



**European Parties Elections
And Referendums Network**

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO.45

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS IN ITALY, 6-7 JUNE 2009

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Key points:

- The turnout in Italy (65%) was well above the EU average (43%). However, it was much lower than at the last general elections of 2008 (80.5%), as well as it was lower than at the EP elections of 2004 (73.1%) and at the local elections taking place in the same day in 2009 in many municipalities (76.7%) and provinces (69.2%).
- The share of votes for the incumbent governing parties (45.4%) was overall identical to that of the last general elections of 2008 (45.6%). However, this was the result of a realignment of votes within the coalition in favour of the radical Northern League (*Lega Nord*) and at the expense of the party of the Prime Minister.
- Minor and radical parties were considered the real winners of these elections. The Eurosceptic and xenophobic Northern League reached its highest score ever (10.2%). Also the Italy of values (*Italia dei Valori*), a party whose ideology is rather undistinguishable even if it is allied with the major centre-left party, also reached its highest score ever (8%). Their electoral success was achieved at the expense of the larger coalition partners.
- For the first time, a threshold of 4% was introduced for these elections, as a consequence many small parties (communists, greens, extreme right) did not gain EP representation.
- Scandals involving the Prime Minister Berlusconi, especially those concerning his private life, overshadowed the European issues that, as a result, were virtually absent from the campaign.
- The ballot confirmed that the elections were treated as 'second-order elections'. There was a total absence of the European issues in the campaign, the governing coalition was still in a honeymoon with the electorate one year after the government was appointed but the party of the head of government experienced a vote loss to the benefit of its smaller coalition partner, and there was the success of two small parties.

In 2008 general elections were held in Italy after the fall of the centre-left government led by Romano Prodi that followed a loss of a majority in the Parliament. This event marked the early end of a legislature lasting only twenty months and characterised by the internal factionalism and policy deadlock of a narrow majority. Consequently, the centre-right easily won the elections with a large majority made of the newly created People of freedom (*Popolo della Libertà*, a merger of Berlusconi's party *Forza Italia* and the conservative National Alliance of post-fascist origins) and the Northern League. Berlusconi was appointed Prime Minister. Since, the government and Berlusconi in particular enjoyed high public support, in spite of the fact that many of the bills that they passed were rather contentious¹. The executive has enjoyed a level of stability unknown to the previous centre-left government of 2006-08, as well as to the previous centre-right government of 2001-06 that was supported by a larger and more diverse majority². The reason for the stability of the incumbent government resides indeed in the cohesiveness of its majority. On the contrary, the opposition, in particular the newly created Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, a merger of the social democrat Left Democrats and the centrist *Margherita*) experienced a serious crises, characterised by a fall of public support, internal conflict and resignation of the party secretary Veltroni, who had been elected by popular vote at the head of the party about one year earlier. Beyond the achievement of the two main parties that were able to secure over 77% of seats (low chamber), the general elections of 2008 also marked the disappearance from parliament of many small parties (communists, greens, extreme right), as they were denied electoral alliance by the two larger parties and failed to pass the threshold of 4% (Chamber of Deputies) and 8% (Senate).³

The EP elections of 2009 took place at a time of low salience of policy debate, but high political tension due to the scandals linked to the figure of the Prime Minister Berlusconi. Notably, over the past months, he was fiercely accused by the media of dubious private behaviour. In particular, he was accused of having had an affair with a young model who was under eighteen at the time. His wife, for the second time in a few years, accused him publicly through a letter that was published by the main opposition newspaper, *La Repubblica*. Through the letters, the first time the wife was only asking for a public apology from Berlusconi for publicly declaring that, if he was not married to his wife, he would marry an ex TV character, recently elected MP, who was then appointed minister in 2008. However, with her second letter to the newspaper, shortly before the EP elections, Berlusconi's wife openly accused the husband of habitual betrayal and she depicted a scenario of corruption and decadence by the Prime Minister who, allegedly, would reward his mistresses with posts, either in his owned broadcasting companies or in public office. In this occasion, Berlusconi's wife also corroborated the allegation advanced by the media that her husband started a relationship with a young model when she was under eighteen. Immediately after her second letter, she announced her intention to divorce.

¹ One example is the law that forbids any lawsuit against the main state figures while in office, including the Prime Minister, that caused the accusations toward Berlusconi of creating this law to protect his own interest. Another example is the reform of the school system that, when announced, was followed by large student protests that finally led the government to re-negotiate its plan with the unions.

² At that time, the majority included the Christian democrat Centre Union (*Unione di Centro*).

³ In this respect, it should be noted that for the first time since WWII communists are not represented in the Italian parliament.

The scandal had many implications of public relevance. Firstly, although this has not become a judicial case yet, there has been a public accusation that the Prime Minister had a relationship with a person under age. Secondly, he was accused of nepotism (as a consequence, some of the original candidates of his party for the EP elections, who had no political background but only experience in show-business, were suddenly removed from the electoral lists as soon as the scandal broke through). Thirdly, Berlusconi was accused of being disloyal to catholic values and, after this, the catholic church and the Vatican State started to condemn his behaviour and refer to him in the catholic press as a negative role model. In this respect, it should be noted that previously the relationship between Berlusconi and the catholic church was positive. He was believed to be a more reliable ally for the church than the centre-left which, in the previous government led by the catholic Prodi, tried to pass a law legalising civil unions, including those for same sex couples, a policy strongly opposed by the Pope personally.

In this context, the campaign for EP elections took place in a context of acute political tension. This tension was not so much linked to the implementation of the policy programme on the side of the government. Neither was it related to contestation of European issues. Instead, political conflict at the time of EP elections was predominantly about personality. Particularly, the campaign was focused on accusations from the opposition that Berlusconi was not fit to be in the role of Prime Minister, and on the defence from the government of his leader. The bitterness of the political climate after these public scandals - documented also by the international media through publication of embarrassing photos of Berlusconi in his private house and, in the weeks to come, by the declarations of some escorts who, admittedly, have met Berlusconi in the recent past - led the President of the Republic, Napolitano, to recommend more sobriety in the election campaign and of the approaching international commitments.⁴

No attention was paid to European issues in these elections. This is not a new phenomenon, for example, also in 2004 the discourse on the EU had little or no salience in this country. In general, the political discourse on the EU is not issue-specific in Italy. Party attitudes toward the EU tend indeed to be broad and unspecific, even on the side of the most Europhile parties.⁵ As it is typical of second-order elections, also this time the issues related to the European arena were over-shadowed by those concerning the national arena. It should also be added that in 2009 local elections were held in many municipalities at the same time as EP elections. In particular, the direct election of mayors, represents in Italy a time of intense personalisation of political competition, especially when large municipalities are involved - as it was the case in 2009. Furthermore, this kind of ballot is perceived as an important political test on the support for the different political forces throughout the various areas of the peninsula. Hence, on this occasion the issues related to domestic politics were far more salient than those of the European arena. Also the popular election of mayors was more prominent than Europe.

⁴ Italy hosted a G8 meeting in July 2009.

⁵ See: Nicolò Conti, 'Tied hands? Italian Political Parties and Europe'. *Modern Italy* Vol. 14, 2009, pp. 203-216

