

The European Parliament elections of 2019 and the Italian electoral earthquakes¹

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In the early 1990s, Italian democracy underwent a series of important changes in terms of its political system and party system. A number of scandals caused by corruption, as well as judicial investigations, contributed to the decline of the major political parties and to the delegitimisation of party leaders. Within this context, centre-right forces emerged from the fusion of post-fascist parties, Christian Democrats, and the ethno-regionalists of the North League (LN), which succeeded in solving the problem of the leadership immediately taken over by Silvio Berlusconi (thanks to his political and economic influence).

Meanwhile, centre-left forces were facing a decrease in the number of their members and an inability (and unacceptability), despite the strategic and intensive use of primary elections, to provide strong and long-lasting leadership that could counteract Berlusconi. This framework led to the bipolarisation of the system through the development of two large and heterogeneous coalitions competing with each other for control of the government of the country. With the rise of Matteo Renzi, the new leader of the Italian centre-left, the Berlusconi era seemed to have passed and this new, charismatic young leader had a real opportunity to remain in government for several years.

However, a new political force, the M5S was founded, succeeding in a short space of time in reaching unexpected prominence and, in the general elections of 2013, becoming the leading political party in Italy, thus transforming the bipolarity of the Second Republic into a real tripolarism.

After this “political earthquake” of the 2013 national elections, the Italian party system suffered a further violent shock in 2018, with the consolidation of the centre-right and the Five Star Movement (M5S) as the major parties.

In this context, the electoral geography of Italy has changed radically: the North is now controlled by the centre-right parties; the South by the M5S, with over 43% of the votes reached in general election; and in the middle of the country, in the so-called “red zone”, once the unconquerable fiefdom of the left, there is now the most fierce and open competition for seats. The rapidity and intensity of these changes have overturned the established norms of the system, such as the dominance of the left in the “red zone”, and the “moderate and pro-government” tradition of the South.

After the second upheaval, M5S and the (formerly, Northern) League struck a five-year agreement forming the first coalition government which excluded the ‘mainstream’ parties in 2018. Since the 2019 European elections, after a short initial honeymoon period when they first formed a coalition in 2018, conflicts have emerged between the two allied parties, so

much so that they have called into question the stability of the government itself. Despite the importance of the latest EP elections for EU's future, in Italy, as has always happened in the past, the electoral race was run based on salient national issues. This meant the focus was on the management of migrants and asylum seekers and unemployment. In Italy (as, generally, elsewhere), EP elections are described as 'second-order elections' with national issues occluding EU issues. Indeed, in Italy, EP elections have never been particularly Europeanized, with Italian parties unable to plan their electoral strategies in relation to a programme in common with the pan-European political groups.

The main political actors in Italy's last European election campaign (2019) were the leaders of the two government parties: Matteo Salvini's League, which received the highest percentage of votes ever recorded in such elections (34.3%), and Luigi Di Maio's M5S, which, in contrast, received its lowest percentage since 2013 (17.1%). The competition between the two allied parties transformed the EU election into a battle for the role of the foremost political party in Italy, and this had consequences for government policy. The overtaking of M5S by its governmental ally, the League, caused a new political earthquake, increasing the government's already high volatility and replacing the left/right dimension with a variety of alternative directions.

This latter situation has meant that the government has been able to mix a number of policies historically connected with both the right wing and the left. Moreover, in just a few years, under Salvini's leadership, the main Italian political party, the League, has been turned from a northern ethno-regionalist party into a national right-wing party. While after the 2018 elections, the North was represented by the League and the South by the M5S, after these last EP elections, the League has made itself into more of a national party than its governmental ally, becoming a pivot of both national and territorial government.

In this new scenario, the position of League now represents the most critical one with regard to the EU and may push the Italian government to force for greater sovereignty over its own affairs. Thus, the most important factor which has been brought into play is that the 'soft' Eurosceptic parties, with fundamental and deep-seated objections to the EU but where, at least for the moment, this stops short of wanting to leave, now have more votes than the pro-EU forces. The question is - why did the soft Euroscepticism win in Italy? One important reason was that Salvini prevailed in two crucial issues. First of all, that of the synergy between immigration and security - two sovereignty issues in regard to which he enjoys more trust than other Italian politicians. Second, Salvini has always been perceived as the protector of Italian interests, and as a proponent of "Italy first". There is reason to question to stability of the current government. However, Salvini is an experienced politician who dominates the government, and his attention is on the appointment of the Italy's EU Commissioner, the flat tax and the Turin-Lyon high-speed railway (TAV).

