

Italy's looming election: Will the Five Star Movement really form the next government?

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Italy will hold its next general election no later than spring 2018, with Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (M5S) currently ahead in most of the recent polling. [Daniele Albertazzi](#) argues that despite intense media speculation about what a victory for the M5S could mean for Italy and its participation in the euro, the picture is far from clear and could be altered substantially by current negotiations over the country's electoral law.



With a general election due to be held in Italy before next spring, the media are [assessing the likelihood](#) that the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S, Five Star Movement) may form the country's next government. Some [recent polls](#) show the party enjoying the support of over 32 per cent of the electorate, which would make it the largest party in Italy. Its nearest competitor, the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD, Democratic Party), has been shown by the same polls to be attracting 26.8 per cent of the vote, although the situation is [very much in flux](#).

Throughout 2016, international media focused on the M5S' criticism of Europe and the euro, peddling a narrative whereby Italy was about to deliver a mortal blow to the European project. This claim was much repeated before the [constitutional referendum](#) held in the country in December, after which, despite Italians rejecting the constitutional reform that was on offer and despite its proponent, Matteo Renzi, resigning from his job as PM, nothing much happened, either to Italy or indeed the EU. Now the question on everyone's mind, is whether the M5S will be able to form a government for the first time in its brief history following the next election. The short answer to this is that even the experts on Italian politics cannot make any sensible predictions right now.



The Five Star Movement's Beppe Grillo, a comedian turned political leader. Credits:[Claudio Bisegni](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0)

Consider just the known unknowns. First on the list is the date of the election itself – the only certainty being that it

will be held before the spring of 2018. A lot can happen in 12 months, of course, if indeed Italians end up waiting that long to vote. The second unknown is the electoral law that will be used in the elections – something Parliament is looking into as we speak. We do not have the space here to enter a detailed discussion of what may or may not happen as a result of the negotiations between parties about this legislation, however it is likely that the new electoral law will have a strong element of proportionality.

If this were to be the case, then it would be far from certain that the M5S would have the numbers to govern on its own after the election, or manage to create a governing coalition with others. Not to mention that, even if it did, it would need to change the Constitution before holding a referendum on Italy's membership of the euro anyway, as it is impossible to hold referendums on laws authorising the ratification of international treaties under the current one. Would the M5S take the perilous path of trying to amend the Constitution not long after Italians have voted to keep it as it is? Very unlikely.

And then there are the things we know we know, but they do not help predicting the election outcome either. The first on the list is that Matteo Renzi is [back with a vengeance](#) and is on course to being elected leader of his party for a second time. He will most likely be the PD's candidate for the premiership in the elections. Renzi may have [lost the December referendum](#), but his 'side' (i.e. the 'yes' camp) still attracted over 40 per cent of the vote on a decent turnout of 65 per cent. Granted, not all of these people would vote for the PD in an election, however this remains a decent result to build upon in a forthcoming campaign for a party already attracting about 30 per cent of the national vote.

The second thing we know is that the right is in disarray, and has been for several years (that is, since the fall of the last Berlusconi government in 2011). In particular, Forza Italia is a spent force waiting for some Godot to save it from its own leader and founder, Silvio Berlusconi. The already mentioned polls suggest that it may gain as little as 12 per cent of the vote in the forthcoming election, from about 20 per cent in 2013, and 38 per cent in 2008 (under a different name). The party's crisis is deep-seated, and a repeat of the [media stunts](#) Berlusconi has been known for in the past will not suffice to resolve it.

Even leaving aside that, for legal reasons, Berlusconi will be [very unlikely to run](#) for the premiership in the forthcoming elections, he has not taken any credible initiatives in years as Forza Italia's leader and also lacks a strategy to re-launch the centre-right electoral alliance. He would be well advised to step aside and leave the leadership of both his party and a renewed centre-right alliance to someone else, but there is no sign that he is willing to do this for the moment. Further complicating matters, Matteo Salvini – the leader of the most important party to have governed with Forza Italia since its creation, the Lega Nord (LN – Northern League) – has ruled out taking part in a coalition led by Berlusconi and has put himself forward as the would-be leader of the centre-right.

With the LN also doing well in the polls – attracting over 12 per cent of the vote in contrast to the 4 per cent it gained in 2013 – the party's support may well be essential for the creation of any centre-right government in the foreseeable future. As I explain in a [recent paper](#), Salvini's LN has gone through a process of reinvention in the last few years. From being a regionalist populist movement trying to achieve some degree of autonomy for northern Italian regions, the LN has transitioned into a nationalist party focusing on the whole of Italy. It is not afraid of collaboration with the likes of Marine Le Pen's Front National in France, and Heinz-Christian Strache's Freedom Party of Austria at the European level, not to mention extreme right organisations in Italy itself.

To fill in the space opened on the right by Forza Italia's crisis, Salvini has created an organisation called 'Noi con Salvini' (NcS – Us with Salvini) which is fighting elections in central and southern Italian regions in which the LN does not normally compete. So far, NcS' performance has not been impressive, but it remains early days and it is impossible to predict how things will pan out for the organisation in the future. After all, Salvini's popularity [remains buoyant](#) among centre-right voters. His leadership constitutes a major break from the regionalist Lega his predecessor Umberto Bossi created and led for over two decades, and this introduces a further element of uncertainty in the country's political landscape.

To conclude, it would be wise to leave predictions concerning the outcome of the next Italian elections to astrologers and avoid crying wolf about Grillo's M5S again. But I am not optimistic that this is going to happen, especially once the French Presidential elections are over.

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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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