



# A New Constellation

## Making Sense of the Italian Election

By Anthony Silberfeld

Italians have a long history of conducting national elections that result in short-lived governments. With more than 40 prime ministers and over 60 governments since World War II, stability and longevity have not been the hallmarks of Italian democracy. When Italians return to the polls on March 4, they will be hard-pressed to break with that tradition.

Despite the echoes of the past, this election has its own unique cast of characters, electoral quirks and the potential for strange bedfellows that make it one worth watching.

### The Establishment

#### Democratic Party (PD)

It has been a shocking fall from grace for the party that currently leads the center-left coalition government in Rome under Paolo Gentiloni. Just a few years ago, the young, charismatic Matteo Renzi was a popular prime minister with the potential to provide long-term stability in a country that had been struggling to recover after the economic crisis. But after a series of missteps, which included a failed gambit to reform the constitution and a recent corruption scandal, the wattage of Renzi's star power has dimmed significantly ahead of the election. In speaking with voters in Italy, it is clear that those shortcomings could be forgiven, but the PD's move to the center has compelled its left-wing base to search for alternatives.

#### Forza Italia (FI)

Just when you thought Silvio Berlusconi's political career had come to an end, the media magnate and three-time prime minister has found a way to resurrect his image and the fortunes of his party. Despite being banned from holding office due to his conviction on tax fraud, Italy's own "Teflon Don" remains the driving force behind Italy's predominant center-right party. Staking out extreme right positions on issues like migration – recently

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calling migrants a “social time bomb” – and more moderate stances on economic matters, Forza Italia hopes to be able to attract enough moderate and right-wing voters to be able to lead the next coalition. There remains the question of who would take the helm of an FI-led government, but it is clear that Berlusconi would be pulling the strings.

### **Lega Nord (LN)**

Having transformed his party from secessionist movement to potential kingmaker in national politics, Matteo Salvini is leading Lega Nord into the next election as the anti-immigrant, Euro-skeptic, Italian nationalist alternative to Forza Italia, the party with which it is currently aligned in a center-right coalition. Given that migration is one of the primary issues on the minds of Italian voters, the environment is ripe for LN to make electoral gains à la the National Front in France and Alternative for Germany. The party would also stand to be the biggest beneficiary of any Russian intervention in the Italian election. Lega Nord maintains a cooperation agreement with Vladimir Putin’s United Russia party, so keeping an eye on LN’s finances and activity across digital platforms may offer clues into how the party will perform next month.

## **The Front-Runner**

### **Five Star Movement (M5S)**

The Five Star Movement, the brain child of internet entrepreneur Gianroberto Casaleggio, and brought to prominence by comedian Beppe Grillo, has sprinted to the top of the most recent polls ahead of the election. Political analysts across Italy have used a variety of adjectives to describe M5S including fascist, extremist and populist. However, taking a look at the M5S platform which includes environmental protection, universal connectivity and economic inclusivity, one might conclude that this is a party at home on the political left. Yet its opposition to migration casts an extremist shadow over the party. This contradiction leads us to the chief criticism of M5S: since it stands for everything, it actually stands for nothing. Speaking with voters from factory towns in Umbria to the gritty streets of Naples, it is apparent that this doesn’t bother voters at all. Disillusionment with the established parties far outweighs the perceived lack of depth and consistency in the Five Star’s approach to politics. The notion of a party created on the internet that trumpets direct democracy is appealing to Italians who feel the established parties have failed to deliver. With Grillo sidelined, the face of the party is 31-year old Luigi Di Maio who must figure out a way to ride voter apathy to victory in March.

## **The Junior Partners**

### **Free and Equal (LeU)**

The perception that the PD under Renzi had sold out the left in pursuit of the Blairite center, created a schism in the progressive wing of Italian politics. As a result, Liberi e Uguali broke from the PD to form a party dedicated to the core values of the traditional left. While it may find support among the working class voters in the industrial heartland of the country, its best outcome will be to reach the three percent threshold to enter parliament, and serve as a junior partner to a left-wing coalition. Most analysts believe however, that the splintering of the left will have two more serious consequences in this election: a weakening of the PD and a strengthening of the Five Star Movement.

### **Brothers of Italy**

There are parties that are hyperbolically derided as “fascist,” and then there are actual fascist parties. The Brothers of Italy is the latter. An anti-migrant, anti-Europe, Italian nationalist party, it is the modern day successor of the Italian Fascist party. Despite its extreme views, the party’s leader, former Berlusconi Minister Giorgia Meloni has signaled that she would be prepared to offer her electoral numbers to form a coalition of the right.

## **Fuzzy Math**

As if the Italian electoral landscape weren’t already complicated enough, a new law dubbed the “Rosatellum” created a hybrid system meant to favor the establishment parties at the expense of outsiders like M5S and upstarts like LeU and Brothers of Italy. It remains to be seen if the intent of the law comes to fruition, but what is certain is that this new situation creates plenty of opportunities and risks for all. Under the new system, 64 percent of the seats will be determined by proportional representation, and 36 percent will be selected on the basis of first-past-the-post. It is notable that a party must gain three percent of the vote in order to enter the parliament, which could prove challenging for smaller parties in an electorally fragmented landscape.

Despite the changes to the system, the number that matters most is 40. With 40 percent of the vote, a party or coalition will be able to form the next Italian government.

## **Love: Italian Style**

In a January 25 poll by YouTrend<sup>1</sup>, the Five Star Movement led with 27.6 percent of those polled, followed by PD at

23.5 percent, Forza Italia at 16.6 percent and Lega Nord with 13.2 percent. On their own, none of the parties would be able to reach the magic number of 40 percent without some help. M5S, who once declared unequivocally that it would not form a coalition with any party, has softened its stance in recent days. With that in mind, here are the four most likely scenarios:

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> [www.youtrend.it](http://www.youtrend.it)

**Scenario 1:** Hung Parliament – No party or coalition can reach 40 percent, triggering new elections.

**Scenario 2:** Grand Coalition – Forza Italia and the Democratic Party

**Scenario 3:** Right-Wing Coalition – Forza Italia, Lega Nord and Brothers of Italy

**Scenario 4:** Wild Card – Five Star Movement and Lega Nord

Each of these scenarios comes with significant risk. A hung parliament will deepen Italian disenchantment with the political class and lead to greater apathy. A Grand Coalition will cause dismay among the party faithful who would view such an alliance as a betrayal of their values. This could strengthen smaller parties, or lead to the further fragmentation of Italian politics. A right wing coalition would likely shift Italian politics from the center to the far right, which may cause concern among international investors and European institutions. The wild card scenario would create the most uncertainty and instability for Italy. Combining an unproven populist party with an openly xenophobic and nationalist party has the potential for to undermine stability, not only in Italy, but in the wider EU as well.

## Will the Stars Align?

While the contours of Italian political preferences remain fluid, what is clear is that the electorate is fed up with the establishment parties, which they view as corrupt and out of touch. The Five Star Movement is likely to benefit from this protest vote, but whichever parties are ultimately in a position to govern will have to address real concerns. Who will address the 20 percent youth unemployment? Who will figure out how to integrate the migrants who have sought refuge on Italian shores? Who has a plan to reignite the Italian economy?

When the votes are counted and coalitions are formed, these are the questions that will matter. If the next Italian government fails to address these challenges, Italians will be going back to polls sooner than expected.