a book (2014) written by the M5S activist Di Cori Modigliani (with foreword by Grillo and Casaleggio) to explain in detail the 2014 manifesto, the emphasis on a ‘cultural battle’ for the restoration of ‘the people’s sovereignty’ against the establishment (mostly identified, again, with the ‘old parties’) is even clearer. Environmental problems are barely mentioned as a by-product of the political parties’ and EU-bureaucracy’s control over society. The sovereigntist/Eurosceptic turn was in fact confirmed in 2017 by Roberto Fico, the main exponent of the ‘progressive’ wing of the party, and therefore potentially less close to sovereigntist *mots d’ordre*:

Sovereignty is central, including energy and food sovereignty, also because then you are no longer dependent on foreign countries and the outside world, and that means a strengthening. This concept is very strong (INT8).

This sovereigntist shift was also confirmed by the party’s choices in terms of alliance at the EU parliament level. One month after the European elections, M5S leaders pushed for allying with pro-Brexit UKIP in the EP. This strategy was ratified by the membership through an online vote excluding the possibility of joining the Greens/EFA group which, according to a prominent party cadre, ‘refused any dialogue’⁷. In early 2017, the M5S attempted an unexpected move to ‘apply for accreditation as a governing party’ (INT27) and, while breaking with the UKIP, asked to enter the Lib-Dem ALDE group, which rejected M5S’s application on the basis of ‘fundamental differences on key European issues’⁸. In view of the 2019 European elections, the M5S again found itself isolated: the Greens/EFA blocked any dialogue because of the M5S-League alliance at the national level and because of ‘the non-democratic features of M5S organization’⁹. The M5S then opted to build its own alliance composed of four minor anti-establishment conservative parties (from Poland, Greece, Croatia and Finland, all of them failing to win any seat at the European elections)¹⁰.

⁷ See: M5S, blog Grillo: si vota su alleanze Ue. (2014). *La Repubblica*, June 12. Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/joxN2>

⁸ See: Grillo tentato di lasciare EFDD. Sul blog si vota su futuro in Ue. (2017). *ANSA*, January 10. Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/izKLO>

⁹ See: Il M5S è incompatibile con noi. Parla il leader dei Verdi in Europa. (2018). *Il Foglio*, October 16. Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/krtW1>

¹⁰ See: Elezioni europee: chi sono gli alleati del Movimento 5 Stelle. (2019). *Wired Italia*, February 15. Retrieved from <https://shorturl.at/bdpG7>

In the run-up to the 2018 national parliamentary elections, the party launched, via the Rousseau platform, a series of online polls to invite members to ratify each of the 18 chapters (drafted by the PPO) which should have formed the final version of the manifesto. The outcome was a document of 540 pages: 244 concerning energy-related issues, and 140 focusing on 'Environment'. All the chapters were accompanied by a vast amount of quantitative data – almost an 'engineering' approach, demonstrating the PPO's high level of attention to these issues (in this sense, Mosca and Vittori, 2023). In terms of proposals, the emphasis was put on the centrality of the state (once protected from the influence of corporations) as a decisive actor in implementing new sustainable economic models. The manifesto advocated, as a principle, the transition from a linear economy to a circular economy; it emphasized the importance of introducing economic incentives (e.g., the provision of an 'A+++ tax' [referring to the classification of household appliances in energy classes] for less polluting activities) and penalizations (against fuel-based private mobility). The document emphatically stated that 'the state is the sovereign people' (p. 87), since 'the sovereign right of countries to control essential services, water, food, education, health, transport, communications and energy is superordinate to any form of commerce' (p. 81), and 'the state is the main protagonist in achieving the programmatic objectives set for the country's economic, social and environmental vision' (p. 91).

This 'long' manifesto, however, was not widely circulated, and did not become the official version, which was instead a much shorter document (three pages) personally signed by Di Maio and listing '20 points to change Italy'. Environmental issues were mentioned in just two of these 20 points: the sixth point concerning 'support [through funding of up to 50 billion euro] for strategic sectors for "productive investments"' (e.g., renewable energy production, incentives for electric mobility, fight against hydrogeological instability); the sixteenth point promising a 'Green Economy: Italy 100% Renewable', with particular emphasis on job creation. The first five points of the manifesto aimed at the de-bureaucratization and digitalization of the country, the introduction of the *Reddito di Cittadinanza*, substantial (both corporate and income) tax cuts and 'cutting the cost of politics'.

