



The General Elections in Italy: An Assessment

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Italy's new government was sworn in on 1 June 2018, three months after the general elections were held on 4 March 2018. This is Italy's 67th government in the last 72 years. The new government comprises of two populist parties, which are critical of the EU, friendly to Russia, and share a few joint political goals. The one party, Lega, draws the majority of its support from the wealthy north while the other, Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle, M5S), has its roots in the comparatively poor south. The government, finding common grounds, has pledged to pursue a host of populist policies, including reclaiming national sovereignty from the European Union over issues ranging from border protection and immigration to economics and finance.

The paper analyses the Italian elections of 4 March 2018, identifying major parties and the issues which were raised during the campaign. The paper also tries to analyse the formation of the government, mandate that the new government presented, and the emerging relations between the new government and the EU.

Background

The Italian general elections of March 2018 took place in the context of a threefold crisis: an economic crisis, a migratory crisis and a representation crisis. Economically, Italy was particularly affected by the economic crisis of 2007-08, then by the sovereign debt crisis of the Eurozone in 2010. The repercussions of the crisis were low growth, high unemployment and unstable banking system. It has suffered from double-dip recession as the policy-makers imposed budget cuts to try and rein in the country's massive debt - \$2.8 trillion, i.e. over 130 per cent of gross domestic product. Although unemployment rate in Italy decreased to 10.7 per cent in 2018 as compared to 11.1 per cent in 2017, it is still in double digits.¹ According to the latest Eurobarometer polls, unemployment is the main issue facing Italy with 48 per cent votes followed by immigration with 35 per cent vote.²

The country was also hit hard by the migratory crisis that reached its peak in 2015 because it is one of the main points of entry into the European Union, through its geographical position in the south of the Mediterranean. Italy is one of the countries (along with Greece, and to a lesser extent Cyprus and Malta) where the larger part of the refugees trying to reach Europe arrives by boats. Although the number of migrants arriving in Italy has declined, the issue remains at the forefront of political and social debate. Italy received almost 16,739 migrants in 2018 (since January-May) as compared to 119,369 migrants in 2017, 181,436 in 2016 and 153,842 in 2015. The majority of the migrants are from African countries, with Tunisia (21.6 per cent), Eritrea (17.4 per cent) and Nigeria (7.2 per cent) as the top three countries.³

Lastly, there is a crisis of political representation in Italy. The general election of 2018 was Italy's first since 2013, when the government led by the centre-left Democratic Party's (Partito Democratico, PD) Enrico Letta succeeded the caretaker administration of Mario Monti, a technocratic government which stepped in after Silvio Berlusconi resigned in the midst of Italy's debt crisis in 2011. The government managed to fulfil its full five-year term, although it was a difficult road for three different prime ministers. Matteo Renzi had succeeded Enrico Letta in 2014, after the party called for him to step aside to make way for a new government. However, Italy has been led by a caretaker government since 2016 when Prime Minister Matteo Renzi resigned. He had pressed for constitutional reforms⁴ to reshape the legislature staking his leadership on the referendum on the issue, which the Italian voters rejected with 59.1 per cent vote.⁵ Paolo Gentolini, member of Democratic Party, was appointed as a temporary prime minister until the next elections.

The Italian General Elections, 4 March 2018

The elections of 4 March 2018 can be considered as a three-way competition between centre-right, centre-left and Five Star Movement, although there were a number of small parties also in the fray. The centre-left coalition was led by Democratic Party under the leadership of former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. The centre-left coalition included support from smaller parties such as Piu Europa (pro-European), Lista Insieme, and Civica Popolare. Among the pledges made by the PD were an increase in the minimum wage, increased child benefits and tax breaks for parents. The PD also called for closer EU integration involving a directly elected European Commission president and the creation of a finance minister for the Eurozone. It also called for renegotiating the EU's fiscal compact and slowing down budget deficit reduction while capping the deficit at 3 per cent of GDP. It also said it would push for changes to EU Dublin regulations which oblige asylum-seekers to be processed in their country of first entry, and proposed withholding EU funding from Member States that refuse to take in migrants.

