The Italian Election of 2018 and
the First Populist Government of Western Europe

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1. Background to the election

The 2013 election heralded an unprecedented tripolar era for Italian politics, with the two traditional forces of the Second Italian Republic (Silvio Berlusconi's center-right and variously assorted center-left coalitions) eventually matched, in terms of size, by the *MoVimento 5 Stelle* (M5s) – to date, the most successful rookie of Italian politics with 25 percent of valid votes at its first national election (Garzia, 2013). Such an impressive result, although insufficient to grant them the majority bonus in the Lower Chamber, was nonetheless enough to complicate to a large extent the formation of a parliamentary majority. Indeed, the problematic nature of the electoral outcome resulted in a correspondingly long process of government formation, which took over two months. On April 28th, the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, appointed Enrico Letta as the head of a unity government featuring personnel from both *Partito Democratico* (PD) and *Popolo delle Libertà* (PdL). This parliamentary majority, however, only lasted until November 2013, when Silvio Berlusconi led the PdL's withdrawal from the government and the simultaneous reversion of the name of his party to its original denomination *Forza Italia* (FI). This event led in turn to the formation of a smaller fringe party – *Nuovo Centro Destra* (NCD) – which, under the leadership of Angelino Alfano, decided not to withdraw from government. In a matter of just a few weeks, the process of political change took another turn with the 'primary' elections for the leaderships of both the PD and the *Lega Nord* (LN). On December 8th, Matteo Renzi became the new leader of the PD, while Matteo Salvini became leader of the LN. Persistent tensions followed Renzi's election as Secretary of the PD, and they eventually culminated in Letta's resignation as Prime Minister in February 2014. Renzi quickly took over as a result and formed a new government based on the same coalition of parties supporting Letta's cabinet (PD and NCD). A strong mandate from his party and high government popularity figures allowed Renzi to lead his party to the strong showing in the 2014 European Parliament election (Segatti *et al.*, 2015). This deferred honeymoon would however get towards the end with the approaching of the constitutional referendum proposed by Renzi's government. Eventually, the constitutional reform was rejected on December 4th 2016 with 59 percent of votes against it. Following defeat, and as a result of his strong personalization strategy

(Ceccarini and Bordignon, 2017) Renzi stepped down as Prime Minister and was replaced by his Minister of Foreign Affairs and co-founder of PD, Paolo Gentiloni. Under Gentiloni's leadership, the government carried the country to general elections at the natural end of the legislative term, yet under totally different (proportional) rules, as we shall see below. On December 29th 2017 President Sergio Mattarella dissolved Parliament and a new general election was called for 4 March 2018.

2. Coalitions, leaders and a new electoral system

As a consequence of the 2016 constitutional referendum – which was itself tied to a previously attempted electoral reform under the name of *Italicum* – and of two different sentences of the Constitutional Court, the electoral laws for the two houses of the Italian Parliament lacked uniformity. The new electoral system known as *Rosatellum* (from the name of his proponent, Ettore Rosato, head of PD's faction in the Lower Chamber) was approved as a result in October 2017, with the parliamentary support of PD, FI, LN and minor parties. It is a mixed system, with 37% of seats in each Chamber allocated through First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) in single-member constituencies, and 63% by national proportional representation in multi-member constituencies. The law recognizes the existence of pre-electoral coalition, and therefore the thresholds – equal for both Chambers – are differentiated for party lists (3 percent) and coalitions (10 percent). Interestingly, those lists below 3 percent (but above 1 percent) that are not entitled to gain representation in parliament are nonetheless able to bring their votes to the respective coalition – provided the coalition itself is able to overcome the 10 percent threshold. Voters are allowed to cast their two votes (one for the FPTP, another for the proportional part) on a single ballot paper featuring both the names of the candidates to single-member constituencies and, in close conjunction with them, the symbols of the linked lists for the proportional part, each one with a list of the relative candidates. It is not allowed, under penalty of invalidation, the *panachage*, so the voter cannot vote simultaneously for a candidate in the FPTP constituency and for a list which is not linked to him or her. This feature is paradigmatic of this electoral system, as it homogenizes by default the voters' choice around candidates and parties from the same party/coalition, irrespective of the potential appeal of FPTP candidates – thus de-potentiating the essence itself of a mixed system.

