

Electoral results: The PD from the “majoritarian vocation” to its realisation

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The result of European Parliament (EP) elections is unambiguous: the Democratic Party (PD) led by Matteo Renzi has obtained a neat success reaching a record share of 40.8% of the votes. No centre-left party had previously achieved a similar result. Since the EP elections are held in 1979, the PD is overall the Italian political party that has obtained the highest share of votes ever. If we look at general elections, only De Gasperi in 1948 and Fanfani in 1958 had achieved greater electoral successes in terms of vote shares. Clearly, the same does not hold if we take into account the absolute votes: the PD has obtained about one million votes less in the present EP elections compared to the PD led by Veltroni in 2008 (counting only 33.2% in terms of percentages). The reason lies in the fact that the turnout level registered for those political elections was the 80.5% whereas for the EP elections, the turnout value registered for resident Italian citizens was 58.7%. Whenever the difference in turnout rates becomes so relevant, it is more appropriate to take into account percentage measures to evaluate the electoral performances of a political party in relative terms. The consideration of electoral results by geopolitical area² (Table 1) reveals some interesting patterns. For the first time, the PD reveals a rather homogeneous electoral strength nationwide: if on the one hand, the PD confirms its traditionally highest vote share in the area of the (formerly) Red Belt with the 52.5% (among which stands out the 56.4% obtained in Tuscany),

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² The areas that have been considered include North-West (Piedmont, Liguria, and Aosta Valley), North-East (Lombardy, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and Trentino Alto Adige), the Red Belt (Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Marche, and Umbria), and the South (Lazio, Molise, Abruzzi, Campania, Basilicata, Apulia, Sicily, and Sardinia).

on the other, the PD reaches vote shares beyond 35% also in other geopolitical areas. In particular, it achieves a vote share of 41.1% in the North-West, the 39.1% in the North-East, and the 36% in the South (the area in which the PD registered the worst results). Therefore, the PD remains overrepresented in the regions of the Red Belt and underrepresented in the South. Notwithstanding, it should be acknowledged the superb results obtained in the Northern regions. In particular, the fact that the PD stands out as the first political party in the North-East of the country—namely, in the “white area” formerly dominated during the First Republic by the Christian Democracy and thereafter by “forzaleghismo” (Berselli, 2007) [TN: this expression refers to electoral alliance of *Forza Italia* and the “Northern League”]—is unprecedented. In the North-West, the PD has become the first political party, and the votes it obtained exceed the number of votes collected by all the centre-right political parties: 39.1% versus 35.3%.

To bring the analysis one step further, it is needed to compare the results of the PD with those obtained by the other two main Italian political parties: the Mr. Grillo’s *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (Five Star Movement, M5S) and Mr. Berlusconi’s *Forza Italia* (Go Italy, FI). Grillo’s M5S has achieved 21.2% of the votes at the national level, and the area where its performance has been better is the South of the country (25%). In particular, the regions where the M5S proved to be most successful have been Abruzzi (29.7%), Molise (27.3%), and in the big islands, reaching 30.5% of the votes in Sardinia and 26.3% in Sicily. In the North-West, the Movement has won 22.7% of the votes whereas the areas in which the M5S reported the least satisfactory results include the Red Belt (19.1%) and especially the North-East (17%). For what concerns *Forza Italia*, Mr. Berlusconi’s party has achieved almost 17% of the votes at the national level, characterised by a geographical distribution closer to the one of M5S than to PD’s one. As for Grillo’s Movement, FI also registers its best performance (20.6%) in the South: particularly high vote shares have been achieved by Berlusconi’s party in Campania (almost 24%), in Apulia (23.5%), in Molise (23.4%), and in Sicily (21.3%). Regarding the other geographical areas, FI has become by now a party with average dimensions within the Red Belt (12.2%) although its results are fairly disappointing also in the North-West (15.2%) and in the North-East (15.6%). The result in the North-East is particularly informative because it includes the area of “lombardo-veneto” [TN: area consisting of Lombardy and Veneto], namely, the economically most dynamic part of the country, formerly characterised by the electoral strength of Berlusconi’s party. In this area of the country, neither FI nor M5S obtains satisfying vote shares. Analysing the geographical distribution of the votes, it becomes clear that both the M5S and FI are characterised by a process of “meridionalizzazione” [TN: Southernisation] of the electorate compared to Renzi’s PD. As for the remaining political parties, only the Northern League (LN) led by Matteo

Salvini, the New Centre-Right in alliance with the Union of Christian Democrats (NCD-UdC), and the left-wing list “the other Europe with Tsipras” have passed the 4% threshold, thus obtaining seats in the European Parliament. The Northern League, riding Euroscepticism as similarly done by the *Front National* of Marine Le Pen in France and the UKIP of Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom, has obtained a satisfying 6.2% of the vote share nationwide, with the following geographical distribution: 7.1% in the North-West, 14.1% in the North-East (almost achieving the 20% of the votes in Veneto), 3.6% in the Red Belt, and 1% in the South (where its list was presented anyways). The NCD-UdC has collected 4.4% of the votes, benefiting especially from its electoral strength in the South, where it collected the 6.2% of the votes. Differently, the Other Europe with Tsipras, managing to obtain seats in the European Parliament with its 4%, is the most geographically homogeneous list, considering its vote distribution across the various areas of the country.

