

Looking Ahead, Nervously, to Political 2018

Judith Harris (December 14, 2017)



As the year winds down, Italy looks ahead nervously to political 2018, when national general elections may take place as early as March. The predicted three-way split is almost certain to make forming a new government a challenge.

ROME -- As the year winds down, Italy looks ahead nervously to political 2018. National general elections must take place by May 20, their final deadline, but may loom just 90 days from now, when Parliament shuts down. The reasons for the concern -- to some, anguish -- are countless. [The Partito Democratico \(PD\)](#) [2] that has dominated the government for the past four years is weakened and shriveled. [Beppe Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle \(M5S\)](#) [3] has overcome temporary setbacks and has even improved its position, becoming Italy's largest single party. After a certain hiatus former [Premier Silvio Berlusconi](#) [4] has returned to political activism. At the same time an unknown number of millennials will vote for the first time. Not least, when elections do take place, they will be under a new and untested election law.

The most serious concern is that a three-way split appears almost inevitable. The three forces --

center-left, center-right, and Grillo's M5S -- seem locked into such a close tie that to build a functional governing coalition looks extremely difficult. Divisions within his party have weakened [Renzi](#) [5]'s PD, which now has three leftist splinters, one headed by former magistrate [Pietro Grasso](#) [6], Senate president, who quit the PD last month. Chamber of Deputies President [Laura Boldrini](#) [7] is expected to join Grasso shortly. Renzi was given another black eye when Giuliano Pisapia, former Milan mayor, started his own splinter party but then quit, saying it was all too stressful. At the same time the present government's coalition partner Angelino Alfano announced he is resigning from Parliament.

The center-right is similarly divided between Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) and [Matteo Salvini](#) [8]'s Lega (formerly the Lega Nord). Supposedly Berlusconi, 81, who by dint of legal problems is ineligible to run for office, is interviewing prestigious outsiders -- doctors, professors, lawyers -- for his party to present. Salvini is riding high on his anti-immigrant rhetoric that emulates Marine Le Pen's in France (although some here predict Salvini is starting to lose ground on this).

Berlusconi and Salvini flirt with each other more off than on, and whether or not they could eventually form a coalition is an unknown. With his support on the rise, Berlusconi, if a vote were held today, would claim over 15%, while the Lega with 13% or so is tending to lose consensus.

Facing off against these two grouplets, center-right and center-left, is the M5S, whose candidate for premier is [Luigi Di Maio](#) [9], all of 31 years old and the youngest vice president in history of the Chamber of Deputies. Latest polls give the party founded by former comedian Grillo between 27% and 29%, well ahead of the once more powerful PD, which now has 25% or less.

The PD had been the largest single party ever since the last national general elections held in 2013. But just one year ago its Premier Matteo Renzi called a referendum that proved to be a flop. Renzi resigned as premier but stayed on as head of the PD. Asked by President Sergio Mattarella to replace him was the mild-mannered [Paolo Gentiloni](#) [10], Renzi's foreign minister. In sharp contrast to Renzi's self-confident ease, which some consider brazen, Gentiloni initially appeared insipid, and Time magazine for one headlined Dec. 14, 2016, "Don't expect it [his government] to last." Since then it has lasted, and voters now tend to regard Gentiloni with admiration, including for his more subtle approach. In popularity polls he tops the list of possible center-left candidates for premier.

The new election law is nicknamed the "[Rosatellum](#)" [11] for Ettore Rosato, the MP who first proposed it. It was passed this year after Italy's Constitutional Court (supreme court) raised objections about the previous proportional representation law, by which voters cast a ballot for the political party but not for individual candidates. That selection was made by all-powerful party leaders.

The "Rosatellum" appears slightly flawed, however. First, it was forced through Parliament only thanks to a vote of confidence. Its critics add that almost two-thirds (61%) of the members of both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate will still be selected proportionately by party leaders, and only 37% nominally, in the "person-by-person" system. (In both houses the remaining 2% vote is from overseas constituencies.)

In addition, the latest demographic redistribution of Italy's 619 constituencies takes away six from the South and hands over six to the North, to the presumed advantage of Berlusconi and Salvini. The greatest number to be elected to the Chamber of Deputies will, in fact, be from the North, with Lombardy the single largest, with 85. Next is the Veneto with 50, and then Emilia-Romagna, 45. By comparison the Center-South will have less clout: Tuscany will have only 38 MPs, Lazio 58, Campania 60, and Sicily 52.

Another unknown is the huge, untested "millennial vote" which affects the Chamber of Deputies (not the Senate, where the minimum age is 25). While fears are that these over 18-year-olds will simply not turn out to vote at all, six out of ten said that they will. Of these, almost 43% said they plan to vote for the left. In a poll of these first-time voters published in L'Espresso Dec. 10, the PD with 28% bested the M5S with under 20% while Berlusconi's Forza Italia claimed only 13.5%. The remaining parties -- and there were eight others -- showed that splinter groups are the rule -- and that building a governing coalition will be a challenge.



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