

Italy's political and institutional crisis means that Beppe Grillo and Silvio Berlusconi will benefit the most if the country once again goes to the polls.

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/04/18/italy-political-crisis/

18/04/2013

Italy's elections at the end of February were a major victory for Beppe Grillo and his anti-establishment 'Five Star Movement' at the expense of the country's traditional parties. With a hung parliament, and no deal to form a new government in sight, [Aidan Regan](#) argues that Italy faces a significant crisis, brought on not by EU-imposed austerity, but by Italians' rejection of what they see as a corrupt political elite.



The clear winner of the Italian elections was Beppe Grillo and the Cinque Stelle Movimento (Five Star Movement). They emerged out of nowhere to take 25 per cent of the vote, recording the largest ever vote share for a party entering their first election. They now hold the balance of power in parliament, but have no interest in entering government. Italy has a hung parliament and unless the social democrats strike a suicidal deal with Silvio Berlusconi (which Grillo wants) a new election is likely. Presently, the government are electing a new president who will be tasked with trying to forge a grand coalition. In the unlikely event that this occurs, those who are likely to benefit from a new election, according to recent polls, are Beppe Grillo and Silvio Berlusconi: two masters of the populist style of leadership which attracts so many votes in Italy. It is the undesirable outcome of the personalisation of politics, and something the left have proven incapable of adapting to.

While the social democratic, 'Partito Democratico' (PD), led by Pier Luigi Bersani, emerged as the largest party, taking 29.5 per cent of the vote, it was 8 per cent less than what they had achieved in the 2005 elections. In the context of unprecedented financial turmoil, recession and austerity, this significant drop in support is being heralded as a clear crisis for the centre-left. Furthermore, for the first time in Italian elections, the far-left failed to get above the 4 per cent threshold, taking no seats in parliament. Some have argued that had the social democrats elected Matteo Renzi instead of Pier Bersani, they would have taken an additional 7 per cent of the vote. Renzi (the mayor of Florence) is young, charismatic and understands the dynamics of contemporary media driven politics. For the traditional left he is nothing more than a reformist promoter in the style of the UK's Blairite New Labour. But he appreciates that there are votes in the centre and that Italians, more than most, have a tendency to support personalities. If a new election is to be held, Renzi will probably strike towards the leadership.



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Another important observation to be taken away from the election was the outright rejection of Mario Monti and his centre right civic movement, who won a mere 10 per cent of the vote. This is less than what was gained by the pre-existing centrist parties that he gathered to form his civic movement. Some have argued that the vote against Monti was a vote against European austerity. There is an element of truth in this. His reforms were widely criticised as having depressed domestic demand, leading to increased unemployment. But the policy reform he introduced that led to most criticism was the re-introduction of a property tax. This has nothing to do with Europe. The role of European Monetary Union in shaping the Italian crisis was secondary to domestic politics in this election. In fact, the

Italians don't even have a word for 'policy', it is all about 'politics', and Monti simply did not fit the bill for what makes a successful politician in Italy. The respected technocrat was demolished by the political campaigning force of Berlusconi. But importantly, one must think about the counter-factual situation of what would have happened if Monti had not entered the election? He split the right-wing vote and kept Berlusconi out of government. If this is the case, then Monti succeeded in his task of saving Italy from Berlusconi.

Berlusconi's centre-right 'Popolo Della Libertá' (PDL) emerged as the second largest party, taking 29.18 per cent of the vote. Some have lauded this as a political comeback, but this hides the fact that it was the biggest ever defeat for a sitting party in Italian elections. The PDL lost 16 per cent of the vote. This is much like what happened to the Christian Democrats in the late 1980s. They probably would have lost more if Berlusconi had not promised to personally re-fund the property tax if elected. It is only because of Italy's peculiar [electoral law](#) that Berlusconi has a commanding majority in the house of deputies, and hence a claim to form a government. The outcome is that there are 8 possible majorities that could facilitate a coalition government. Bersani and the PD must be part of 7 of these. The only real possibility, however, is Grillo supporting the social democrats. He has categorically ruled this out. Hence, Italy is in the hands of Beppe Grillo, who does not play by the rules of representative democracy. Is this a crisis for Italy?

The short answer is yes. The two main parties of the left and right have lost their largest share ever in Italian elections. It was the second most volatile election since WW2. The volatility can be explained by a change in 'supply' (i.e. the entry of a new party). Hence to understand the political fiasco of Italy we have to explain the success of Beppe Grillo and his Movimento. In much of the Italian press they are dismissed as a joke led by a quasi-authoritarian comedian. In truth they are a mix between the German pirate party and anti-establishment populism, with a charismatic political leader. The emphasis they place on participatory democracy is not practised within the party. Their policies are predominately left wing even if they refuse to call them so. In terms of the candidates who ran under the platform of the Movimento, according to research carried out at the Bacconi institute, they were the youngest, most female represented, and most educated of all the political parties. In this regard, the Movimento are more reflective and representative of Italian society.

Those who voted for Grillo and the Movimento, however, do not reflect this profile. A significant share of their vote came from small towns and municipalities with traditionally low-voter turnout. This might suggest that a vote for Grillo was an alternative to abstention. The social democrats continue to take most of the votes from those with higher education. Those with secondary education were most likely to vote for Grillo. Berlusconi and Grillo, in this regard, take their vote from what would have been traditionally called the 'working class'. The Italian left have always tried and failed to mobilise this section of the electorate. Grillo seems to have succeeded. But this has little to do with their 'new internet' approach, given the age profile and broadband coverage of those living in these rural municipal areas. In truth, Grillo mobilised the disaffected, and those who are fed up with the Italian political caste. This is all the more remarkable when one considers that the Movimento refused to deal with the mainstream media throughout the campaign.

Beppe Grillo and the Movimento succeeded in this election because they tapped into mass popular discontent toward what the electorate perceive to be a self-serving corrupt political elite, who have ransacked Italian institutions for their own gain. This has little if anything to do with EU imposed austerity. Italians are feeling the recession, but blame poor economic performance on domestic, not European politics. It is remarkable that throughout the election campaign Bersani and the social democrats never mentioned corruption once. Needless to say, Berlusconi didn't either. But it was the central message of the Movimento. If one accepts that the real crisis in Italy is institutional and political (in the same vein as [Daron Acemoglu would argue](#)) then the Movimento are a counter-political backlash against an old regime that needs to change. It is quite another thing to argue that the Movimento can be the agent of this change, but it does pose a serious dilemma for the Italian left. They failed to win after the collapse of the Italian system in 1994 and they have failed to win again today. In the absence of a serious alternative to Monti (technocratic) and Berlusconi (populist) the electorate will flock to Grillo and the Movimento, with unforeseen consequences.

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