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## The Italian parliamentary election of 2022: the populist radical right takes charge

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### ABSTRACT

The Italian parliamentary election of 2022 was called following Mario Draghi's resignation in June. The campaign took place – for the first time in Italian history – over the summer. Yet, its crucial moments occurred in the very first days, when parties had to present the respective coalition strategies. In a matter of weeks, Italy's political system moved from the embryonic tripolarism inaugurated in 2013 to a full-fledged quadripolarism. The election saw less than two thirds of the eligible voting population participate – a new all-time low for Italian general elections. The result awarded a clear victory to the center-right coalition, due to its successes in most FPTP constituencies. Given the clear indications which emerged from the election results, the process of government formation took less than a month overall. This election can be considered historical in at least two ways. The first is the formation of a government led for the first time by a female politician, Giorgia Meloni. The second is the political composition of her government, with two populist radical right parties in control of about 80 percent of the votes cast in favour of the governing coalition.

**KEYWORDS** Coalitions; electoral systems; Giorgia Meloni; populist radical right; turnout decline

### Background to the election

The 2018 parliamentary election held on 4 March resulted in a hung parliament. On the one hand, *Movimento 5 Stelle* (M5S) won the largest proportion of votes (32 percent) among all party lists competing in the election. On the other hand, the center-right coalition composed by *Forza Italia* (FI), *Lega* (LN) and *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) managed to command a relative majority of seats in both chambers: 42 percent in the Chamber and 43 percent in the Senate (for a better discussion of the election outcome, see: Chiamonte *et al.* 2018; Garzia 2019). After almost three

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months of negotiations between the main political parties, the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, commissioned Giuseppe Conte, a lawyer and university professor initially proposed by M5S, to form a new government. His self-declared ‘government of change’ was sworn in on 1 June with the support of the yellow-green coalition – after the party colours of M5s and LN, respectively (for a discussion of the nature of these two parties and the reasons behind their success, see: D’Alimonte 2019).

The subsequent European Parliament elections of May 2019 signalled the exponential growth of Matteo Salvini’s LN (historical record for the party with 34 percent of the popular vote) and a parallel decline in popular support for the M5S (minus 15 percent compared to the previous year’s general election). In turn, this resulted in rising tensions between the two coalition partners which culminated with the League’s exit from the government majority and a call issued by Salvini for new elections (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2019). However, the following weeks saw M5S reaching an agreement with *Partito Democratico* (PD) for a new government, again led by Giuseppe Conte. On 5 September, the Conte II government took office. Among the most immediate consequences of the yellow-red government’s (with PD’s red replacing LN’s green) formation, which ought to be signalled is the spillage from PD of two political formations, namely, *Italia Viva* (IV) led by former party leader Matteo Renzi, and *Azione* (A) led by former minister Carlo Calenda – with IV remaining within the government majority and A moving to the opposition.

The state of emergency imposed by the unfolding of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 made the government hold fast. However, subsequent disagreements regarding the initiatives tailored at economic recovery led to the resignation of Renzi’s ministers and the collapse of the government as a consequence. On 26 January, Giuseppe Conte resigned as prime minister. President Mattarella issued an appeal to all parties represented in Parliament to support the formation of a ‘high profile government not identifiable with any of the existing political formulas’ (Garzia and Karremans 2021: 107). The formation of such a government was mandated to Mario Draghi, former president of the European Central Bank. His government took office on 13 February with the support of all parliamentary groups except Giorgia Meloni’s FdI. With the support of 535 Deputies and 262 Senators, the Draghi government ranks third in the history of the Italian Republic in terms of parliamentary support, after Mario Monti’s 2011 and Giulio Andreotti’s 1978 cabinets (Garzia and Karremans 2021). The year 2021 also witnessed the change of party leadership in both PD (with former Prime Minister Enrico Letta replacing Nicola Zingaretti) and M5S (with Giuseppe Conte replacing Luigi Di Maio). Renewed tensions among the parties supporting

Draghi's national unity government became apparent on the occasion of the election of the President of the Republic in January 2022. Unable to find consensus over a shared candidate, the parliamentary groups resolved to elect a disinclined Sergio Mattarella for a second term.