To depict more completely the frame of the European elections’ results, I compared the result obtained by the main political parties in the 2014 EP elections with those obtained in the 2009 EP elections and in the general elections of 2013. Table 2 and Table 3 report both absolute vote differences, as well as percentage variations, presented by geographical area. Between 2009 and 2014, the Italian party system is affected by deep changes: new political actors enter the political scene, primarily the M5S; others have changed their name while others still originated from party splits; and so on and so forth. For instance, a split with the People of Freedom (PdL, after renamed with the previous “*Forza Italia*”) has created the NCD led by Alfano. This new party has presented its list in an electoral alliance with the UdC. To produce a meaningful comparison, it has been thus decided to aggregate some political parties belonging to the same political block (Chiaromonte, 2007) taking into account the electoral supply at the 2014 EP elections. Hence, the votes received by FI at the recent EP elections have been summed to the ones collected by the NCD-UdC: in this manner, it becomes possible to compare the votes of the wider political area of FI with those obtained in the past by the PdL and the UdC.³ A similar procedure has been considered for European Choice (*Scelta Europea*), namely, an electoral cartel supporting the ALDE candidate at the EU Commission Guy Verhofstadt and formed by the Democratic Center (*Centro Democratico*), Stop the Decline (*Fare per Fermare il Declino*), and

³ In particular, for the 2009 EP elections, it has been considered the sum of the votes for PdL and UdC, for the 2013 general elections the sum of the votes for the PdL, UdC, *Grande Sud*, and the MIR (the latter two political parties have included their candidates in the FI’s lists at the 2014 European elections).

Table 1 – Electoral results at the EP elections 2014 by geographical area, in absolute and percentage values

Geographical area	North-West		North-East		Red Belt		South		Italy	
	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%
FdI	119514	3.9	247492	3.0	181239	3.3	455792	4.3	1004037	3.7
FI	467074	15.2	1292033	15.6	665210	12.2	2181014	20.6	4605331	16.8
IdV	20955	0.7	46177	0.6	26201	0.5	86360	0.8	179693	0.7
Northern League	218300	7.1	1163819	14.1	198177	3.6	106260	1.0	1686556	6.2
M5S	697326	22.7	1405113	17.0	1045847	19.1	2644579	25.0	5792865	21.2
MAIE	6075	0.2	15238	0.2	8814	0.2	18323	0.2	48450	0.2
NCD-UdC	95692	3.1	295897	3.6	150070	2.7	658044	6.2	1199703	4.4
PD	1262153	41.1	3236590	39.1	2871363	52.5	3802755	36.0	11172861	40.8
European Choice	22335	0.7	56379	0.7	26470	0.5	90973	0.9	196157	0.7
SVP	0	0.0	134881	1.6	2567	0.0	0	0.0	137448	0.5
The Other Europe with Tsipras	131877	4.3	286329	3.5	243021	4.4	441976	4.2	1103203	4.0
Greens	30884	1.0	91747	1.1	46660	0.9	76152	0.7	245443	0.9
Valid votes (turnout)	3072185		8271695		5465639		10562228		27371747	
Entitled voters	5013279		13459754		8342625		22440511		49256169	
Actual voters	3272584		8640217		5689835		11305368		28908004	

Table 2 – Electoral gains and losses for the main political parties by geographical area, at the 2014 EP elections and 2013 general elections (absolute and percentage values)

Party	Differences 2014 EP elections – 2013 General elections											
	North-West		North-East		Red Belt		South		Italy			
	Diff.	Var. %	Diff.	Var. %	Diff.	Var. %	Diff.	Var. %	Diff.	Var. %		
Fdl-AN	40172	33.6	100946	68.9	70537	63.7	126347	38.4	338002	50.7		
Northern League	74076	33.9	38835	3.5	103381	109.1	80108	306.3	296400	21.3		
FI + NCD-UdC	-163296	-29.0	-496243	-23.8	-363864	-30.9	-1342945	-32.1	-2366348	-29.0		
European Choice	-391200	-1751.5	-1255327	-95.7	-569375	-95.6	-1119478	-92.5	-3335380	-94.4		
PD	359555	28.5	861672	36.3	624515	27.8	682932	21.9	2528674	29.3		
SVP + others centre-left	-	-	-11923	-8.1	-	-	-	-	-9356	-6.4		
Tsipras + IdV + Greens	5010	2.7	42380	11.1	-35314	-10.1	-338351	-35.9	-326275	-17.6		
M5S	0	-44.3	-781736	-35.7	-586616	-35.9	-1219014	-31.6	-2896303	-33.3		
Others	-12310	-202.6	-173504	-91.9	-80445	-90.1	-242505	-93.0	-508764	-91.3		