The 2018 election was contested by three main factions (centre-left, centre-right, and M5s) plus a minor left-wing contender. The centre-left coalition contested the election under Matteo Renzi's renewed leadership after his re-election as party secretary in the primary elections of April 2017 – despite his declared intention to leave politics once and for all had the 2016 Constitutional

referendum been rejected. According to the PD's statute, in fact, the party secretary is also the party's candidate for Prime Minister. Nevertheless, it must be noted the ambiguity that surrounded the coalition leadership throughout the whole campaign, with incumbent Prime Minister Gentiloni hardly in the spotlight but never openly excluded for the possibility to lead the *coalition* in the aftermath of the election. Indeed, the PD did not face the election on its own. Junior partners of the centre-left coalition consisted of +*Europa* led by long-time Radical Party leader Emma Bonino; *Insieme*, an electoral alliance formed by the Italian Socialist Party, the Federation of the Greens, and some assorted *vintage* personnel dating back to Romano Prodi's Ulivo experience; *Civica Popolare*, led by incumbent Minister of Health Beatrice Lorenzin and which included all those members of Alfano's NCD who decided to remain loyal to the center-left coalition. The centre-left coalition also included its traditional French-speaking (VdA) and German-speaking (SVP) allies. A left-wing fringe will contest the election in opposition to the centre-left coalition under the denomination *Liberi e Uguali* (LeU). In early 2017, a number of PD founding members including Massimo D'Alema and former party leader Pierluigi Bersani abandoned the party in opposition to Renzi's policies and supported the formation of LeU under the leadership of Pietro Grasso, President of the Senate and former anti-mafia prosecutor.

The main stakeholders of the centre-right coalition were Berlusconi's FI and Salvini's LN. The declining popularity of Berlusconi and the rapid rise of Salvini's LN led to an unprecedented agreement: the leader of the coalition would have corresponded to the leader of the party gaining more votes at the following election. Similarly to Renzi, also Salvini was re-elected federal secretary of his party in spring 2017. Under his leadership, the party quickly moved towards an "Italian Nationalist" populist force, withering any notion of Northern separatism and emphasizing *in primis* Euroscepticism and anti-immigration attitudes (Albertazzi *et al.,* 2018). Suffice it to say that the new Lega does not even feature the word "North" in the party symbol anymore. Smaller coalition partners for the centre-right included the extreme-right *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) led by Giorgia Meloni, and *Noi con l'Italia* (NcI) the splinter of NCD that decided to leave the government camp.

With regard to the M5s, their first parliamentary term highlighted a continued support among the public (21 percent in the EP election of 2014 and a growing number of municipalities under their control, including Rome and Turin) in spite of the drastic changes in the party structure and leadership positions. Party founder and chief strategist Gianroberto Casaleggio died on April 12th 2016, to be replaced by his son Davide. In September 2017 another fundamental change took place, with the selection of Luigi Di Maio – by then Vice-President of the Chamber of Deputies – as the movement's candidate for Prime Minister and "political head", thus replacing Beppe Grillo.

3. The campaign

Already in December 2017, at the core of the public discourse lied the foreseeable outcomes of a complex electoral law in a rapidly changing political environment. The move from a largely bipolar context towards a tripolar one gets further complicated by a proportional setting in which the declining electoral strength of the traditional centre-left and centre-right coalitions is coupled with the explicit unwillingness of the M5s to compromise with any of them after the election. Against this background, virtually all journalists and commentators supported the idea that the electoral outcome would not result in a functioning parliamentary majority (Mancini and Roncarolo, 2018). This feeling of indecisiveness accompanied the whole campaign and marked its rather low level of engagement with leaders and issues. As with the previous elections, no leaders' debate took place in television – this time also as a result of the ambiguities regarding the actual leadership for both the center-left and the center-right coalitions. Silvio Berlusconi dusted off one of his most celebrated campaign work horses by signing a new "Contract with the Italians" in Bruno Vespa's late night show for the national television channel. In a similar vein, Matteo Salvini committed (and underwrote) to the immediate abolition of all excise duties on petrol, again in front of the cameras.