As the Covid-19 emergency eased throughout 2022, the Draghi government found itself facing yet another emergency, this time due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its economic consequences. The prodromes of the government fall began unfolding in June, as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and former party leader Di Maio left the M5S (along with 49 Deputies and 10 Senators) in disagreement with the confrontational political line taken by the party under the new leadership of Giuseppe Conte. The increasingly critical attitude of M5S towards the Draghi government crystallised on 14 July, when the party did not grant a vote of confidence in the Senate on a decree ('Decreto Aiuti') concerning economic stimulus to counter the ongoing energy crisis. The following, immediate resignation by Mario Draghi was however rejected by Sergio Mattarella, who invited him to substantiate the existence of an alternative majority in the Parliament. The subsequent vote of confidence in the Senate on 20 July highlighted the lack of such an alternative majority, with LN and FI now joining M5S in withdrawing their support from the government. The following day Mario Draghi renewed his resignation. At this point, President Sergio Mattarella was forced to dissolve the XVIII legislature before its natural term (March 2023) and call for new elections on 25 September.

## **Parties, coalitions and the electoral system**

The election campaign of 2022 took place (for the first time in the history of the Italian Republic) over the summer. Yet, its crucial moments occurred in the very first days, when parties had to put in the field the respective coalition strategies – indeed, the cornerstone of prospective electoral success due to the highly majoritarian spin of the Italian mixed electoral system.

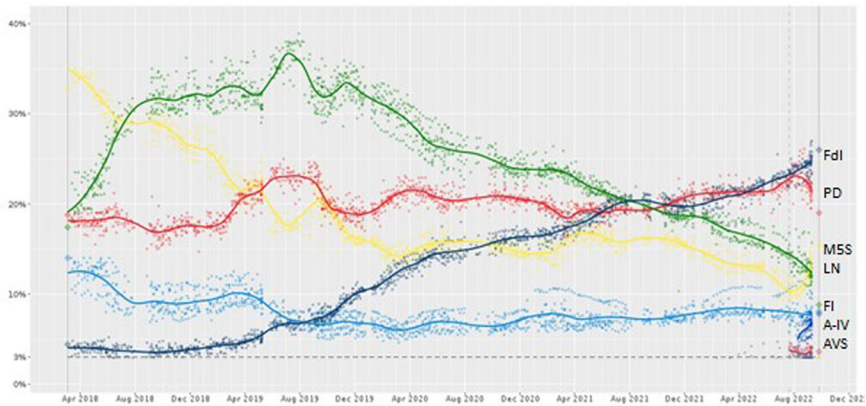
In place since the previous parliamentary election, the so-called *Rosatellum* is in fact a mixed system that awards two thirds of the seats in each chamber in proportion to the votes received at the national level by the single parties competing in the election, while the remaining third of the seats is allocated through first-past-the-post (FPTP) in single member constituencies.<sup>2</sup> The electoral law does not only recognise the existence of pre-electoral coalitions; it encourages their formation in order to maximise the chances of winning as many FPTP constituencies as possible (for a better discussion of Italy's current electoral system, see: Chiaramonte *et al.* 2018; Garzia 2019).

The center-right coalition was the first to reveal its strategy, in spite of its partners' inconsistent positioning towards the Draghi government up until the previous weeks. On 27 July, Berlusconi, Meloni, Salvini and Lupi (*Noi Moderati*: NM) announced their intention to run together, under the agreement that the leader of the most voted for party would assume the role of coalition leader and prime ministerial candidate *in pectore*.

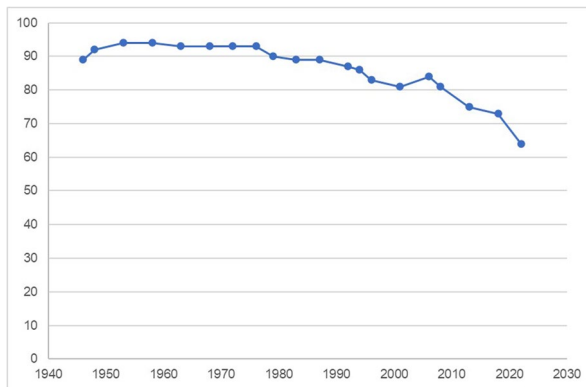
Things proved to be more complicated on the other side of the political spectrum. The most consequential outcome of the Draghi government's fall was in fact the decision by PD to discontinue its collaboration with M5S begun under the auspices of the yellow-red government. According to Enrico Letta, the government crisis represented an 'irreversible break' between M5S and his party (ANSA 2022). Also, this choice signalled the direction that PD would have taken regarding coalition strategies, with a clear emphasis on the continuance of the so-called 'Draghi Agenda'. It is against this background that the agreement should be understood between PD and the federation composed of *Azione* (A: Calenda) and *+Europa* (+E: Della Vedova) that was reached on 2 August. In a parallel attempt at strengthening its left flank, Letta also negotiated an electoral alliance with *Alleanza Verdi Sinistra* (AVS) which was made public on 6 August. This agreement, however, caused tension between Letta and Calenda. The latter's support for nuclear power and regasifiers led him to consider as impossible his own coexistence with the left-green alliance in the same electoral coalition. The decision to break the alliance with PD was communicated by Calenda on 7 August. Eventually, he would join forces with Renzi's IV towards the development of a centrist alliance (also known as 'Terzo Polo') under IV's symbol – to avoid collecting signatures for a new party – but led by Calenda himself. Della Vedova's +E remained instead within the center-left camp alongside IC (*Impegno Civico*), a marginal new party led by Luigi Di Maio.

