

The Italian General Election of 2018

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Editors

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Italy in Uncharted Territory

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FOREWORD

THE ELECTIONS OF 2018: A (CRITICAL) TRANSITION

There is no doubt that the general election of 2018 has given rise to a profound—and in some respects ‘critical’ change in Italian politics. This is so for two main reasons.

First, the vote has marked a change in the structure of the political supply on offer. Until the election, or rather, until the election before that, it had been bipolar. In the First Republic, the Christian Democrats were pitted against the Communist Party. Then, from 1994, the centre right, based on the alliance between Silvio Berlusconi/Forza Italia (FI) and the Northern League, was pitted against a centre left built around Romano Prodi’s Ulivo and subsequently around the Democratic Party (PD) bringing together ex-Communists and ex-Christian Democrats. Since 2013, the party system’s structure—and dynamic—has been tri-polar, this thanks to the ‘incursion’ (I can find no better expression) of the Five-star Movement (M5s): an ‘anti-party party’, a ‘non-party’, an undefined entity.

The elections of March 2018, have brought further change to the nature of competition and the political projects on offer, which once again revolves around two formations. But unlike the past, unlike the First Republic, the two main—not to say, dominant—parties, the League and the M5s, have not proved to be ‘alternatives’; much less have they made possible governing alternation. On the contrary, they are allies. For reasons of convenience and necessity they have been forced to converge

even though they are very different from each other. For this reason, in presenting an analysis of the vote carried out by the LaPolis research centre at the Carlo Bo University of Urbino, I suggested that the election could be characterised using the oxymoron, ‘parallel divergences’ (Diamanti 2018a: v–xii), thereby evoking, by analogy, the ‘parallel convergences’ of Aldo Moro, the fortieth anniversary of whose kidnapping and murder, during the years of lead, falls precisely in 2018.

In parallel, FI and the PD, the political actors which until a few years ago sustained the bi-polar system, have considerably declined in significance, in political weight. And it is by no means certain that they will regain it in the future, because both are personalised—indeed personal—parties, ones that have undergone a profound change, the second change that distinguishes these elections—elections in which the choice between the two leaders who defined the political agenda of recent (and not so recent) years, has lost visibility and meaning.

Matteo Renzi and Silvio Berlusconi no longer set the terms of political debate. Berlusconi, in particular, has suffered the worst result in the history of Forza Italia, falling to below 15% and being superseded by Matteo Salvini’s revamped League: the Lega di Salvini or LDS, as I have called this party, which is now profoundly changed as compared to the former Lega Nord. Meanwhile, in the aftermath of his party’s collapse, Renzi has been making vague utterances about a comeback—about revenge—for the PD, to be achieved, once again, through the construction of a new personal party: his PD-R, the Partito Democratico di Renzi, as I have called it.

The new protagonists of the Italian political system are two parties with (very) different histories. The M5s, the winner of the election with more than 30% of the votes, has a history stretching back no more than a decade. But it emerged as a significant actor at the general election of 2013 when it took around 25% of the vote. Subsequently, it was unable to achieve similar results in local or regional elections, being weakly rooted on the ground, while it also struggled to make headway by expressing anti-European sentiments at the European parliament elections of 2014.

The League, in contrast, has a long history. It is the last surviving party from the First Republic, the only one to have retained its original name, notwithstanding its recent modification thanks to the gradual loss of its regional associations with the North and with Padania. Now it is the League and nothing more: a national, a personal party. The ‘North’ has been removed from its title.

The leaders, too, have different histories. Salvini took over the League in 2013, having ‘dethroned’ the party’s historic leaders, Umberto Bossi and Roberto Maroni. He has radically changed both the party’s identity and its organisation, but also its political and geopolitical orientation—this by embracing support for nativism and by hurdling the river Po, so to speak, to move increasingly southward. Even more so has he acquired positions of strength in the central regions where he has taken several (once) red citadels, former strongholds of the parties and the political culture of the left.

Luigi Di Maio, on the other hand, is not a leader, but the ‘political head’ of a (non)-party that continues to be led from the outside by Beppe Grillo and Davide Casaleggio, son of Gianroberto the co-founder of the M5s.

The other distinguishing feature of this electoral ‘changeover’ is, as just mentioned, the geopolitical change. For the first time in the history of republican Italy, the geographical divide in electoral behaviour reflects the historical division between North and South. The League, together with the centre right, has taken over the regions of the North and the Centre North, the M5s the regions of the South and Centre South. The South in particular is, for the first time since the war, ‘united’ by its support for a single party.

Concomitantly and consequentially, these elections have witnessed the disappearance of the ‘red belt’ where the parties of the left had until the vote, always been dominant.

