



Italian Vote-Winner 5 Star Movement Has Spotty Record Governing Rome

As protest movement vies to head national government, critics point to its problems keeping the capital clean and moving

A woman walking in a flooded street near Rome's Colosseum after heavy rains in December. The highly indebted city's infrastructure is decrepit and its potholes legendary. ANGELO CARCONI/ANSA/ASSOCIATED PRESS



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By [Giovanni Legorano](#) and [Pietro Lombardi](#)

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ROME—For the 5 Star Movement, the Eternal City has been an eternal headache.

Since the antiestablishment party swept to power in Rome nearly two years ago with the [election of Virginia Raggi](#) as mayor, uncollected trash, chaotic public transport, leaky water pipes and huge debt have compounded its reputation as a movement more suited to protest than to governing.

Now, after national elections this month made 5 Star Italy's [biggest party](#) with 32% of the popular vote, it has a shot at governing the entire country. That prospect has trained a spotlight on the movement's experience in local politics, and the view isn't always flattering.



Garbage overflowing on the street in Rome's Cinecittà neighborhood in May. PHOTO: STEFANO MONTESI/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

Since 2013, [5 Star has come to power](#) in 45 cities and towns. Most of them were small until

2016, when 5 Star candidates won mayoral races in Italy's No. 1 and No. 4 cities, Rome and Turin. Running Italy's capital city in particular has been trial by fire.

The city's long-suffering transport system has been racked by near-constant turmoil. During her campaign, Ms. Raggi—a politically untested 39-year-old lawyer—promised to revolutionize local transport with new buses color-coded by destination and a root-and-branch revamp of the notoriously inefficient city-owned company that runs Rome's buses, subway and trams.

Since then, Rome's transport system has gone from bad to worse, opposition figures and commuters say. Forty percent of its buses are broken, and 35 have caught fire in the past 3½ years. According to a city watchdog, buses and trams have hardly ever completely hewed to their timetables in the past two years. The transport agency, Atac, is €1.4 billion (\$1.7 billion) in debt, and the watchdog says transport employees drive on average 40% less than their peers in London's system.



Rome's Mayor Virginia Raggi, campaigning earlier this month for her 5 Star Movement, which got 32% of the vote in national elections. PHOTO: DANILO BALDUCCI/ZUMA PRESS

Altroconsumo, a consumer organization, launched a class-action lawsuit in late January demanding reimbursement of half of the fares travelers paid in the past three years, arguing that in that time Atac has supplied only half of its scheduled services. A spokesman for Atac said the company has no comment on the initiative.

Ms. Raggi blames predecessors, saying that when she took over only half of the buses were running. In September, Ms. Raggi's government filed for bankruptcy protection for the transport company, with the goal of relaunching it. As part of that effort, she said, in January her administration approved the purchase of 600 new vehicles. She has also increased ticket controls to stop free-riders, and plans to extend tramways and subways and to curb cars in the city center to speed buses.

Meanwhile, a solution to another chronic problem in Rome has also eluded Ms. Raggi: the city's mountains of trash.

After a previous government shut Rome's main rubbish dump due to contamination and pollution problems, the city's capacity to collect rubbish has operated on a knife's edge. If just one disposal plants breaks down, trucks stop collecting trash. Piles of uncollected trash in the city's periphery last year attracted wild boars, one of which caused a deadly motorcycle crash.



People standing at a bus station during a 24-hour national public transport strike in Rome in June. PHOTO: MAX ROSSI/REUTERS

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Rome has agreed to transfer rubbish to other regions' dumps to keep it from accumulating on Rome's streets. But other problems can't be shunted away: The ancient city's infrastructure is so decrepit that slightly more than one third of its public water is either lost or illegally diverted, and the city's €13 billion debt makes addressing that problem difficult.

Flooding is common during heavy rains, adding to the huge number of potholes on Rome's streets. Ms. Raggi recently launched a €17 million plan to fill in more than 1,500 holes every day, or 50,000 every month. Her head of public works has dubbed it a "Marshall Plan" for public roads.

Ms. Raggi—who has switched out a dozen senior officials since taking office in June 2016—is now one of Italy's least popular mayors, according to polls.

Michela Di Biase, an opposition member of Rome's city council, brought a bag full of trash to a government meeting in January. Rome is "overwhelmed by trash," she said. "We are still waiting" for Ms. Raggi to fulfill her promises.



A motorscooter driver skirting a pothole this month on a street in the center of Rome. PHOTO: ALESSANDRO DI MEO/EFE/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

At a speech at a party convention in September, Ms. Raggi cited 254 achievements of her administration, ranging from new kindergartens, a new archaeological area at the Circus Maximus and bicycles lanes for commuters.

"The 'incompetents' are doing a few things," she told a TV interviewer in January. "We are giving it our all. It isn't enough? We'll do even more." A spokesman for Ms. Raggi added that in less than two years in power, she has laid the basis for a real change and keeps pursuing her plans for the city.

Some 5 Star supporters say the mayor gets a bad rap. "We come from a very serious situation," says Annalisa Caselli, 30, who voted for Ms. Raggi. "At least she's honest and is doing her best."

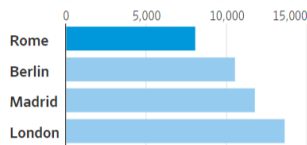
And whatever the Roman mayor's problems, Italians evidently didn't see fit to punish the 5 Star Movement at the polls in response to them.

"Some were saying that once in power they would have shown their incompetence and lost support. The opposite happened," "The rage of Italians against the old political class is still so high that support for the movement not only remained strong—it exploded," said Roberto D'Alimonte, professor at Rome's LUISS University. "The rage of Italians against the old political class is still so high that support for the movement not only remained strong—it exploded."

Along for the Ride

Transport workers in Italy's capital aren't as efficient as many European counterparts.

Miles of public transport per employee, 2017



Source: Agenzia per il controllo e la qualità dei servizi pubblici locali di Roma Capitale

Corrections & Amplifications

The ancient city's infrastructure is so decrepit that slightly more than one third of its public water is either lost or illegally diverted. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said that nearly half of the water is lost or diverted. (March 14, 2018)

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