Overall, party manifestos remained vague and largely unrealistic as well (for a better discussion, see: Amato and Perotti, 2018). The defining pledges for the main leaders' campaign can be summarized as follows: Silvio Berlusconi insisted on tax reduction, this time in the form of a "flat tax"; Matteo Salvini backed up Berlusconi's proposal without hesitations, but focused his campaign on anti-immigration and security stances; Matteo Renzi backed Gentiloni's policies and promised to enlarge the pool of recipients for the "80 Euros", a tax deduction approved during his political tenure – this time in the form of a monthly allowance for parents of each minor child; finally, Luigi Di Maio forcefully grounded the whole M5s campaign around their trademark proposal known as "income of citizenship" (consisting of 780 Euros monthly to the large pool of unemployed Italian voters).

The overall un-persuasiveness of the 2018 campaign can be assessed against the (lack of) party conversion rate over the campaign itself, as shown in Figure 1, as well as the relative degrees of (un)popularity for the main party leaders, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 1. Voting intentions for coalitions (October 2017 to February 2018)
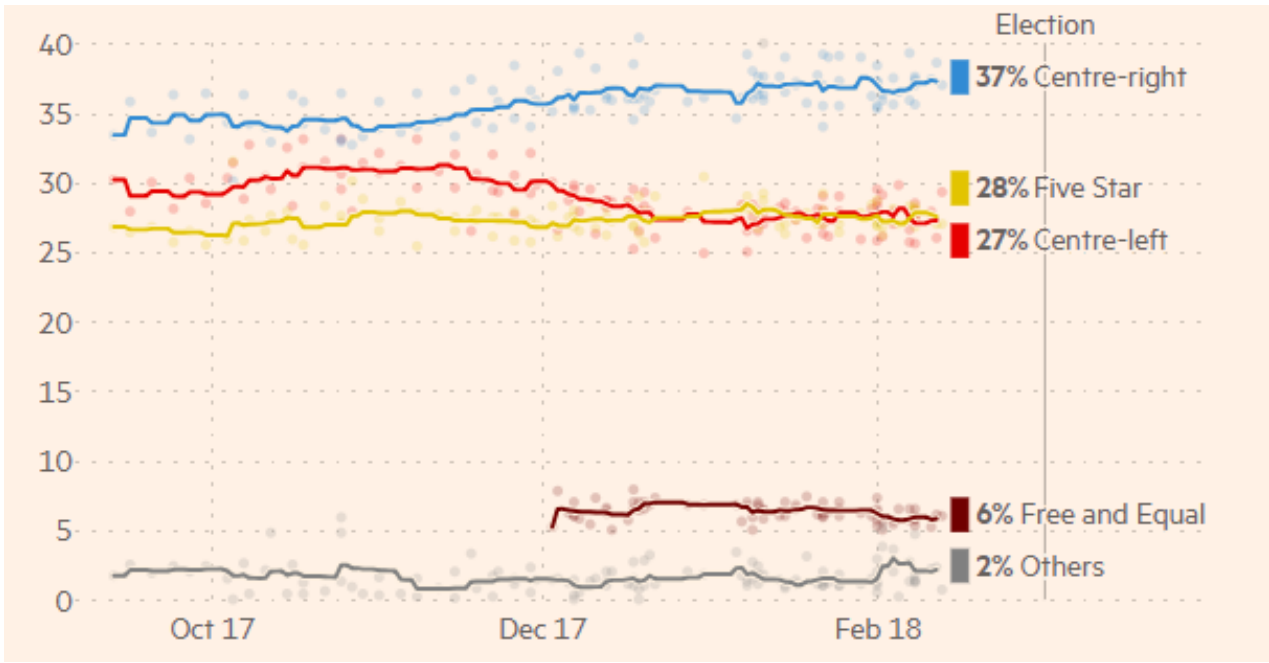
Figure 2. The popularity of main party leaders across the electoral campaign
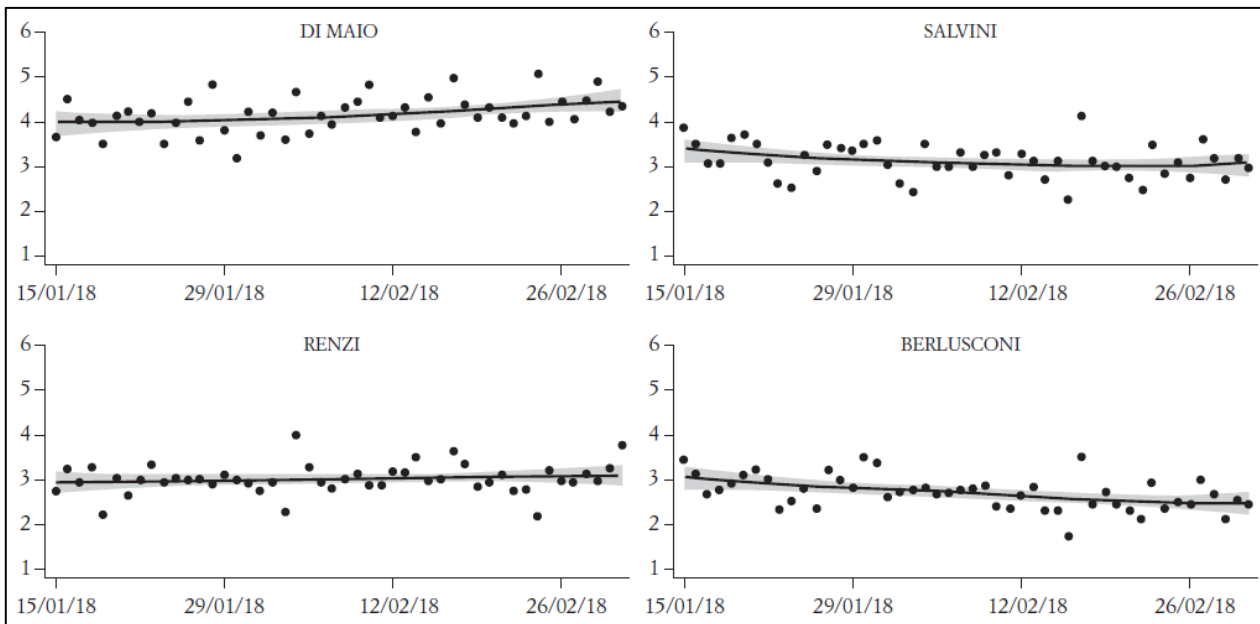
Against this background, one could interpret the overall campaign as an attempt of the major leaders and coalitions to (re)appeal to their traditional constituencies. This "static" interpretation, however, must be complemented with the observation that public opinion concerns have changed throughout the legislature. A fairer picture would thus need to take into account longer-term processes in public opinion that can potentially account for the decline of traditional government forces (PD and FI) at the expense of oppositions (LN) and outsiders (M5s). Eurobarometer data shows that in 2013 the major concerns of Italian voters were unemployment (58 percent) and economic growth (42 percent), with immigration only mentioned as an important problem faced by the country by only 4 percent of respondents. The picture in 2017 is rather different, with traditional concerns regarding the state of the economy diminished at the expense of immigration (now mentioned as an important problem by 33 percent of the sample). While this is a key to understand Salvini's long-term strategy, it must be paired with the observation that the issue of unemployment diminished by 16 percent points and yet remained overall the *most* important among Italian voters. In all likelihood, this played in favor of M5s' strategy to emphasize the income of citizenship as their flagship proposal.

