

# Introduction: a perfect storm?

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This book is dedicated to the Italian general election of 2013. Like a series of recent elections in other European countries (Spain in 2011, France, Greece – twice – and the Netherlands in 2012) it yielded unprecedented results in terms of incumbent's punishment and party system change. Such results have inevitably been related by most commentators to the emergence not only of the financial and economic crisis, but most importantly to the austerity measures that have been enforced in most countries as a reaction to such crisis. Political change stirred by such austerity measures has represented in all cases a serious challenge to the stability and performance of the party system.

This is clearly the case in Italy as well. However, in the Italian case we can argue that this external shock overlapped with (and to some extent reinforced and precipitated) other long-term processes. It has also combined with additional factors of instability.

The most relevant long-term process is undoubtedly the crisis of the Berlusconi leadership in the centre-right camp [Chiaramonte and D'Alimonte 2012]. After securing a comfortable majority in both chambers in the 2008<sup>1</sup> general election and a honeymoon period of roughly two years, Berlusconi ended up facing mounting scandals and judicial prosecution about his private life and business activity. This combined with an increasing malaise within his own party (the PdL) and with rising scepticism among other European governments and international financial institutions. A first parliamentary challenge occurred in December 2010 following a split inside the PdL led by Gianfranco Fini. Berlusconi survived the vote of no confidence by a very narrow margin. But his government was weakened further by mass protests over his sex scandals in February 2011, and fi-

nally fell in November 2011. By then he had lost his parliamentary majority also as a result of his lack of credibility in enforcing the austerity measures made necessary by the rapidly worsening financial situation. Berlusconi's fall, albeit still far from representing the actual end of his political career, inevitably marked a deep crisis of leadership and a change of equilibria in the centre-right coalition. This affected to some extent the centre-left opposition as well, testifying how Berlusconi's leadership had been a stabilizing force in Italian politics over the last twenty years.

The government crisis did not cause early elections. This was due to a lack of initiative by the leftist opposition and the strong belief held by President Giorgio Napolitano about the risk involved in an electoral campaign waged in the middle of a very serious financial crisis. Napolitano asked former EU Commissioner Mario Monti to form a technocratic government [Marangoni and Verzichelli 2012] supported both by the PdL and the Pd (the two large rival parties, respectively center-right and center-left) as well as the Udc (a minor centrist party). The Monti cabinet, after initially passing some controversial measures with the support of public opinion, lost its effectiveness after few months, paralysed by a series of vetoes of the two main parties on all controversial policy measures.

Two additional factors of instability need to be mentioned. On one hand, Berlusconi's crisis increased the distrust of rightist voters, thus weakening party-voter ties in that camp; on the other hand, as several commentators have observed [Bellucci and Segatti 2013] the formation of a technocratic government has strongly blurred in voters' mind the government-opposition cleavage. The responsibility of the Berlusconi government for the severe economic and financial situation became less clear. As a result the Monti cabinet strongly complicated the blame attribution process performed by voters. Perhaps, in our view, if elections had been held immediately the discontent of conservative voters would have been channelled into a normal incum-

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<sup>1</sup> The only time when such majority emerged, in the three elections held with this system, in 2006, 2008 and 2013.

bent-punishment mechanism, benefiting a constructive opposition (and perhaps ensuring a stable parliamentary majority) without challenging the structure of the party system. Instead, the installation of a technocratic government prevented the effective functioning of such mechanism, and gave way to a protest vote directed against all parties.

Finally, there is one more factor that made the 2013 Italian general election something close to a perfect storm: the Italian electoral system. Italy has a fully symmetrical bicameralism. The House and the Senate enjoy the same powers including that of giving and revoking the confidence to the government. However, the two chambers are elected by different electoral bodies: the voting age for the House is 18, that for the Senate is 25. In 2005 the Berlusconi government passed an electoral reform which introduced in both chambers a proportional electoral system with a strong majoritarian element provided by a majority bonus [D'Alimonte 2007]. In the House the party or coalition with the plurality of the vote at the national level gets 54% of the seats. In the Senate however the majority bonus is awarded at the regional level and not at the national level. This feature, combined with the difference in the electoral bodies of the two chambers, creates the possibility of different outcomes. In addition, the system provides no strong disincentives for third parties. In other words, what was clear before the elections was that the emerging anti-establishment Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S, 5-Star Movement) would find no serious obstacles in the electoral law, and that – in case of a strong success – it could prevent the formation of any majority in the Senate.

And this is precisely what happened, as detailed more systematically in the book. For the first time in Western Europe (excluding founding elections of a new democracy), a new party has achieved a similar percentage of votes in its first election. The M5S obtained – in part unexpectedly, according to previous polls – 25,6% of valid votes (excluding the Aosta Valley and the foreign constituency) and it became the largest party of the country. With this performance it prevented any majority in the Senate which would not include two of the three largest parties. Having declared its unwillingness to enter into any coalition, the result was a *dangerous stalemate*. One of the consequences of such stalemate has been the re-election of Giorgio Napolitano as president for another 7-year mandate (in fact it just happened that his first term expired just at this time). In turn the reelection of Napolitano produced once again the formation of another

oversized-majority government (this time with a political majority, as ministers were drawn from all the supporting parties), with Enrico Letta. A government which currently appears to be facing similar problems to those of Monti.

