

Italy's 2018 Elections: A Hung Parliament and Four Government Scenarios

by Alessandro Marrone

The Italian elections have sanctioned the success of the conservative coalition – made up of an alliance between the Lega, Forza Italia and Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*, FdI) parties – which secured a relative majority of votes (37 per cent) and seats in both houses of parliament. The Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S) also won a significant victory, growing to become Italy's major party with 32.7 per cent of the vote. Meanwhile, the progressive coalition led by the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*, PD) suffered a stinging defeat, obtaining 22.7 per cent of the popular vote.¹

Italy's political scene is consequently divided in three poles, none of which holds a ruling majority in parliament. Accordingly, four scenarios are theoretically possible in the months ahead. Each holds different implications

¹ The distribution of the popular vote stands as follows: M5S 32.7 per cent; PD 18.7; Lega 17.4, Forza Italia 14, FdI 4.3, LEU 3.4, +Europa 2.5. Other smallest parties are below 1.2 per cent of votes.

for Italy's foreign and defence policy, its relations with Europe and major world powers.

The distribution of votes and the balance of power within the conservative coalition is particularly important to determine who will be the next prime minister. Here, the Lega headed by Matteo Salvini scored 17.4 per cent of the vote, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia 14 per cent and FdI led by Giorgia Meloni 4.3 per cent – the rest being allocated to smaller allies. Within the progressive coalition, almost all seats have been allocated to the PD, which scored 18.7 per cent and is led by Matteo Renzi who has announced his resignation as head of the party.

The concrete allocation of seats in Italy's two parliamentary houses is also extremely important. In the Chamber of Deputies, where a majority of 316 seats is needed, none of the three poles come close. The conservatives hold 263 seats, the M5S 223, the PD-led coalition

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118, and the left wing grouping the Free and Equal party (*Liberi e Uguale*, LEU) 14.² In the Senate, the conservatives obtained 138 seats, the M5S 112, the PD-led coalition 60 and LEU 4.³ Here, the needed majority of 158 seats may be within reach for the coalition led by Salvini and Berlusconi.

Italy's president, Sergio Mattarella, will play a determining role in the formation of the next government and therefore on which of the four scenarios may occur. In accordance with the constitution, the president will consult with the parties and movements in parliament about the possibilities to form a government. He then has the right to assign the task to a certain personality, who will negotiate the composition of the future cabinet with potential coalition partners.

For almost 20 years, this has been a rather straightforward exercise due to the bipolar political system built around progressive and conservative coalitions. In the 1994, 2001 and 2008 elections Berlusconi was asked by the president to form a government because his conservative coalition had won the vote, as was the case in 1996 and 2006 with Romano Prodi's progressive coalition. This praxis was halted in 2013, however, because three poles emerged from the election, and none had a clear majority.

² "Elezioni politiche 2018 - Camera dei Deputati", in *La Stampa*, <http://elezioni.lastampa.it/2018/cameradeideputati>.

³ "Elezioni politiche 2018 - Senato", in *La Stampa*, <http://elezioni.lastampa.it/2018/senato/dellarepubblica>.

The result at the time was the formation of a "grand coalition" between PD and Forza Italia, followed, during the same legislature, by two progressive coalition governments led by the PD's Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni – the latter still fully in charge until the next executive is formed.

Today, one possible scenario would see Mattarella ask Salvini to gather a majority based on the conservative coalition and either the whole of the PD, or lawmakers originally elected with PD and/or the M5S that may be convinced to support such a government. The Italian president could well make this choice because Salvini has emerged on top within the conservative coalition, which hold a relative majority of seats in both parliamentary houses, and enjoys Berlusconi's support as a potential leader.⁴

The likelihood of this scenario is diminished by the difficulty to find a sufficient number of parliamentarians beyond the conservative camp who would be willing to switch sides and support such an executive, or to convince the PD to support this government given its differences with the Lega on a number of important issues. Should this scenario materialize, such a government would likely trace a line of continuity with Italy's recent European, foreign and

⁴ Marco Galluzzo, "Berlusconi: 'L'incarico spetta al centrodestra. Sosterrò Salvini e sarò il garante della coalizione'", in *Corriere*, 7 March 2018, <http://www.corriere.it/elezioni-2018/notizie/berlusconi-l-incarico-spetta-centrodestra-sosterro-salvinisaro-garante-coalizione-elezioni-2018-c5ccd9dc-2183-11e8-a661-74ccbd41f00f.shtml>.

defence policies,⁵ while introducing relevant changes such as stronger action to reduce migratory flows, more confrontational rhetoric deployed against EU institutions and a more positive attitude towards both the US and Russian presidents.

