

# Where does Renzi's victory come from?

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Where does Renzi's victory come from? Most analyses presented in the aftermath of the elections have essentially focused on the description of Democratic Party's success: dealing with its cross-class character, with its ability to increase its support in the Northern areas of the country (and especially in the North-East, so far the Achilles' heel of PD), and so on and so forth. Nothing has been hypothesised about a possible explanation of this success. How has it been possible, for a party achieving 25% of vote share only last year, to reach more than 40% of the votes in the EP elections, traditionally favouring anti-establishment parties? It is true that its renewed leadership played a role. But what is crucial among the various elements differentiating Renzi's PD from the one led by Bersani?

## Two possible strategies

My effort here aims at advancing an explanatory hypothesis grounded on few theoretical considerations and some piece of data: in particular, data from the "Issues, leaders and priorities" survey conducted by the CISE (through CAWI methodology<sup>2</sup>) in the first week of May 2014.

The theoretical argument is straightforward: parties and leaders can attempt to undertake two different strategies in order to aim at electoral success.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally published in Italian on the CISE website. It appears in English for the first time in this book.

<sup>2</sup> The sample collected in the survey consists of 1,600 respondents' representative of the Italian voting age population by gender, age, and geographical area. Weighing is performed by sociodemographic and political variables. The interviews have been collected between the 29th of April and the 9th of May 2014.

1. The first strategy consists of focusing on *divisive* issues. The choice may fall on issues like same-sex marriages or tax cuts (which imply welfare cuts). Such issues usually divide public opinion between supporters and opponents. On such divisive issues, parties typically adopt *positional* strategies: they give prominence to that issue, by advertising their position, if they assess that they have a favourable position on the issue. In general, parties will choose issues satisfying three conditions: a) party supporters more or less agree on the party's position; b) a large number of voters outside the party base also share that position, thus creating a potential electoral gain; and c) other important parties do not play on that same issue (De Sio, 2010; De Sio and Weber, 2011). Based on this model, it is possible to identify the most favourable issues for each party. For instance, based on our survey, the issues satisfying these criteria for a party like the Northern League (LN) are restrictions on immigration and the introduction of welfare restrictions for immigrants; for the Five Star Movement (M5S) they are budget cuts for F-35 fighters, and the adoption of a different model of economic development; for the Democratic Party (PD), key issues are the permanence in the Euro area, and the redistribution of wealth favouring the poorer; and for *Forza Italia* (FI), a key issue is the principle that tax cuts should precede a harsh fight of tax evasion.
2. There is an alternative strategy. It is to focus on issues that almost *unify* the electorate and that are thus essentially considered as *problems to be fixed*. Typical examples are to promote economic growth and the creation of new jobs, to renew the political class and to cut the costs of public administration, and to defend more effectively the Italian interests at the EU level. On these issues, all political parties essentially have the same position (who might disagree?): notwithstanding, parties do not share the same *credibility* in dealing with them. These issues, technically known as *valence issues* (Stokes, 1963; Stokes, 1992) trigger a different kind of competition where parties focus only on issues where they are perceived as more *credible* than other parties (De Sio, 2011). Obviously, this strategy can be pursued only insofar as the political party is considered more credible than the others on at least one issue.

### The data: which strategies were possible?

Taking the two strategies into account, we can now analyse what potential the various political parties had at the beginning of the electoral campaign, by looking at our data. As for the *positional* issues strategy (strategy 1), we can argue that there were no striking differences among parties, as for all of

them, some key issue was available: these are represented by those issues listed above in this article. The only party in a disadvantaged position seemed *Forza Italia*, with the tax cuts as the only issue potentially effective. With reference to the second strategy (problem-solving credibility on valence issues), we already anticipated (in a CISE blog post published on May 9) that our respondents' evaluations about the credibility of political parties were strongly favouring the Democratic Party. For each of 17 shared goals that are relevant for Italy today, we asked respondents to report which party was deemed most credible. In 10 out of 17 cases, the Democratic Party resulted neatly more credible than the other ones (outperforming the second most credible party by 10 percentage points). The M5S resulted the most credible party in only three goals, but also in these cases, the Democratic Party followed at a short distance in the ratings.

However, the key aspect involved those issues considered by respondents as most important: economy and jobs (these were deemed the most important problems by 61% of respondents while only 26% considered a priority to cut the costs of the political class). On both of these economic issues, the M5S ranked even third, after FI; and the distance between PD and FI was 14% ("creation of new jobs") or even 19% ("boost Italian economy"). As a consequence, the PD resulted particularly advantaged in terms of credibility and for the cross-cutting nature of such credibility advantage.

### How is credibility built?

This is a key point, especially when considering that several commentators have pointed out the problems caused to the M5S by a too aggressive campaign. The data show quite clearly that the reputation of better credibility for the PD was already present *before the start of the electoral campaign*. The reason is straightforward: it is widely recognised that the campaign is essentially permanent (Blumenthal, 1980); all actions performed in the political realm contribute to the creation of a reputation of credibility and efficacy.

From this perspective, the weak credibility of the M5S in dealing with the country's problems may originate from the start of the legislature. In fact, in this phase, the strongly noncooperative attitudes towards the other political groups in the parliament and towards a potential government with Bersani suggested that the M5S's priority was more electoral success and ideological purity rather than facing the problems of the country. An ideological attitude on some key issues (even refusing Renzi's proposal to overcome the bicameral legislature—a typical M5S issue—essentially only because it was proposed by Renzi); finally, the almost exclusive attention paid to the fight against the political establishment—ranking first only for a minority of voters—while leav-

Table 1 – Respondents' evaluations about the credibility of the various parties in dealing with the main Italian problems

Who is most credible to...	None really credible (%)	Most credible party (%)	Second most credible (%)	Credibility gap between the first and the second party (% points)	(N)
<i>Issues favourable to the PD</i>					
Promote the role of women in politics and society	36.9	PD 35.2	M5S 10.3	+25.0	(1575)
Boost Italian economy	46.1	PD 28.6	FI 10.0	+18.6	(1575)
Support the Italian education system	47.5	PD 26.7	M5S 8.3	+18.4	(1576)
Better represent Italian interests in the EU	42.1	PD 27.6	M5S 10.5	+17.1	(1576)
Create new jobs	49.6	PD 24.2	FI 9.9	+14.2	(1574)
Reduce delayed payments of the public sector to private businesses	51.6	PD 22.5	M5S 10.0	+12.5	(1576)
Facilitate access to credit for firms and households	46.8	PD 23.3	M5S 12.1	+11.2	(1579)
Reduce bureaucracy	41.5	PD 26.7	M5S 15.6	+11.1	(1570)
Push Europe towards growth rather than austerity	49.2	PD 22.2	M5S 11.3	+10.9	(1576)
Protect the cultural and artistic heritage	53.7	PD 19.8	M5S 9.4	+10.5	(1570)
<i>Issues favourable to the M5S</i>					
Cut the costs of public administration and political class	39.0	M5S 26.8	PD 22.1	+4.7	(1579)
Renew the political class	39.2	M5S 26.6	PD 23.7	+3.0	(1576)
Protect the environment	51.4	M5S 14.8	SEL 14.3	+0.6	(1576)

ing in the background (and without convincing proposals) employment and economic issues.

On the other side, it is easy to understand Renzi's frantic, hectic activism—e.g., widely advertising the anticipation of his first PD staff meeting at 7:30 in the morning—as it was oriented since the very first days as the PD leader, and then as prime minister, to show Renzi's ability to make a difference with concrete actions, as a first example, by building a feasible agreement to change the electoral law and the Senate or by performing an income redistribution effort towards the poorer (a measure reducing taxes for low-medium-income employees by 80€). Finally, by paying attention to the issue of gender discrimination in the formation of the government (Renzi is the first Italian government with a 50% gender balance among ministers) and in the electoral lists. It is not surprising that on this specific issue, the PD is in fact 25% more credible in the score than the M5S. Such effort—as we will observe shortly—has paid off in electoral terms.

### Does credibility really matter for the vote?

Of course, a focus on this strategy would not work if voters do not take into account credibility for their political decisions, i.e., vote ideologically or decide on other reasons. As a consequence, we need to assess to what extent credibility-related considerations have affected vote decisions. This implies the estimation of various linear regression models, whose results are concisely reported in Table 2. In a nutshell, this analysis enables us to evaluate the relative weight of various aspects on the propensity to vote for a certain political party.

In short, Table 2 shows that credibility evaluations had a (surprisingly) high importance. The first column reports the general model, considering estimates for all the political parties (including the smaller ones). In this case, the set of variables included in the analysis allows to “explain” about half (49%) of the variance in propensities to vote each political party reported by each respondents.<sup>3</sup> The key points are quite simple:

1. Sociodemographic characteristics play only a very limited role (about 3% of the variance), confirming what is already known in the literature.
2. Voters' long-term political predispositions (left-right self-placement; closeness to a political party) still represent the most important factor (30%).

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<sup>3</sup> Respondents are asked—for each party—how likely it is that “he/she will ever vote in the future for that party” (on a scale ranging from 0 to 10). Considering that these are individual scores, 49% of explained variance is quite a good result.

Table 2 – Weight of various explanatory factor on the propensity to vote respectively for a party in general and for specific parties

	General model (all parties included)	Specific models		
		PD	M5S	FI
Sociodemographic characteristics (geographical area, town size, gender, age, educational attainment, and occupational status)	3%	4%	6%	3%
Ideology (self-placement on the left-right continuum) and closeness to a political party	30%	32%	31%	49%
Credibility evaluation for dealing with problems	16%	22%	21%	9%
Positioning on specific issues	1%	4%	2%	3%
Total variance “explained” by the model	49%	61%	60%	63%

Note 1: The model estimates the effect of credibility evaluations in a conservative way as it assumes that the closeness to a political party is causally antecedent with respect to the evaluation of credibility while further—omitted—statistical tests suggests the relationship might work the other way around.

Note 2: The dependent variable is a Propensity-to-Vote measure for each political party (PTV) ranging from 0 to 10; the percentages reported in Table 2 represent the differences in the R-squared values between each model and the model including only the previous blocks of—causally antecedent—variables.

3. The fundamental finding is that—quite surprisingly for Italy—credibility evaluations explain a 16% of variance, namely, *more than half of long-term political predispositions*. This is undoubtedly an unprecedented fact for a country that after the fall of the Berlin Wall has been still ideologically polarised by Berlusconi’s ability to revive the fear of communists.
4. Attitudes towards specific issues—linked to strategy 1 previously exposed—appear to have played only a marginal role.

The results produced separately for the three main political parties are even more interesting: credibility becomes even more important to explain individual vote propensities—higher or lower than the average—for the PD and the M5S (respectively 22% and 21% of the explained variance) while FI clearly corresponds to a more ideological profile: scores assigned to this party are driven essentially by previous political predispositions, with an extremely marginal relevance of credibility (or lack of credibility) attributed to FI in dealing with specific problems.

## Concluding remarks

Ultimately, credibility did matter a lot and in an unprecedented way. On the one hand, this gives us a reason to explain Renzi's success (as well as the M5S's neat loss).<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, these results suggest the limited impact of the electoral campaign: reputations of credibility are built mainly through facts, and as a consequence, they are harder to change during the campaign. Following this perspective, the determination of Renzi to provide tangible evidence of his governing activity—e.g., the €80 tax cut and the formation of a gender-balanced government—appear to have made a difference. Differently, the harsh electoral campaigning by the M5S appears to have reinforced the previous perceptions of the M5S's lack of credibility, if any.

At the same time, the evidence presented here allows to better identify Renzi's challenges and problems. He was successful in transmitting the idea that economic and political choices are not necessarily constrained but require choices, effort, and determination: this has induced voters to carefully consider the criterion of credibility in problem-solving.<sup>5</sup>

The problem yet is that credibility can be volatile; it has to be systematically and continuously consolidated with facts and results. Therefore, if Renzi will not maintain his pledges of discontinuity and effectiveness by the next general elections, his political support would be seriously undermined. A partial solution to his problem might be represented by a future consolidation of his electoral result through the construction of an ideological and political profile of the Democratic Party, in a way that would secure ideological support even in case of a crisis of credibility. But this is another story.

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<sup>4</sup> Even neater if we take into account the fact that this was a second-order election in which political parties similar to the M5S should be favoured as suggested by previous international research (Reif and Schmitt, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> This is not self-evident. For instance, in those countries who have signed deals with international financial institutions to release financial aids, the room for manoeuvre in economic policies has vanished to the point that economic issues (thus including the perceptions of competence and credibility) have become almost irrelevant for voting decisions (Magalhães, 2014).

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