Table 3 – Electoral gains and losses for the main political parties by geographical area, at the 2014 EP elections and 2009 EP elections (absolute and percentage values)

Party	Differences 2014 EP elections – 2009 EP elections											
	North-West		North-East		Red Belt		South		Italy			
	Diff.	Var. %	Diff.	Var. %	Diff.	Var. %	Diff.	Var. %	Diff.	Var. %		
Northern League	-242421	-52.6	-983177	-45.8	-238117	-54.6	28139	36.0	-1435576	-46.0		
FI + NCD-UdC	-697705	-55.4	-1826031	-53.5	-1330551	-62.0	-3103606	-52.2	-6957893	-54.5		
PD	416174	49.2	1294736	66.7	646276	29.0	833633	28.1	3190819	40.0		
SVP + others centre-left	-	-	-13229	-8.9	234	10.0	-	-	-21727	-13.6		
Tsipras + IdV + Greens	-286901	-61.0	-605174	-58.8	-541136	-63.1	-1463638	-70.8	-2896849	-65.5		
Others	-175426	-96.7	-410209	-96.4	-297124	-97.1	-444982	-96.0	-1327741	-96.5		

Civic Choice (*Scelta Civica*). Therefore, the votes for European Choice have been compared to the sum of the votes obtained in 2013 by the parties that have joined this electoral cartel (adding also the votes for Future and Freedom for Italy (FLI), Mr. Monti’s ally in 2013). Finally, another political block is the one formed by the parties on the left of the PD, including the votes for the Other Europe with Tsipras, the Greens, and the IdV.⁴

The turnout level at the past year general elections has been 75.2%. As for the 2014 European ones, the turnout remained slightly below 60%. Almost 6.5 million voters decided to stay at home. Notwithstanding, Renzi’s PD has improved its past electoral performance not only in percentage terms, passing from the 25.4% to the 40.8%, but also in absolute terms as it collected 2.5 million votes more. Considering the marked reduction in turnout, it would have been sufficient for Renzi to collect the same votes gained by Bersani to attain a greater vote share. Instead, he managed to increase that number. Hence, the PD’s success can be deemed “historical,” also considering that the distance with the party ranked second (the M5S) results of about 20 percentage points. Compared to the votes obtained at the general elections, the PD has enlarged its electorate by 29.3%. The geographical area in which the PD has experienced the most significant expansion is the North-East where the Renzi’s party has increased the general elections’ result by 36.3%. Once again, it has to be acknowledged the unprecedented electoral success obtained by the PD in the most productive area of the country where in the past, the left had never accomplished electoral successes. In the South, the registered electoral expansion was 21.9%, smaller than in the other areas of the country. Considering the 2009 EP elections as basis for the comparison, the improvement of the PD becomes even clearer, with an increase of about three million votes (+40%). Also, in this case, the North-East stands out as the area with the most sizable increase in the vote share collected by the PD, +66.7%.

The M5S has lost about three million votes compared to the 2013 general elections, namely, -33.3%. The North-West represents the area in which the electoral loss of the M5S has been more pronounced: in this area, 308,937 voters have abandoned Grillo’s party, namely, 44.3% of those who had previously decided to support the Five Star Movement in this area of the country. Smaller electoral losses have been registered in the South of the country (-31.6%). The political block of FI (FI + NCD-UdC) has lost almost two and a

⁴ For the 2009 EP elections, this block corresponds to the votes for the Communist Re-foundation Party (PRC), the Italian Communists’ Party (PdCI), Left and Freedom (SEL), and IdV; for the 2013 general elections, the votes for SEL and Civil Revolution (*Rivoluzione Civile*).

