

An Uncertain Italy

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The results of the 4 March 2018 Italian elections are paradoxical. On the one hand, they clearly show three winners and three losers. On the other hand, they have made Italy enter a stage of extreme political uncertainty.

The losers are, first and foremost, the two main political parties that had been attempting to impose their hegemony for years on their respective ends of the political spectrum. At centre-left, the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD), with 18.7% of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies, suffered a crushing defeat. It has almost disappeared in the south and has lost ground in its bastions in central Italy, which have always been a left-wing stronghold. In power during the last administration, it has been sanctioned for its policies, a sanction that the Italians have systematically applied since 1994, 'removing the incumbents.' Indeed, three Prime Ministers who were members of the PD succeeded one another: Enrico Letta, Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni. During this administration, many reforms were carried out. But they have divided the left, especially those regarding the labour market and school, and have not won over the Italians, who have the sensation, often grounded, that their situation has deteriorated despite a real return to growth. The Democratic Party is also paying for the excessive personalization and media coverage of its leader, Matteo Renzi, who

has submitted his resignation in the wake of this disaster. In fact, the PD's defeat is yet another example of the deep crisis of the entire continental European left. For its part, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, with 14% of the votes, has obtained its lowest election results since it was founded in 1994. *Il Cavaliere*, at 81 years of age, no longer mobilizes anyone but his most diehard followers and no longer aggregates an arc of broader forces behind him ranging from the extreme right to the centre. He has thus been greatly weakened by the results of this election. The exhaustion of his party, which exists nearly exclusively for and by him, attests to a more generalized phenomenon, that of the difficulties of the European right, as can be seen, for instance, in France, Germany, Austria and Spain. In Italy, as elsewhere, the governing parties are penalized. And finally, the third election loser is the small radical left coalition party, Free and Equal, which aspired to weaken the PD and obtain some 6% of the votes, but only garnered slightly over 3% in the end.

The big winner is the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) (32.6% of votes for the Chamber of Deputies), an unclassifiable party within the panorama of European populism. It proposes a programme that is at once classic left and post-modern left (citizens' basic income, for instance) but also ecological and at the same time, rather right-wing in matters of security and immigration. During this campaign, the M5S carried out significant changes from 2013, when it became the leading Italian party with 25.6% of the votes. This time, it is headed by a young leader, Luigi Di Maio, aged 31, who, in contrast to Beppe Grillo, comes off as the leader of a credible party, even insofar as his manner of expressing himself and his '*bodily hexis*'¹. It has mod-

¹ Bodily hexis is a concept ultimately developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, which could be summed up more or less as referring to a person's subconscious use of their body, i.e. body language, posture, bearing, accent when speaking, etc. – Translator's Note.

erated its criticism of the European Union, the euro and what it formerly called “the immigration business.” And finally, it has accepted the principle of possible alliances with other parties. The M5S, with a general presence throughout the territory, has above all conquered the peninsula’s south, which is in dire social straits. Its electorate is characterized by an overrepresentation of young people, the working class and people with lower levels of education. The League (Lega) is the second big winner (17.3%, as compared to 4% five years ago). Its leader has turned the North League (Lega Nord), a regionalist party hostile to Rome and the south, into a party inspired by the French Front National, deliberately situated at the extreme right, with its virulent criticism of immigrants, insecurity and the European Union. The League, well established in the north, has made inroads in the centre and gained some ground in the south. At its side, the post-Fascist party, Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d’Italia), with over 4% of the votes, doubled its results from 2013. The centre-right coalition of these two parties plus Forza Italia and a miniscule grouping of centre parties has thus shifted strongly further right.

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The electoral progression of the League, Brothers of Italy and the Five Star Movement follow a specific logic, but likewise attest to the depth of Italian discontent. This has various explanations. Social, first of all, since unemployment remains high, inequalities of all sorts have increased and poverty has spread greatly. Political, in the second place, since Italy has been experiencing a profound political crisis for decades indicated in all surveys: The Italians’ dissatisfaction with their political leaders and more generally, the ensemble of the ruling class, the parties, parliament and the administration, is extremely high. And finally, cultural, in the sense that Italians are asking themselves who they are, now more than ever; what unites them in the face of globalization, the Eu-

ropean Union and various migratory shocks. They are in search of an identity, aspiring to re-establish a state of “living together”, while being tempted by a withdrawal into individualism or the family, with opinion polls demonstrating their strong mistrust of foreigners, but also of strangers in general.

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Although an analysis of the election results is simple, future scenarios are unclear because no one party or coalition is in a position to exercise power alone, since they do not have the majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies or the Senate. The parliamentary democracy and the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, are thus being hard tested. Already the presidents of the two parliamentary chambers were elected on 24 March after an agreement between the Five Star Movement and the League, which imposed the decision on Forza Italia, thus demonstrating its dynamism: in the Senate, Maria Elisabetta Alberti Casellati, one of Silvio Berlusconi’s people, and in the Chamber of Deputies, Roberto Fico, embodying the leftist tendency of the Five Star Movement and a priori faithful to its founding principles. For the Administration, all the combinations possible will be explored by Sergio Mattarella: a centre-right, centre-left alliance, an M5S-PD coalition, an M5S-centre-right union, an M5S-League coalition or a ‘minority’ administration led by a figure who, for a limited time, would have a narrow parliamentary majority, with the possibility of quickly returning to a vote in case of failure. The formation of the executive is rendered all the more complicated by the fact that the parties’ interests and programmes are incompatible, if not completely opposed. The Five Star Movement, for instance, promised citizens’ basic income during its campaign and must now meet the expectations of a southern electorate that demands social protection and aid from the government, which is not at all

what the electorate of the League –more liberal and mistrustful of the bureaucratic and administrative machine– expects.

The Italians are thus waiting, as are the Europeans. Especially since these elections have marked a further stage in the major trend that began a quarter of a century ago of disenchantment, discouragement, or even scepticism regarding the EU registered in all opinion polls, whether Italian or European-wide. Of all the eurozone, it is Italy that registers the lowest level of adherence to the single currency. How should we interpret such a change in attitude among Italians vis-à-vis Europe?

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Indeed, Italy was a founding country of the European Community and was very Europhile for a long time, especially since it was a question of breaking with the warmongering nationalism of twenty years of fascism. Historically, at first, the strong Communist Party and the Socialist Party condemned the Common Market, denouncing an Atlanticist, anti-Soviet, capitalist and Christian Democratic Europe, which was in power in Italy and remained in power uninterrupted until the beginning of the 1990s. The Socialists changed their position first in the 1960s, followed by the Communists in the 1970s, such that a broad, pro-European political consensus characterized Italy as of the 1970s, particularly since building the EU was then synonymous with growth, prosperity, protection and peace. Fissures began to appear as of the mid-90s, when the Maastricht criteria prevented governments from continuing to increase the deficit and public debt, which had allowed them to ensure a sort of social peace.

And again, beginning in 2007-2008, with the financial and economic crisis that severely affected the peninsula and entailed austerity, rigor, recession, unemployment, increased inequality and the growth of poverty. Finally, in 2013 and over the course of the following years, over 660,000 migrants arrived under dramatic conditions on the coasts of Italy and the Italians, with good reason, felt abandoned by the other EU Member States in their attempts to manage the situation. Mainly the League and the Brothers of Italy, but also, to a lesser extent, Forza Italia and the Five Star Movement, deliberately used the migrant question as a political resource, intentionally amalgamating three realities: that of immigrants established on the peninsula and regularized (over 5 million now, four times their number in 2001, which has overwhelmed Italy, unaccustomed to hosting so many foreigners); clandestine immigrants, who often live by their wits, are involved in trafficking of all sorts and practice delinquency; and finally, the inflow of migrants arriving under dramatic conditions after crossing the Mediterranean, over 600,000 of them in five years.

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It is now a matter of ascertaining what orientation the new executive will take, if the executive can even be formed after the parliamentary vote, knowing that one Italian out of two voted de facto for parties that ultimately mistrust and criticize the European Union, although they attenuated their attacks against it during the election campaign, especially the Five Star Movement, more so than the League. Will Italy continue to be a major protagonist in European construction and its hypothetical relaunch or will it prefer to stand aside? This is the great question that arises after these doubtless historic elections.