If we add to the specific electoral context of 2009 the fact that European issues were absent from the political discourse during the past year, it could be said that, recently, the EU has been a latent theme in the Italian political scene. For example, the Lisbon treaty was ratified by the Italian parliament by unanimity vote, in isolation from public debate and in the absence of any real opposition either in the parliament or in the society. Although in 2004 the ratification of the treaty establishing a European constitution was a more contentious matter, with the two extremes (Reconstructed communists and Northern League) voting against, the ratification of the Lisbon treaty was a non-contentious process. It has been showed that the pattern of party competition over the EU in Italy is determined by ideology and by the distance from the centre of the political spectrum. here is a tendency in this country to have a more pro-European centre-left than centre-right and a broad support for the EU from mainstream parties as opposed to a rejection from radical parties.⁶. However, competition over EU issues has gained very little salience in Italy in the recent past and larger decisions such as that concerning the ratification of the Lisbon treaty have seen the convergence of centre-left and centre-right, while the Northern League has moderated its Euroscepticism since in government from 2008 and other parties at the flanks of the political spectrum such as the communists are not represented in the parliament. Overall, contrary to the nineties, when efforts to meet the Maastricht criteria and enter the Monetary union made the EU a more salient theme, Europe has almost disappeared from party competition in the recent past. Consequently, the EP elections of 2009 were characterised by an absolute lack of EU-specific content.

The Campaign

Given the absence of EU issues from the campaign, the main content came from national and, as mentioned above, local politics. However, the EP elections of 2009 were overall exceptionally poor in terms of policy content. The personalisation of politics in Italy has reached, a level that seems to have obscured any real programmatic discourse. A reason for this could be that the positions of parties in the key socio-economic policy space have converged over time, in particular on the socio-economic issues. In 2008 the creation of two large parties (People of freedom and Democratic Party), competing for the vote of the median voter, marked a tendency towards similarity of the respective programmatic platforms of both parties. In the end, over three-quarters of votes at the general elections were captured by the converging programmatic platforms of parties whose ideological distance was dramatically reduced over the years, just as happens in most mature systems of bipolar competition and alternation in government⁷. Contrary to the rhetoric of political leaders and to the dramatisation of the tones in the electoral campaign, including that of 2009, if we consider only the programmatic supply, politics in Italy seems in actual fact increasingly more about who is better in doing things than about radically different political projects. This has made the policy content of the campaigns less salient while it has increased the strategic focus on coalition politics and the race for national leadership.

Though the socio-economic policy space has seen the convergence of the main political forces over the years, polarisation is still visible in the issues related to

⁶ See: Nicolò Conti, 2009, *ibid.*

⁷ See: Nicolò Conti, 'The Italian Parties and their Programmatic Platforms: How Alternative?'. *Modern Italy*, Vol. 13, 2008, pp. 451-464.

immigration and law and order.⁸ At the time of the electoral campaign for EP elections in 2009, a potential explosive issue was represented by a law under debate in the parliament and finally passed by the centre-right majority shortly after the elections. This law introduced the crime of illegal immigration and extended the period of confinement of illegal immigrants in temporary detention centres, as well as authorising organised citizens' patrols to fight urban criminality. The centre-left opposed this law arguing that it was only based on anti-immigration sentiments, that it would breach human rights, overburden the work of tribunals with cases of illegal immigration, while denying the country the access to a needed foreign labour force. However, in spite of the fact that this issue was rather divisive and ideologically important for the parties, it never really broke through the campaign as a policy issue.

As already said, European issues were absent from the campaign. Despite this, with some exceptions, parties published Euromanifestos in this occasion. Among the parties that obtained seats in the EP in 2009, the People of freedom led by Berlusconi, as *Forza Italia* in 2004⁹, did not produce a real manifesto. It is quite striking that the largest Italian party and the main partner of every centre-right government repeatedly shows the lowest level of programmatic commitment on European issues. The only document made available this time by the party was a short list of political priorities that includes the reconstruction with EU funds of the areas of *Abruzzo* recently interested by a strong earthquake; the involvement of the EU in the fight against illegal immigration; a broad commitment to the ideals and the platform of the European People's Party. Other points listed in the document focus on the achievements of the incumbent government, such as a privileged dialogue with Russia, an agreement with Libya, the need for Italian mediation to overcome the resistance of Turkey in the appointment of the new Secretary General of NATO. These points are clearly not directly related to the EU, so the focus of this document is only partially related to the EU arena.

As well, other parties did not publish a proper Euromanifesto. For example, in line with 2004 when the party only published a very short and broad document, also in 2009 the centrist Christian Democrat Centre Union did not publish any real Euromanifesto. This is, however, a minor party in the Italian context, one that used to be part of the centre-right coalition until 2006, but since it broke from the coalition with Berlusconi it has remained apart from any political alliance and rather marginal within the national context.¹⁰

What is probably more striking is instead the limited commitment of the Northern League to a specific position on the EU in this occasion. This party has often represented the main stronghold of Euroscepticism in the country and its programmes have clearly documented this attitude. In 2009, the Northern League published a platform that, in actual fact, only marginally addressed the main EU issues. Really,

⁸ Other salient issues such as those related to traditional morality cut across parties and the political spectrum.

⁹ Among the main Italian parties *Forza Italia* was the only one that did not issue its own manifesto for European elections and only made use of the European People's Party manifesto, a lowest common denominator platform based on the consensual agreement within the party federation.

¹⁰ However, the coalition potential of this party should not be underestimated. Thanks to its centrist ideological position, it could play the role of pivot party in the future. Recently, when the party decided to ally either with the centre-right or the centre-left locally, the party often proved fundamental to secure a majority.

this document was meant for both EP and local elections that, as already said, took place at the same time. It is important to note that being a regionalist party, the Northern League attributes great importance to the local elections where it achieves favourable results and many posts in the local governments, thanks to the strong electoral roots in the North of the country. Indeed, the Euromanifesto of the Northern League deals for the most part with issues that have a different focus than the EU arena. Actually, it is an overwhelming platform expressing well the party world view, more than it is a proper Euromanifesto. However, in the few sections of the document devoted to the European issues, opposition to the current trajectory of the EU is expressed through fierce criticisms concerning: 1) the democratic deficit of the EU; 2) any delegation of power to the supranational level; 3) the EU constitution. At the same time, opposition to membership for Turkey and the defence of the Christian roots of the European continent are given great emphasis in the document.

Conversely, the Democratic Party produced a proper Euromanifesto expressing the highest level of Europhilia in the Italian context, as has been traditional for the Italian centre-left in the last fifteen years. This was characterised by: 1) support for the delegation of power to the EU in many policy areas including those of the Second and Third pillar and in social policy; 3) defence of the Lisbon Treaty; 4) support for the empowerment of the supranational institutions, notably by linking the European electorate to the President of the Commission via competitive elections.

Finally, the short Euromanifesto of Italy of Values - a party led by the anti-corruption ex-judge of Operation Clean Hands Antonio di Pietro, characterised by a rather indistinguishable ideological position in spite of its alliance with the centre-left since 2006, but characterised by the issue-ownership of fight against corruption - consists of twelve priorities, for the most part in favour of the communitarisation of the judiciary and the establishment of the EU defence policy.

However relevant the above programmatic positions could be found, they were given no visibility during the electoral campaign. Only the most informed voters who voluntarily accessed these documents (available in the internet) could orient their vote at EP elections on the basis of the party positions on the EU. Otherwise, European issues remained uncontested, competition over such issues was frozen and the campaign was entirely focussed on the issues of leadership in the Italian government and in the largest municipalities interested by the local elections.

Results

Italy's 72 MEPs were elected from 5 electoral districts formed by grouping the Italian regions in the following districts: North-West, North-East, Centre, South and the Islands. For the first time since the first direct elections of the EP in 1979, a threshold of 4% was introduced nationally. The allocation of seats was determined nationally using the Hare-Niemayer method of proportional representation.

The turnout was exceptionally low for Italy (65%). It was particularly low when compared to the EP elections in 2004 (73.1%), the general elections in 2008 (80.5%), as well as the local elections of municipalities (76.1%) and provinces (69.2%) in 2009.