The emphasis was therefore primarily on economic development – by resorting to deficit spending instead of tax increases – and thus job creation, as well as on 'anti-caste' policies – in line with voters' priorities (Table 4). One could clearly see the ambition to build a social coalition based on small and medium-sized enterprises¹¹ and workers, as well as on those excluded from the welfare system (Padoan 2020, 2022). Environmental issues were substantially downplayed.

The salience of environmental issues, however, was immediately re-affirmed following the outcome of the 2018 elections. In particular, the start of negotiations for a coalition government with Matteo Salvini's League, as well as the subsequent changes in the balance of power between the two parties, as certified by the 2019 European elections (when the League reached 34 per cent and the M5S collapsed to 17 per cent), convinced the M5S to insist more on issues defining its positive identity.

¹¹ See also the thirteenth point, announcing the creation of a 'public investment bank for small enterprises, farmers and families'.

Table 4. Most important issues according to Italian electorate, per coalition voted, by percentage (ITANES post-electoral questionnaire, 2018 Elections).

	Tax			Public		Immigration	Environment
	Unemployment	Evasion	Taxation	Debt	Corruption		
M5S	52.25	15.63	25.92	11.55	34.37	18.31	4.65
Centre-Left Coalition	50.78	30.81	19.19	18.80	27.13	9.50	4.84
Centre-Right Coalition	43.99	6.35	35.15	9.98	15.19	45.58	1.36
Abstention	41.20	14.40	22.00	14.00	27.20	22.80	4.80
Total	48.51	17.42	25.72	13.46	27.07	22.80	3.96

Source: own elaboration of ITANES Data (2018). Maximum two issues per respondent. Exact question wording: 'In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing the country today? And the second most important problem?'

Already within the 'Government Contract' signed by the M5S and the League in May 2018, the party led by Di Maio attempted to assure the saliency of environmental issues: 'There is a need for greater involvement and knowledge of environmental issues that can [...] bring the ecological issue to the centre of politics' (M5S and League, 2019: 10). The chapter dedicated to 'Environment, Green Economy and Zero Waste' was the longest and most detailed chapter of the 'Contract'¹². The M5S did obtain from the League the inclusion of 'decarbonization' as a key goal: 'our task is to support the "green-economy", research, innovation and training for the development of green jobs and the revival of the competitiveness of our industrial system, with the aim of "decarbonizing" production and finance and promoting the circular economy'. [...] 'It is therefore crucial to [...] combat climate change' (M5S and League, 2019: 10-13). However, the emphasis was immediately placed on the (less controversial) goal of reducing waste, to be tackled through performative initiatives implemented by Public Administration so as to 'become a reference for the adoption of good practices, best techniques and standards [...] as already happens in Treviso [a League-led municipality]' (M5S and League, 2019: 11). The Government Contract also anticipated important public resources for the energy requalification of buildings (see below about the so-called 'Superbonus 110%') and for the fight against hydrogeological instability ('combining virtuous spending and job creation').

As far as the electoral manifesto for the 2019 European elections is concerned, among the (few) results claimed by M5S action in the European Parliament from 2014 to 2019, environmental issues stood out (reduction of CO2 emissions for new vans and cars; ban on single-use plastic). The manifesto was divided into six macro-areas: environmental issues were mainly (and strongly) discussed within the second ('stop austerity: full employment and sustainable development') and third macro-area ('protection of people, health and the environment'). Within the second macro-area, there are again proposals for business incentives ('especially small and micro') for sustainable transition, with an emphasis on 'job creation, especially at the local level' (pp. 16-18). Decarbonization policies were included in sections dedicated to transport and energy, and to the protection of citizens' health (clean mobility; no incinerators; strict application of the

¹² See also the chapter on 'Public Water', and the provision for tightening sanctions for environmental crimes.

precautionary principle with regard to GMOs). Nationalist rhetoric is often used ('let's defend our seas from drilling'), in part also echoing the typical language of Salvini's League ('let's produce energy at home!'). The protection of the environment was also included within the traditional frame of the fight against 'politician's privileges' (see the proposal to close the European offices in Strasbourg, also because of the high emissions produced), as well as associated with the protection of 'Made in Italy' products – here, 'Salvini-esque' vocabulary abounds ('the invasion of South African oranges', 'the new threat: Asian rice').

