

# Conclusions: what lies ahead?

We introduced this book by suggesting the idea of a perfect storm: a unique combination of factors that led to the outcome of a *dangerous stalemate*. The empirical analyses of this book have detailed a result which can be quickly summarized. Despite the large defeat experienced by Berlusconi's coalition (losing almost half of its 2008 votes), the center-left coalition led by Bersani has failed to achieve the clear success that was predicted by the polls, due (to a large extent) to the explosion of the anti-establishment M5S. This outcome in votes has then interplayed with the awkward electoral law, leading to the lack of a political majority in the Senate.

In terms of explanatory factors, how do the more detailed analyses of the book allow a more precise assessment of their relative importance? First of all, the largest phenomenon is the success of the M5S. The size of such success and its almost perfectly cross-cutting nature clearly suggest the emergence and relevance of a second spatial dimension, centered on anti-establishment stances. The choice by Mr. Napolitano, the Head of State, to not call early elections (which would reinforce a bipolar competition), assembling instead both camps into an oversized majority supporting a technocratic government, has inevitably created the potential for this dimension to become relevant. Such potential has grown together with a low-responsibility, anti-system opposition, somehow echoing memories of the party dynamics of Italy's First Republic [Sartori 1976, 131-132]. The tough austerity measures enforced by the Monti government, along with its clear loss of initiative after a few months (due to the inevitable mutual vetoes of its majority partners) have then converted this potential into actual political support, leading to the huge success of the M5S.

We want to emphasize once again how this potential explanation does not rest on particularly idiosyncratic, Italy-specific assumptions. It only assumes the common blame attribution, incumbent-punishment mechanism characterizing vot-

ers in virtually all contemporary democracies. It should be clear that, if *all* mainstream parties are involved in a government taking unpopular (and to some extent ineffective) measures, punishment of the incumbent will hit *all* of them, and reward an anti-system opposition. Said differently, this problematic vote outcome appears not as a strange behavior of Italian voters, but as a rational reaction by voters to a strange behavior of Italian political elites. Elites who apparently still assume that Italian voters behave differently from voters of other countries.

And this might also partially explain the sub-par performance of the PD. First of all, the PD has inevitably ended up paying some cost-of-government for supporting the Monti cabinet: a problem that already emerged in discussions within the PD in the year before elections. At the same time, the strategic campaign mistakes by the PD leadership cannot be overlooked. Crowned by successful and popular primary elections – where he also defeated the young competitor Matteo Renzi, mayor of Florence – Mr. Bersani was in the position to win elections without huge efforts. But then his campaign has appeared to not perform *any* effort: lacking clear policy choices, lacking media visibility, and most importantly with an unclear and ambiguous stance towards his centrist competitor Monti. Mr. Bersani even declared that the PD would behave as if having only 49% votes, even if obtaining a 51% – suggesting that they would seek an alliance with Mr. Monti even if not needed. No wonder then, that voters looking for clear-cut alternatives would turn to Grillo's M5S.

After the vote, Mr. Bersani's leadership finally collapsed after the collision with the impossibility to obtain the support of the M5S to a PD-led government (due both to the M5S rigidity and to a very cold reception of this scenario by the Head of State). As a result, the choice of an oversized majority revived, and PD and PdL were back in the

same government, headed by Enrico Letta, this time with a political majority where both parties express ministers.

What happened after is history of the present day. Berlusconi was – for the first time ever – officially condemned for a crime, with such verdict confirmed in all three degrees of judgment. This will likely result in its expulsion from the Senate, and an acceleration in the end of his political career. To some extent a crucial development of this process happened in early October 2013, when – for the first time ever – the leadership of Berlusconi's PdL (whose current secretary-general is Angelino Alfano) took a decision that was against Berlusconi's will. Mr. Alfano refused to comply with Berlusconi's request to withdraw the party's delegation from the current Letta government. Thus Alfano stopped Berlusconi trying this desperate move to possibly delay his expulsion as a senator.

The fact that a party places its very interests first – above those of its original founder – might signal the birth of an actual political party. However, the power struggle within the PdL is far from over. As the case of the French Fifth Republic shows, the institutionalization of a charismatic party [Panebianco 1988] might prove complex and problematic. As a result, the PdL has recently split in two on the issue of supporting the Letta government. Mr. Alfano along with all PdL ministers has formed the NCD (New Centre-Right), with Berlusconi, along with radical anti-government rightists, reviving the old Forza Italia name. To some extent, this has made visible the impossibility for Berlusconi to accelerate the fall of Enrico Letta and call early elections – as the NCD alone provides the government with a majority. But, at the same time, the NCD and the PdL are carefully containing mutual conflict only to the government issue. They are fully aware that, in case of early elections, they would have to run together. Perhaps that might even prove more productive, as centre-right voters would be offered two alternatives – one for and one against the Letta government. But it is clear that this would be inevitable, given the current electoral law. A law which does

not appear easy to reform, as mutual vetoes prevent the adoption of substantial changes.

What lies ahead? As Berlusconi's expulsion from the Senate should materialize in the coming weeks, leadership in the centre-left may be also close to a change. The coming open elections organized by the PD for the choice of its secretary-general<sup>1</sup>, to be held on December 8<sup>th</sup>, will likely see the victory of Matteo Renzi. Mr. Renzi, 38, is younger than most Italian political leaders and has openly challenged the current leadership of the PD. After last year's defeat against Bersani, he has both capitalized on Bersani's failure in the general elections, and slightly moved to the left his policy positions. However, its success will likely shift the party's positions towards the center, and in the direction of a major turnover of political personnel. This might increase the appeal of the PD among former supporters of Berlusconi and Grillo, but could create problems with part of the current centre-left electorate. Also, a success of Mr. Renzi will likely threaten the survival of the Letta government. Should Renzi become secretary-general, he might be interested into a premature end of that experience, although he assured his support to Letta, at least until the end of the Italian term for the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, in December 2014. In this scenario, spring 2015 – at the latest – could see new elections, where a more competitive PD could attempt to win a majority in both Chambers. However, with the current electoral law even a clear success might not be enough. And an electoral reform appears beyond the possibilities of the current parliamentary equilibria. As a result, two years after the fall of the last Berlusconi government, uncertainty is still the main keyword to describe Italian politics.

## References

- Panebianco, A. [1988], *Political Parties: Organizations and Power*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.  
 Sartori, G. [1976], *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework of Analysis*, New York, Cambridge University Press.

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<sup>1</sup> The election is open to all citizens above 16.