



Trans European Policy Studies Association
TEPSA Briefs – June 2018

Talking Europe: How did Italians do it in the latest election campaign and what will come next?

*Nicoletta Pirozzi**

The latest national elections in Italy were characterised by an unprecedented rift in the country, exacerbated by the electoral law and the fragmentation of the political system. The uncertainty of the electoral results led to almost three months of protracted and acute political and institutional crisis and resulted in the formation of the first populist government of Western Europe through a coalition between the Five Star Movement and the League.

The elections results: a country cracked in two and no clear majority

The main outcome of the latest national polls held in Italy on 4 March is an unprecedented rift among the voters. If we look at the map of the election results, we see a country cracked in two, with the Northern part that voted massively for the centre-right coalition led by Berlusconi's

Forza Italia and including the League and the far-right Brothers of Italy and the South dominated by the Five Star Movement, while the centre-left coalition led by the Democratic Party remained confined to big cities like Rome and Milan and traditionally left-wing regions in the centre of the peninsula.

This has been the consequence of an extremely polarised electoral campaign, characterised by a harsh competition and a bitter political debate on hot topics for Italian citizens like migration, unemployment and taxes.

It was also determined by the fragmentation of the political landscape, with three main competing forces – centre-right, centre-left and Five Star Movement – and by the electoral law, a mixed system between first-past-the-post and proportional methods that did not favour the

*Nicoletta Pirozzi is Head of the "EU, politics and institutions" programme and Institutional Relations Manager at Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). All the opinions expressed in this briefing are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the IAI nor of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA).

emergence of a clear majority from the consultation.

The results confirmed some expectations (and fears) of main analysts and brought some (nasty) surprises. Among the confirmed expectations, no coalition or party reached the required 40% to get the majority in the Parliament through the plurality bonus that was foreseen in the electoral law. The first coalition in terms of votes was the centre-right coalition with 37% of preferences, while the first party with almost 32% of preferences was the Five Star Movement.

Among the surprises, we can name the overtaking of Berlusconi's Forza Italia (stuck at 13-14%) by Salvini's League, which got 17-18% (compared to the 4% of preferences in 2013). Also, we have to mention the catastrophic results of the Democratic Party (around 19%) and its centre-left coalition, with Emma Bonino's europhile party not reaching the 3% threshold required to enter the Parliament.

What are the possible explanations for this situation? On the one hand, we can say that Italy is in line with European trends if we look at the bad results of mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties, at the general crisis of social democracy and at the success of euroskeptic, populist, sovranist and anti-system political forces in many other countries, from France to Germany, from Austria to Hungary. But on the other hand there are also some Italian specificities. First of all, the recent positive economic figures have not yet translated into

better living standards or increased social guarantees for Italian citizens, especially in the South of Italy. Most of Italians are still dissatisfied with the status quo, and both Democratic Party-led governments and the EU were constantly blamed for not addressing the citizens' concerns. Secondly, we need to take into consideration the Five Star Movement phenomenon, which is completely different from other experiences like Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain: it is a transversal, post-ideological, anti-establishment movement that has been able to collect votes from extreme right to extreme left. Moreover, the centre-left was in a situation of extreme fragility, with its main actor, the Democratic Party, that had recently undergone a dramatic breakup and was still in search of a new identity.

The vote aftermath: a protracted crisis and the government of "change"

The vote aftermath was characterised by a protracted political and institutional crisis. Italian citizens had to witness several weeks of stalemate, during which the President of the Republic explored different options to give the country a new government by consulting with the main political forces in three consecutive rounds and issuing exploratory mandates first to the President of the Senate, representative of the centre-right coalition, and then to the President of the Chamber of Deputies, representative of the Five Star Movement.

All these attempts to find a majority in the Parliament failed and, after almost three months

after the elections, the President announced the decision to appoint a neutral government and call for new political elections in July. It was then that the Five Star Movement and the League decided to coalesce and negotiate a political pact as the basis of a new coalition government, and to entrust the law professor Giuseppe Conte the task to lead the coalition. But the choice of the Ministers itself was a highly contested process, in particular with regard to the Minister of Economy and Finance proposed by the League, Paolo Savona, a professor who had strongly advocated for Italy's withdrawal from the Euro and was considered dangerous for the country's economy.