The centre-right coalition was led by former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. The other leading party of this alliance was the Lega, an anti-south, anti-immigrant party led by Matteo Salvini. There were also smaller parties like Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) and Noi con l'Italia (Us with Italy). In terms of policy proposals, both the Lega and Forza Italia pledged to introduce a flat tax, i.e. a single income tax rate. The centre-right parties said they

would bring in a change to national law which would give the Italian constitution precedence over EU legislation. The parties also called for a reform of the Dublin regulations on processing of asylum-seekers in the country of entry. The Lega also wanted to stay in the EU provided that the EU Treaties were revised, returning to the status of the EU prior to the Maastricht Treaty. On immigration, Salvini pledged that the Lega would implement a plan to deport 100,000 undocumented migrants a year over five years.

The third key player is the Five Star Movement led by Luigi Di Maio. The Five Star Movement emerged in 2009 as an anti-establishment, Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, and pro-green party outside of the traditional Italian political spectrum. The Five Star's most important pledge was the proposed introduction of a "citizens' income". This would enable unemployed people to be paid €780 a month, provided they perform weekly community service and actively seek work. They also called for bringing down the public debt by 40 percentage points over the next decade; replace 2011 pension legislation to allow earlier retirement. Also to trim privileges of politicians and well-off pensioners and reorganize public companies and agencies; hire more police and build two new prisons; work on international treaties to help repatriation of migrants; separate banks' retail and investment arms and create a public investment bank.

Beside these, there were other minor parties and coalitions like the Revolutionary Left and Communist Party, CasaPound and Italia agli Italiani (Italy for the Italians).

Elections Result

The elections were held under the new electoral laws called Rosatellum⁶, which were passed in 2017. The voters' turnout was 73 per cent as compared to 75 per cent in 2013. The election delivered a hung parliament as no party was able to cross the 40 per cent threshold required for forming a majority government. However, the most important take-away from the elections was high levels of support for the Five Star Movement and Lega. The Five Star Movement won 32.7 per cent of votes as compared to 25 per cent in 2013, doing particularly well in the South where it won the vast majority of seats. The centre-right coalition together got nearly 36 per cent of the vote. An important shift within the centre-right coalition was with the Lega – previously the junior partner - finishing ahead of Forza Italia. The Lega won 17.4 per cent of votes quadrupling its 4 per cent vote share received in 2013. The Lega was also able to win votes in Italy's southern regions for the first time, establishing itself as a national force throughout Italy. Overall, the centre-right was dominant in the northern regions. Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni's Democratic Party suffered a major defeat, scoring about 19 per cent votes, prompting Matteo Renzi to step down as party leader. In total, the PD's centre-left party coalition scored just under 23 per cent. The centre-left remained the leading force in parts of its traditional centre-north strongholds (in Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna).

Formation of the New Government

Italy found itself in a political deadlock after the results of the 4 March 2018 general elections as no party was able to cross the 40 per cent threshold needed to reach a majority in parliament. Lega and M5S launched talks on 4 April 2018 to form the government. After a third round of

consultations failed to break the stalemate, President Sergio Mattarella warned on 7 May 2018 that he will form a “neutral” caretaker government or call elections in July. The M5S and the Lega asked for more time to resolve the “key issues”. In a major step forward, the two parties published on 18 May 2018 a joint policy programme for their would-be populist coalition government, declaring Giuseppe Conte as the next proposed Prime Minister of Italy.

