

# What happened in Italy on Sunday and what will happen now?



*Italy's election on 4 March saw major advances for the Five Star Movement and Lega, but the picture remains uncertain in terms of the formation of a government. [James L. Newell](#) assesses the reasons underpinning the result and what might happen next in the negotiations over the coming weeks.*

The two great winners from the 2018 Italian election were above all the national-populist Lega (up from 4% to 18%) and the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5s) (up from 25% to 32%) which garners its support from across the country and from voters located across the political spectrum from left to right. The great losers are the centre-left Democratic Party (PD) (down from 25% to 19%) and Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) (down from 22% to 14%). The new great divide in Italian politics is no longer between the left and right, but across the line dividing the mainstream-establishment parties on the one hand, and the populists, with over 50%, on the other.

How has this come about? Let us start with the centre left. In government since 2013, the PD sought to appeal to voters on the basis of its record, which was a creditable one. It introduced important measures to combat poverty. Last summer it reached an agreement with the government of Libya which has stemmed the flow of refugees and asylum seekers reaching Italy from across the Mediterranean. The Italian economy is reviving. The government has also been praised by the OECD and in other quarters for a series of structural reforms deemed essential to raising productivity and investment.

The problem was that the man who most personified these successes – the PD's Prime Minister, Paolo Gentiloni – was not his party's leader and therefore the PD suffered from a considerable handicap, in an era of mediated and personalised politics, in that Gentiloni was unable to translate his considerable personal popularity into support for the PD as such. More generally, the PD, like parties of the centre left elsewhere in Europe, has suffered from the loss of any kind of cultural ascendancy since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in that it has incorporated the neo-liberal narratives of its adversaries on the right and in so doing failed to offer representation to – and thereby to *constitute* as such – a working class that now feels threatened by the effects of globalisation, especially austerity and mass migration. The left's natural constituency has been left prey to alternative appeals, and the inevitable consequence has been a dramatic advance for the populist right represented by Lega.

The Five Star Movement, meanwhile, has succeeded in winning votes in several quarters. It ran a highly professional campaign in which it was successful in portraying itself simultaneously both as a party of anti-establishment protest (personified by Alessandro Di Battista who significantly had a front-line role but was not actually a candidate) and as a party of government (personified by its youthful prime ministerial candidate, Luigi di Maio). In this way it was able to mobilise those driven by the long-standing and deep-seated anti-political sentiments of Italian voters; those driven mainly by disappointment with the outgoing government, and those who might otherwise have been attracted by the new-found moderate profile of an 81-year old Berlusconi who was once an anti-establishment figure but who, having had several turns at the helm, no longer convinces.

What now then? Let us begin with the institutional trajectory. The current government will remain in office until some time after the new Parliament meets for the first time on 23 March to elect the presidents of the two branches of the legislature, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The outcome of these elections – bearing in mind that they will inevitably be the fruit of some kind of cross-party agreement concerning the candidates to be supported – could give some indications, if they have not already emerged from public debate in the run-up, of the governing alliances possible. Thereafter, the President of the Republic will initiate consultations with the parties with a view to identifying a governing majority and a person able to lead it. Only if there emerges reasonable certainty about this will the President make a formal prime ministerial appointment through the conferral of a full mandate for the formation of a government since, once appointed, the new government will have to overcome the hurdle of confirmatory votes of confidence in both chambers of Parliament.

What is the composition of the new government – if one emerges – likely to look like? On the one hand, one might argue that the mainstay of the incoming government will be the Five Star Movement – this on the basis that, as it is the largest party but without a majority, it is too small to govern alone but too strong to be excluded: there is no majority for a ‘mainstream’, FI-PD, coalition; the parties of the centre right (Lega, FI and Brothers of Italy) do not command a majority either. On the other hand, the parties of the centre right constitute the largest single coalition represented in Parliament and Lega’s Matteo Salvini has explicitly ruled out a governing arrangement with the M5s – understandably so: Berlusconi now appears to be a spent force, so Salvini will want to inherit his support and thus consolidate his leadership of the centre right.

Salvini will not want to waste such an opportunity by playing ‘second fiddle’ to a government led by Di Maio. It is likely, then, that everything will depend on how the PD reacts to its defeat, for it faces some grim and unpalatable choices: since the vote, some of its spokespersons have been talking about a return to opposition, but if it takes this road, then it is difficult to see how any kind of governing coalition – formal or informal – can be assembled at all. On the other hand, a governing role means propping up either a government of the centre right, or a Five Star government led by Di Maio – with all the risks for what remains of the PD’s popularity that such a decision would entail.

So, the future of the Italian left looks grim indeed – but so too does the future of Italy and of Europe. For the former, there is the prospect that the M5s fails successfully to complete its transition from party of protest to party of government, as it grapples with the difficulties of making decisions that will inevitably have winners and losers, and so ends up fuelling the already high levels of popular disenchantment with Italy’s political class. For Europe, there is the near certainty of conflict between an incoming government and the Brussels institutions given that both the M5s and Lega have built their remarkable successes on growing Euroscepticism. For those Italians who belong to the ‘educated classes’ – comfortable with the cultural changes of globalisation, in sympathy with the left’s internationalist themes and now the bedrock of what remains of the left – the outcome of Sunday’s election will have been a very sad one indeed.

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