The President of the Republic opposed Savona's nomination and decided to give a mandate to Carlo Cottarelli, a former International Monetary Fund officer, to form a technical government to be approved by the Parliament together with the 2019 budget law and with a view to prepare the next political elections, which could be held by Spring 2019. However, it soon became clear that such a government would have never got the required majority in the Parliament, as only the Democratic Party declared to give a benevolent abstention to its formation and all the other parties opposed it.

Meanwhile, the Five Star Movement launched an aggressive campaign against the President of the Republic, calling for an impeachment procedure on the basis of a betrayal of his Constitutional mandate against the accusation of impeding the winners of the elections from forming a political government. This has been

considered as one of the most difficult institutional crises ever experienced in the country, which provoked strong reactions by both the Democratic Party and Berlusconi's Forza Italia and brought to many citizens' rallies in defence of Italy's main institutional representative.

The peak of the crisis was overcome after the Five Star Movement reversed its previous position by dropping the impeachment proposal and the League accepted to renegotiate the list of Ministries, finally replacing Savona with a more pro-Euro professor, Giovanni Tria, and proposing Savona as Minister of European Affairs (without portfolio). On this basis, the new government of "change" was formed on 1 June, with the Five Star Movement's leader Di Maio accepting to betray the electoral promise to refuse any coalition with other parties, and the League's leader Matteo Salvini accepting to betray his ally Berlusconi and the electoral promise to keep the centre-right coalition united. The newcomer Giuseppe Conte is the new Prime Minister, while Di Maio and Salvini act as Deputy Prime Ministers and occupy two key ministries, the Ministry of Economic Development, Labour, and Social Policies, and the Ministry of Interior, respectively.

Looking ahead: Italy as the new bridgehead of European populists

Three weeks after the formation of the new government, it seems that the electoral campaign has never ended. The leaders of the two main parties, Di Maio and Salvini, continue

to address their electorates by advancing promises on the realisation of the main proposals included in the government contract, in particular the introduction of a basic income and a flat tax, but the Minister of Economy and Finance is struggling to find the financial resources that should guarantee the implementation of these reforms.

While the support for the two political forces continue to grow among Italian citizens, getting close to 30% in both cases, the balance of power within the government is leaning towards a predominance of the League. Its leader Matteo Salvini has taken the front scene by capitalising on the migration issue, menacing to block boats carrying migrants from landing at Italian ports, and engaging a struggle with other EU governments and institutions, accused of not doing enough in sharing the responsibility for tackling illegal migration and managing asylum. This anti-migration campaign has no financial implications, but it is paying off very well in terms of political backing. However, the situation might change, leading to a rebalance between the two forces, or to an irreconcilable fracture before the next European Parliament elections.

Looking at the impact on Italy's European and foreign policy, it seems that the government will refrain from taking potentially disruptive decisions announced before or during the elections by the two leading parties, like a referendum on the Euro and the veto against a renewal of restrictive measures imposed by the European Union against Russia. However, as it

emerged in the latest European Council on 28-29 June, Italy runs against a more immediate and concrete risk of marginalisation at European and international level. The decision to lean away from the Franco-German engine and towards countries like Hungary and Austria can easily become a political boomerang, as these governments do not share Italy's national interests – from the stabilisation of the southern neighbourhood to migration – and cannot be reliable partners for Rome in many negotiations and battles in Brussels and in other multilateral fora. Being the bridgehead of European populists might not be such a rewarding strategy after all!



Trans European Policy Studies Association
Rue d'Egmont 11, B-1000
Brussels, Belgium

To know more about TEPSA visit: www.tepsa.eu

Follow TEPSA on:

 [@tepsaeu](https://twitter.com/tepsaeu)

 [@tepsa.eu](https://www.facebook.com/tepsa.eu)

 [TEPSA – Trans European Policy Studies Association](https://www.linkedin.com/company/TEPSA-Trans-European-Policy-Studies-Association)



Istituto Affari Internazionali
Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 – 00186
Roma, Italy

Visit IAI at: <http://www.iai.it/en>

Follow IAI on:

 [@IAIonline](https://twitter.com/IAIonline)

 [@IAIonline](https://www.facebook.com/IAIonline)

 [IAI – Istituto Affari Internazionali](https://www.linkedin.com/company/IAI-Instituto-Affari-Internazionali)

Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union



"The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein."