

The new Draghi government and the fate of populism in Italy

*In 2018, Italy appeared set to embark on a new era of populist government led by the Five Star Movement and the League. Yet less than three years since the 2018 election, the country now finds itself with a technocratic Prime Minister in the shape of Mario Draghi. **Marino De Luca** writes on what this turn of events tells us about the fate of populism in Italian politics.*

In the past week, Italy has seen the establishment of a new technocrat-led government. This follows on the heels of a relatively popular government that included the populist Five Star Movement in coalition with the centre-left. The fall of this government was engineered by Matteo Renzi, whose actions have brought Mario Draghi into the centre of Italian politics and produced a new and wide-ranging government encompassing left, right, populist, and technocratic actors. Italy now appears to be beginning a new phase in its relationship with populism.

How we got here

Since the ‘political earthquake’ of the 2013 national elections, the Italian party system has [undergone profound changes](#). A new political force, the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S), succeeded in a short space of time in becoming the leading political party in Italy. In the 2018 elections, with the support of Matteo Salvini’s League, the M5S formed a government, choosing as Prime Minister a political novice, Giuseppe Conte: ‘a defence attorney for all Italians’ who seemingly set the course for the two main Italian populist parties to form a new type of government.

By 2019, the tensions between these different populist parties resulted in Salvini withdrawing his party from the coalition in the hope of creating conditions for a League-led government. But he was to be frustrated. Conte managed to maintain his position as Prime Minister, and even achieved high popularity levels during the Covid-19 crisis, securing strong credibility in the rest of the EU.

However, in recent months, Italia Viva, an offshoot of the Democratic Party led by Matteo Renzi, the former flag bearer of the centre-left and Prime Minister between February 2014 and December 2016, [left Conte’s cabinet](#), forcing a dramatic shift in fortunes for the Italian government. Although the idea of a new government led by Conte himself seemed possible, this gave way in the face of gruelling negotiations. In a matter of a few days, which were intended as a period to try to recompose the old majority, including Renzi, harsh disagreements emerged between the potential government parties. This forced the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, to rule out early elections and call back perhaps the most acclaimed man in Italy in recent years, [Mario Draghi](#), to give him the power to form a new government.

Draghi’s government

Although Draghi represents the spectre of technocracy – and [its relationship with populism](#) – he has formed a government in which only 8 out of the 23 ministers are technocrats, and obtained in a few days a large parliamentary majority with the support of all parties except the far-right Brothers of Italy (FdI) and a small leftist party, the Italian Left (SI) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Investiture vote for Draghi government (17–18 February 2021)

	<i>Senate of the Republic</i>			<i>Chamber of Deputies</i>		
	<i>For</i>	<i>Against</i>	<i>Abstention</i>	<i>For</i>	<i>Against</i>	<i>Abstention</i>
Five Star Movement	69	15	-	154	17	4
League	62	-	-	126	1	-
Democratic Party	35	-	-	91	-	-
Forza Italia	49	-	-	81	-	-
Italia Viva	17	-	-	28	-	-
Free and Equal	4	2	-	11	1	-
Brothers of Italy	-	19	-	-	31	-
Others	26	4	2	44	6	1
Total	262	40	2	535	56	5

Note: Free and Equal is a left-wing parliamentary group incorporating Article One and the Italian Left party. Of the 321 members of the Senate, 302 cast a vote, while in the Chamber of Deputies, 591 of the 630 members cast a vote. *Source:* openpolis.it

Of the 15 ministers in the new government that have been appointed from political parties, the M5S accounts for four ministers, with the League, the centre-right Forza Italia (FI) and the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) being assigned three each. Italia Viva (IV) and Free and Equal (LEU) each have one minister. Table 2 below shows the full distribution of ministers in the government. Draghi has [ultimately established a very broad-based government](#), with only a light sprinkling of technocrats and a heavy dose of populists.

Table 2: Party breakdown and composition of Draghi's government

	<i>Number of Ministers</i>	<i>Ministries</i>
Independents	8	Interior; Justice; Economy and Finance; Ecological Transition; Infrastructure and Transport; Public Education; University and Research; Technological Innovation and Digital Transition*
Five Star Movement	4	Foreign Affairs; Agriculture; Parliamentary Relations;* Youth Policies and Sport*
League	3	Economic Development; Tourism; Disabilities*
Democratic Party	3	Defence; Labour and Social Policies; Culture
Forza Italia	3	Public Administration;* Regional Affairs;* South and Territorial Cohesion*
Italia Viva	1	Family and Equal Opportunities*
Free and Equal	1	Health

Note: The roles marked with * refer to a Minister without Portfolio. In the Free and Equal group, Article One has supported the new government while the Italian Left party voted against.

Furthermore, Mattarella outlined an emergency programme with three urgent aims that Draghi will have to realise within a few months. First, to attack the Covid-19 virus with an efficient vaccination campaign in close coordination with the state and the regions. Second, by the end of March, to counter unemployment effects with social protection measures. Third, by April, to present to the European Commission a plan for the substantial EU funds assigned to Italy.

Italy's populist parties

While the Brothers of Italy will remain in opposition in the hope of transforming into a new reference point for national interests and anti-Europeanism, the League and M5S have followed different paths. Salvini had to surrender to the large companies of the north that form the foundation of the League's main support base and which have been damaged by the economic crisis. He was convinced both by Giancarlo Giorgetti, the new Minister of Economic Development, who is the closest politician in the party to the establishment and a great admirer of Draghi, and by Luca Zaia, the President of Veneto, who is a key rival to Salvini for the party leadership. The League ultimately came to support a strongly pro-EU government led by a technocrat – a decidedly long journey from where they began.

The M5S has faced a tough internal battle over the Draghi government. Conte's success in smoothing relations with the EU means that the pro-EU nature of the new government is no longer a problem for most of the party. But Draghi's background as a banker and man of the elite has proven to be a far greater sticking point. An internal vote on the direct democracy platform used by the M5S resulted in 60% of the 70,000 votes cast backing the new Prime Minister. Nevertheless, Alessandro Di Battista, one of the leading figures within the Five Star Movement, left the party as a result of its support for Draghi. The M5S focused most of their efforts during the negotiations on projecting themselves as a green party, a strategy that has never achieved significant electoral success in Italy.

For the moment, then, Italian populism appears to have gone into hibernation. The League has moved away from its anti-establishment roots to join a broad-based, technocrat-led, pro-EU government, while the M5S has carved out a new ecological identity and joined the government. Only the Brothers of Italy now remain on the outside, but thus far as a relatively marginal force.

This summer, a so called 'white semester' will begin: the last six months of the Italian President's term in office, during which Parliament cannot be dissolved. By August, Mattarella will therefore have to decide whether to call new elections or proceed further with Draghi until the end of the legislature's term. Draghi's government has already forged a relationship of mutual dependence with the two most important populist forces in the country. The fates of both the League and the Five Star Movement are now inextricably tied up with that of a pro-EU technocrat. And equally, the fate of that technocrat appears to lie in the hands of the populists.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 838418. The Research Executive Agency (REA) is not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained in this article. Featured image credit: [Presidenza della Repubblica](#) (Public Domain)