However, President Mattarella rejected Conte’s nomination of Paolo Savona, who is extremely critical of Italy’s Eurozone membership, as finance minister. This resulted in Giuseppe Conte having to resign on 27 May 2018. The leaders of MS5 and Lega, Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini, denounced the veto, decrying what they called meddling by Germany, ratings agencies and financial lobbies. Di Maio also called for President Mattarella to be impeached.⁷ President Mattarella defended his decision by saying that naming Savona as finance minister posed a risk to Italian families and citizens, because it created uncertainty in the Italian economy. On 28 May 2018 Mattarella appointed economist Carlo Cottarelli as prime minister, giving him the mandate to form a potential technocrat government. However, in a last-ditch bid to revive their coalition, MS5 and Lega offered a compromise candidate, Giovanni Tria, in place of Paolo Savona, who was proposed as European Affairs Minister. This led to a breakthrough with President Mattarella giving Giuseppe Conte a mandate for a second time and approved his list of cabinet ministers, paving the way for them to be voted in. The new government of Italy was sworn in on 1 June 2018 with Matteo Salvini as the interior minister and Luigi Di Maio as the minister of the newly-created joint ministry of labour and industry. Both leaders would also serve as deputy prime ministers.

Contract for the Government of Change

Almost three months after its general election on 4 March 2018, Italian parties were able to form a new government on 1 June 2018, with Giuseppe Conte as the new Prime Minister. His cabinet is formed largely of relative political novices from the two parties. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte called his country’s new government proudly populist and anti-establishment as he outlined a sweeping vision for overhauling its migration system, renegotiating its relationship with Europe and moving closer to Russia. He said the new government “brought a radical change that we are proud of.” The label populism, he said, fit “if populism is the attitude of the ruling class to listen to the people’s needs,” while the label anti-establishment fit “if anti-system means aiming at introducing a new system able to remove old privileges and encrusted power.”⁸

A joint programme of the two parties called the “Contract for the Government of Change” was released in May 2018. It represents a blueprint for the future course to be taken by the government. The Contract for Government reflected a number of themes around which the two parties had converged. These included: a roll-back of pension reforms; a more critical approach towards the EU, including a call for reform of Eurozone rules and relaxation of EU-imposed budgetary constraints; a tougher approach on migration; and, an ‘opening’ to Russia.

A 20 per cent tax for high-income individuals and companies and a 15 per cent flat tax for the rest is one of the proposals meant to deliver much-needed relief for ordinary Italians and

small and medium enterprises (SMEs) struggling with hefty taxes. The flat tax was part of Salvini's electoral campaign, and it helped him cement the Lega's dominance of the north, where the country's most productive SMEs are located. A basic income of €780 (\$922) a month for unemployed Italians is also in the coalition's programme. This was a key proposal of the Five Star Movement during the election and helped them succeed in the south, where high unemployment is the most pressing socio-economic problem. The two parties plan to complement these measures with a reversal of recent pension reform and the reduction of retirement age.

More importantly, the two parties have a clear anti-immigrant plan. The contract pledges accelerated processes to examine asylum applications and repatriate rejected applicants, with the objective of removing irregular migrants from Italy within 18 months of arrival. Also, repatriation centres would need to be set up across the country, with at least one in each Italian region, with a capacity sufficient to host all irregular migrants in Italy. It also called for an audit of humanitarian missions using Italian ports to disembark migrants, and pledged a crackdown on trafficking operations. They also call for other EU states to take a bigger share of asylum seekers and the scrapping of the Dublin Regulation, which relegates responsibility for incoming migrants and refugees to EU Border States. The contract called on the EU to recognise that Italy represents an external border which needs "to be adequately protected in order to guarantee the principle of free movement of persons and goods." To this end, it states that reforms are required in relation to the management of EU funds allocated to Italy.