4. The result

The election of March 4th 2018 saw the participation of 72,9 percent of the eligible voting population (lowest figure ever in the history of the Italian Republic, –2.3 percent as compared to the by-then all time low of 2013). The coalition that received more votes was the centre-right (37 percent, fully in line with pre-electoral expectations based on opinion polls). Within the coalition, it must be signaled the massive gain brought about by Salvini's LN (+13 percent as compared to 2013, most voted party in the coalition) as well as the decline of Berlusconi's FI (–7 percent as compared to 2013, enough to lose for the first time since 1994 the numeric supremacy in the coalition). Amongst the winners it must be certainly mentioned Di Maio's M5s, with a further increase of 7 percent vis-à-vis 2013 and now largest political force in the country commanding virtually one out of three votes (33 percent, 4 points higher than pre-electoral polls). When it comes to the losers of the 2018 election, one cannot avoid pointing at PD, falling below 20 percent (–7 percent as compared to 2013 and worst result ever in its history). If numerically this was enough to score as second biggest party in the country, the poor performance of its coalition partners has resulted in the centre-left becoming the third political force in the country.

Table 1. Chamber of Deputies' election results, 2013 and 2018

	2018			**2013**		
	Seats N	Votes (000's)	Votes %	Seats N	Votes (000's)	Votes %
MoVimento 5 Stelle (M5S)	225	10,732	32.68	109	8,689	25.55
Partito Democratico (PD)	107	6,161	18.76	297	8,644	25.42
Lega (LN)	123	5,698	17.35	18	1,39	4.08
Forza Italia (FI)*	103	4,596	14.00	98	7,332	21.56
Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	32	1,429	4.35	9	665	1.95
Liberi e Uguali (LeU)	14	1,114	3.39	-	-	-
+Europa (+E)	2	841	2.56	-	-	-
Unione di Centro (UdC)	4	427	1.30	8	608	1.78
Insieme (I)	1	190	0.58	-	-	-
Civica Popolare (CP)	2	178	0.54	-	-	-
Südtiroler Volkspartei (SVP)	4	134	0.41	5	146	0.43
Scelta Civica (SC)	-	-	-	39	2,824	8.30
Sinistra Ecologia Libertà (SEL)	-	-	-	37	1,089	3.20
Rivoluzione Civile (RC)	-	-	-	0	765	2.25
Fare per Fermare il Declino (FARE)	-	-	-	0	380	1.11
Centro Democratico (CD)	-	-	-	6	167	0.49

Note: The 2013 result for Forza Italia is that of Popolo della Libertà (PdL)

To account for such a continuing inter-election volatility, a number of factors must be called into question. A preliminary interpretation could fruitfully address the changing importance of voting determinants across time. First of all, the parties themselves. In this respect, the 2018 election marked the arrival point of a long-term trend towards increasing distrust of traditional party actors. As illustrated in Table 3, the proportion of Italian voters declaring to trust political parties in their country in 2018 plunged to historic low.

Table 2. Proportion of Italian voters declaring to trust political parties (ITANES series)

2001	2006	2008	2013	2018
22%	27%	19%	10%	5%

Note: Values for 2001-2013 are the cumulative percentage of respondents with "a lot" and "fair amount" of trust in political parties. The value for 2018 is the proportion of respondents reporting values higher than 6 on a 10-point scale.

Connected to this growing disaffection towards parties lies the intertwined decline of importance on behalf of the left-right divide in driving voters' choice – also due to the effect of M5s' rhetoric in dealigning voters from the traditional left-right categories. Indeed, the proportion of voters unwilling to place themselves on the left-right scale – systematically below 20 percent throughout the ITANES series – goes above 30 percent in 2018. With parties and traditional ideological categories at their weakest, it is to be expected that short-term factors could have played a correspondingly bigger role. Yet, this is only partly the case. With regard to the party leaders, their mobilizing potential must be understood against the background of their widespread unpopularity – albeit slightly improved in 2018 as compared to their *annus orribilis* in 2013 (Barisione *et al.,* 2013). Figure 3 presents the mean thermometer evaluation for the main party/coalition leaders throughout the ITANES series spanning all the elections held in the so-called Second Italian Republic. A number of interesting findings emerge in longitudinal perspective. First, the leaders of the traditional parties have never been so unpopular. Second, the leader of LN has never been so popular, nor he's ever been more popular than traditional coalition partner Silvio Berlusconi. Third, a totally unexperienced leader of a non-party is now the more popular leader in the country – and yet, he's not even remotely as popular as party leaders used to be for the large part of the Second Republic. In other words, if leaders have mattered, they must have done so as a function of something more complex than their mere popularity (or lack of thereof) among the Italian electorate.

