

# The Five Star Movement's victories in Italy's mayoral elections: A major blow for Renzi and the PD

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*Italy's Five Star Movement secured victory in mayoral elections in Rome and Turin on 19 June. [James L. Newell](#) and [Arianna Giovannini](#) interpret the results as a major blow for Italy's Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi. Substantial problems now lie ahead for the Italian government, as the PM faces a looming referendum on constitutional reform on which he has staked of his political future.*



On 5 and 19 June, Italians went to the polls for local elections with potentially extremely dramatic consequences for the Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, and the future of Italian politics. Although only about a quarter of the electorate were involved, the elections have created major difficulties for Renzi as he seeks to mobilise support for major constitutional reform which is due to be voted on in a referendum to be held this autumn.



In the second, run-off, ballot, his governing [Partito Democratico](#) (PD) lost, among others, the symbolically important municipalities of Turin and Rome where the anti-political [Five Star Movement](#) (M5S) scored significant victories beating the PD by 55% to 45% in the former case and by an astonishing 67% to 33% in the latter. In the previous elections in 2013, the PD's mayoral candidate had won almost double that proportion.

In these two cities, the results tell the story of a revolt against the 'ancient regime' of Italian politics, and can be read as the product of a growing sense of rage among the electorate against the establishment and 'professional politicians'. The fact that the two young women – Virginia Raggi in Rome and Chiara Appendino in Turin – winning the mayoralties have little political experience has been seen as a strength rather than a hindrance for them, giving citizens an opportunity to cast their votes for 'new faces' and a fresh start.

This seemed to be especially necessary in the capital where in recent years local government, led by the centre-left, had been tainted by a level of corruption that had left the city in complete disarray. In Turin, another centre-left stronghold, local government certainly worked better than in Rome, but decades of PD administration had coincided with a high level of clientelism, which had marginalised voices from the more radical and locally entrenched left as well as civil society.



**Virginia Raggi, the newly elected mayor of Rome (Livioandronico2013 / Wikimedia Commons).**

By thus seeming to have mismanaged, although in different ways, two key Italian cities, ‘Renzism’ in the eyes of the electorate has turned into what it had promised to change, and it has been punished for this. In popular perceptions, Renzi’s PD has become equated with the Europeanist and financial establishment and with the ‘Caste’ it aimed at eradicating. The paradox is obvious and has wide ranging implications: Matteo Renzi, the ‘scrapper’ whose mission was to get rid of the old and stale political class and bring in a once-in-a-generation political revolution has been himself ‘scrapped’ by the electors in two of the biggest cities in the country.

Whilst it is refreshing to see two young women being elected as mayors of two major cities, Sunday’s vote carries a bitter taste for both the left and the right, showing that the M5S is growing as a credible political alternative, one able successfully to appeal to voters from across the political spectrum – with major implications.

This could be seen in the results relating to the 154 municipalities with over 15,000 inhabitants, accounting for the vast majority of electors called to the polls: in 121 cases, there were run-off ballots because neither of the two best placed candidates on 5 June had won 50% of the vote; and although the Movement made it through to the second round in only twenty of these cases, where it did so, it won in all but one of them. The reason is easy to appreciate. As an anti-political catch-all party able to mobilise significant support, when it finds itself in a straight contest with a competitor of either the centre left or the centre right the M5S will attract the ballots not only of its own habitual voters but also those of the supporters of more or less all the parties opposed to the candidate it is trying to beat.

As such a party, the M5S was able to act as an effective vehicle of protest against Renzi and the governing PD – whose officials had betrayed their awareness of this fact in their insistence, during the campaign, that the vote was very much a local matter from which no particular conclusions for politics at national level could be drawn. And yet these elections seem to have acted as second-order elections, perceived by voters as an opportunity to punish or reward national-level public-office holders, as much as any local elections in the past. Perhaps more so: institutional reform since the early 1990s has enhanced the weight of political actors at sub-national level; the growing use of primaries since then has added to the media attention such elections are able to command. And heightened media salience means heightened political salience.

So no one is under any illusion about the extent to which Renzi has been damaged by these results which, given the context in which they have come about, will have effects on the political class and system well beyond the elections that have generated them. First, they will make it much more difficult for the Prime Minister to keep control of the turbulence within his own party, especially that part of it which is driven by opposition to the new electoral law he has managed to introduce for the Chamber of Deputies. This too is based on the principle of run-off ballots – which, once conceived as a means of excluding the M5S from power, have just been confirmed as offering unrivalled opportunities for the Movement.

Second, they will make it harder for the Prime Minister to win the referendum on which he has staked his political career; for by saying he will resign if the vote goes against him, he has effectively framed it as a plebiscite on a premiership the strength of which the local election results have just served to diminish. And if the referendum is lost, then lost, too, will be the package of constitutional reforms hanging on it. This may be no bad thing; but what is certain is that in such a scenario the democratic crisis currently affecting much of Europe will continue in Italy – either because an opportunity to address it effectively will have actually been lost, or because it will be widely perceived to have been lost.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

### **James L. Newell** – *University of Salford*

James L. Newell is Professor of Politics in the School of Arts and Media at the University of Salford. He recently edited a special issue of the Italian journal *Polis* on [Politics, citizens' engagement and the state of democracy in Italy and UK](#) with Arianna Giovannini. He is Treasurer of the PSA's [Italian Politics Specialist Group](#).



### **Arianna Giovannini** – *University of Sheffield*

Arianna Giovannini is a Researcher at [SPERI](#) (Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute), University of Sheffield. She is the co-convenor of the [PSA's Italian Politics Specialist Group](#). She's on Twitter [@AriannaGi](#)



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