In short, the M5S, during the 'yellow-green' government, aimed to emphasize the political relevance of environmental goals while clearly defending its political-strategic choices (i.e., alliance with the League) and thus adapting its register accordingly. Both party cadres and rank-and-file, however, tended to reject an increasingly costly alliance in electoral terms, leading the M5S to give in on 'identity battles'. This is how the then President of the Chamber of Deputies Roberto Fico expressed himself on the Tav project¹³, to which Giuseppe Conte gave a substantial green light¹⁴. Several M5S representatives at municipal and parliamentary level, interviewed in the first half of 2019, unanimously (INT9-10-14-15) tried to mark their distance from Salvini's agenda, by emphasizing the salience of environmental issues and downplaying the centrality of migratory issues:

'Eco-feminism and eco-pacifism have been the fundamental core of M5S thinking from the very beginning [...] Migrations have always existed. It is not true that it is a recent issue, they are not episodic, they are part of the movements of peoples on earth [...] Nowadays humanity is cannibalizing itself through economic, environmental wars. Migrations are the consequence' (INT9);

'Immigration is an issue, but it is a symptom, not a priority. If we continue with policies that are extremely irresponsible from the point of view of the exploitation of territories and resources, we will be moving towards huge migrations. But this is not a matter of cultural clashes: it is a matter of distribution of resources' (INT10).

5.3. 'In the Progressive Camp' (2019-)

The two Conte governments were characterized by other elements of continuity (apart from the same PM), such as the Minister of Environment, i.e. Sergio Costa (M5S), a former State Forestry Corps officer previously known for his prosecutions on environmental crimes committed by the mafia in Campania. In both of his speeches at the opening of his terms in office¹⁵, Costa started by emphasizing the climate emergency and the need to decisively pursue the path of green transition, at both national and international levels, as well as the fight against environmental crimes.

However, the main environmental measure of M5S governmental action was not the 'Climate Decree', designed by Costa and aimed at strengthening local public

¹³ See: Tav, Fico: "Il nostro no non è ideologico" ma "una battaglia identitaria del M5S". (2019). *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, March 9. Retrieved from shorturl.at/joxN2

¹⁴ See: Conte: "Sulla Tav il governo è per il sì". (2019). *La Repubblica*, July 23. Retrieved from shorturl.at/izKLO

¹⁵ See: Ambiente: le linee programmatiche del Ministro dell'Ambiente Sergio Costa. (2018). *Ministero dell'Ambiente e della Sicurezza Energetica*, November 14. Retrieved from shorturl.at/krtW1

transport and rewarding ‘plastic free’ consumption choices. The real flagship of the M5S on environmental issues was instead the ‘Recovery Decree’ (DL 34/2020, May 2020). Approved in the middle of the lockdown, the decree introduced the so-called ‘110 per cent Superbonus’, a system of transferable tax credits to upgrade the energy efficiency of public and (in fact, mostly) private properties. The Superbonus was not the responsibility of Costa (who, on the contrary, on some occasions criticized it¹⁶): it was instead supported, first and foremost, by the then Minister for Economic Development (Stefano Patuanelli, very close to Conte). According to the current Minister of the Economy, the Superbonus will cost over 200 billion euro¹⁷; Draghi’s government increasingly restricted the transferability of tax credits, thus hugely affecting the Superbonus’s cardinal principle, while Meloni’s government has recently (January 2024) abrogated the policy.

The main accusations addressed to the Superbonus focus on its impact on public accounts, on the fraud and irregularities detected, on its regressive impact (as it mainly benefited middle-income families) and on the increase in raw material costs linked to the boom in the construction sector (Papi, 2022). Defenders of the measure tend to emphasize its positive impact on GDP growth, the revitalization of the economy in the post-pandemic period, and environmental benefits.

Agostino Santillo, one of the M5S MPs who has most closely followed the Superbonus story, even dedicated a book (edited by a publishing house owned by a former senator of the party) to the policy. The Superbonus is described as the ‘green measure that made the economy fly and revived the construction sector in Italy’. In Santillo’s reconstruction, the Superbonus was conceived in the context of the economic crisis linked to the pandemic. The main frame of Santillo’s defence is much more economic than environmental: more than 75 percent of the book is dedicated to celebrating the Superbonus benefits from the point of view of economic and employment growth and to circumscribing the impact on the public budget, while extolling the positivity of state intervention in the economy. The book closes with a collection of testimonies of entrepreneurs and workers damaged by the restrictions imposed by Draghi and Meloni on the transferability of tax credits.