The local elections that took place in June, in the aftermath of the general election, revealed these tendencies more clearly and in part accentuated them.

In particular, they confirmed that the left had declined in its areas of strength and that the centre right had grown everywhere. The (no-longer) red belt has now become blue thanks to the League’s advance and its new colour (Diamanti 2018b).

The M5s, finally, is continuing to experience the difficulties it has never overcome of making headway in local elections due to the fact that it does not yet have a well-organised party on the ground or a network of well-known leaders in the localities.

Overall, there are no longer any areas, for any party that are politically secure. ‘Devout’ voters have disappeared while the reservoir of ‘liquid’ voters has increased in size.

It seems, then, that what is emerging is a politically ‘colourless’ country. Or perhaps one that is multi-coloured. Nevertheless: ‘unstable’. It is therefore reasonable to expect further changes.

In the future, we will have much to study. And much work to do.

Urbino, Italy

Ilvo Diamanti

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ABBREVIATIONS

Ala	Liberal Popular Alliance—Autonomies (<i>Alleanza Liberalpopolare – Autonomie</i>)
ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
AN	National Alliance (<i>Alleanza Nazionale</i>)
API	Alliance for Italy (<i>Alleanza per l'Italia</i>)
CAMI	Computer-Assisted Mobile Interviewing
CATI	Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing
CAWI	Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing
CD	Centre Right (<i>centro destra</i>)
CGC	Contract for the Government of Change (<i>Contratto per il Governo del Cambiamento</i>)
CGIL	Italian General Confederation of Labour (<i>Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro</i>)
DC	Christian Democrats (<i>Democrazia Cristiana</i>)
DEF	Economic and Financial Planning Document (<i>Documento di economia e finanza</i>)
DL	Democracy is Freedom (<i>Democrazia è Libertà</i>)
DS	Left Democrats (<i>Democratici di Sinistra</i>)
ECB	European Central Bank
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
EFDD	Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
EUNAVFOR Med	European Union Naval Force Mediterranean
FdI	Brothers of Italy (<i>Fratelli d'Italia</i>)
FI	<i>Forza Italia</i>

FPTP	First-Past-The-Post
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICT	Information and Communications Technologies
IdV	Italy of Values (<i>Italia dei Valori</i>)
IfI	Income for Inclusion (<i>Reddito di inclusione</i>)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRPEF	Income Tax (<i>Imposta sul reddito delle persone fisiche</i>)
Istat	National Statistics Institute (<i>Istituto Nazionale di Statistica</i>)
LeU	Free and Equal (<i>Liberi e Uguali</i>)
LTROs	Long Term Refinancing Operations
M5s	Five-star Movement (<i>Movimento Cinque Stelle</i>)
MDP	Article 1—Democratic and Progressive Movement (<i>Articolo 1 – Movimento Democratico e Progressista</i>)
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MISE	Ministry for Economic Development (<i>Ministero per lo sviluppo economico</i>)
MMDs	Multi-Member Districts
MSI	Italian Social Movement (<i>Movimento Sociale Italiano</i>)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NL	Northern League (<i>Lega Nord</i>)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PaP	Power to the People (<i>Potere al Popolo</i>)
PCI	Italian Communist Party (<i>Partito Comunista Italiano</i>)
PD	Democratic Party (<i>Partito Democratico</i>)
Pdl	People of Freedom (<i>Popolo della Libertà</i>)
PDS	Democratic Party of the Left (<i>Partito Democratico della Sinistra</i>)
PP	Percentage Points
PPG	Parliamentary Party Group
PR	Proportional Representation
PSOE	Spanish Socialist Party (<i>Partido Socialista Obrero Español</i>)
QE	Quantitative Easing
R&D	Research and Development
RAI	Italian Radio and Television (<i>Radiotelevisione Italiana</i>)
RC	Communist Refoundation (<i>Rifondazione Comunista</i>)
SD	Democratic Left (<i>Sinistra Democratica</i>)
SEL	Left, Ecology and Freedom (<i>Sinistra Ecologia Libertà</i>)
SI	Italian Left (<i>Sinistra Italiana</i>)
SMDs	Single-Member Districts

SMEs	Small- and Medium-sized Enterprises
SMSP	Single-Member, Simple Plurality
SVP-PATT	South Tyrolean People's Party-Trentino Tyrolean Autonomy Party (<i>Südtiroler Volkspartei-Partito Autonomista Trentino Tirolese</i>)
TLTROs	Targeted Long Term Refinancing Operations
TV	Total Volatility
UKIP	United Kingdom Independence Party
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UPB	Parliamentary Budget Office (<i>Ufficio Parlamentare di Bilancio</i>)

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