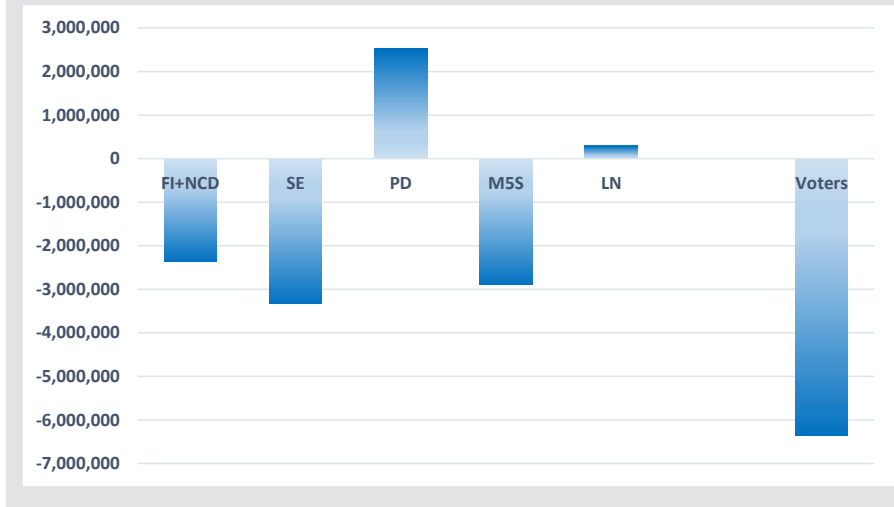
half million votes, namely, 29% of its votes in 2009. The most sizable shrinkage can be observed in the South where the decrease in the number of votes equals 32.1%. Therefore, the South represents the area in which the centre-right political block reports the best electoral performance but also the area in which the losses with respect to the previous general elections are more pronounced. Considering the 2009 EP elections as basis for the comparison, the loss becomes even neater with a reduction of almost seven million votes (-54.5%). Overall, the most sizable electoral shrinkage reported by the centre-right block is registered in the Red Belt, given by -62%.

Among the other parties, the Northern League is the only one to report satisfying results. It has increased its votes both in percentage and absolute terms, respectively, by 2.1 percentage points and 300,000 more votes. This implies an increase by 21.3% compared to the 2013 elections' result. In particular, sizable increases are registered in the Center (+109.1%) and in the South (+306.3%) although the vote shares in these areas remain quite low. Notwithstanding, this could represent how the Northern League campaigned against the Euro to extend its traditional areas of support, adopting an issue proven to be sensitive at the national level further than at the regional one. *Fratelli d'Italia-AN* (Brothers of Italy-National Alliance) led by Giorgia Meloni have campaigned on Eurosceptic positions as well, but they were unable to reach the entrance threshold of 4% (they reported only 3.7%). However, they were able to increase their votes compared to the 2013 general elections (+50.7%), with the greater increase registered in the North-East (+68.9%) and in the Red Belt (+63.7%).

Among the other political parties, the heavier loss has been experienced by European Choice. It has obtained only 200,000 votes, which means a loss of about three million of votes—namely, -94.4%—and a complete debacle in the North-West. The radical left block has lost 17.6% of its previous 2013 general elections' votes, registering more sizable losses in the South (-35.9%), while it has slightly increased its votes in the North-West (+2.7%). Compared to the 2009 EP elections, the electoral loss experienced by this political block becomes more evident with three million votes less (-65.5%).

Figure 1 reports the electoral gains and losses for the various political parties between the political and EP elections in absolute terms to help the reader. The success of the PD results even more evident. Moreover, this success was achieved in an electoral context unfavourable for the PD. In fact, the EP elections represent second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), in which the stake is smaller than in the national elections, where the national government is at stake. Under such circumstances, voters feel more autonomous in their political choices and may decide to punish mainstream parties in case of underperforming political actions. Following this perspective, the EP elections represent an electoral arena particularly favourable to opposition and protest parties. Governing parties (like the PD) are usually disadvantaged based on

Figure 1 – Gains and losses 2013–2014 in absolute terms



the theory of the electoral cycle (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996) unless the EP elections are held during the honeymoon period between the government and the electorate, close to the previous general elections. On the one hand, it is true that the Renzi’s government has taken charge about two months ago, and thus, it is still highly trusted by the public, but on the other, this government was formed without any popular legitimisation, especially in times of economic crisis and high unemployment. In the rest of Europe, the theory of second-order elections has been confirmed, considering that governing parties performed badly (with the partial exceptions of Orbán’s *Fidesz* and Merkel’s CDU). In Italy, the opposite was true. The PD did not only win but it also increased its votes with respect to the general elections, thus becoming the first party in terms of seats within the socialist group in the EP (31 seats out of 191, namely, 16% of the European reference party) and the first party in Europe in absolute values. The Italian paradox is represented by the fact that the M5S—who received three million votes less than in the general elections in a potentially favourable electoral arena as suggested by the second-order elections’ theory for the EP elections—still represents the first antiestablishment party in Europe. Italy thus represent an interesting and peculiar case in the European context. The uncontested and historic electoral success for the PD represents a strong legitimisation for the government led by Renzi, who managed to lead the PD to a result beyond expectations. This does not mean that the PD has settled the victory for the next general elections. As the last 2013 general elections have demonstrated, uncertainty

and electoral volatility represent the salient trait of Italian politics nowadays. The votes, once obtained, have to be maintained, and this will depend on the effectiveness of the government's political action and its reforming ability.

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