Particularly interesting is the description of the constituencies targeted by the M5S through the Superbonus: ‘technicians [architects, engineers, surveyors and geologists], together with the entire entrepreneurial and personnel world, and then [...] carpenters, bricklayers, electricians, plumbers, painters, tilers, carpenters, blacksmiths, glaziers and other skilled artisans with which our country is particularly endowed’ (Santillo, 2023: 15). All these categories would have benefited from ‘expansive economic policies [...] scaring the banking and political system imposed by the lords of austerity’ (Santillo, 2023: 140).

These are central categories in the socio-economic discourse of the M5S, particularly in recent years, as is also evident from the aforementioned internal programmatic document drafted in 2020 (M5S, 2020). There, the M5S proclaimed itself as the spokesperson for ‘low-middle income working classes (state employees, private employees, small and micro-enterprises)’, while an economic inspiration defined as ‘*planned*

¹⁶ Retrieved from shorturl.at/xGKS2

¹⁷ See: Superbonus, costi 200 miliardi. Giorgetti: “Paese assuefatto, chiudere rubinetti”. (2024). *Corriere della Sera*, March 28. Retrieved from shorturl.at/vDFQS

degrowth' (M5S, 2020: 29) would rediscover the centrality of the 'old craft trades' (M5S, 2020: 12). Grafted onto ideological positions that clearly reject any capital-labour opposition, state interventionism in the economy nevertheless appears central: the party strives for political-economic action centred on a peculiar 'third way [overcoming American neo-liberalism and Chinese statism] in which citizens will have a central role; the state will have the power to direct and coordinate all activities; the tension towards the collective good will not exclude the private production of goods' (M5S, 2020: 18). Not coincidentally, in the same document, environmental policy guidelines are included within the chapter on the economy, where the key words are, in order, 'State - Social Market Economy - Welfare - Universal Income - Green'.

The centrality of economic and social proposals is also evident in the electoral manifesto for the 2022 parliamentary elections, again published in a 'short' (thirteen pages, divided into twenty-two bullet points) and in a 'long' form (246 pages) – both 'official' versions. In the 'short' manifesto, the word *environment** appears only four times, the word *ecolog** just two (in contrast, the word *work** occurs 25 times and the single word Superbonus, elected as a model to be implemented in other areas, five times). However, the attention paid to environmental issues, almost always linked to proposals for far-reaching socio-economic reforms, is very high. In addition to the specifically dedicated points (point 7: 'for energy and ecology transitions, for the defence of biodiversity'; point 8: 'for a circular economy'; point 12, 'for sustainable mobility'; point 16, 'for the common good', with focus on public water; point 17, 'against hunting' and for tax incentives for veterinary expenses; point 19, 'for agriculture and defence of our traditions'), environmental issues are also dealt with in the chapters dedicated to taxation (incentives to companies 'on the Superbonus model' to support the costs of the green transition); corporations' policies (incentives dedicated to favouring the transition of 'energy-intensive' companies); housing (to upgrade social housing's energy efficiency); anti-mafia (repression of environmental crimes); EU policies (creation of an 'Energy Recovery Fund' and revision of the Stability Pact to exclude 'green' investments from the deficit calculation).

The 'long' version of the manifesto proposes a 'new social model', centred on three words: 'People', 'Environment' and 'Development', to which special sections are devoted. The M5S advocates a 'new Humanism... an effective ecological transition, which can gradually orient the entire production system towards a culture of sustainability, and must inspire and integrate a new growth model' (M5S, 2022: 6). A further fourth section is devoted to 'Foreign Policy', in which the first two chapters, dedicated to EU policies, recall the need to pursue a 'Europe centred on the eco-social market economy' (as opposed to 'rigid neoclassical liberal theories') and 'integral ecology and energy transition'. The word *environment** recurs 87 times in the document, in a much less unbalanced ratio to the word *work** (332 times) than in the 'short' version. *Ecolog** (33 times), *clim** (29 times), and also *transition* (68 times, also associated with 'digitalization') are also central. The three most recurring adjectives are *public* (68 times), *social* (52 times) and *national* (51 times), testifying to the redistributive, statist and 'sovereignist' inspiration of the current M5S – still extremely careful to avoid pitting capital and labour against each other: 'Enterprises that produce economic value and that, at the same time, are attentive to the values of the person and the wellbeing of workers, that consider the

environment a primary good and sustainability a “non-negotiable” prerequisite of any prospect of economic growth, are truly the enterprises of the future’ (M5S, 2022: 8).