Another possible scenario would see Mattarella charge Luigi Di Maio, the head of M5S and the single largest party to emerge from the vote, to form a coalition government. In this scenario, he would seek to get a deal with the whole PD or a large majority of it. Such a move would be difficult to justify for Di Maio *vis-à-vis* his electorate, because the M5S has been among the most stringent critics of the PD, which is the most pro-establishment party in the Italian political spectrum.

At the same time, such an eventuality would also represent a U-turn for the PD given its mainstream platform and identity – as already debated within the progressive camp.⁶ In the unlikely case that such a scenario materializes, the degree of discontinuity with regards of Italian foreign, defence and European policies will depend on the balance between the two parties, and will probably be higher than in the previous scenario.

⁵ Alessandro Marrone, "Italy's Defence Policy: What to Expect from the 2018 Elections?", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 18|05 (January 2018), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/8688>.

⁶ Alberto Custodero e Monica Rubino, "Renzi sfida i suoi: 'Chi vuole governo con i 5 Stelle lo dica'. Franceschini: 'Mai pensato ad alleanze con M5s e destre'", in *Repubblica*, 6 March 2018, http://www.repubblica.it/speciali/politica/elezioni2018/2018/03/06/news/pd_polemiche_calenda-190573130.

In the third and least likely scenario, Di Maio would still be charged by Mattarella to form a coalition government, but turn to Salvini's Lega, possibly building on their common ground of euro-scepticism. Such a coalition would result in a loss of much political capital for both leaders. Indeed, Salvini would have to renounce his hard-won leadership within the conservative coalition and agree to be a junior partner of M5S-led government. Di Maio would find difficult to justify to his electorate the compromises needed to get a deal, for instance to reconcile his expensive welfare promises with the tax cuts proposed by Lega.

Should this very unlikely scenario come true, the resulting government would represent a strong discontinuity in Italy's foreign and defence policies, and particularly with regards to Europe. While both candidates have officially abandoned the idea of exiting the euro via a referendum – a possibility that in any case is forbidden by the Italian constitution⁷ – they are likely to criticize the EU fiscal compact, drastically reduce Italian military commitments in NATO and EU missions and adopt a more pro-Russian stance.

The upcoming calendar of institutional appointments in Italy's two houses of parliament may give further hints as to the direction Italian politics may take, and the likelihood of a certain scenario

⁷ Art. 75 of the 2012 Italian Constitution stipulates that referendum cannot be called on laws "regulating taxes, the budget, amnesty or pardon, or a law ratifying an international treaty". See Constitution of the Italian Republic, 8 May 2012, https://www.senato.it/documenti/repository/istituzione/costituzione_inglese.pdf.

winning over the others.

On 23 March, newly elected lawmakers will initiate voting procedures to elect speakers' for each parliamentary house. None of the three poles is able to elect a speaker by relying solely on its own lawmakers, but the constitution stipulates that these roles need to be filled before moving forward with the formation of a government.

If the two speakers are elected through an enlarged conservative coalition, by a M5S-Lega alliance, or through an agreement between the M5S and the PD, this may be a prelude to a government formed by a similar coalition. Over the coming weeks, lawmakers will also need to decide and elect chairs of the various committees (Economy, Defence, Foreign Affairs, Constitutional Affairs, etc.) for both parliamentary houses, and these decisions will test and eventually confirm the alliances in the making.

As a result, what is today deemed improbable may become more plausible tomorrow, due to the need of political negotiations in the parliament the subsequent changes in the political discourse.

There is a fourth potential scenario, however. This could materialize if the various attempts to form a government fail, leading Mattarella to call new elections, possibly by July, while Gentiloni would continue to govern Italy.

In this event, the new elections will become a neck-to-neck race between the conservatives and the M5S, with

each having a real possibility of securing a majority of seats – in any case at the expenses of the PD. However, this scenario may be almost impossible because of the deep-rooted tendency of newly elected lawmakers to not give up their seats after only a few months in office.

Such an event never happened in the 70-years long history of the Italian Republic, and did not occur even in 2013 when PD and FI joined forces to form a government despite two decades of bipolar confrontation. On top of that, the Italian president has historically played a stabilizing role by favouring the formation of a government rather than a return to the polls, a tradition that Mattarella is widely expected to continue.

To conclude, the conservative coalition won the elections by obtaining a relative majority of seats in parliament, yet the M5S has emerged as the single largest Italian party. Neither of them has secured enough seats to form a government.

The two more likely scenarios include one of these two stronger poles striking a deal with the weaker PD. In comparison, a coalition between the major electoral winners – Lega and the M5S – is more unlikely, and new elections in a couple of months are nearly impossible. If one of the two more likely scenarios materialize, much of today's fears about a potential crisis in Italy's relation with the EU, as well as deep shifts in its broader foreign and defence policies, would turn out to be exaggerated.

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