

The Italian centre-left is stalling in the campaign, but (probably) not in the election

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This week sees elections in Italy. The centre-left coalition have seen their comfortable polling lead reduced but are predicted to do be successful on election day. **Giuliano Bobba** and **Duncan McDonnell** argue that despite Silvio Berlusconi and Mario Monti's rhetoric about promoting young people and women, the centre-left PD and SEL perform better on both counts, and that this bodes well for the future of the centre-left.



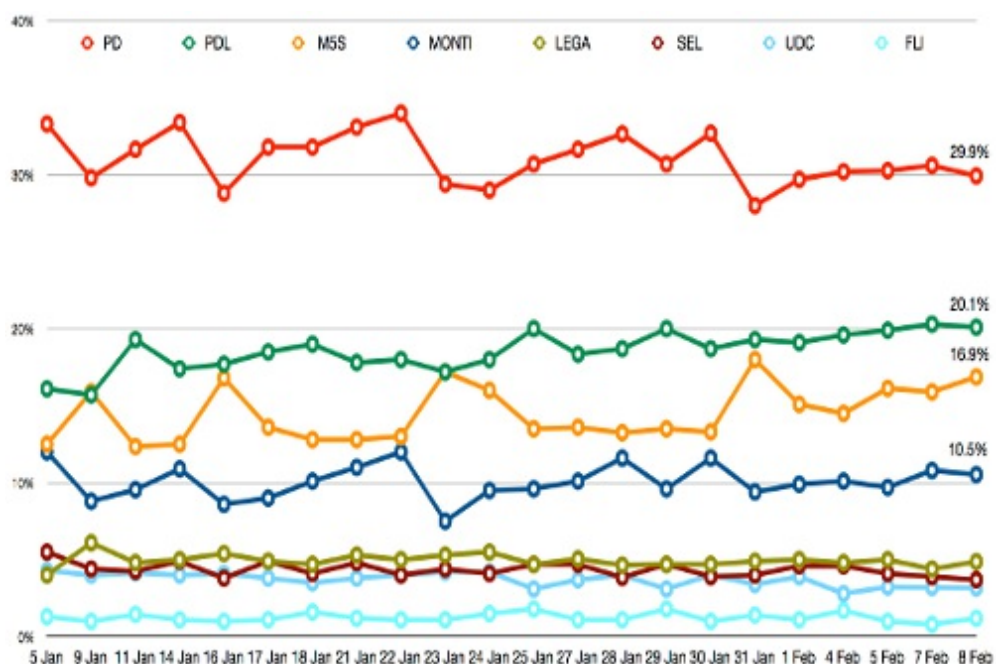
Given the fear which Silvio Berlusconi strikes into newsrooms across Europe and his ability to help sell papers, we will inevitably read more alarmist editorial headlines like [this](#) over the next 10 days, warning of impending doom should the former prime minister return to power. So, let's begin with a bit of perspective:



Based on surveys released last Friday (the final ones, given the 2-week pre-election blackout), it is extremely unlikely we will ever again have the pleasure of seeing [Berlusconi interacting with Angela Merkel](#). As the average results of the main polling houses over the past month in Figures 1 and 2 below show, Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà (PDL) and his centre-right coalition have narrowed the gap on the Partito Democratico (PD) and the centre-left alliance (PD and SEL), but there are still between 5 and 9 points separating them according to different polls.

Moreover, as Roberto D'Alimonte argued in the [Sole 24 Ore](#) last week, Berlusconi will have great difficulty convincing enough of the remaining 'undecided' voters (30-35 per cent) to support him. Especially since, if this election follows the patterns seen at local, regional and European elections over the past four years, turnout should be well below the 80 per cent seen in 2008. So, although Berlusconi has – once again – fought a more impressive campaign than the centre-left, it will almost certainly not be enough.