It is important to highlight how the resilient sovereigntist inspiration of the party makes its relationship with the Green party family very complicated, even nowadays. Although the M5S has officially abandoned its hard-Euro-scepticism, by defining the EU as one of the ‘traditional pillars’ of the ‘Italian foreign policy’ with which the M5S is ‘coherent’ (M5S, 2021), its position on international questions (with particular reference to the war in Ukraine, as put by both Greens/EFA and M5S representatives¹⁸) remains a major factor preventing the inclusion of the party within the Green parliamentary group at the European level.

6. Concluding Remarks

The literature has shown how environmental issues have become increasingly politicized, moving from being valence to positional (divisive) issues. The M5S has reflected this more general trend in the evolution of its political discourse and proposals.

In the ‘early phase’, the original ‘five-stars’ created a utopian, techno-optimist image of advances in the production and circulation of information and technologies to build environmentally sustainable societies. Such an image conveyed the idea that the M5S proposals were not only successful, but inescapable (and thus ‘post-ideological’), and motivated the party’s narrative against an establishment that resisted change.

This narrative was also nourished by performative practices that were not limited to the appropriation of ‘honesty’, but also applied to environmental issues. It took the form of proposals and actions typical of the ‘new left’ (e.g., calls for ‘degrowth’, as well as the focus on ‘good practices’ to be implemented by political actors and public institutions in the first place: Batstrand, 2014). The sovereigntist inspiration has ended up, especially in the current era in which environmental issues have clearly become positional, by emphasizing – according to a perspective partially similar to the ‘old left’, in Batstrand’s scheme – the centrality of the state as a key actor in guiding the ecological transition, also combining economic development and social justice.

The M5S environmental discourse is thus informed, at least in its current phase, by the ‘anti-status-quo, [sovereigntist] ideology’ described by Ruth and David Collier (i.e. their very definition of populism), to be pursued through what has been termed ‘economic populism’ (Dornbusch and Edwards, 1992). The M5S positions and proposals on green transition-related issues represent an important application of these doctrines, strongly contributing to the politicization of the same issues. It is not surprising, therefore, that the M5S has been interpreted as populism in its ‘pure’ form (Coticchia and Vignoli, 2020): this is, this paper suggests, *precisely because* the M5S moves away from the ideological radicalism with which populism is often (analytically and empirically) equated (e.g. Huber et al., 2022). As Drake (1992: 40) argued, focusing on the Latin American context: ‘Rightist groups lashed populists as demagogues who spurred excessive mass expectations and inflation. At the same time, leftists denounced populists as

¹⁸ See: Nessuno sviluppo nell’alleanza tra Verdi Ue e Movimento 5 Stelle. (2024). ANSA, March 1. Retrieved from shorturl.at/b62549; M5S: sull’Ucraina i Verdi più vicini a Meloni che a noi. (2024). ANSA, April 4. Retrieved from shorturl.at/7e8c98

charlatans who duped the workers [i.e., the “people”] into settling for reform instead of [nurturing class conflict]’. Are these not considerations that perfectly capture how political competitors target the M5S within the contemporary Italian party system?

Such fundamental, even ‘genetic’, populist features of the M5S also explain why this party departs from the Green party family, despite clear congruencies in terms of policies (Bressanelli and De Candia, 2019). In terms of constituencies, the M5S, only in the very early phase (i.e., before its national expansion following the 2012 Sicilian elections), when it was mostly rooted in Northern and Central Italy, shared some characteristics with the typical (left-oriented, more educated than average and libertarian) Green voter (Biorcio and Natale, 2013). The party since 2013 has tended to attract labour market outsiders (Padoan, 2020) and, since 2018, has found its stronghold in Southern regions and in highly unequal areas, coherently with its social policy platform (Bloise et al., 2023). In terms of organization, M5S effectively shares the ‘amateur/activist’ militancy typical of Green parties, and for a long time also flaunted the primacy of the party on the ground (since manifestos are always ratified by ‘the Web’) over the PPO, named ‘spokespersons’ in M5S jargon. However, the (still evident) plebiscitarian traits of the party contradict such rhetoric. The non-democratic features of internal party organization, as well as the sovereignist positions (and former national alliances) of Conte’s party, have contributed to the rejection of M5S’s application to join the Greens/EFA group.