In less than a couple of weeks, Italy's political system moved from the embryonic tripolarism inaugurated by the 2013 elections (Garzia 2013) to a fully-fledged quadripolarism featuring, from 'left' to 'right': M5S, the centre-left coalition (PD, AVS, +E, IC), the centrist 'third pole' (A, IV), and the centre-right coalition (FdI, FI, LN, NM). However, while in the 2018 election the relative size of the three competing coalitions was by and large comparable, in 2022 the expected vote distributions coupled with the already mentioned majoritarian spin of the electoral law turned the center-right coalition into an instant favourite (see Figure 1).

Indeed, the overall campaign dynamic can be well exemplified by the mottos chosen by the leading parties of the two major coalitions. On the one hand, Meloni's FdI portrays itself as having already won the election ('Ready'), while Letta's PD is left with the underdog choice of



**Figure 1.** Trends in voting intentions, 2018–2022.



**Figure 2.** Voter turnout in Italian parliamentary elections, 1946–2022.

polarising the campaign in us-versus-them terms (‘Choose’) trying to leverage on strategic voting by means of a ‘lesser of two evils’ rhetoric. A visual inspection of the poll trends in [Figure 1](#) also confirms that the extent to which the campaign was able to alter the state of the relative electoral forces was marginal, if at all.

## The result

The election of 25 September 2022 saw the participation of 63.8 percent of the eligible voting population. This represents a new all-time low in Italian parliamentary elections (see [Figure 2](#)). And although turnout figures have been systematically declining since the election of 2006, this time the magnitude of inter-election change has been the strongest in the history of the Italian Republic. Suffice it to say that between 1979 and 2018, the mean diminution in aggregate turnout rates between two consecutive

elections amounted to 1.9 percentage points (Vassallo and Vignati 2022a). Between 2018 and 2022, the turnout decline amounted to over 9 percent.

The electoral results (as shown in Table 1) awarded a clear victory to the center-right coalition. Note that although its four parties did not reach the absolute majority of votes (i.e. 43.8 percent in total), the coalition secured a majority of seats in both chambers (i.e. 54 percent in the Chamber, 58 percent in the Senate), due to its victories in most FPTP constituencies (i.e. 121 out of 146). Giorgia Meloni's FdI was the unanimous winner of the election, with a more than six-fold increase in votes as compared to the previous parliamentary election. Her party was not only the most voted for in this election; importantly, it also began the legislature by commanding an absolute majority of votes (and seats) within the center-right coalition. The other main stakeholders of the center-right had less to enjoy beyond the coalition's victory. The 8.1 percent represented the worst result ever for Silvio Berlusconi's FI, which condemned the party (for the first time) to third place in the center-right coalition he founded back in 1994. The second place went in fact to Matteo Salvini's LN with 8.8 percent of valid votes – which represented nonetheless a massive drop when compared to the 34 percent gained just three years before at the European Parliament elections.

The support for the center-left coalition remained relatively steady, with its main stakeholder – Enrico Letta's PD – scoring slightly above 19 percent. The stability of this figure vis-à-vis 2018 is rather remarkable