Before introducing the actual analyses presented in the book, it is worth spending few words about the predictability of such perfect storm. Could all of this be expected? With some immodest honesty, we argue that most of these elements were previously anticipated by analyses published online by the CISE before the elections. In particular, before the elections we concentrated [De Sio and Emanuele 2013] on some key aspects connected to economic voting. First, we expected the economic crisis to play a role. The unprecedented results in all recent elections in a number of European countries provided ample evidence of that. At the same time, as we mentioned earlier it was plausible to expect that the blame-attribution mechanism might act against both the center-left and the center-right (and towards the new Monti list itself), given the sharing of responsibilities in the last year under the Monti government, and therefore that it would benefit the anti-system M5S.

We went further and also advanced some more articulated hypotheses about the actual causal mechanisms behind the effects of the economic crisis, drawing upon the electoral results of regional elections in Sicily in October 2012. Sicily is a geographically peripheral region of Italy, albeit with a crucial position in the Mediterranean Sea, which explains its historical strategic value and its long-standing close relationships with powers such as France, England and the United States. His political traditions, with the exception of limited rebellious populist movements immediately after WWII, have been consistently conservative. Sicilian voters supported consistently the DC (the large Christian-Democratic party uninterruptedly in government in Italy from 1948 to 1992), and later Berlusconi. Historically such continuous government support was exchanged for a very large degree of autonomy, and a generous distribution of resources from the central state, allowing for the development of a pervasive local patronage system. All this ended in the regional elections of 2012 (with very similar results in the general elections of 2013), as Sicily massively turned its cold shoulder to Berlusconi. The steep decline of electoral turnout (especially in urban districts more dependent from patronage) was coupled with the massive success of the M5S, leading to a new surge of anti-establishment

rebellious populism in Sicily, for the first time since 1948. This suggested to us an additional mechanism (compared to explanations based on traditional sociotropic or pocket-book economic voting) by which austerity measures impacted vote choices: the dramatic restriction of resources available for patronage politics. In our view, this might be a parsimonious explanation of political change in Sicily from Berlusconi's fortress to Grillo's stronghold. Moreover this might explain in more general terms how Berlusconi's appeal has decreased, although under his leadership – once he clearly reaffirmed it after the Sicilian elections – the PdL performed better than expected in the general elections. Along with the M5S performance this contributed to the dangerous stalemate that emerged.

The analyses included in this book give a more detailed picture of the outcome we outlined above. They are the product of the activity of the CISE – Centro Italiano di Studi Elettorali (Italian Center for Electoral Studies), which regularly publishes on its website (<http://cise.luiss.it/>) short online reports in Italian dedicated to Italian electoral politics. Such analyses, based both on aggregate data as well as on survey data collected independently by the CISE, are published first on line (shortly after the election day or the collection of survey data) and then have been put together into freely downloadable e-books since 2012, leading to four volumes. Such volumes (composing the CISE Dossier series) are dedicated respectively to the 2012 Italian local elections [De Sio and Paparo 2012], to the evolution in Italian public opinion before the 2013 general election [De Sio and Maggini 2012], to the results of various elections held in 2012 as anticipating trends for 2013 (covering Sicily, various European countries, and the Pd primary) [De Sio and Emanuele 2013] and finally to the results of the 2013 general elections [De Sio, Cataldi and De Lucia 2013].

This book is partially derived from the fourth CISE Dossier. It presents a selection of short analyses on the 2013 general elections, which have been translated and adapted for an international audience with little familiarity with Italian politics. Additional articles published by CISE scholars in international venues have been also included. This effort follows the same philosophy that led to the development of the CISE Dossier series. Our goal is to provide the large community of people interested in elections with short, simple yet rigorous empirical analyses. Such community ranges from journalists to practitioners of politics, to scholars (not nec-

essarily of elections) to ordinary citizens interested in politics. Different audiences will find different materials of interest. But even electoral scholars might find suggestions for hypotheses, to be tested in-depth more systematically. The idea is to provide fresh information that might help foster the development of more structured research questions.

The success of the CISE Dossier series in Italy prompted us to try a similar effort directed to an international audience, by providing a freely downloadable e-book on the latest Italian general elections. In this case we are aware of the additional challenge of documenting and explaining Italian electoral politics to foreign journalists, practitioners and scholars who might not be familiar with it. We lived up to it by using a broader scope, different from the more specialized and technical approach usually found in international publications on Italian elections. We think such a publication performs a useful function. Italy is – after all – the third largest economy in the Eurozone and too often its politics is portrayed abroad in a superficial fashion without the support of fresh data and a proper understanding of the deeper processes lying underneath it. With this book, in spite of its limited scope, we hope to contribute to filling this gap, at least partially.

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