With regard to EU policy, while the contract refers to the need to revise Eurozone governance rules and criticises the dominance of the free market over the social dimension of the EU in recent years, it makes no reference to the parties' previous calls for Italy to withdraw from the euro. The contract states that the EU Treaties need to be renegotiated and with greater attention paid to principles in the Maastricht and Lisbon treaties, promoting "balanced and sustained economic and social development." In addition, the contract states that the government would oppose aspects of EU international trade negotiations, including on the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which "lead to an excessive weakening of citizens' rights and also damage fair and sustainable competition in the internal market." The contract also calls for strengthened EU co-operation in justice and home affairs and a strengthening of the European Parliament "as the only EU institution with direct democratic legitimacy"

In tackling Italian debt, the contract stated that "The government's actions will target a programme of public debt reduction not through revenue based on taxes and austerity, policies that have not achieved their goal, but rather through increased GDP by the revival of internal demand". The Contract referred to the failure of austerity policies in bringing down Italy's debt and instead suggests that debt will be reduced through economic expansion. It refers to the need to boost internal demand through investment with a multiplying effect and policies to boost the spending power of families. In order to facilitate this approach, it argues for the need for the European Commission to remove 'productive public investment' from deficit calculations.

In foreign policy, the emphasis was placed on centrality of national interest and on bilateral and multi-level promotion. The membership for the Atlantic Alliance was confirmed with the United States of America as a privileged ally. The contract also called for an opening to Russia, to be perceived not as a threat but as an economic partner. It also highlighted that it was appropriate to withdraw sanctions imposed on Russia, to be rehabilitated as a strategic interlocutor for the resolution of regional crises (Syria, Libya and Yemen). It called for considering Russia not as a military threat, but a potential partner for NATO and for the EU.

The contract proposed to slash the number of parliamentarians to 400 members of the lower Chamber of Deputies and 200 members of the Senate (reduced from 630 and 318 respectively). It also proposed introduction of a binding mandate, to prevent the practice of members of parliament crossing sides and joining another political grouping other than the one they were originally elected on. In addition, the contract proposed strengthening the role of referendums in Italy's policy-making, through the introduction of propositional referendum (whereby citizens can propose the introduction of laws). Abrogative referendums (to cancel existing laws, or parts of them) are already possible under the Italian constitution, and the contract proposes increasing their potential scope by abolishing the existing quorum whereby a majority of all those eligible need to vote for the result to be binding.

Reactions to the New Government

Reaction to the new government was wary, with concerns running high about Italy's massive debt and the future of the EU and its single currency. The swearing-in of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte prompted an appeal from European Council President Donald Tusk not to abandon the EU. "Your appointment comes at a crucial time for Italy and the entire European Union," Tusk said in a letter to Conte. "To overcome our common challenges, we need unity and solidarity more than ever."⁹ European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said "Italians need to work harder, be less corrupt and stop blaming the EU for the problems of the country's poor south... We will help them as we always did. But don't play this game of loading the EU with responsibility." The remarks earned a furious response from Lega's Matteo Salvini.¹⁰

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said she would communicate with a new Italian government in an "open-minded way" amid political turbulence in Rome that has stirred fears of another euro zone crisis. Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa said Italy showed that Europe has to stand together to avoid turbulence. He said "Italy (illustrates that) when we react too late to the causes of crises, we generate undesirable phenomena like populism, extremism and nationalism". Adding that "Europe needs to work quickly to avoid and prevent situations like this,"¹¹ French Economic Minister Bruno Le Maire for his part said that the stability of the eurozone will be at stake if a populist new government in Italy fails to keep its financial commitments. "If the new government takes the risk of not respecting its commitments on debt and the deficit, but also the clean-up of the banks, the financial stability of the eurozone will be threatened," Le Maire said. "Everyone must understand in Italy that Italy's future is in Europe and

nowhere else, and if this future is to be in Europe, there are rules that must be respected,” he added.¹²

Italy’s New Government and European Union

Europe is set to enter a new period of political uncertainty after the two populist parties in Italy, Lega and M5S, agreed to form the government. Their main aim, as evident from their Contract for the Government of Change, is to challenge the fiscal constraints that govern the single currency in order to implement a package of tax cuts and spending increases. While both Five Star and the Lega insist they are not considering Italy leaving the euro, their combative approach towards Brussels threatens a rift with the EU and large member states including France and Germany. Italy’s new government has started its mandate on a collision course with Europe, as top ministers from the Lega and the Five Star Movement threatened to take a harsher line on migrants and implement a number of spending measures.