Figure 3. The popularity of main party/coalition leaders in the Second Italian Republic
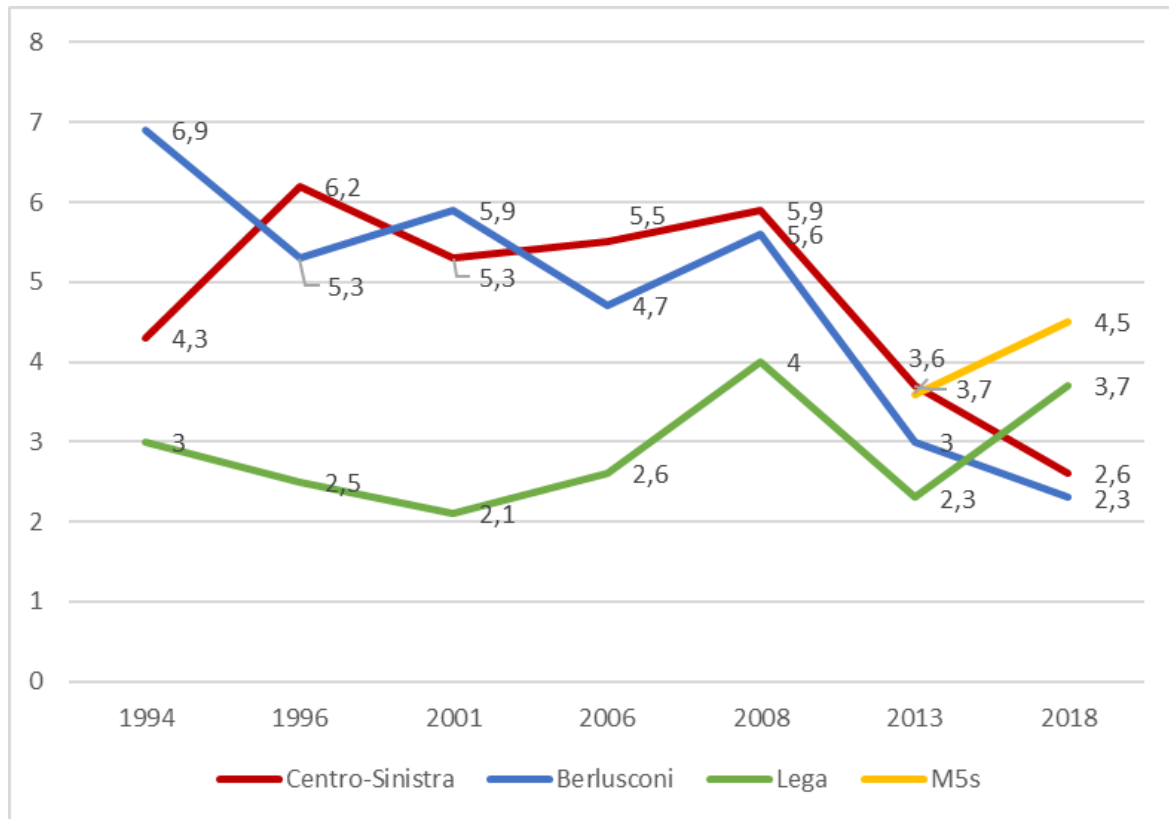
A more encompassing explanation should probably depart from the connection between leaders' credibility in connection with the issues more salient to different types of electorate against a background of unprecedentedly widespread anti-party sentiments (Barisione *et al.,* 2018). Indeed, what it seems to have worked is a blend of issues and perceived competence, with Di Maio largely appreciated by those voters most concerned with unemployment and corruption, and Salvini ranking highest among voters concerned primarily with immigration and security. And while both Berlusconi and Renzi scored just too low to be able to attract any specific issue public, it must be highlighted that Gentiloni managed to be perceived the best leader by those voters mostly concerned with economic growth, reduction of the public debt and fighting tax evasion (see Table 3). While this latter finding could speak against the choice of the centre-left coalition to downplay the results of the incumbent government led by Paolo Gentiloni himself, it should also be noted that the proportion of voters concerned with such topics was already secured in the camp of the center-left.