Table 1 – Results of 2009/2004 EP elections and 2008 general elections

	2009 EP Elections		2004 EP Elections		2008 General Elections*
	%	Seats	%	Seats	%
People of freedom	35.3	29	32.5 (Forza Italia + National Alliance)	25	37.4
Democratic Party	26.1	21	31.1 (Joint list of the Olive Tree formed by Left Democrats + Margherita + others)	25	33.2
Südtiroler Volkspartei	0.5	1	0.4	1	0.4
Northern League	10.2	9	5	4	8.3
Italy of Values	8	7	2.1 (Di Pietro + Occhetto)	2	4.4
Centre Union	6.5	5	5.9	5	5.6

The table shows results only for the parties that have obtained seats in 2009. Small parties that did not pass the threshold of 4% introduced for the EP elections in 2009 are not shown in the table, even if they obtained seats in 2004.

* Overseas districts are not included.

A comparison of the results of the different elections requires some specifications. As it is well known, after the political turmoil of the early nineties and the collapse of the old parties, the Italian party system has been rather fluid. Many new parties were created at different waves, some of which are the successors of older and more established parties, some others are completely new, some others as the People of freedom and the Democratic Party (currently the two main parties) are the results of party mergers. The Italian party system is now characterised by these two main parties, a regionalist party (Northern League), a single-issue party (Italy of Values) and a centrist party (Centre Union). Other minor and fringe parties failed to gain representation both in the national and in the European parliament. Despite the fluidity of the party system in the recent past, the results of 2009 and 2008 can be compared directly as the party system presents exactly the same format in these two occasions. However, the parties contesting the 2004 EP elections were different from those of 2009. For this reason, in order to make the data comparable, in table 1 (above) the vote share for the parties that have merged respectively into the People of freedom and into the Democratic Party have been aggregated.¹¹

The EP elections of 2009 took place fourteen months after the general elections of 2008. In terms of the electoral cycle, this can be considered a transitional period, when the honeymoon between voters and the winners, as a result of the most recent first order elections, is not completely over and the eventual discontent of the electorate for the government's lack of compliance with its electoral promises had not time enough to mature. As a matter of fact, the share of the vote for the incumbent governing parties (45.4% was the combined vote for People of freedom and Northern League) was overall identical to that in the last general elections (45.6%), while they substantially increased their votes compared to the EP elections of 2004 (when they had been in government for three years). However, it should be noted that this

¹¹ Note that in 2004 other minor parties joined a common list with Left Democrats and *Margherita* but they did not merge into the Democratic Party when it was founded in 2008. However, these parties are very small and have almost disappeared from the party system, so their part in the share of votes for *Olive Tree* in 2004 should be thought as minimal.

achievement was the result of a realignment of votes within the coalition in favour of the radical Northern League (+1.9%) and at the expense of the party of the Prime Minister, People of freedom (-2.1%). Hence, although it is not possible to talk about the end of the honeymoon of voters with the incumbent government, it is still possible to see some clear sign of unease. Particularly, under the form of a decline of the support for the Prime Minister and for his party to the benefit of the more radical Northern League, a party with radical demands on immigration and territorial politics¹² that maintains a distinctive profile of “opposition within the government.”¹³ It is difficult to tell how much the scandals involving Berlusconi had an influence on the vote for his party. Certainly, the expansion in the support for the government and, more specifically, for the Prime Minister that has been registered by the opinion polls since Berlusconi came to power in 2008 came to a halt in 2009. It remains to be seen from this point on whether the popularity curve will follow the usual trend, i.e. a decrease of popularity for the government in the middle years of the legislature and, eventually, an increase toward the end.