Prime Minister Conte in his Senate speech on 5 June 2018¹³ criticised the EU’s failure to manage the migration situation and said the government would call for a revision of the Dublin regulations and a sharing of responsibilities for hosting asylum-seekers. He pledged that the government would tackle the “business of migration” which he said had increased “under the cloak of a fake solidarity” but asserted that “we are not and will never be racist.” This combative approach was also very much visible when country’s interior minister, Matteo Salvini, the Lega’s leader, sparked a crisis by closing the country’s port to a foreign-flagged migrant rescue ship, Aquarius, containing 600 migrants, insisting that the Maltese authorities allow the boat to disembark in Malta instead. Salvini said he would be blocking another rescue boat seeking to land migrants in Italy, adding, “Italy has stopped bowing its head and obeying. Now there is someone who says no.” Salvini’s position was also supported by Five Star leader Luigi Di Maio. He said that while Italian naval and coastguard vessels would still be able to rescue migrants and bring them to Italian ports, NGOs would have to “go elsewhere.”

Ahead of a special EU leaders’ mini-summit organised to discuss asylum and migration on 24 June, the Italian government was reported to be angered by draft conclusions stressing the need to counter “secondary movements” (movements of asylum-seekers within the EU once they have already entered a Member State). Prime Minister Conte said he was not ready to discuss secondary movements “without having first tackled the emergency of ‘primary movements’ that Italy has ended up dealing with alone”. Italian Prime Minister Conte then presented a 10-point plan called “European multi-level strategy for migration”, at the summit. The plan foresees protection centres for migrants in transit countries, strengthening the EU external borders, “overcoming” the Dublin asylum system, getting rid of the responsibility of the first country of arrival, and the creation of protection centres in more countries (not only in Italy and Spain). “The rescue obligation cannot become an obligation to process asylum requests on everyone’s behalf”, the document said. Italy also called out to countries not willing to accept refugees, such as the Visegrad Four (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia). “Each state establishes entry quotas for economic migrants,” the document said, adding “It is a principle that must be respected, but adequate countermeasures must be provided for funding with respect to states that

do not offer welcome to refugees,” it said. The text of the Italian proposal called for “shared responsibility among member states” when it comes to handling migrants who arrive by sea at the EU’s external borders. “We can’t take everyone to Italy and Spain,” the document states, envisaging “reception centres in several European countries.”¹⁴

At the European Council Summit on 28-29 June, it was reported that Prime Minister Conte had initially blocked the adoption of the Council’s conclusions, seeking an EU commitment to address Italian concerns on migration before agreeing a joint position on other issues. However, agreement was eventually reached on a plan which would involve some Member States voluntarily taking asylum-seekers arriving in Italy, with processing centres being set up in other EU Member States. The Council also endorsed the plan to establish asylum processing centres outside of the EU.

However, on a positive note, in his first interview since becoming Finance Minister, Giovanni Tria said that the “position of the government is clear and unanimous” that there is “no question of leaving the euro.” He also said that the government was “determined to prevent in any way the market conditions that would lead to an exit materialising.” In addition, Tria said that the government did not plan to revive growth through deficit spending, and that the government would reduce public debt by stimulating economic growth. He said that policy would be “based on structural reforms” which would create better conditions for investment and employment.¹⁵

