

Italy: Complete overturn among government partners – League doubled, M5S halved

IRENE LANDINI AND ALDO PAPARO

Italy was among the countries going to the polls for the European Parliament (EP) 2019 elections on Sunday, May 26th. The electoral system comprises five constituencies, which, however, are not relevant for seat allocation among parties, as this is done purely on the basis of votes received nationwide. Furthermore, there is a 4% legal threshold.¹ In addition to the European Parliament (EP) elections, municipal elections were held in just under half of the 7,915 Italian municipalities – involving roughly a third of Italian voters.²

CAMPAIGN AND COMPETITORS

A total of eighteen lists competed in the European Parliament (EP) elections. The main contenders were identical to the recent general elections, held in March 2018 (Paparò, 2018). Besides the government parties, three other parties were expected to meet the 4% threshold – the Democratic Party (PD), *Forza Italia*, and Brothers of Italy (FDI). Of all other parties, only More Europe (+EU) was considered to be in credible contention for EP seats.

The most salient issues during the electoral campaign were the future of the European Union (EU), management of migrants and asylum seekers, unemployment, and redistribution. However, to put the EP election in context, we should also mention that in June 2018, after the non-decisive results of the general elections, M5S and League formed a coalition government – the first mainstream-free cabinet in all of EU history (Chiaramonte et al., 2018). In the months preceding the EP elections, numerous conflicts emerged. The tensions between the government allies and the prospect of survival of the government itself were also very prominent during the electoral campaign.

Focusing on the main parties, the League represents a particularly interesting case. Formerly an ethno-regionalist party of the North (Tronconi, 2009), in the past five years – under Salvini's leadership – it has turned into a nationwide radical right-wing

1. We must mention that the threshold does not apply to parties representing linguistic minorities, which is the case for the South Tyrolean People's Party (SVP).
2. Moreover, regional elections were held in one of the twenty Italian regions – Piedmont.

party (Passarelli and Tuorto, 2018). This turn proved successful in the 2018 general elections, when the party scored a historic 17.4%, and polls indicated a continuing positive trend. The League is now part of the Europe of Nations and Freedom group (ENF), and it shows the most critical position towards the EU among the main Italian parties. During the campaign, it supported stronger sovereignty for nation States and a sort of pre-Maastricht cooperative model between EU member States – centered on mere economic cooperation. As in 2018, migrant repatriation and stricter rules to secure EU external borders were salient issues in Salvini’s campaign. Fiscally speaking, the League proposed overcoming the economic rigidity imposed by the Fiscal Compact and reducing taxation by means of a low-rate flat tax.

The M5S (Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy, EFDD) also represents a peculiar case in comparative terms (Tronconi 2015; 2018). In 2019, it campaigned mainly on welfare issues, namely the implementation of an EU minimum wage system, stronger welfare provisions for European citizens in need, and a more accessible education system. While the party cannot be defined as completely pro-Europe, it advocated for giving stronger powers to the EP in order to bring the Union closer to its citizens.

The PD (Socialists and Democrats, S&D) approached the EP elections with a newly appointed leader – Nicola Zingaretti. It is one of the most pro-European parties in Italy, and it advocated for a stronger European political and economic leadership at the international level. Besides, the party supported increasing public investments to foster employment, and welfare measures to help disadvantaged groups – such as a European minimum wage. On immigration, the PD stressed solidarity and burden-sharing among EU member states in hosting new arrivals.

Forza Italia (European People’s Party, EPP), once again with Silvio Berlusconi as its main candidate, shared some proposals with the PD – such as the desire for a stronger European leadership on the world stage and increased investments to foster employment. It also agreed with the League on reducing taxes and implementing the flat tax.

Tax reduction was proposed by FDI (European Conservatives and Reformists, ECR) as well. The party also campaigned on abandoning austerity measures and for refocusing Italian economic policies on supporting Made in Italy production. On immigration, FDI supported military controls of European external borders and a “Marshall Plan” for African countries.

Finally, More Europe (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, ALDE) is the most pro-European party in Italy. In its manifesto, Europe was seen as a ‘bastion’ of civil and social rights. The platform also dealt with social issues, especially the proposal of a European system of unemployment subsidy, and the implementation of green economy measures.

RESULTS

In contrast to what emerged in many EU countries, voter turnout in Italy decreased – from 58.7% at the 2014 EP elections to 56.1%. This is in line with the half-a-point-

per-year decline observed since the mid-70s due to generational replacement. Still, this also represents the new historical low for turnout in an Italian nationwide election.

The indisputable winner of the elections was the League. Salvini's party received 34.3% of the votes, nearly doubling the unprecedented result of the 2018 Italian general elections. Compared to the previous EP elections, the League has gained 28 percentage points and twenty-three EP seats (Table 1).³

In contrast, its government ally M5S has been downgraded from being the largest party in Italy (in the 2018 general elections) to third place, almost halving its result— from 32.7% to 17.1%. Moreover, the party also lost compared to the 2014 EP elections, by 4 percentage points and three seats.

The M5S's decline is paired with the “comeback” of the PD (CISE, 2019). While in the 2018 general elections the PD suffered a historic defeat (18.8%), it has now grown back to 22.3%, thus becoming the second-largest party in Italy. Yet, it did not increase its vote total in absolute terms. Moreover, compared to the historic success obtained in the 2014 EP elections (Maggini, 2014), the PD has lost over 18 percentage points and twelve seats.

