

What Italy's election result means for Europe



Italy's election produced a hung parliament and it remains unclear what type of government will emerge from coalition negotiations. [Iacopo Mugnai](#) writes that regardless of the nature of the next Italian government, the Italian election result had broader significance for European politics. He argues that the recent French, German and Italian elections have confirmed the decline not only of Europe's centre-left, but also of the dominant political and economic consensus that has underpinned European integration since the 1980s.



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There is no doubt that the 2018 Italian election result will have come as a shock to many observers across Europe. The election may have delivered a hung parliament, partly due to the country's electoral law, but the high levels of support for the Five Star Movement and Lega, as well as the geographical distribution of votes, represented a seismic shift in Italian politics. Nevertheless, the result also had broader implications beyond Italy itself.

It is worth considering three aspects of the result. First, the enormous success of the Five Star Movement, which moved from 25% in the last elections in 2013, to over 32% in 2018, opens up new challenges and opportunities for the party, which may lead to its normalisation as a political force.

Second, for the first time since 1992, Lega pushed Forza Italia into second place in the centre-right coalition, pushing the alliance further to the right. Given it is now clear that Berlusconi's career is in decline, it will be crucial for Forza Italia (and the Italian party system in general) that the party finds a new leader and a new identity. Failure to do so could see it become a permanent junior partner to Lega (which has undergone its own transition away from the secessionist movement that it represented in the 1990s).

Third, and much in line with the last French and German elections, the Democratic Party suffered a dramatic loss of support, finishing only narrowly ahead of Lega. Although there is no doubt that the result was primarily the outcome of deficiencies in the strategy persistently followed by Matteo Renzi and his associates, the party's decline also took place against the wider decline of the centre-left in Europe and should be understood within that broader context.

However, before considering the wider picture, a few words are needed on the government that might form from the current situation. One option that would be potentially controversial, but which has some merit, is a coalition between the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party. There are in fact some tangible reasons why this would be desirable for some on the centre-left. The other coalition options (a coalition between the Democratic Party and the centre-right, or between the Five Star Movement and the centre-right) would bring Lega to power. It is understandable why many would find this undesirable given Lega's right-wing populism and Euroscepticism.

A coalition between the centre-right and the Democratic Party would be, in principle, possible as well. However, this could carry the risk of doing more long-term damage to the party than a coalition with the Five Star Movement, just as the new German Grand Coalition could damage the German Social Democrats. Moreover, a coalition between the Five Star Movement and the centre-left could also bring some reassurance in terms of the policy agenda, since the latter would have an incentive to abandon the government should the Five Star Movement pursue irresponsible policies.

But irrespective of which government emerges from the negotiations, it is difficult to escape from the conclusion that the centre-left is now facing a pattern of decline in Europe and among western democracies more generally. For some, this is the legacy of almost three decades of social democratic parties moving towards the centre, embracing neoliberalism (although now with a more human face) and losing much of their identity and support base.

As it happens, in the Italian case, the Five Star Movement has prevented Lega and the right from receiving higher political support: without their presence, Lega may well have received more than 20% of the vote, potentially securing a majority for a right-wing government. And the left is arguably in a better position in Italy than is the case in other countries like France. The Democratic Party still remains a key player in the party system, unlike the French Socialist Party. While Emmanuel Macron and the nuances of the French electoral system have kept the right out of power in France, Macron has no stable social movement underpinning his position and should he fail to live up to his domestic promises and implement his vision of EU reform, the next French elections could deliver a drastically different picture.

While much of the attention is now focused on the horse-trading that will accompany the formation of a new government, the Italian election and the wider decline of social democracy should raise serious questions about the content and future direction of European integration. Taking inspiration from Kathleen McNamara's [The Currency of Ideas](#), it is easy to identify in the recent French, German and Italian elections the [epilogue of a consensus](#) built around a specific macroeconomic regime (of which the single market and euro are an expression) that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s.

For too long, perhaps, Europeans have forgotten that monetary arrangements and economic regimes, for good or bad, are social products, politically contested and historically contingent. The once unquestioned ideal of "ever closer union", for good or bad, is now being debated. And it is telling that other actors, such as the [Dutch Prime Minister](#), are also rejecting the notion that the European Union is on an inevitable path towards greater political integration after Brexit. It is therefore crucial, before it becomes too late, that European elites (particularly social democrats) reflect on the scope and direction of future EU economic and political integration.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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