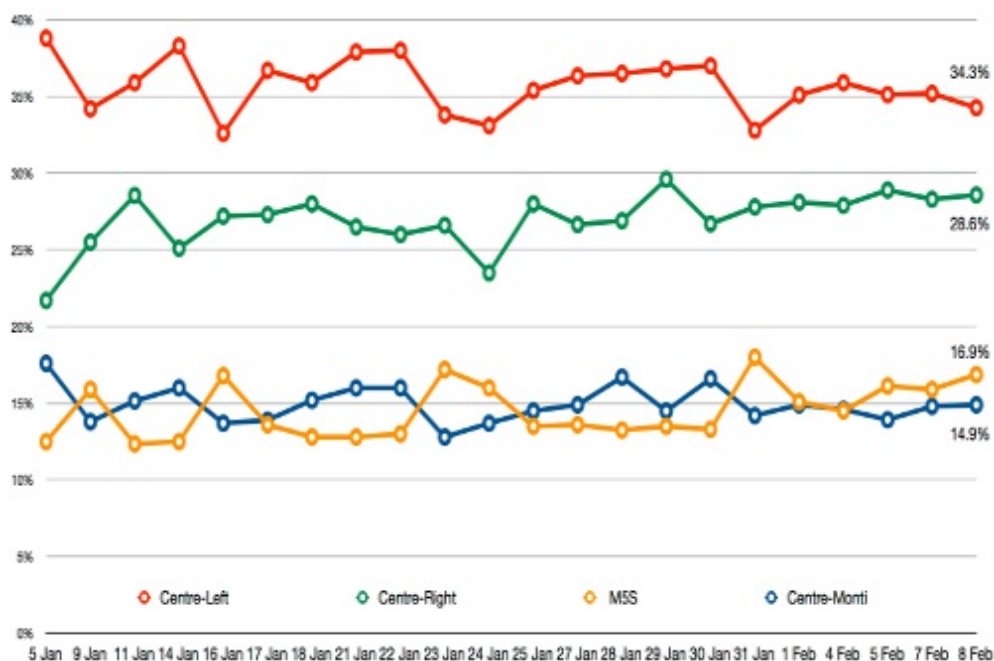
Figure 1: Average performances of main parties in surveys during 2013



Source: These averages are based on surveys published between 5 January and 8 February 2013. The

polling houses included are Demos&Pi, Demopolis, Emg, Ipsos, Ispo, Swg. See www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it

Figure 2: Average performances of main coalitions in surveys during 2013



Source: As above.

Nonetheless, although a clear victory for the centre-left seems highly probable in the Chamber of Deputies – where the leading coalition takes 55 per cent of the seats – the same is not true of the Senate. Thanks to Italy’s bizarre 2005 electoral law (which all parties have criticised for years, but failed to change), the majority bonus in the Senate is decided not on the basis of who scores highest nationally, but on a region-by-region basis. To cut a long story short, if the centre-left does not win the Senate election in the key region of Lombardy (now being dubbed Italy’s ‘Ohio’), it will almost certainly not have a majority in Italy’s upper house given that another large region, Veneto (Italy’s ‘Nebraska’ perhaps) will almost definitely vote centre-right. If that is the case, the only plausible move for the PD leader, Pierluigi Bersani, will be to seek a post-electoral accord with Mario Monti’s centrist alliance.

From one point of view, that might be a good thing: given the inevitably difficult years ahead and the need to rebuild societal consensus, it does not seem ideal for Italy to be run solely by a centre-left government which gains well under 40% of the vote. From another perspective, however, a ‘rainbow coalition’ stretching from the far-left Nichi Vendola of SEL to the social democrats of the PD to the centrists, neo-liberals and former far-Right members of Monti’s hotchpotch alliance does not seem designed to ensure governmental stability. Such a scenario of course is predicated on all sides accepting it – something which is not guaranteed. Indeed, a [recent survey](#) showed that although 79 per cent of PD voters would approve of a coalition with Monti, only 47 per cent of SEL ones agreed.

Although the centre-left campaign so far has been largely uninspiring (and unsuccessful if we judge by the polls), there are several important positives which are worth highlighting.

First, the predictions that the hard-fought primary between Bersani and Matteo Renzi would leave a residue of bitterness in the election campaign have proved unfounded. On the contrary, Renzi has actively campaigned at grassroots level with, and for, Bersani.

Second, despite Berlusconi and Monti’s rhetoric about promoting young people and women, the PD and SEL perform better on both counts. As we can see from Figures 3 and 4 below – in which we have calculated the number of women and people born since 1978 among the top 10 positions (i.e. with better chances of election) in candidate lists for the Chamber of Deputies constituencies – it is the centre-left which has responded best to public demand for renewal in the political class. SEL (45.9 per cent) and the

PD (39 per cent) are the two parties with most women among the first 10 candidates in the various constituencies, while they also score well compared to their main competitors as regards the promotion of younger candidates. This bodes well for the future of the centre-left.

Figure 3. Percentage of women among top 10 candidates in party lists for Chamber of Deputies constituencies