Table 3. Leaders' mean thermometer score by most important issues facing the country

Most important issue(s)	N	Berlusconi[a]	Di Maio[a]	Gentiloni[b]	Renzi[a]	Salvini[a]
Unemployment	763	2,1	4,7	4,1	2,5	3,5
Political corruption	374	1,3	4,9	3,8	2,2	2,7
Taxation	278	3,1	5,0	3,7	2,6	4,6
Immigration	268	3,3	4,4	2,9	1,9	5,9
Economic growth	235	2,4	3,9	5,0	3,1	3,4
Fiscal evasion	158	1,5	4,1	5,7	3,2	2,5
Public debt	147	2,3	4,2	5,6	3,2	3,3
Criminality	144	3,0	3,9	3,9	2,5	4,6

Source: a: ITANES post-election study 2018; b: ITANES pre-election study 2018 ; Total N=1558

5. The aftermath

Based on the election result, both Salvini (as leader of the most voted coalition) and Di Maio (as leader of the most voted party) stated their intention of receiving from President Mattarella the task of forming a new government. Eventually, Salvini offered a coalition agreement to the M5s but only at the condition that Berlusconi would have been part of such coalition. In spite of Di Maio's rejection of this offer, both M5s and the centre-right moved the first steps towards an alliance by agreeing on the names of Roberto Fico (M5s) and Elisabetta Alberti Casellati (FI) as Presidents of the two Chambers. In April, both Fico and Alberti Casellati were conferred an exploratory mandate to test the possibility of different coalition governments (M5s+PD and M5s+centre-right respectively). After both attempts failed, President Mattarella announced on May 7th his intention to soon appoint a "neutral government". This occurrence led M5s and LN to request extra time to Mattarella in order to form a government between the two parties. An agreement on the government program was eventually reached on May 13th, and a week later the two parties proposed the name of Giuseppe Conte, a lawyer and university professor with no previous political experience, as Prime Minister. On May 27th Conte renounced to his office due to a contrast between Salvini and Mattarella on the name of Paolo Savona as Minister of the Economy. As a result, Mattarella conferred to Carlo Cottarelli, former IMF director, the task of forming a new government. Eventually, his attempt did not even make it to the vote of confidence due to sufficient lack of support in Parliament. Meanwhile, Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio announced their willingness to restart the negotiations to form a political government. The government was eventually formed on June 1st, under the leadership of Giuseppe Conte and with both Di Maio and Salvini as joint deputy prime ministers.

The result of almost three months of negotiation is the so-called *Governo del Cambiamento* ("government of change"). The circumstances under which this coalition agreement took place departed massively from the pre-electoral expectation that the M5s would have never agreed to enter in coalition and the corresponding assumption that the new government would have looked like one another grand coalition, German-style (Faas, 2015). While part of the reason is to be attributed to the poor electoral performance of PD, it must be also noted that this falls within a more general trend for established social-democratic parties across Western Europe (van Holsteyn, 2018). Similarly, only part of the explanation lies in the unprecedented success of a right-wing populist force like LN, considering that similar parties recently made it to government in countries like Austria (Bodlos and Plescia, 2018) and Norway (Aardal and Bergh, 2018). If one is to look for the Italian peculiarity in the story, this is likely to be found in the ambiguous part played by the M5s. Di Maio's unexpected choice to enter a coalition government paved the way for Salvini, for the first time in the Lega's history, to enter in government *without* Berlusconi. How long this unprecedented alliance will last remains to be seen. As of now, one can only speculate about the prospects of what looks to many as the first full-fledged populist government in Western Europe – with the European elections of 2019 quickly approaching, Italy's never-ending election campaign is far from being over.

WORD COUNT: 4.013

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