The opposition did not experience a victory that could allow the use of the results of this ballot as a domestic challenge against the incumbent government. On the contrary, the Democratic Party reached 26.1% of votes with a loss of 7.1% compared to the general elections of 2008 and of 5% compared to the EP elections of 2004. Its electoral gap from the main party adversary People of freedom reached this time a high of 9.2%. This was in some part due to the electoral success of another opposition party, Italy of Values (+ 3.6% compared to the general elections of 2008 and +5.9 compared to the EP elections of 2004), whose opposition to the government in general and to Berlusconi in particular has always been more uncompromising. This party is also characterised by a rather populist rhetoric.¹⁴ Hence, as for the Northern League, the electoral success of this party confirms the expectation that minor, radical and protest-based parties perform well in second order elections at the expense of major and mainstream parties. In the end, these two parties were described by the media as being the real winners of the elections where, it should be noted, they reached their maximum electoral share ever.

Also the moderate Christian democrat Centre Union did well in these elections (6.5%) and strengthened its electoral basis. Otherwise, other opposition parties did well enough to secure some seats only if the electoral system remained the same as the one in place between 1979-2004. However, since the creation of the People of freedom and Democratic Party, these two large parties have colluded in order to exclude minor parties from the political scene.¹⁵ They denied any alliance to them both in the general

¹² The party proposed the secession of the Northern regions from the rest of the country in the mid-nineties and has then evolved into more moderate demands for federalism, in particular from the point of view of taxation and distribution of resources.

¹³ See: Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, 'The Northern League in the second Berlusconi Government: in a League of its own'. *West European Politics* Vol 28, pp. 952-72.

¹⁴ An anti-elite appeal characterises the discourse of this party and of his leader Di Pietro who repeatedly depicts the national elites as corrupt.

¹⁵ It should be underlined that in the past small parties showed an exceptional rapacity for public office during the phase of government formation resulting in their disproportionate formation weight. As well, they showed a disproportionate veto power in the agenda setting and in the policy-making of the government, resulting in an equally disproportionate coalition weight. This caused the revenge of the major parties that agreed on various strategies in order to exclude minor parties from representation.

and in the EP elections. As a consequence, many minor parties are not represented in the national and in the European parliament due to their failure to pass the electoral threshold. It should be added that some fringe parties tend to be extremely litigious, for example this time two alternative communist lists contested the EP elections separately (obtaining respectively 3.4% and 3.1% of votes). This share of vote for the extreme left is about double that obtained in the 2008 general elections when strategic voting penalised these parties to the benefit of the Democratic Party. Clearly, they would not pay the costs of strategic voting that is most common in first order elections, so they would be able to pass the electoral threshold of 4% if just they contested the elections with a joint list.

Conclusions

The EP elections of 2009 took place during a transitional period of the electoral cycle when the second order effects of these elections are somewhat mitigated. However, clear signs of a decline in the honeymoon of voters with the Prime Minister and with his party were visible. Furthermore, minor and protest-based parties did better in these elections than in first order elections. They also did better than mainstream parties, as the former increased their vote share at the expense of the latter. This provoked some consequences for the domestic scene. For example, immediately after the vote, the Northern League negotiated with the Prime Minister his withdrawal from supporting a referendum that would take place two weeks later and that was meant to change the electoral law for the general elections. If the yes vote would prevail in the referendum, one of the two major parties would be able to secure a majority in the parliament without making any alliance with smaller parties such as Northern League, as a majority bonus would be attributed to the party (and not to a coalition as it is the case today) gaining more votes. Although until that time, Berlusconi supported the yes vote to defend a legitimate interest of his party, after the EP elections he succumbed to the request of the Northern League and withdrew his support. With a turnout of only 23.3% the turnout failed to pass the quorum of 50% and so the referendum was simply rejected. This is certainly a side effect of the electoral achievement of the Northern League in these elections. It is easy to predict that the success of the Italy of Values will also increase the bargaining power of this party with the Democratic Party. Finally, the Italian vote of 2009 confirms the second order nature of the EP elections under the point of view of the turnout that reached 65%, higher than the EU average of 43%, but definitely lower than any other (national or local) recent election in this country.

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This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and

See: Nicolò Conti, 'On the political 'fragmentation': Stay in or stay out? The role of small parties in the Italian Centre-Left'. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, Vol. 13, pp. 388-404.

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