Waiting to understand the results of the negotiation between the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and the Italian Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, on the appointment of the new Italian Commissioner, the internal debate is focused on a flat tax

proposal and TAV. The first regards an important tax reform of the political programme of the League, which concerns a reduction in taxes from the five thresholds currently foreseen in Italy (between 23% and 43%) up to a threshold equal for all of 15%, safeguarding a no-tax area for low incomes. The second issue regards the main discussion between the two parties' orientation on the Turin–Lyon high-speed railway, an old infrastructural project that will connect the two cities and link the Italian and French high-speed rail networks. In the past few years, the project has been criticised for its high cost and potential environmental risks during the construction of the tunnel. For these reasons, since the beginning, the M5S has supported the 'No TAV movement' becoming its main political referent. On the other side, the League has always been in favour of building the infrastructure, causing deep division within the Italian coalition government.

At the moment, the League of Salvini is strong in Italy, but within the EP, for example, it has less influence than the Democratic party (PD), and having chosen to stay away from the only parliamentary group where it might have had real impact, the European People's Party (EPP), it risks being isolated.

On the other hand, even the M5S in Europe seems to have some problems. In fact, to date, after the farewell to Farage in the last legislature, the 14 MEPs have not yet formalised their membership of any political group, despite attempts to find an agreement with various groups: from the Greens to the Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left to the Renew Europe Group.

In this context, the tension between the two Italian allies has also shifted to Europe. Just consider, in fact, the split of the vote in the European Parliament that brought Ursula von der Leyen to the presidency of the Commission with the M5S voting in favour, while the League voted against. Each of the parties considers the vote of the other political force a betrayal. Indeed, without the 14 votes of the M5S, the former German minister would not have been elected. In short, after the electoral earthquake that saw them as protagonists, now they seem to withdraw into themselves. Why is there this division of Italian populists in the European Parliament too?

Both parties try to characterise themselves in Europe as the defenders of the Italian people, threatened from above by the elites and, from below, by many dangerous 'others', especially immigrants. Both try to show that they have an international political role, for example, Di Maio with China and Salvini with Putin's Russia, but also Prime Minister Conte who enjoys good relations with Trump. Each political party represents the alternative to the other, thinking their time has come, and believing they are part of a wave that will sweep the world and change politics and its actors.

And in these changes, what happens to the now-former mainstream parties? Although Silvio Berlusconi has returned to the EU parliament after several years (being 82 years old, he is now the senior MEP), and has almost become a symbol of a Europeanism of the centre-right, and although David Sassoli, a former centre-left journalist and moderate PD politician was elected president of the European parliament, in Italy, the mainstream parties seem

destined to further reduce their influence and their ability to manage social problems. Therefore, they are ceasing to be a legitimate guide to what is happening both within the country and in terms of its foreign policy.

In this context, the parties' attempt in recent years to involve distant people has met with a fluid and mobile approach to an indefinite and changeable electoral market. From this perspective, representative government, not only in Italy, remains an elite government where the affirmation of one new elite corresponds to the decline of another. The perception of the current crisis reflects the disappointments of previous expectations and the representative government, although democratic, failed to shorten the relationship between representatives and their constituencies.

Indeed, the growth of distance in the representation relationship has developed new forms of anti-politics and populism, sometimes related to each other, other times not, in which the distrust of politics and its manifestations have taken on a 'karstic trend': running underground, emerging periodically, with clear reference to particularly deplorable events and behaviours of the parties and the political class, leaving space, at times, for the affirmation of media populisms with tendencies towards the acclamation of leadership.

In short, the situation in Italy seems to have settled around two party visions that are currently contending for government leadership. It looks like a new balance of the Italian political system, until the next political earthquake.

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