Forza Italia continues its electoral decline. Berlusconi's party is basically halved in comparison with the 2014 EP elections (from 16.8% to 8.8%), and it lost seven seats. Already in 2018, FI was no longer the largest party within the center-right field, but at 14% it was close to the League (17.4%), which in turn now has virtually quadrupled its votes.

Conversely, a surprising result was achieved by FDI, managing to grow in spite of the rise of the League. FDI gained 2.8 percentage points compared to the previous EP elections, moving from 3.7% to 6.5% — therefore surpassing the electoral threshold and obtaining five EP seats. This result also represents an increase compared to the 2018 general elections, where it reached 4.4%.

The remaining fifteen parties running in the elections did not overcome the electoral threshold. Among those, three deserve some attention. Although slightly gaining compared to 2018, More Europe merely succeeded in being the largest party to miss the threshold, with 3.1%. Green Europe can claim a marginal victory as well, having received 2.3% of the votes, more than twice its 2014 result. By contrast, The Left (an electoral coalition of left-wing parties) got 1.7%, a disappointing result compared to the result of a similar cartel in 2014 (4% and three MEPs).

DISCUSSION

Overall, the results of the 2019 EP elections confirm the turmoil that characterizes the Italian party system. Compared to 2014, electoral volatility is at 37.3, marking

3. The additional seats will become twenty-four when Brexit will be effective. Italy is assigned three of the twenty-seven Brexit seats. A total of seventy-six seats has been allocated according to the electoral results, but only seventy-three will be effective until Brexit has been finalized. The League, FI, and FDI are the winners of the three Italian Brexit seats.

Table 1 – Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Italy

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)
League (Lega)	ENF	9,153,638	34.3
Democratic Party (PD)	S&D	6,050,351	22.7
5 Star Movement (M5S)	EFD	4,552,527	17.1
<i>Forza Italia</i> (FI)	EPP	2,344,465	8.8
Brothers of Italy (FDI)	ECR	1,723,232	6.5
More Europe (+EU)	ALDE	822,764	3.1
Green Europe (EV)	G-EFA	609,678	2.3
The Left (SIN)	GUE-NGL	465,092	1.7
South Tyrolean People's Party (SVP)	EPP	141,353	0.5
Others		799,862	3.0
Total		26,662,962	100
Turnout (%)			56.1
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			4

	SEATS	SEATS IN CASE OF BREXIT	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014 IN CASE OF BREXIT
	28	29	+28.2	+23	+24
	19	19	-18.1	-12	-12
	14	14	-4.1	-3	-3
	6	7	-8.0	-7	-6
	5	6	+2.8	+5	+6
			+2.4		
			+1.4		
			-2.3	-3	-3
	1	1	+0.0		
			-2.3	-3	-3
	73	76			+3

the second extremely volatile EP elections in a row (Emanuele et al., 2019). As described above, electoral change is also remarkable in comparison with the 2018 general elections.

The most impressive outcome is the complete reversal of fortunes, in electoral terms, between the two government partners. The change in the electoral geography is also particularly noteworthy. While maintaining its strongholds in the North (where it is above 40%), the League now receives above 20% in all Southern regions (De Sio, 2019a). These results represent the ultimate success of Salvini's strategy to transform the Northern League into his League, namely a nationwide radical right-wing party. In 2018 the North was represented by the League; and the South, represented by the M5S. Now, Salvini's party has become the center of gravity at both governmental and territorial level. The challenge will now be to actually reconcile and satisfy the demands and needs of both the North and the South.

Paradoxically, the League is now more nationalized than its governmental ally. In fact, the M5S lost more (roughly 50%) in the Northern regions, where it was already weaker in 2018. Minor losses are registered in the South, where the party had about 45% in 2018 and lost approximately a third of its support. In 2013 M5S was the most geographically uniform party in Italian history (Emanuele, 2015), with almost the same results throughout the different regions of Italy. The party now scores just 10% in the North and its supporters are mainly confined to the least economically productive areas of the country (Emanuele and Maggini, 2019). Historically, all Italian parties undergoing a similar process, experiencing a strong decline in the long run.

Finally, the PD has clearly improved its position within the Italian party system, although it is still weaker in the South – slightly below 20%. As the second-largest party in the country, it now represents the most viable option for those who do not want Salvini in office. Therefore, it may attempt to form a coalition with other parties in the center-left field – such as Green Europe and More Europe. Nevertheless, in light of the EP election results, something else appears to be required in order for Salvini not to win the next general elections – either a coalition with the M5S, or the ability to attract large numbers of M5S voters (De Sio 2019b).

CONCLUSION

The consequences of the 2019 EP elections will be relevant for the whole Italian party system. In brief, Salvini achieved a “triple victory” (CISE, 2019). First, in mere numerical terms, the League represents the center of gravity of the current governmental coalition. Secondly, from a geographical perspective, it now has quite homogenous electoral support across the whole country. Finally, from a strategic point of view, Salvini now has multiple alternative options. He may consider bringing down the current government to pursue an alternative government coalition – after new general elections. He can either pursue the classic center-right alliance with FI and FDI, or a smaller coalition with FDI only. The latter could win a majority of parliamentary seats as well, provided that the EP elections results were replicated. Hence, the

leader of the League is now the arbiter of Italian politics. His strategic choices in the next few months, and how the other parties react, will determine not just his own fate, but the future development of the Italian party system as a whole.

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