Our analysis highlights how environmentalism is a key value for the M5S. It is part of the genetic positive identity of the party and of its rank-and-file. It cannot be merely considered ‘ancillary’ to the anti-establishment component: the M5S has always been able to make environmentalism fit the populist strategy – and *vice versa*. From the early ‘eco-populist’ strategy, i.e., the adoption of populist strategies of articulation of local environmental struggles, the M5S has gradually evolved into a *diminished* type of ‘green populism’ trying to reconcile green transition and social justice. It is *diminished* – if compared to *La France Insoumise*, for which the term was coined (Chazel and Dain, 2023) – because of the clear refusal of political visions involving class conflict, both visible in the party rhetoric and in the party’s flagship policy (the *Superbonus*). The M5S, in any case, demonstrates what Pollex and Berker (2022) has named a ‘complex understanding’ of environmental questions, and thus a strong connection between environmental and other key economic issues, which is typical of Green parties.

At the same time, environmentalism is a necessary but non-sufficient condition to belong to the Green party family (Carter, 2023). Indeed, the electoral success of the M5S owes little to its environmental platform, while being much more linked to its ‘incorporating’ (via social policy) ambition (typical of Latin American populisms: Collier and Collier, 1991), to its moralizing view of politics (typical of populisms *tout court*: Mudde, 2004), and perhaps to its sovereignist positions (also empirically associated with populism: Basile and Mazzoleni, 2021). All of the above fit well with the party’s positions on foreign policy issues (praise for a multipolar world; opening to China) and much less so with the current Greens/EFA alignments, thus increasing the party’s isolation at the international level. If the Greens, as a party family, are internally homogeneous in comparative perspective (Ensser, 2010), the M5S is too much a *rara avis* to be part of it.

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7. Appendix

Table A. List of Quoted Interviews

ID	Affiliation	Role	Date
IT1	M5S	Regional Councillor in Piedmont	4 November 2016
IT2	Former M5S	MP Lazio	10 November 2016
IT3	M5S	Regional Councillor in Puglia	15 November 2016
IT4	No Muos social movement	Activist in Sicily	15 November 2016 (online interview)
IT5	M5S	Municipal Councillor in Pomezia (Rome)	10 December 2016
IT6	M5S	Regional Councillor in Lombardy	10 October 2016
IT7	M5S	MP Umbria	28 December 2016 and 24 April 2017
IT8	M5S	Member of the 'Committee of Guarantee' former President of the Italian Lower Chamber	2 March 2017
IT9	M5S	MP Veneto	27 September 2018
IT10	M5S	MP Veneto	18 June 2019
IT11	M5S	Regional Councillor in Sicily	1 February 2017
IT12	M5S	Regional Councillor in Puglia	8 November 2016
IT13	M5S	MP Veneto	2 November 2016
IT14	M5S	Local Activist, Veneto	28 September 2018
IT15	M5S	Local Activist, Piedmont	28 October 2018
IT27	Former M5S	MEP Lombardy	9 March 2017

Table B. List of Unquoted Interviews

ID	Affiliation	Role	Date
IT16	M5S	Regional Councillor in Lombardy	18 October 2016
IT17	M5S	Regional Councillor in Liguria	7 December 2016
IT18	M5S	Regional Councillor in Lazio	11 January 2017
IT19		Former Casaleggio Associati employee	27 November 2017
IT20	M5S	Regional Councillor in Friuli Venezia Giulia	15 November 2016
IT21	M5S	Local Activist, Campania	29 April 2020
IT22	M5S	MP Veneto	18 June 2019
IT23		Government Adviser, Conte II government	26-27 April 2021
IT24	M5S	Former MP, Campania	26 February 2021
IT25	M5S	Local Activist, Veneto	25 September 2018
IT26	M5S	Municipal Councillor, Veneto	20 April 2020