**Table 1.** Chamber of Deputies' election results, 2018 and 2022.

	2022			2018		
	Seats N	Votes (000s)	Votes %	Seats N	Votes (000s)	Votes %
Fratelli d'Italia (FdI)	119	7,302	26,00	32	1,429	4,35
Partito Democratico (PD)	69	5,356	19,07	107	6,161	18,76
Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S)	52	4,333	15,43	225	10,732	32,68
Lega (LN)	66	2,464	8,77	123	5,698	17,35
Forza Italia (FI)	45	2,278	8,11	103	4,596	14,00
Azione/Italia Viva (A-IV)	21	2,186	7,79	–	–	–
Alleanza Verdi Sinistra (AVS)	12	1,018	3,63	–	–	–
+Europa (+E)	2	793	2,83	2	841	2,56
Italexit	0	534	1,90	–	–	–
Unione Popolare (UP)	0	402	1,43	–	–	–
Italia Sovrana e Popolare (ISP)	0	348	1,24	–	–	–
Noi Moderati (NM)	7	255	0,91	–	–	–
Sud Chiama Nord (SCN)	1	212	0,76	–	–	–
Impegno Civico (IC)	1	169	0,60	–	–	–
Südtiroler Volkspartei (SVP)	3	117	0,42	4	134	0,41
Liberi e Uguali (LeU)	–	–	–	14	1,114	3,39
Unione di Centro (UDC)	–	–	–	4	427	1,30
Insieme (I)	–	–	–	1	190	0,58
Civica Popolare (CP)	–	–	–	2	178	0,54
Turnout		63.8%			72.9%	

if one considers that the party had been in government for the last four years. Yet, this could hardly be seen as a satisfactory result from the coalition's point of view, as it was unable to substantially enlarge its voter base. The left-green alliance led by Bonelli and Fratoianni was the only coalition partner that managed to overcome the 3 percent threshold. Della Vedova's +Europa fell slightly below the threshold but was nonetheless able to confer its votes to the coalition. To the contrary, Luigi Di Maio's IC did not even manage to overcome the 1 percent threshold. Di Maio's result has cast doubts over Letta's strategy of including IC in the coalition (in spite of the polemics it ignited with M5S and later Calenda), which was due, in all probability, to its leaders' continued loyalty to the Draghi government as well as its oversized parliamentary faction.

Ranking third among coalitions – though running alone – the M5S ended up with over 15 percent of the votes. On the one hand, this could be understood as a defeat in the long-term perspective (minus 15 percent from 2018). On the other hand, many – including party leader Giuseppe Conte – celebrated this result against the background of gloomier pre-electoral expectations, also highlighting the extraordinary result in many Southern regions of the country (Biancalana and Mancosu 2022). Last (but also least) the coalition of Carlo Calenda and Matteo Renzi, whose poor result in FPTP districts made their parliamentary party group much smaller than FI and LN's in spite of relatively similar results in the proportional part. This result will likely have (negative) consequences during the legislature regarding their outlook on coalition potential should the center-right majority be unable to hold its current shape.

Overall, the Italian parliamentary election of 2022 represented the third most volatile election in Italy after 1994 and 2013 – as well as the tenth most volatile in continental Western Europe since 1945 (author's calculation based on: Emanuele 2022). To account for such a high rate of inter-election volatility, a useful point of departure is represented by an analysis of the flow-of-vote estimates. According to Vassallo and Vignati (2022b) the noteworthy result of FdI is to be ascribed, primarily, to a reshuffle among center-right voters: the majority of FdI voters in 2022 were in fact FI or LN voters in 2018. With regard to PD, the large majority of 2022 voters were already PD voters in 2018. Moreover, the votes lost to the brand-new A-IV alliance (between 10 and 20 percent of the flow-of-vote) were compensated by similar inbound flows from M5S. The latter appears to have lost instead a substantial part of its 2018 votes to abstention *in primis*, then FdI and only after PD.

With regard to the individual motivations for party choice, a post-electoral analysis by SWG (2022) finds idiosyncratic patterns across the major parties (see Table 2). The relative majority of FdI voters



**Table 2.** Individual-level motivations for party choice (most mentioned reason for each party).

Party	Most mentioned reason for vote choice	%
Movimento 5 Stelle	It is led by Giuseppe Conte	49
Fratelli d'Italia	It always remained coherent	40
Partito Democratico	To attempt beating the center-right	30
Azione/Italia Viva	It made valid policy proposals	30
Lega	It made valid policy proposals	28
Forza Italia	It made valid policy proposals	27

mentioned the party's political coherence, thus hinting at its positioning at the opposition of the Draghi government (unlike its coalition partners) as a potential explanatory factor. In line with the party's polarising campaign strategy, the relative majority of PD voters declared to having voted for it in order to beat the centre-right, while almost one M5S voter out of two declared to having voted for it due to the appeal of former prime minister Giuseppe Conte – undoubtedly one of the keys for the successful campaign of the party. Quite to the contrary, the shrinking popularity of Berlusconi and Salvini can be ascribed to the reasons why the relative majority of the respective parties' voters mentioned policy proposals as the reason for vote choice despite the strongly personalised nature of the parties.