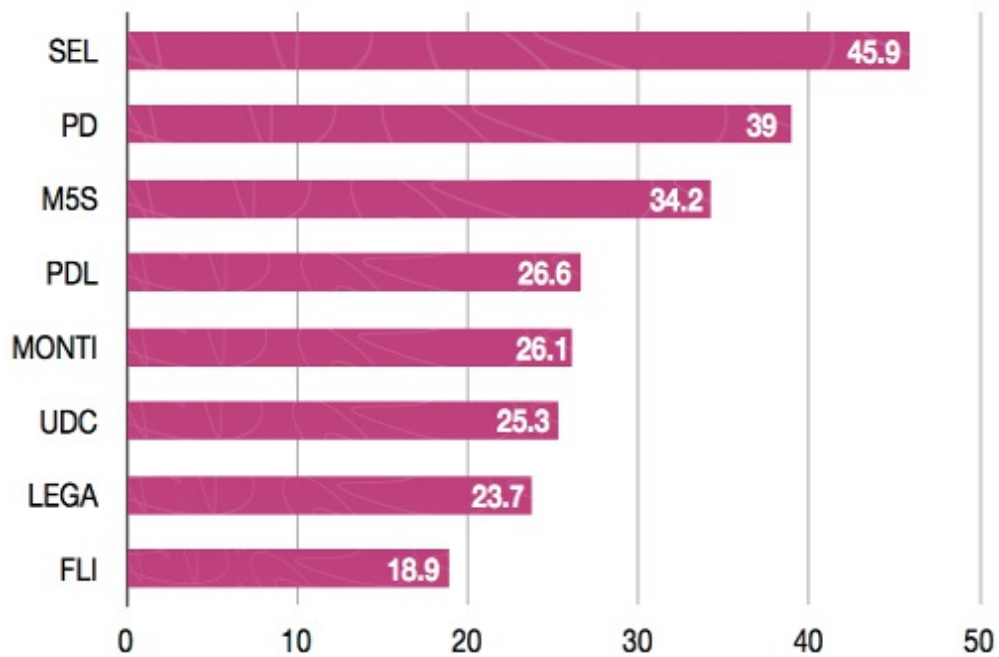
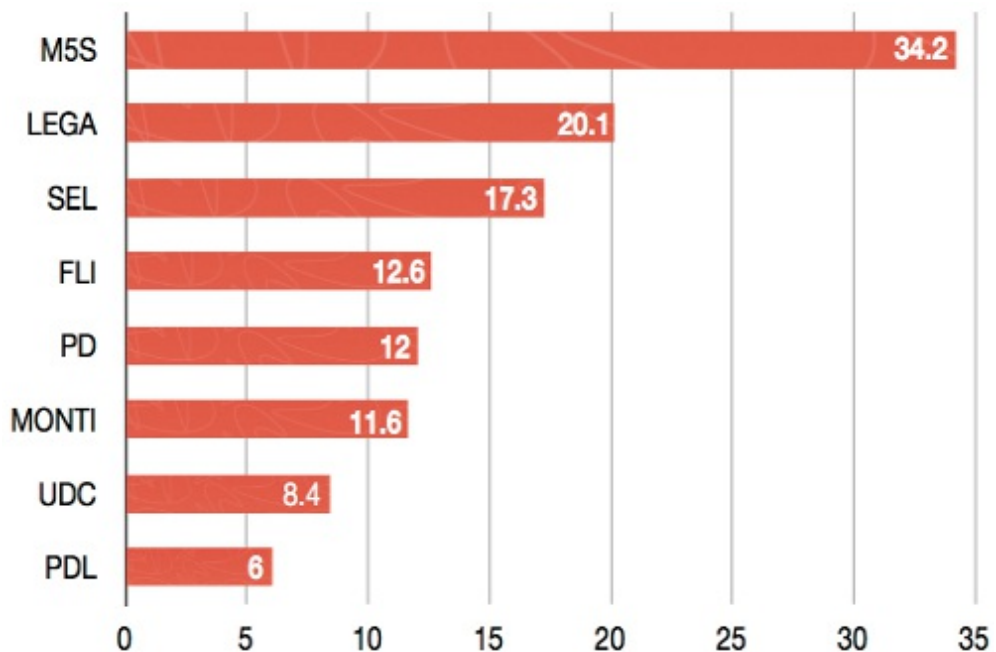


Figure 4. Percentage of those born in 1978 or after among top 10 candidates in party lists for Chamber of Deputies constituencies



After the positives, back to the negatives: as we enter the final 10 days before the vote, Bersani's campaign is increasingly resembling that of Romano Prodi in 2006 when the centre-left coalition was well ahead in the polls and conducted a 'what we have, we hold' campaign. This almost ended up in a shock Berlusconi victory, with Prodi's alliance winning by just 0.1 per cent. Bersani does not seem to have entirely learned that lesson. Rather, he has played a waiting game which has allowed both Berlusconi and Monti to set the agenda. Moreover, in terms of visibility, [recent data](#) show that Bersani has been far less

prominent than Berlusconi and Monti on mainstream media and, compared to other candidates, his presence on social networks is negligible. As regards content, beyond vague platitudes about what the centre-left would do in government, Bersani's communications have focused on attacking Berlusconi (same old story) and reaching out to Monti (which suggests weakness and annoys SEL).

Given the centre-left's lead is currently double that of Prodi's in 2006 at the same stage, this should not prove fatal. However, it shows once again that the centre-left's inability to communicate and campaign effectively remains a key problem. They should get away with it this time, but the outcome will almost certainly be a lot less comfortable than it ought to have been.

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