

Elections in Italy: Pro-austerity government punished but votes go to racist Lega and populist Five Star movement

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As in 2013, the Italian general elections have not produced a government majority. No party or coalition has crossed the 40% threshold that would allow them to form a government. So has nothing changed, asks Dave Kellaway?

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On the contrary, Renzi's Partito Democratico (PD) failed to break even the 20% barrier, after its 40% in the European elections and the referendum it lost. Berlusconi's Forza Italia, which effectively allowed the Renzi/Gentiloni PD led governments to stay in office, declined to nearly 4 points below the Lega. Salvini, the Lega leader led a racist campaign around national identity, crime and removing half a million migrants. This paid off as his party reached its highest ever score.

If there ends up being a centre right coalition government, then given the deal between Berlusconi and Salvini, the Lega leader would be Prime minister since his party got more votes than Forza Italia. But the Five Star Movement (M5S) was the big winner with one in three Italians supporting it. It did significantly better than the polls had suggested, picking up votes from the traditional parties but particularly from the PD and polling very well in the South.

Italian General Election Results March 4th 2018 - Lower house only

	Leader	Votes	%	2013
<i>Centre right coalition</i>				29.18
Lega	Salvini	5.625.710	17.47%	4.09
Forza Italia	Berlusconi	4.523.768	14.46	21.56
Fratelli d'Italia	Meloni	1.400.302	4.34	1.96
Noi con Italia		424.630	1.31	
<i>Centre left coalition</i>				29.55
Partito Democratico	Renzi	6.026.18	18.70%	25.43

	Leader	Votes	%	2013
Europa	Bonino	821.644	2.54%	
others			1.53	
Five Star Movement	Di Maio	10.624.221	32.58	25.56
Liberi e Uguali	Grasso, Bersani, D'Alema	1.087.610	3.37	NEW
Potere al Popolo	Viola Carafolo	368.754	1.13	NEW
Fascist				
Casa Pound	Di Stefano	308.665	0.94%	
Italy for Italians (Fuerza Nueva)	Fiore	124.331	0.38	

Abstention rate :27.07% in 2013 25.76%

No government majority but important changes

Quite a lot is changing :

1. the relationship of forces within the centre right area has changed
2. there is a further deepening of the crisis of pro-austerity Social Democratic parties following the collapses in France, Germany and the Spanish state
3. populist forces that are Eurosceptic and reject some aspects of the capital's austerity programme and/or drive racist anti-migrant campaigns won half the electorate
4. the left is still very weak state since the demise of Rifondazione as a mass party to the left of the PD but there is a glimmer of hope with the debut of the new Potere al Popolo movement.
5. the needs of capital for a stable political hegemony is facing a new challenge after the Renzi/Gentiloni governments implemented most of the bosses' policies.

An uninspiring and racist campaign

Andrea Camilleri, the famous police thriller writer remarked about this election campaign that "it was impossible to find a name for such a disgusting spectacle made up of false promises and reciprocal insults". In the middle of the campaign an ex-candidate of the Lega shot and seriously injured 6 migrants in Macerata after a crime in which a white woman was allegedly killed by a migrant. The response of Salvini was not to condemn his party member but to blame the whole incident on the number of migrants in Italy.

The response of the PD interior minister was to try and stop anti-racists demonstrating. He failed and 20,000 people turned out. But the racist campaign won the Lega many votes. In Macerata its vote increased from less than one to twenty percent.

It is difficult to understand how well both the Lega and M5S did without realising how austerity has created such desperation and poverty in Italy. Social spending was 349 million in 2008 and dropped to 52.5 million in 2011. Most serious research studies put the growing number of poor people in Italy at over 10 million. The unemployment rate among younger workers is around 30%. Wages have

not kept up with inflation and working conditions are more and more degraded, facilitated by the pro-employer reforms like Renzi's Jobs Act.

In this context and with a weaker, divided left and trade union movement it is unsurprising that populist, individualist solutions are winning votes.

A breakthrough for the Five Star Movement

Despite the incompetence of some of their local government representative and scandals surrounding the selections of some candidates, the Five Star Movement continues to consolidate its position as the biggest single party. People vote for it because they like the way it attacks the political 'caste' through demands to cut big salaries and generous living allowances. M5S representatives have to hand over their salaries to the party which redistributes it to small businesses.

Their refusal to form coalitions with other parties also gives it an image of a party that is a bit different. When their people are caught in corrupt practices they are removed relatively quickly compared to other parties. Their opposition to wasteful big public works like the high speed rail link near Turin and their criticism of the PD's connection to dubious banking practices also wins them support.

Like the radical left they are against the Jobs Act which brought in more pro-employer precarious work and want to change the Fornero bill which will raise the retirement age to 70. A big winner for them in these elections was the proposal for a universal basic income of nearly 800 euros a month aimed at those who have lost their job or have a low income. This proposal was particularly popular in the south where need is greatest.

Although the M5S have shifted their position to a tougher position on immigration and have a Eurosceptic orientation, they generally do not adopt the openly racist positions of Salvini. Another card they played in this campaign was the selection of Di Maio who is in his early thirties as their candidate for prime minister. He comes from Avellino in the South and this helped their success here. He tried to project a ready for government narrative, meeting the president and presenting a shadow cabinet. The protest stunts were toned down and Di Maio reached out to business a lot more.

Both the demise of a strong left in Italy and the pro-austerity policies of successive PD governments have created a big space for Grillo's movement. It attracts a younger electorate too - some 40% of its voters.

Curtains for the old devil?