### Government formation

Given the clear indications that emerged from the election results, the process of government formation took a rather short time – especially when compared to the 89 days elapsed between the election of 2018 and the swearing in of Conte's first government. The newly elected legislature was seated on 13 October for the election of the Senate's president, i.e. the second highest-ranking office in the Italian political system. Ignazio La Russa, a member of FdI with a long political career begun in the neo-fascist MSI, was elected on the same day without the votes of FI but with the external support of a number of MPs of unknown origin (i.e. the election of the chambers' presidents takes place through secret ballots). On the following day, the tensions between FI and its coalition partners seemed to have cleared up, as testified by the election of Lorenzo Fontana (member of LN and outspoken critic of abortion and LGBT rights) with the votes of all centre-right coalitions' MPs.

A quick round of talks between the opposition party leaders and President Mattarella on 20 October was followed by a meeting with the center-right delegation the next morning. In the afternoon of 21 October, Giorgia Meloni was again given the task by Mattarella of forming a new government. The Meloni government was sworn in on 22 October. She

obtained a vote of confidence in the Chamber of Deputies on 25 October and in the Senate the following day.

## Conclusions

The Italian parliamentary election of 2022 can be considered historical in at least two ways. The first is the formation of a government led by a female politician for the first time in Italian history.<sup>3</sup> The second is the political composition of this government, with two populist radical right parties (FdI and LN) in control of about 80 percent of the votes cast in favour of the governing coalition. The continued and increasing electoral success of radical right parties is part of a trend fitting with other major European democracies such as Germany (Faas and Klingelhöfer 2022) and France (Durovic 2022). However, it is safe to argue that the Meloni government is by and large the most right-leaning among all governments ever formed in post-war Western Europe. Among the reasons for Meloni's FdI success, is, as has been highlighted, its continued positioning as a party of opposition, which makes it the only currently existing Italian party that never held government responsibility since its foundation in 2012.

It is clear that the Meloni government will have to face numerous hurdles. From the point of view of representative democracy, the first is constituted by its relatively low popular legitimation. The whole governing coalition has in fact received the support of only 27 percent of eligible voters (abstainers included). In the Southern regions, this figure falls below 20 percent (Cersosimo and Viesti 2022). The reform of the 'worst electoral law ever' (in the words of Enrico Letta) could be a fruitful avenue towards rebuilding popular trust in political parties and leaders. In this respect, however, the governing coalition has proposed a set of institutional reforms towards semi-presidentialism that are likely to fuel further confrontation among political camps. The extreme right connotation of the parties supporting the government is another reason for unease in terms of further polarisation of the Italian electorate. In this regard, the election of La Russa and Fontana as presidents of the two chambers of the Parliament (as well as the names of some newly appointed ministers) should be highlighted as a signal for concern.

In terms of international relations, Giorgia Meloni has clearly voiced the positioning of Italy within the Euro-Atlantic camp of NATO when it comes to the war in Ukraine. More concerns emerge regarding the positioning of the Italian government vis-à-vis the EU, especially about issues of economic recovery (i.e. government leaders have repeatedly voiced their intention of modifying the conditions of Italy's participation

to the Next Generation EU program during the campaign), civil liberties and the rule of law (as testified by both FdI and LN's choice to vote against the EP report on the rule of law in Hungary and Poland in September 2022). All these reasons, coupled with a seemingly non-granitic alignment among coalition partners, would seem to forecast a rather short honeymoon and a definitely bumpy ride for the Meloni government.

## Notes

1. Other recent reports in the Elections in Context series include Faas and Klingelhöfer (2022); Durovic (2022); and Lopes (2023).
2. Note that after the 2020 constitutional referendum, the size of the two chambers of parliament has been reduced to 400 (Chamber) and 200 (Senate) members respectively. Also, for the first time in history, 18-year old citizens have been entitled to vote in both the Chamber and the Senate elections (up until 2018, the minimum voting age for the Senate was 25).
3. However, it is also worth mentioning that the legislature inaugurated in 2022 marks a drop in female presence in both the Parliament (31 percent as compared to 35 percent in 2018) and the Council of Ministers (25 percent as compared to 35 percent in the Draghi government).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Diego Garzia* is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Lausanne, and also a recurrent Visiting Fellow at the European University Institute in Fiesole. His research interests include parties, elections, and political behaviour in comparative and longitudinal perspective. He currently holds positions in the Scientific Committee of the Italian National Election Study (ITANES) and in the Steering Committee of the Consortium of National Election Studies (CNES). [diego.garzia@unil.ch]

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