Conclusion

Italy as a founding member and the third largest economy in Eurozone, used to be among the countries with the highest support for European integration. However, in the last few years, the support for the European Union has dwindled to 23 per cent in 2018 as compared to 26 per cent in 2017, according to the Eurobarometer polls. Although trust in the EU has decreased in Italy, a majority (almost 66 per cent in 2018 as compared to 59 per cent in 2017) of Italian respondents still want to stay in euro, and see themselves as European citizens and identify with Europe (56 per cent in 2018 as compared to 54 per cent in 2017).¹⁶

The latest Italian elections and formation of a populist right-wing government follows the rise of nationalist parties in Central-Eastern Europe, the right-wing turn in Austria and Brexit. It adds to a growing movement which rejects what Europe has become in the decades following the end of the Cold War, as well as its ideological underpinnings. The two halves of the new coalition – the Lega and the M5S – disagree on many issues, but they are united in blaming Italy’s problems on the European Union. Although M5S and Lega managed to form a government together, plenty of problems still lie ahead. Italy’s economy continues to struggle; any confrontation with Brussels will spook markets and investors at a time when Rome needs to be attracting foreign capital. But their biggest obstacle is that neither party has much executive experience. While the two may be able to paper over policy differences temporarily, it remains to be seen how they will compromise their relatively extreme positions for an extended period.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

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² Italy, Standard Eurobarometer 89, Spring 2018

³Migration, Mediterranean, UNHCR <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5205>, Accessed on 13 July 2018

⁴Aim of the Constitutional Reforms: i) Reduce political instability and gridlock: by abolishing the “bicameralism perfetto”, the reforms would give the Lower House sole responsibility for most legislation, including the appointment of governments. This, combined with a new electoral law which guarantees election winners a wide majority in the Lower House, aims at putting an end to unstable governments, while reducing the powers of the Upper House would prevent it from blocking legislation passed by the Lower House. ii) Reduce bureaucracy and the costs of politics: This would be done by increasing the power of the central government on issues that are now dealt with by the regions, and by cutting the number of Senators from 315 to 100. (https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_italys_constitutional_reform_referendum_what_you_need_7199)

⁵Italy Voted No to Constitutional Reforms: This is Why and What Happens Next, The Washington Post, 5 December 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/05/italy-voted-no-to-constitutional-reform-this-is-why-and-what-happens-next/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.e27cb006245f, Accessed on 13 July 2018

⁶Italy’s parliament is made up of two houses or chambers: the Chamber of Deputies (or Lower House) with 630 members, and the Senate (Upper House) with 315 members. For any law to get passed in Italy, it needs approval from both these chambers. Italians get two votes, one for each of the houses, and can vote for different parties in each if they wish. In total, 37 per cent of the seats in each house will be allocated via the first-past-the-post system (directly elected), and 64 per cent proportionally (indirectly elected based on lists). Voters can’t split their vote between the first-past-the-post and proportional representation system, so a vote for a first-past-the-post candidate is a vote for the party or coalition they are aligned with. To get more specific, 232 seats in the Lower House and 102 in the Upper House will go to first-past-the-post winners, while 398 and 213 will be awarded based on proportional representation lists. Most of the seats awarded through proportional representation will be based on national lists, though a small number (12 in the Lower House and six in the Upper House) will go to the overseas vote, awarded based on separate lists but still using proportional representation. Also it guarantees an absolute majority (of 340 seats) to the list that obtains at least 40% of the votes. There is a 3% threshold at the national level for entitlement to seats. (<https://www.thelocal.it/20180115/how-does-italys-new-electoral-law-rosatellum-work>)

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¹⁴ *European Multilevel Strategy for Migration*, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 24 June 2018

¹⁵ Italian Finance Minister Giovanni Tria commits to euro, aims to cut debt, DW, 10 June 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/italian-finance-minister-giovanni-tria-commits-to-euro-aims-to-cut-debt/a-44148001>, Accessed on 16 July 2018

¹⁶ Italy, Standard Eurobarometer 89, Spring 2018, Eurobarometer; Italy, Standard Eurobarometer 88, Autumn 2017, Eurobarometer