Although the British media talked a lot about a Berlusconi comeback, the truth was that he had never gone away. He did a famous deal with Renzi in the Nazareth road PD headquarters which led to both the Renzi and Gentiloni governments. However the old devil's campaigning touch seems to have finally left him as his personal performances on TV and on the hustings shown up his physical and mental decline.

The flat tax idea, shared by his coalition partners the Lega, ran well particularly in the economically more developed North but he was simply eclipsed by the racist dynamism of the Salvini campaign. Even in defeat his delusions remained strong, claiming that the poor score was because he was

prevented from being a candidate! He is barred due to his conviction for tax fraud.

Losing the leadership of the centre right is a problem for big capital who are wary of Salvini's Euro-scepticism, racist populism and plans to deport half a million migrants.

Democrat Party takes a beating but its latest split fails too

Renzi has resigned. The fact that the PD barely beat the Lega and has gone backwards since previous elections will not stop a fractious debate about what now despite the fact that it has already undergone a number of splits over the last few years. There are voices in the PD such as Emiliano, the Renzi critic from Puglia, that are floating the idea of an arrangement with the Five Star Movement to allow it to govern in order to stop a Salvini led right taking over. This move would be divisive since other leaders are saying the party needs to be in opposition to rebuild itself.

The last split from the PD formed the Liberi e Uguali (Free and Equal) electoral slate for this election. It just made the quorum of 3% to get into parliament but this was far below its expectations, D'Alema was claiming they would make 10% a few months ago. This is a group with a number of well known ex-Prime Ministers and government ministers with a good presence in the media and an apparatus.

Yet its campaign failed to come over as a real alternative on the left since its leaders like Bersani, Grasso and D'Alema had taken leading roles in pro-austerity governments. Even during the campaign they kept on putting out feelers that they would support a new arrangement with the PD in government. The concern of these people to have a left current centered on maintaining their posts in parliament meant they alienated forces to their left at the big national left meeting in July called the Brancaccio (after the place where it was held).

It was at that meeting that the seeds of a new radical left coalition was born when a group from a left community centre in Naples confronted these so-called lefts and stormed out of the meeting. Potere al Popolo was established in November and managed to get the thousands of signatures needed to stand in most regions. It ended up with 360,000 votes and perhaps the basis for developing a new left alternative.

A glimmer of hope for the left?

Potere al Popolo(PAP) is composed of two main elements: a) the community based movement activists who in many Italian towns have occupied abandoned buildings and carry out practical work with homeless, poor people and migrants and b) organised radical left groups like the remnants of Rifondazione, the revolutionary Marxists of Sinistra Anticapitalista and some anti-EC, sovereigntist groups like Eurostop. Local assemblies were the means for selecting candidates and the campaign surprised people by its impact in some towns. Its spokesperson Viola Carofolo from Naples came across well on TV and it also won the backing of some intellectuals and artists. Their vote probably was competing with the M5S in the south and generally with LEU elsewhere. In the Naples/Campania area there were constituencies where their score approached or passed the 3% needed for the quorum. In a statement on facebook today they state

"in three and a half months we have gone from being a lot of dispersed collectives, associations, bits of parties to an embryo of an organisation made up of 10,000 militants and known by a few million. It would have taken years and big street demonstrations to obtain such results(...)but come to the

meeting on the 18th in Rome to discuss the next steps”

Now we should not overestimate this initiative and there is still a lot of political clarification to be had between for example Rifondazione and other organised political groups and the many younger movement activists but this does represent a glimmer of hope for the class struggle left.

Rifondazione is a strong organised force compared to the other elements and a lot depends on how they intervene. PAP received endorsements from Melanchon, Morales, Podemos, Ken Loach, the European Left group and other new left parties. Building the electoral slate and preparing for the European elections should not detract from the steady, patient work of redeveloping the basic elements of a workers movement which has been seriously weakened. The sort of mutual aid and solidarity these social centres carry out is one way of reweaving the threads of workers solidarity.

One small footnote to these elections was the failure of Casapound and Forza Nuova, two out and out fascist groups to make a significant breakthrough but their campaign was evidence of a new confidence and a new complacency of the media and other political forces to their emergence.

What happens next?

Both Di Maio and Salvini are parading around proclaiming they should become prime minister. Both lack the numbers to do that without agreements with other forces. As the single largest party it is likely that the President will talk with Di Maio and see if there is scope for a government of the M5S supported from the outside. There could be some movement from within the centre left but officially they say they will go into opposition.

Renzi going will loosen up the situation. A coalition between the populists of the Lega and the M5S is being touted but is unlikely. The programmes only really overlap on Euroscepticism. Despite a slippage towards more talk about crime, security and controlling migration the M5S base is unlikely to swallow the mass deportation plans of Salvini. If all else fails the president could contrive a government of national unity to discuss changing the electoral law (again!) and a few basic points leading to early elections. Pundits are talking of a ‘Mattarella party’ that will help set up a M5S government with PD support. Some of the PD leaders outside the Renzi circle are touting themselves for a role in this. Renzi has announced his resignation but has postponed its official date until a government is formed. He hopes in this way to block any maneuvers of this type, but who know what will happen inside the PD in its present disarray.

This election has strengthened tendencies towards the disaggregation of the traditional parties and the further strengthening of populist currents of protest which include a large racist element. The slow task of rebuilding a fighting left with democratic organisation has to continue both in elections and at the base in the communities and workplaces.

Dave Kellaway, 6 March 2018

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<http://socialistresistance.org/pro-austerity-government-punished-but-votes-go-to-racist-lega-and-populist-five-star-movement/11698>